



Drawing and Visualisation Research

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NESTS: DRAWING AS MORPHOLOGICAL IMPRINT

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This essay concerns the importance of movement to 'de-centering' in the drawing process. It uses the language of theatre to describe how the rhythms of drawing movements enable artists to disrupt the drawing process, and achieve critical distance. It juxtaposes theory with practice, referring to drawings made since losing the sight in my right eye; this work led me to think about the interplay between looking and movement and the impact of changing viewpoints on action and reaction during drawing. My new monocular state requires an increased use of head movements as well as, for the purposes of the work cited here, magnifiers. This means that the environment is moving in and out of my field of vision as I move my head, and in and out of focus as I look through the magnifiers and then around them. I found that this multiplicity of views has correlates with the world of theatre, and I imagine the drawing room as a performance space in which the artist is actor/audience/critic. I suggest that in drawing, as in performance, disrupting the perceptual locus is a form of dissolving and resolving the relationships between self, other and object, and that this is manifested in metaphoric and literal acts of stepping back and forth from a work. That this puncturing takes place within a mimetic frame leads me to think of drawing in terms of a dynamical system rather than as I have previously discussed, a causal (action – reaction) or schematic (plan-do-review) process. I now see drawing movements as part of a constellation of neuro-somatic patterns and the drawn work as a fulcrum upon which the psychological and physical playfully seesaw.

This essay concerns the movements made in drawing. It describes research into the relationship between the somatic and creativity in drawing, and discusses how those ideas relate to the interaction between movements and perception in my current work, which involves making detailed drawings of nests using magnifying glasses to mediate between the drawing, the drawing object, the drawing act and the viewer. This work is also a response to a change in my own visual field (through acquired visual impairment) and because the practice is informing the theory, which here is still tentative, I have structured the paper to reflect this dialogical interaction, juxtaposing the theoretical discourse with a drawing narrative (identified in grey in the footnotes below).

I first looked at the role of drawing movements during my doctoral research (Wilson, 2005). I considered that the movements we make whilst drawing formulate or chart the spatial relations of the image we are planning to draw before we commit to draw it, and I thought that these movements are mimetic and amount to a pre-drawing; a discrete rehearsal and action sequence with purposes critical to the overall drawing process. I found that the drawing act, if considered in a theatre paradigm, is a conduit for moving 'being' into 'becoming' (Wilson, 2005: 161).

The mimetic context provided the research with a unifying thematic thread. Its conceptual range and internal trajectory offered generous and evolving viewing points; looking at the movements in drawing from the perspective of mimesis as imitation, offered a good way to account for the fluctuating exchanges that are an expression of transferences between the gesture and the idea or 'details in the head' (Noe, 2000: 126).

It seems that actions made during drawing are coordinated via similar mimetic or imitative impulses as other acquired motoric behaviors (Wilson, 2005: 100-101). In Walter Benjamin's biologically determined model of mimesis, these instincts operate in the innate urge to learn through emulation as well as in higher brain functions where environmental and social interactions move away from establishing similarities, towards finding differences; an adaptive behavioral process that pushes and pulls at the notions of 'self' and 'other' (Walter, 1986: 133). Further, the kinesthetic of drawing exemplifies versions of mimesis as porous and malleable, with the movements forming a re-enactment of the encounters of the artist as a mobile, haptic entity for whom, as described by Alva Noe 'experience is not a passive interior state, but a mode of active engagement with the world' (Noe, 2000: 128).

The nest drawing became a project because of Heidegger's idea of the 'clearing in the woods' that means, approximately, making a mental clearing into which some thing (idea, memory?) arrives or reveals itself. Looking for this 'clearing' coincided with a fascination with nests and their architectural, unannounced wonder.

Our instinct to imitate is in mimetic behavior that also extends into a natural desire to see imitation and in this reciprocity we calibrate what we are learning of the world in order to navigate it. As we move through the stages of emulative learning, the response we receive to our behavior turns us into actors and our social groups become our audience, reflecting back our actions and reactions. In learning theory this is also a reflexive cycle (Schon, 1995) and looking at people drawing and hearing artists talk about their physical drawing process suggests that artists might enact this reflexive cycle by playing out the roles of actor/audience in the drawing space as a way to decenter their practice.

Artists' movements have other parallels with performance; not only mirroring mimetic neural and somatic functions, they also exhibit a poetic organization whereby the energy fluctuations in the physical positioning are analogous to some performing arts such as mime and dance. An artist's drawing movements equate to an impetus, action and reaction sequence similarly found in performance styles where the pre-movement, or 'energy in time' (E. Barba, 1995: 94), is as important as the whole action (Brook, 1968: 134). In drawing, the point at which the body is momentarily still holds in it the energy that flows into and animates the drawing gesture. That impulse, together with the dissipation of the energy into the marks and the almost simultaneous re-gathering into a new intention, collectively amount to a positioning or orientating choreography that enacts what it feels like to be peripatetic in the world. Looking at the drawing process revealed that this movement string is repeated; each iteration having a directional effect on the way the artist inhabits the drawing space (which here means the place between the artist and the drawing). The occurrence of this behavior in artists while drawing suggested the perambulation of the body in the drawing space is intrinsically significant, loaded with innate impulse and intention as well as conforming to social and cultural conventions, and expressing the personality and history of the artist (Wilson, 2005: 134).

