



Drawing and Visualisation Research

BLIND DRAWING: A DISRUPTION OF PERFECTIONISM

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Blind drawing is an exercise based in phenomenological and experiential pedagogy which I do with students in every architecture design Studio I teach no matter the year level of their education. It is drawing blindfolded with charcoal and dry pastel on large sheets of paper using a guided conversation to evoke sensory experiences and abstract thought. It is a transformative exercise that changes students' perceptions of drawing, image-making, representation of concepts, and offers alternatives to how architecture design Studio can perform. Removing outward-looking visual connections turns the students' attention to inward perception and the imagination. These poetic drawings are embodied energy drawn out from the subconscious. This style of blind drawing is a disruption of perfectionism and establishes an embodied attitude for the design Studio by breaking through the fear of mark making and the intellectual self-criticality of 'getting it right'.

Published in *TRACEY* | journal

Presence

July 2016

[www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/
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INTRODUCTION

Blind Drawing is an exercise I developed during Master of Architecture design Studios I taught at the University of Melbourne, Australia in 2012. It came about after one student said she was unable to draw. It turned out she was just scared to when faced with the emptiness and perfection of the clean white sheet of drawing paper. She felt incapable of making 'worthy' marks upon it. I discovered, by listening to other students, that this was not an isolated case and was the result of high-achieving architecture students feeling they were not adequately 'trained' or proficient in hand-drawing to be able to make 'correct' representational drawings of 'excellence'. (Note 1) This student wrote in her Reflective Journal at the end of the semester: 'I can't believe it's taken three years to go back to what I used to do weekly at VCA. I know final year students who have probably never drawn like this before, and as a result, their sketches are pretty lifeless, tight and boring....' (Skillington 2012) There is no such thing as a 'correct' hand-drawing; they act as an aid to communication to express an idea or feeling more strongly or not. (Figure 1)



FIGURE 1. MELIKŞAH UNIVERSITY, TURKEY. 2015.

Another important aspect contributing to this condition of perfectionism are the functions of architecture CAD programmes. Drawings made by hand can be casual, rough, and ill-defined mark making, whereas drawings performed in CAD can be depersonalised and are not embodied with the mistakes of one's humanity. The 'perfect' drawing techniques of CAD do not have 'errors' of line making, casual disorder, or the unexpected – the smudge of a hard-pressed piece of charcoal, the lingering erasures of a dirty rubber, the traces of over-drawing, or the quirky bodily gesture. The imperfection of viscerally responsive mark making offers the 'happy accident' or can indicate a certain ephemeral or material quality that may take you on a journey of the imagination. (Figure 2) Professor Peter Downton, in his book *Design Research*, says: 'Drawings are an outcome of a productive process, drawing. One is an activity, the other an object that minimally records the process; confusing them, blurring the distinction, leads to errors of understanding.' (Downton 2004, 102).



FIGURE 2. GEDIZ UNIVERSITY, TURKEY. 2015.

The form of blind drawing I am discussing is not a ‘learning to draw’ exercise that would be offered at a night class or art club. Many of these blind drawing exercises try to re-present reality in the form of a portrait, part of the body (often a hand), or object as contours, shapes, and volumes, that is, drawing a thing without looking at it. (Figure 3) My approach is different to those most commonly understood as blind drawings. The final drawings are not the objective of this exercise. It is the physicality of presence within the process, the release of an inner energy, and the meditative concentration acting as a transformative process which remains at the fore. Author Thomas Moore states that in order to be creative: ‘I need silence to hear the intuitions that pass by, like angels on their vaporous footpath, making soft, barely perceptible sounds. Rarely does a new idea come along orchestrated for trumpets.’ (Moore 1997, 105) The blind drawing I do with students has the purpose of looking inward, not outward, to identify sensory arisings. In architecture Studio it establishes the experiential qualities by letting go of the intellect of correctness by focusing on the sensory perceptions of past and present experience; either as a mnemonic or by drawing out from an immediate response. It roots students into my Studio process of subtle awareness and embodiment; a way of teaching which has been lost to haste and the digitisation of product.

