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**Drawing In-Situ**

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[www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/sota/tracey/](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/sota/tracey/)  
[tracey@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:tracey@lboro.ac.uk)

# CONTRACTED SITE: ARTIST ON PAPER, DRAWING

Sharon Jewell <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Queensland University of Technology  
[s.jewell@qut.edu.au](mailto:s.jewell@qut.edu.au)

Traditionally the notion of drawing in-situ has suggested the physical presence of the artist in the environment under scrutiny. The assumption here of enhanced connectivity, however, is hasty in light of the idea that situation implies a relative spatial value determined by the interplay of subject and location, where the possibility of not being “in-situ” is problematic. The fact that traditional drawing in-situ, such as the representation of land as landscape, requires a framing of the world out there implies a distance between the perceived object and the drawing surface. Rather than suggesting that some drawing is situated and other sorts of drawing are not, however, I argue that situation or site is variously extended and contracted depending on the nature of mediation between surface and environment. The suggestion here is that site is not so much a precondition as a performative function, developed in the act of drawing and always implicating the drawing surface. In my discussion I first evoke an experience of drawing where site is incrementally reeled in, to finally be seen as something in the making. I then focus on specific works by Toba Khedoori and Cameron Robbins where the drawing surface testifies to its own emergence as site. As well, in using my own recent drawing practice as a case study, I argue that the geography of site is delimited neither by horizon nor the boundaries of the paper. Rather, I propose that site and drawing surface coincide in variously contracted and extended ways.

To draw on location is to have faith that there is advantage in the unmediated vista: its light is my light, while the event of space - its horizon and convergences - occurs directly upon my eye. My extraction and abstraction of its elements testify to an understanding of this place, and a command of the medium. Yet there is always so much that escapes definition, that can be managed though not totalized, by naming and framing - two actions that come from somewhere beyond this situation. Did I come to this landscape or did I bring it with me? Perhaps few artists are more recognised for situating themselves in the “real world” than Paul Gauguin when, in 1891, he threw in his lot for the primitive purity of Tahiti. Yet as Foster et al. have noted, “the bold contours Gauguin derived from the stone sculptures of Breton churches, as well as the strong colors he developed from Japanese prints, persisted” (2011, p.65). How Gauguin would have made sense of the tropics, without his northern architecture and exotic prints, is impossible to tell.

Lawrence Durrell seems to have recognised the conundrum of the artist in the landscape, the impossibility of finding an *out-there* for, as he has written, “all landscapes ask the same question in the same whisper. I am watching you - are you watching yourself in me?” (Durrell 1969, p.158). Yet how else can this sketch unfold, but through an outward glance and a knowledge of drawing? I hold the pencil before my eye, squinting at the judgment of an angle; I frame up my view. I am aware of the optimum scope of the visual field. All this I have brought with me in readiness, just as Gauguin brought his colours and bold contours. I am not expecting to encounter myself out there, as Durrell suggests. If I were *out-there*, then the one left holding the pencil would be no more than the vanishing point on an opposing horizon, looking back.

In the course of the morning, in-situ, the revealing light hits me hard. The grasses that were the oblique dashes of the pencil now begin to scratch and irritate, more like points than lines. Insects land on the paper, dirt and dust smudge in both inconvenient and fortuitous ways and the wind buffets the page like an ill-furled sail. In short, situation creeps up on me. The *out-there* that was the ground for my enterprise now seems further removed, for the thread that bound the horizon in the world to the horizon on my paper has become ensnared in a litany of gnarly and bristling things. As I allow these things to advance upon my consciousness, the horizon and the formal structures upon which I depended for the logic or composition of the drawing are replaced by a sense that cannot be measured, squared up, composed. I can throw a grid over the distance in order to determine its parts and its angles. The same grid brought ever closer will eventually enclose everything within a single square, incorporating the page on which I draw, and be ineffectual in defining a sensible composition, a set of interconnected references, axes and co-ordinates.