I had been looking for a shape to draw that would focus my mind completely on the act of drawing, which is the best way to forget how I now see, and remember how to draw. With the nest drawings, I try to draw nests in a void with nothing in mind other than capturing the structures. At my first sight, they are bundles of stuff, I cannot see much more than a form, a shape. I look closer and I look harder. This takes either a lot of concentration or being in the flow, then my mind drifts and tunes out the light effects from the broken retina, making room for drawing sensations and finding new ways to draw – 'clearing'. Then I want to see the entire nest, I want to be able to see all there is to see, more than before, more than others. Lighting the drawing space and peering at the nests through a magnifying glass I can see the exquisite detail and by magnifying the drawing I can record it too.

Borrowing descriptive language from the world of the theatre has helped to organize these ideas about the drawing somatic; the analogous references illuminate how artists adopt varying psychophysical positions in order to inform the drawing act as they occupy the drawing space in several changing and flexible roles: as director–designer, the actor–drawer, audience–viewer and reviewer-critic. By moving around the space, an artist changes the viewing position, multiplying the perspectives and invigorating their ‘practical knowledge’ (Noe, 2000: 131) and it is in this shifting viewpoint that I have found enactment. I now want to think about the performance correlation by looking at the space between the artist and the drawing as a dynamic, fluid environment and in light of the realization that drawing is not the linear process I previously modeled through the quasi-scientific language, mechanisms and methodologies of research.

The performance/theatre analogy holds even though there is (typically) no ‘audience’ at the making of the drawing; traditionally, audience happens when the drawing object is located outside the drawing space. However, this isolates the drawing and imagines it as having arrived, fully formed and unconnected whereas it is more than a record of internalized stories, notionally the neural mapping or what Zeki describes as the synthetic concepts (Zeki, 2009: 45) that translate and generate knowledge. (Hirstein, 1999: 19; Zeki, 2009: 41). It is also critically, a rendering of the experience of the drawing space, an experience that includes the enactment of perceptual constancies; a term that describes the brain’s capacity to generate consistent readings of the world (Zeki, 2009: 19).

Drawings are a macro illustration of the micro transformations found in the way that experience tempers perception. They are a culmination of the gestural iterations and calibrations of the artist’s worldview: as Noe put it ‘perceptual experience in whatever sensory modality, is a temporally extended process of exploration of the environment’ (Noe, 2000: 128). I am particularly interested in how an artist achieves the distance from the deeply embodied experience that enables them to conceptualize their drawing movements and how the interchange between embodiment and distance manifests as a poetic flux. I have described this ‘distance’ as the artist *also* being audience and I think we can find transformation from being to becoming in the liminal gap between the act and its realization.

I think about the birds that built the nests and about the nests being all around us, unlooked for and undiscovered. It is very absorbing. I start a drawing; have a pencil, eraser, and the nest and the empty surface – the clearing – and clunky, in the way, lighting and optical equipment.

I am using theatrical metaphors although aware that whilst drawing can be ‘performance’ it is not usually theatre. With no formal audience, it is not performance in the proscenium-arch, ‘forth wall’ sense, but more in keeping with Peter Brook’s ‘I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage’ (Brook, 1968: 11). Together with other aspects of dramatic theory, this provides a framework for how the concepts of presence/distance and being/becoming, align in drawing movements.

From Aristotle’s account of drama in ‘Poetics’ (c322 B.C.E.) to Gustav Freytag’s pyramidal version (Freytag, 1900), we have developed an understanding of dramatic structure as building a narrative arc. This usually begins from something being established and then revealed as untrue, gathers energy with a discovery of information and concludes with a cathartic revelation or destructive or painful action. These characteristics loosely map onto the way the drawing choreography moves an artist between perceptual positions or roles. The first movements of the head and body select and project a concept, establish the ‘narrative’ and then destabilize it through the new knowledge offered by varying viewing perspectives. Discovery is an important part of organizing marks and assimilating the feedback from the emerging image, and calamity is in the marks that destroy the ground, and in the realizations arrived at when re-viewing the drawing. Calamity is critical to achieving distance and role change. It is the punctum, the climax of the dance, and the point of least resistance where the world is permeable. It represents ‘the incapacity of our daily experience to live up to and satisfy the synthetic concepts that the brain generates’ and which are underpinned by perceptual constancies that according to Zeki tend towards a model of ‘perfection’ (Zeki, 2009: 49). It is here that the artist understands the borderlands between ourselves and everything other. This crisis arises from the tension between the autonomous movements and deliberate intentions; the drawing act becomes a site of conflict when collusion fails. This balance between intellectual impulse and its physical enactment has an underlying structure, as described here with the topology of dramatic structure, that dynamically processes self and other.