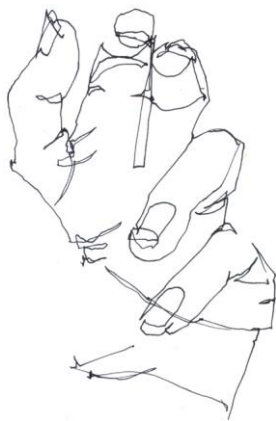


FIGURE 3. KRISTIN HILDENBRANDT. BLIND CONTOUR DRAWING OF A HAND

PHENOMENOLOGY

In the immortal words of Eugen Fink, phenomenology is ‘wonder in the face of the world.’ (Merleau-Ponty 2007, 61) My design Studios are predicated on phenomenology and experiential learning which underpin the development of cross-disciplinary exercises during the semester and the approach to student’s individual design projects. Sensory perception, as it relates to phenomenology through our body and mind, is the direct method for

connecting with oneself and the material world in which we exist. The phenomenological tradition asks us for close observation, which may seem an odd statement regarding blind drawing, yet the intimacy of this exercise encourages the student to make closer observation of the Self as the producer of the unseen drawings. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), considered the father of phenomenology, says: 'To be a subject is to be in the mode of being aware of oneself.' (Zahavi 2003, 87) This is the foundation for placing oneself as the subject of all of one's sensory perception and psychological interpretation directly within the realm of the Self.

Pablo Moncayo, a Masters student of my Silence Studio at Taliesin the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture in America, wrote in his Reflective Journal: 'The Silence Studio was an amazing class that really opened my eyes to the nature of perception and the way we see things. I learned things I never thought I was going to learn at an architecture school such as how to perceive a space through our senses. This class has completely changed my way of looking at architecture. The more I was discovering about our senses and how they work, the deeper it started to get, this class really pushed my boundaries and challenged me to read a lot about perception and how our senses make us comprehend the world. There were a few nights that I went to sleep like at 4am just thinking about my perception, I was waking up at 3am to take pictures of the Studio to see the difference and understand the feeling of the space. I've never done that for any other class, I've never felt this passionate about trying to learn something that is very interesting.' (Moncayo 2013)

Phenomenology describes our direct contact with the objective and non-objective world; that which is material, immaterial and ephemeral. The difference between us and a blunt object is that we, as sentient beings, have a neurological system that brings us into sensory contact with the world through our body. The touching hand is our connection to all that is the world, our skin the medium of our physical contact. Our hands are the tools with which we make, create, devise, and destroy; they are our means of survival in a hostile world. When we touch the world, it touches us back. We exist, according to French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as both the toucher and the touched. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 133)

What is a visible thing? This is a question Merleau-Ponty asks himself, particularly in his well-known book *The Visible and the Invisible*. The visible is that which is sensible and tangible to us, it is the mind's perception of a thing existing in reality; 'the visible is one

continuous fabric,' says Alphonso Lingis. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, lvi.) If we can touch a thing does that make it visible, and if it is not visible can we then not touch it? If I were blind this does not negate my ability to touch that which I cannot see, yet my mind could still perceive and comprehend a physical object through its tactility. Philosopher Jean-Luc Marion suggests the hidden becomes an equally valid phenomenal experience as is the revealed, in that, we understand that if something is hidden it must therefore have the potential to reveal itself, and vice versa. (Marion 2008, 7) Expectation, therefore, pre-empts revelation. As a result of the elaboration of phenomenology as theory and practice in the Studio a Masters student wrote: 'I appreciate how the theory of phenomenology is weaved into every discussion of our work ... being able to see such value in the pieces we create and to pick up on nuances that we have not noticed is especially necessary for the morale of the Studio as well as to hone our sensitivity in operating within the framework of the theory (i.e. understanding what does it mean to 'practice phenomenology').' (Leng 2012)

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential is what is specifically experienced, being attentively aware of that experience, and how it is translated phenomenographically as a learning outcome. Educational theorist David A. Kolb says that learning invokes the 'integrated functioning of the total organism.' (Kolb 1984, 31) We *are* experiences. It is by thinking, knowing, and acting that we become experiential learners. Elizabeth Ellsworth, Professor of Media Studies, makes a strong claim for sensational pedagogies as 'possible experiences of thinking,' which 'address us as bodies whose movements and sensations are crucial to our understandings.' (Ellsworth 2005, 27) Experiential learning is one of pause, reflection, and evaluation of the activities you have undertaken, their meaning, the success or failure of these actions, the result of the outcome, and how you could have done this differently to achieve a more satisfactory result. All acts are purposeful and directed toward an object or condition of being, and in return the object presents itself directly to our senses. Whereas, the blind drawings described in this article are the manifestation of inner experiences and revelations and are not the focus of the exercise. We do not determine the presentation of an object to us merely by our existence, material objects exist with their full array of ever-changing phenomenal attributes intact and ready for reception. However, in the blind drawing exercises it is the reflection upon the experience which is valuable not the drawing as a crafted object.