If, as Jeff Malpas has observed “landscape is the product of an essentially ‘representational’ construal of our relation to the world that always involves separation and detachment” (2011, p.6) then we could assume that *connection* is to be found in a move away from representation, and the attendant thinking of land as landscape, toward the

immediate performance of site. Here, the whisper of the land advances from its distant authority to rephrase as the constant thrum of cicadas, and closer still, to the equally constant buzz of my own ears. As distance, the aerial blur of lilacs and greys, falls from focus, it is because the chromatic gives way to the tactile and the sharp edge of immediacy. My paper is no longer the picture plane or support, that conceit of neutrality, it so recently seemed to be. Rather it is a substrate across which the world variously passes and takes root, that stick ends can stab and whose glaring whiteness could send you blind. I am, now, drawing in-situ.

In the midst and therefore as part of the things that I focus on, the urgency to “get it right” falls away. For, having contracted the *out-there* to my immediate location, the dialogue between landscape and myself is not so easily defined and it alters and appears to take new shape in a mingling of *there* and *here*. When the pencil end stutters over an uneven surface, is that my hand or the ground beneath, at work? I would agree with Jeff Malpas when he writes: “To experience a landscape is to be active within it” (2011, p.14). This, it seems, is in contrast to standing back, looking outward and “capturing” a scene. Though I had begun by adopting such a posture, the mounting friction of immediacy has brought the landscape close, caused me to become aware of the activity where the paper surface, to which my attention and care are given, and my own body, mingle with the world.

While there is no delimiting structure to indicate near and far I would suggest a kind of elasticity across space, where the greater the attenuation – with a rigid line of connection, less available to movement, interaction or chance – the greater the gap between the object of my scrutiny, and the marks that appear on the page. With the release of this tension the stretch between here and there begins to contract; the line slackens, to the point at which I arrive back to the location of the drawing. Here, site is in the process of finding form, it is not given beforehand. I neither bring the landscape with me, nor do I find it waiting. Rather, as a result of my interaction, at the very place I locate my page, site begins to take shape in the making. The question is no longer, “how do I capture this landscape?” Rather, I might dare to ask: “how could this site manifest?” In other words, as site contracts, representation becomes less important than the things that can happen as a result of being here.

Barbara Bolt has argued that the representational framework engenders a gap, citing Vicky Kirby in describing it as a ‘not here’ or ‘not now’ and calls for a performativity where meaning and reality are simultaneously constituted (2004, p.171). She points particularly to the ritual practices and the paintings of Indigenous Australians and observes: “Images no longer stand in for or signify concepts, ideas or things, nor are images signs that ceaselessly circulate; rather, meaning is produced as an embodied, situated event” (Bolt, 2004, p.142). Likewise, Erin Manning writes of the paintings of the Australian Aboriginal Dreaming: “what is felt is not the representation of a story but the act of the telling itself” (2009, p.161). In both these statements, there is evoked a relationship to site that closes

or contracts the gap between language and meaning, image and reality, here and there. Barbara Bolt draws from Deleuze's use of the term *flexion*, whereby "(t)he body that writes is simultaneously written" (Bolt, 2004, p.157). Deleuze uses the term to refer to the limits of language where it no longer describes or represents, but performs the very thing it utters. In this idea, we find another kind of *contraction*, where the gap between a word and its meaning is closed in the performative emergence of the word as meaning. Likewise, the image that performs itself into being, cannot be one that describes or represents a reality external or distant. Flexion takes the extended site and contracts it to the immediacy of its production. I would argue that one example of flexion is the contraction of site to the drawing surface, where the surface, as a situation rather than a support, becomes implicated in the meaning that emerges from it.

This can be understood by way of contrasting the surface or site that *becomes present* through the poetic act, to the one that provides a backdrop or ground for the action brought to it. Paul Carter urges us to consider the western tendency to "stage", to clear a space for the poetic act, in what he calls 'closure', suggesting a figure that stands differentiated from, rather than continuous with, the ground (Carter, 1996, p.292). Like Bolt, Carter references the desert art of indigenous Australians in arguing that there is another way of considering the expressive act, a way that does not assume a neutral stage, a blank canvas or, provocatively, a *Terra Nullius*. Carter makes the colonial reference clear in his elaboration of a staging that ignores the place to which the poetic act is brought. Likewise, Erin Manning elaborates on the "blank canvas" phenomena of the west, anchoring it to a Euclidean geometrical system that abstracts space as a container for concrete entities – bodies, things, land – as opposed to a conception of body, space and time as topologically elastic (Manning, 2009, p.165).