Part of finding and engaging this disconnect involves artists bodily journeying between the different perceptual view points of the drawing, evaluating and reevaluating, ‘distilling from the successive views, the essential character’ (Zeki, 1999: 80). This moving around presents view points equivalent to *actor in the world* and *audience of a version of the world*. Brook explains this detachment another way, saying ‘To commit every fibre of one’s being into an action may seem a form of total involvement—but the true artistic demand may be even more stringent than total involvement—and need fewer manifestations or quite different ones’ (Brook, 1968: 146).

I start to appreciate the different styles of bird dwelling and I love nests, I start a collection.

In drawing, the artist's somatic behavior mediates between states of involvement and detachment and this is a resisted/irresistible form of involvement.

It was my experience with physical theatre that first suggested it as a way to understand the value of drawing movements. Whilst I understood the traction that gave weight to a cognitive account of drawing processes, it seemed to me that in received wisdom, drawing was in some way divorced from the movements that made it and I was intrigued by this disjuncture. Yet, in the event my research still bought me back to a cognition driven model of drawing that systemized movements as a form of processing for instructions from the brain. I had reworked another version of disembodied drawing.

I am now looking at drawing movements as a distinctive feature of drawing, located in the sensory-somatic experience and expressed in the artist's physicality. If the drawing movements are a trace of the artist experiencing and defining the acquired concepts that frame our knowledge of the world (Zeki, 2009: 44- 45), and the drawn marks delineate the artist's encounter with the environment, plotted in their movements around the drawing space; then together, the movement and the marks enable the artist to 'catch themselves perceiving' as Noe eloquently put it (Noe, 2000: 128). This phrase - borrowed and out of context - expresses the way artists manage the distance between themselves and the artwork. Collectively, these meaningful drawing movements harness energy in a way that has a compelling physicality and purposefulness; moving the artist between being and becoming in a form of rehearsal with the dramatic structure intact and repeating. This passage, from the 'Empty Stage' resonates with this concept of the drawing process. 'In early theatre rehearsals, the impulse may get no further than a flicker—even if the actor wishes to amplify it all sorts of extraneous psychic psychological tensions can intervene—then the current is short-circuited, earthed...—in Grotowski's terminology the actors are 'penetrated'—penetrated by themselves' (Brook, 1968: 13).

I want to make the beauty and complexity of these nests known and it's tantalizingly difficult, I can see the nest (they can be surprisingly big) and as I draw I'm reaching for the details, the nest is made of different mosses, leaves, twigs, mud and stuff; this texture is important for explaining what a feat of engineering it is. Recording in this detail is challenging. I cannot see the drawing or I cannot see the nest. So out come the magnifiers.... 2, 3, 4 and the surface is lit up and together, me, the nest and the drawing are locked in a pool of light populated with circles of fat glass. We look like a Joseph Wright painting. I scratch away at the drawing, rebuilding the nest, fascinated, engrossed, hypnotized by the movement but without sight of the whole picture.

The motoric behavior in drawing is driven by psychophysical intent, interjected with a kind of autonomous or innate function that enables artists to watch themselves working; the drawing mark is register of this exchange, which I see as unannounced performance. Unknowingly coordinated and meaningful drawing movements are an onomatopoeic, ritualized gesture that enables artists to reconfigure their assumptions and keep the work energized and in the present.

This gyroscopic practice teeters at the place where the artist plays between being in the world and transforming it; these edge places suspend time or truncate it, expand to hold horizons and contract to a sliver, like a barely-there moon. Walking this line between inside and outside is like crossing a high wire. We hold our breath and gasp with wonder when we see someone get across the border. They have become something.

I move the optical instruments and look. It's not a nest, it's a heart, it's a dark cloud, it's a smudge, an organic mass, it's a blurry mess. Looking again through the improvised panopticon, I can see details and the bird's sublime design. As a working account of the nest, the drawing is oblique, like a cloudy night sky or some murky depths. I need help to see what's in it so I show it to other people to find out what it's like without the optics and it turns out they like looking at the nests, but they really like looking at them through a magnifying glass. The glass confers a sense of gravitas or playfulness? Makes looking a performance and the viewer part of the performance? Activates looking and gives the viewer a feeling of ownership over the views they select, personal as they are to them? And for me they amplify the experience and mechanically pull me back and forwards out of the drawing space, my focus oscillates and I feel as through I'm tracking or stalking the image as it comes in and out of my vision. The no distance between the drawing ground and me has expanded: it drowns out the outside but it's free of white noise, it takes time but none seems to pass, I balance while I am falling, it is the tightrope.

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