In the early 1970s conceptual artist William Anastasi began to create large blind drawings the earliest of which were made in silence, or while listening to music; he said these works are ‘as much callisthenic as they are meditative.’ (Neff) It is the distinctive phenomena of presence that characterises much of his work. Anastasi works in a ‘blind’ state to make drawings that are bodily expressions of sound, music, or train rides, and responses to his immediate environment. There are times when he puts himself into states of sensory deprivation, by wearing sound-cancelling headphones for example, to allow his physical presence to perform drawings. In Anastasi’s instinctive response to movement and to sound he identifies himself as ‘their instrument’. Philosopher Max Picard says: ‘In silence, therefore, man stands confronted once again by the original beginning of all things: everything can begin again, everything can be re-created.’ (Picard 1988, 22) An exhibition statement by Gering and Lopez Gallery in New York stated: ‘By attempting to exclude his sense from the artistic process, Anastasi acts as a passive conduit through which Art passes. [He] finds chance much more intriguing than volition, and has always thought the aesthetic result of his work fared better when he did not look at the drawing.’ ‘Among other things, the remarkable achievement of this deeply compressed expression of presence snaps us into the moment, as we witness its essential self, something like looking in a mirror to watch ourselves breathe.’ (Gering and López) (Figure 4).



FIGURE 4. WILLIAM ANASTASI. ‘ONE HOUR BLIND DRAWING.’ PENCIL ON PAPER, 150 X 274.3 CM. PARIS 2015. COURTESY GALERIE JOCELYN WOLFF. PHOTO: FRANÇOIS DOURY.

In architecture education there has been a dramatic and swift shift towards the theorised and digitised. Architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa says: ‘Despite the profusion of materials, forms and goods, our industrialized cultural environment seems to be increasingly impoverished in terms of experience and feeling.’ (Pallasmaa 1987, 22) And Martin Heidegger, in his essay ‘The Thing’, reinforced that science and technology were still

inadequate to assist people to make sense of their worldly experiences. (Sharr 2007, 24) It was his theory of nearness or 'coming-into-the-nearness-of-distance' that is essential to man's understanding of his lifeworld. (Sharr 2007, 23) Blind drawing concentrates senses, emotions, physicality, and action into a confined and contained experiential space; it is not merely a drawing but an event.

Loosely defined hand-made marks can never be affected in a CAD programme as it performs lines of perfection. Because of this students of architecture feel they are unable to compete with a machine that makes perfect lines. What students seem to forget is that the machine does not think about the lines, and does not express itself in these lines, nor does it perform a physical, embodied action of gracious im-perfections. Life is a messy business; we do not live in a world of precision and absolutes, it is one of errors and humorous mistakes. John Ruskin once said: 'Imperfection is in some way essential to all that we know of life. It is the sign of life in a mortal body, that is to say, of a process and change. Nothing that lives is, or can be, rigidly perfect; part of it is decaying, part nascent.' (Ruskin 1980, 238) A disconnection with nature takes place in a dis-integrated digital world. Students become less aware of the intimate inter-relationships between one's body and sensory perception, of man and nature, or ecology and landscape. Pablo Moncayo, in his reflective journal, wrote: 'Doing a lot of hands on exercises, experimenting and observing the results of each and every exercise really helped me realize the way I perceive things and also the way people around me look at the world.' (Moncayo 2013) Therefore a re-emergence of experiential learning and phenomenographic practice helps to shift the focus for students to acts of the body existing in reality for which they will be responsible as emerging architects.

THE PROCESS

The blind drawing exercise requires big chunks of charcoal and chalky pastels, masking tape, a blindfold, lots of A2 paper of any quality, and space on the table in front of you to move your arms about and draw; either sitting or standing. (Figure 5) Because the students are not able to 'see' their piece of paper, how their hands are moving, or the result of their actions, this means they are not able to judge or edit their drawing traces. The students are not told what the exercise will be beforehand. Thus they are not able to pre-think their ideas or try to work out what they should do to get the exercise 'right'. This is a guided exercise meant to be experienced 'in the moment'.