It is worth observing that in the case of the indigenous Australian painters, the canvases are worked laid out on the ground, the same surface from which the ritual dances are performed, the same surface that connects the places of Dreaming in Song Lines. It is a vast surface that matters, not one brought near by the vertical encounter with a horizon and a foreshortening of land, but through the topological extension and contraction of space and time, in walking as in performing. Interestingly, this horizontality is an operation that recurs in the works I will discuss in the following section.

Where does this leave us with regards to site? Is it, then, that in drawing we must choose between a cool distance of representation or a hot seat in the crucible of production? I do not believe so. Seen in degrees of contraction and extension the drawing act both pulls toward its site of production and casts outward in a move that has both idiomatic and geographic stakes beyond the immediate location. A wonderful example of this double movement is found in the sparse, wax covered drawings by Toba Khedoori. While these works, such as *Untitled (Blocks)*, 2002, or *Untitled (Table and chair)*, 2002 depict static objects from the familiar world – small against the vast surfaces – they appear distinctly

apart from any real locality, with only the faintest hint of shadow, or none at all to suggest a whereabouts of placement rather than place. In this respect the “site” of the drawing is extended to the infinite vanishing point of the idea. The line connecting the immediate world and the object, floating unhinged on the surface is stretched to breaking. And yet, right there in the waxy surface we find, “like living organisms preserved in amber, hand prints, dust, stray hair and smudges of graphite and paint” (Harris, 2005, p.164). The surface, contracted from the extended world to reveal itself as the site of the drawing, is an index of the performative intensity of the work, and the degree to which the drawing is evolving in-situ.



FIG. 1: CAMERON ROBBIN, 2011. WIND DRAWING

The necessary precondition, in Khedoori's work, to the emergence of site is the implication of the horizontally aligned surface. Life passes across the horizontal, floats down upon it, or, responding to the pressure of the atmosphere, leaves its gestural trace. Such are the forces, rather than the perceptions, that manifest in the wind machine drawings by Cameron Robbins (figure 1), where the swiveling, horizontal surface is essential to the registering of wind speed and direction which also move a flexible wire arm attached to the pen. The contracted site in Robbins' works is revealed in time, in the process of making. Because the drawings are the trace of weather movements, site is dependent not so much on a stable location as the changeable atmosphere: wind currents and speeds, rain and even stillness. There is no site here apart from the paper itself, as it intersects with the weather-world. The contraction of movement in time onto the paper substrate reveals through the drawing a real, active system, responsive to the incremental changes in the atmosphere, rather than a representation, which might pick up on perceived and interpreted data in a frozen moment, or enlist the eye and conscious imagination as an arbiter of reality.

This is important to the current discussion of site, or situation, because it corroborates the notion that the movement from extended site – one, say, that takes in a vast *out-there* – to contracted site – embracing an unmediated intimacy between world and drawing surface – is one that implicates degrees of nearness or separation based on increasingly true, or intimate, or increasingly representative levels of modeling. It is on the side of intimacy with the world that Robbins' drawings perform. The wind grips the articulated arm, and locates each and every variable, it would seem, in the possible range of movements. Robbins' machines do not so much draw *in-situ*, but draw the situation as an emergent, complex event.

In both Khedoori's and Robbins' works site reveals itself as a temporal unfolding where the guiding hand retreats. Thus, while there is a contraction of site to the surface, there is now a line extended between performed site and the artist's body. We can speak of an elasticity, the contracting and extending, like an inhaling and exhaling, not of air, but of presence. In my own practice, I have recently become aware of a similar movement between the contracted and extended sites of drawing, and a compulsion to shorten that line between outside and in. So, rather than moving back, I have moved further inward, to the point at which I have recently placed the weight of my body in the midst of the drawing surface. I liken this to a gardener, working the earth and working the body at the same time: between earth-site and body-site there is an unmediated exchange of energy, time, and care. I will briefly outline how this came about.

Throughout 2012 I made a series of drawings on increasingly large surfaces, using increasingly fragmented marks that register, in their swarming thousands, as grey immaterial tones. The only lines in the drawings were those left, intermittently, as negative traces, between the clouds of tiny marks. There was a point at which I reoriented these

large drawings to a table surface and the sense of separation between my position on one side and that of the drawing on the other, on the wall, completely vanished. A connection was established with the work, as I leant over it and moved around it.