FIGURE 5. ABDULLAH GÜL UNIVERSITY, TURKEY. 2014.

Proprioception is the body's sense of the relative position of its parts and the strength of effort being employed in their movement. So when blindfolded and asked to draw it necessitates healthy proprioception to be able to move the charcoal and activate the drawing without watching your hands perform the activity. Similarly when standing and moving whilst drawing proprioception allows you to be able to direct your bodily actions, press firmly or touch lightly, to crush or scrape the charcoal to achieve different sensations which become a variety of appearances on the paper. This is the same skill that allows you to walk in darkness without falling over. Therefore it is this innate sense of our body in space and how it moves and performs which permits us to express our embodiment through the act of drawing while blindfolded. (Figure 6).



FIGURE 6. GEDIZ UNIVERSITY, TURKEY. 2015.

Describing some past experiences of blind drawing allows me to ‘draw’ a picture of the process. From an initial, but brief, moment of apprehension, the students are asked to ‘draw’ a tree; not the image of a tree, but the sense of a tree. In this way they have to engage their imagination and memories and just let their hands make marks that ‘feel’ like a tree. However, most first drawings do look tree-like until the students relax and free up as the process develops. (Figure 7) These marks infer the sensuality of wind, rough bark, soft leaves, dappled light, creaking branches, or winter bareness. One very important factor of the blind drawing exercise is for students not to draw their presumed image of the stated object, that is, a picture that looks like the shape of a tree as a child might draw it, that is, as a contour or form; remembering that this exercise is not a representation of an object in reality. (Figures 8, 9) Prompts I use for other drawings such as storms and mosquitoes are described further in the next paragraphs.

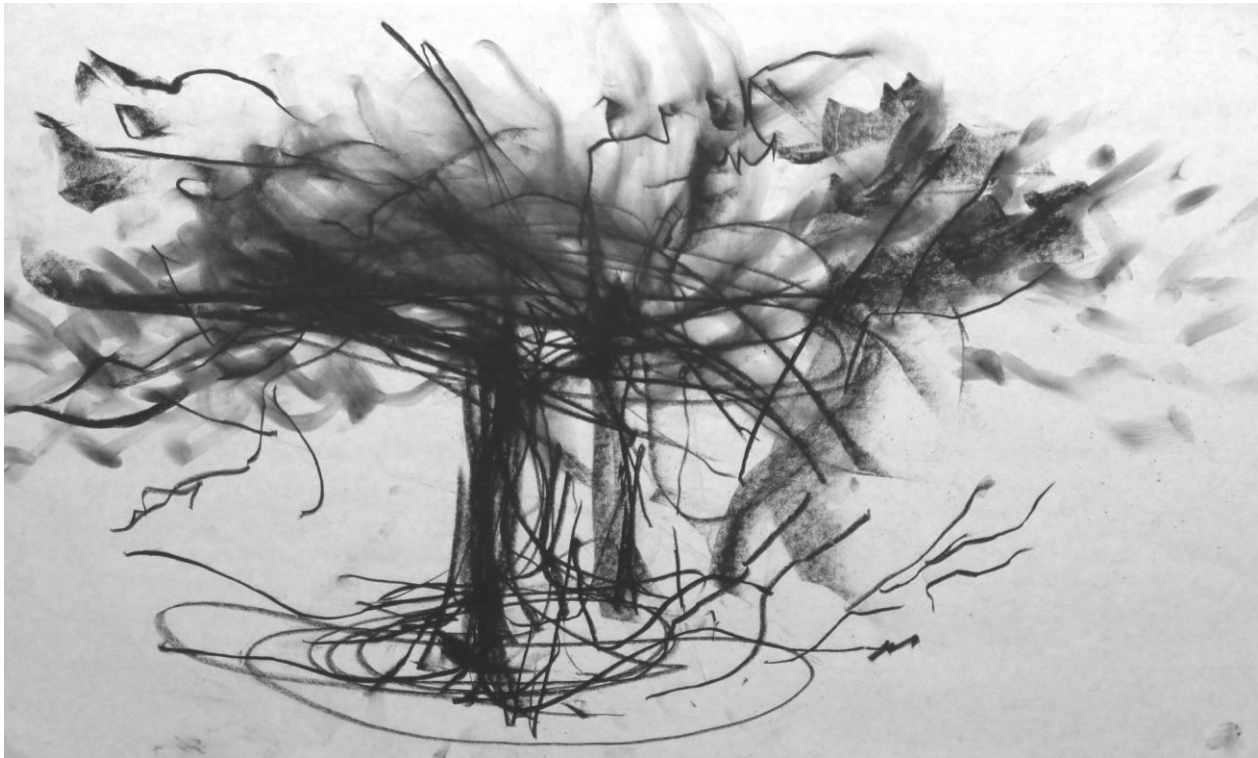


FIGURE 7. TALIESIN, THE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, AMERICA. 2013.



FIGURE 8. TALIESIN, THE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, AMERICA. 2013.



FIGURE 9. UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA. 2012.

When I was a Guest Scholar at Taliesin an impromptu opportunity arose for me to run the blind drawing exercise with a group of high school students from Chicago who were visiting for a week. After starting with the 'tree' drawing I then described to the students, whilst blindfolded, a storm which had raged around the landscape the day before. I asked them to draw the energy, maybe fear, sounds, light, darkness, the rain, of thunder and lightning Also during this stormy week it was very hot and humid during the day so I used some potent adjectives to describe the savagery of mosquitoes at that time of year. The description was to induce a strong sense of physicality and bodily sensation in the students. One girl shuddered, scrunching her face and twisting her body.

These drawings, in two parts, resulted in heavy expressions of the body with hard, vigorous uses of charcoal and pastel, heavy layers, and some very blotchy, itchy looking drawings. The violence of this exercise meant that paper was torn, chunks of charcoal smashed, with pieces and dust scattered about the room. (Figures 10, 11) Some students stood in front of

the table and moved their bodies around quite vigorously whilst holding a piece of charcoal in one hand and pastel in the other. Another student, who was sitting, gradually slumped, her head almost resting on the table with her arms dragging across the sheet of paper. Her whole demeanour seemed trance-like, as if she was channelling the weight and threat of the storm. Watching this student draw was a powerful experience of how someone (so young) was embodying her sensory memory. The students drew several versions of each idea without stopping to look at each one before they started another drawing.



FIGURE 10. MELIKŞAH UNIVERSITY, TURKEY. 2015.