FIG. 2: SHARON JEWELL, 2012. "LINE TO SURFACE TO LINE". PEN AND PAPER ON PAPER

Once orientated horizontally, landscape becomes land, coextensive with the world of real space, where a complex of air currents, sounds, dust and cat move seamlessly between drawing surface and the ground that laps at its edges. The axial determination of the wall-mounted drawing bears no relevance in this reorientation. Although no longer aligned with my vertical body, the drawing is, however, now aligned with the movement of that body, across the ground. With this interaction based on movement, comes a sense that I am dealing not with illusory or abstract space, but with real space, real site. The drawing now shared the same perspectival distortions as the spatialised environment that surrounded us, not to mention the same openness and availability that comes at the interception of gravitational forces. Indeed, I was now able to move upwards, or outwards from the drawing surface, extending the linear elements in ways that would be impossible from the verticality of the wall (see figure 2). As a dancer, Kim Vincs observes a similar alteration of possibility in shifting the active axis from the vertical (standing body) to the horizontal (lying body). In the horizontal position, she observes, “(a)ny part of my body can initiate. Any part can take over” (Vincs, 2010, p.107).

The notion of drawing as a possible site, a place that, as Tim Ingold (2007)\* has suggested, could be traversed and in traversing, undergo topological restructuring, became central to my way of looking at these works. This notion pointed to both an expressive veracity and material integrity inherent to surface, compelling me to seek out a substrate that would register the impact of real forces, in the extraction of marks rather than in their inscription. I found this material in a strong, crisp tracing paper whose creases leave long, sharp, white lines scored into the translucent membrane. The nine panel surfaces were constructed on the floor and immediately exposed to the dramas of destructive forces: crumpling, tearing – allowing tears to happen; folding and creasing – and I in the midst – twisting and then ironing and settling. These actions brought forth a topography as impossible to fully measure or predict as the geological crust. The translucency of the paper and penetration of the markings cured the drawing of the blindness that alienates front from back. On the wall, this translucency made it possible to apply a sub-stratum, in the form of a single colour, over which the skin-like surfaces settle and float (figure 3).

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\*Ingold refers to the ways in which “reading” is directed by the nature of surfaces. Of note here is his reference to the liturgical texts of the middle ages, the surfaces of which were likened to a “landscape or country around which they could roam, picking up stories of its inhabitants” (2007, p.38).



FIG. 3: SHARON JEWELL, 2013. "MAP 1" TRACING PAPER, CARD

The drawings are distinctly topographical. In the absence of horizon, boundary or composition they decline to offer a point of reference that defines a situation from which the work was executed. The point of reference is the drawing itself, from all angles and, at least in the violent eruption of the surface, little to differentiate left from right or front from back. The vanishing point is infinite, but the tactility of the surface, as in Khedoori's works, brings the drawings into an intimate proximity. Nearness and distance borrow from each other, inform each other. Distance contracts into a fold, the fold escapes into immeasurable vastness. The line this drawing casts is not between itself and a world outside, but between its close body and its far body, substantively related.

It is at this moment, where the site of drawing becomes intensive, that the *where* and the *what* are linked in mutual confidence. But there is another side to this analysis that cannot be ignored. The drawings, as already suggested, appear uncannily like maps, or satellite images of the earth's surface. Crisp folds look suddenly like rifts and valleys; seams where paper is torn and rejoined are the winding lines of rivers. Radiating creases, where the paper was twisted and then flattened are the cracks and ridges breaking the earth away around a volcanic core. In short, having attained my site as an intensive contraction to the drawing surface, it now begins to unravel, to open rapidly outwards, further and further to the sky and beyond. It is as though, no longer able to maintain my stability on this papery estate, the only alternative is a spiriting away, thousands of metres above the ground.

I recently took photographs from the window of a plane and noticed how the patterns below, once away from the agricultural patchwork, resembled the tracing paper drawings. The distance of the land from my site of observation was infinitely further than the drawings had been. Yet there it was, undeniably similar, seen from a site extended beyond all reach. It occurred to me, then, that contracted and extended sites are partners that continually find and lose each other, the recognition of which is a navigational tool, in a topology that expands and contracts between land, body and memory.

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