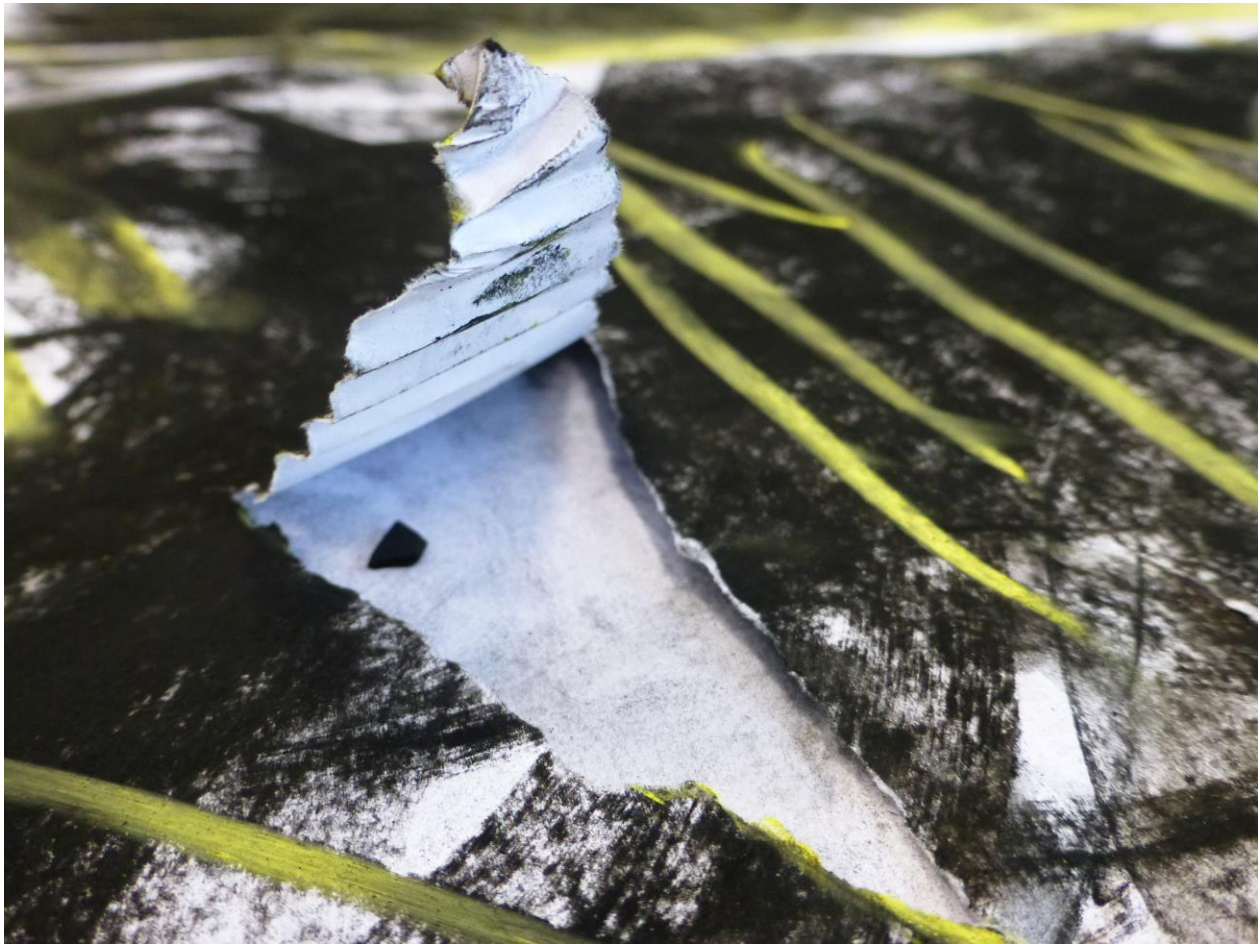


FIGURE 11. MELIKŞAH UNIVERSITY, TURKEY. 2015.

A few days later the feedback from these students and their teachers was that blind drawing was an exciting way of drawing and that from then on the students' drawings were more free and less intellectually controlled. One teacher said that she noticed a significant difference in the students' subsequent drawings after the blind drawing exercise in the way they approached the process of drawing at the beginning of the week compared to those towards the end. This teacher said the students seemed less concerned about being in control of their drawing and were more interested in how the idea was expressed. (Engineer and Juarez 2013) I have used this same imagery to great effect with students from other universities. (Figures 12, 13).



FIGURE 12. GEDIZ UNIVERSITY, TURKEY. 2015.



FIGURE 13. GEDIZ UNIVERSITY, TURKEY. 2015.

For the final stage of Blind Drawing I always ask the students to draw 'suddenness'. I explain to them that this is a drawing which has to come from the body; that which is inside expressing itself outwards by making the invisible visible. This exercise comes after about an hour of drawing when the students seem committed to the process and have given themselves over to being in the moment. Before the students start drawing, and whilst blindfolded, I briefly talk about sensory awareness and for the students to be more tuned into their surroundings; the sounds, bodily sensations, the tactility of materials and, possibly, smells. Without hesitation, and often without questioning the meaning of 'suddenness' the students continue to draw. (Figure 14) For many their body position changes quite obviously during this aspect of the exercise. Some students slump across the page and become seemingly mesmerized as though the drawing is being 'drawn' out from them, whereas others stand up with legs set wide apart and make vigorous movements while drawing with both hands simultaneously. Suddenness is not an object; it is a subjective expression or realisation. Therefore the students have to 'feel' their way through this process and allow themselves to make marks which are an immediate response to sensory perceptions or subconscious arisings. Unlike drawing the sense of a tree, which can initiate images in the mind, it is very difficult to attach a drawable image to 'suddenness'. Some students said later that the drawings seem to come from inner sensations rather than imagined pictorial information. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard comments that one needs '... to put space, all space outside, in order that meditating being might be free to think.' (Bachelard 1994, 231)



FIGURE 14. UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA. 2012.

The progression from a known object (a tree), to states of weather and physical discomfort (storms and mosquitoes), to a pure abstract thought (suddenness) developed deeper and more intimate understanding of Self during the process of drawing. Drawing was the medium and the student was the instrument. Connor Bingham, a student of the Silence Studio at Taliesin, wrote about his experience of the blind drawing exercise and the subsequent Photography exercise in his Reflective Journal: ‘The processes of blind drawing and photography are both methods that push me past these preliminary decisions that I am so keen on retaining. Often when I am presented with a project or problem my mind works rapidly and I feel as though I can visualize my initial response within a couple of minutes. Silence Studio taught me to simply close my eyes and process. I return to Boyd K. Packer’s quote which is a thought I have held close for years: “If all you know is what you see with your natural eyes and hear with your natural ears, you will not know very much.” I learned I needed to momentarily disable my superficial senses and utilize the deeper, more impactful sense, feeling. I connected directly to the emotions and atmospheric qualities of

spaces. Silence Studio taught me to lead with these attributes in mind when I design. My hope is that I will be able to adapt in the future and not be limited by styles of working that preceded the course.’ (Bingham 2013)

Usually the students make about ten to twelve drawings or more during the blind drawing session. After each group of drawings the students are asked to walk around the room to quietly look at each other’s work. An important aspect of blind drawing is that students are not to judge their own or others’ drawings and are not to make interpretive comments or to regard the drawings as good or bad. At the end of the drawing session we never discuss or analyse the drawings. They are put away and we continue with the Studio in general. My insistence that there is no discussion of the quality of the drawings or trying to interpret them is to deflect any intellectualisation attached to this free and expressive process; it is the personal experience which needs to be reflected upon by the student individually. Therefore, the students who tend to be strongly self-critical are not given the opportunity to undermine their performance or production. One student commented in his Reflective Journal: ‘It was a good idea to not have to explain the drawings because most of the time when things are done subconsciously the idea doesn’t register until much later when you begin to draw the connections.’ (Thor 2012)

Surprisingly, during the one and a half hour drawing exercise, many students in their subsequent blind drawings become more liberal and abstract in their expression, possibly due to the fact that they have made some strong and bold marks without actually ‘seeing’ the drawing as it progressed. It is pure energy, from mind imagery to hand action, without the flow being disrupted by intellectual preconception or the mind-chatter of performance anxiety. This freedom of physical expression which is ultimately visual, a drawing, releases an expressiveness for many students that is as surprising to them as it is to me.

CONCLUSION

The blind drawing exercise of making marks disrupts students from judging their drawing abilities, and is a significant turning point in the early phase of a fourteen week Studio. From this point many students actively take to drawing as a means of expressing their ideas throughout the semester. It is a transformative exercise that changes students’ perceptions of drawing, image-making, representation of concepts, and offers alternatives

to how architecture design Studio can perform by making them more physically present and engaged in their work.

Notable bodies of hand-drawn work have been produced during my architecture design Studios where I have introduced blind drawing. This, in conjunction with a phenomenological and experiential approach to teaching and learning, dramatically changes students' expectations of developing conceptual work and how they represent it. Drawing gives them the tools and confidence to integrate this with CAD, Photoshop, and other media with easy cohesion. Their final projects express a depth of thinking, discovery, and physical integration unlike so many standardised presentations in other Studios.

A Masters student made this comment: 'The focus on the physicality of drawing was made very real in blind drawing. ... It is in the process of thinking that you can slow down a pre-ordained end result, and find you have arrived somewhere else entirely. ... something about changing direction or turning a corner allowed me to start thinking more widely about my deep concern.' (Carolane 2012)

As time passes in the semester students rarely say they cannot draw by accepting that they could draw if they did not make a big deal of it. This exercise also makes the students question 'what is a drawing?' and particularly makes them realise that a drawing is only an expression of a concept made visible which can be done in a few minutes as a way of getting an idea on paper; it does not have to be a perfect perspective or an exquisite render. The feeling of the idea can sometimes be more expressive in a quick drawing than the laboured precision of exactness. Hand drawing expresses ideas without thinking in technological terms; it can be a rapid expression of an immediate thought, or become a meditative exercise drawn from the subconscious; drawing is a phenomenographic act of embodiment and presence. This confidence in drawing translates into work that is well-crafted yet humanising in some students' final architecture design projects.

Blindness helps the students to 'see' in a way they had not before. The pressure of perfection is greatly lessened and the emphasis on self-expression and the sensual contact of being present is reinforced in other areas of physical Studio work through an openness of thought process during conversations, less judgement of what is right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or not, and a willingness to take risks and experiment. Each challenge of

process, expression, and reflection is another step towards confidence and defining the students' personal concepts towards architecture.

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Note: VCA – Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne. Katie had previously completed a Bachelor's degree at VCA before starting her Master of Architecture degree at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

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FIGURES

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