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## MAPPING THE COMMON GESTURE

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The *Common Gesture* collaborative drawings are created through a series of directives that cultivate drawn relationships between body, material, and surface, between visual layers of gestures, signs, and marks, and between individual drawing participants and their collective presence. As an experiment in guided marking, graphic gaming, and shared creative labour, the drawings investigate both the limits and the potential of orchestrated group drawing. In the context of phenomenological discourse, the *Common Gesture* is a site of intersubjective drawing experience, wherein the image is figured and refigured according to the spatial rhythms produced by the material gestures and design strategies of the makers as enacted within, and emerging from, the drawing itself. This essay charts the evolution of a *Common Gesture* drawing developed at the TRACEY Conference *Drawing || Phenomenology: tracing lived experience through drawing* held at Loughborough University in September 2017.

## Mapping the *Common Gesture*

The *Common Gesture* is a large-scale collaborative drawing process designed to cultivate play between randomness and structure, between visual, material, and conceptual layers, and, perhaps most vitally, between people, their gestures, graphic symbols, and embodied ideas. This process-driven workshop affords insight into how drawing may be considered as a form of phenomenology, one in which participants' direct physical and dialogic experiences with one another are graphically traced within the auto-figurative space of the drawing. Meaning is derived through the drawing of the thing itself, as it evolves within its specific time, place, and circumstance of creation.

Here, I will consider how the *Common Gesture* drawing process lends material form to the questions posed by the conveners of the 2017 TRACEY Conference, *Drawing || Phenomenology: tracing lived experience through drawing*, queries central to the larger concern of how drawing is phenomenological: "When viewing drawings, is it possible to trace the movement of a drawer's mind and body? How can drawing trace the physicality of spaces? Is materiality a necessity in drawing the trace of lived experience? Are all drawing processes phenomenological?" Each iteration of the *Common Gesture* drawing affords insight into phenomenological attributes of drawing as both action and object, while at the same time suggesting that drawing works as a site of multi-directional philosophical inquiry, a physical space in which concepts may, if only fleetingly, come to light in material and embodied form. The *Common Gesture* drawing enacted at the 2017 TRACEY Conference provides a prime instance of how drawing process and outcome alike can embody multiple modalities of marking, ideation, and auto-figuration.

While acknowledging the centrality of the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in considering the relationships between phenomenology and drawing, I find the meditations of philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer proving equally vital to my evolving understanding of the experiential work being done by, and within, the *Common Gesture* drawings. Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology, while centered on language and its interpretation as an act of meaning creation, bears strong relevance when one imagines collaborative drawing as a kind of conversation, held in the language of bodily gesture and mark.

*The dialogical character of his philosophy is such that Gadamer always interprets the matters themselves as the events which occur 'between' people and their tradition - the common understandings which emerge in a dialogue and which go beyond the intentions of the speakers. A genuine dialogue makes truth manifest beyond the subject: 'a genuine conversation is never the one we wanted to conduct.'* (Moran 249).

*It is a phenomenology of understanding, of sense-making through the process, the dialectic, the conversation between participant-actors and the symbols they use to communicate... In this kind of conversation, the understanding reached is 'neither mine nor yours and thus exceeds the subjective beliefs of the partners in discussion.'* (Moran 250).

Both Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer emphasize, in varying degrees, the dialectical nature of phenomenological experience, the ongoing interplay and influence between environment and being, between subject and object, bodies of flesh, and flesh of the world. It is this sense of *the between-ness* that is at the heart of the eponymous impulse to "map the common gesture" in this essay, lending

attention to the relationships that emerge and evolve among, between, and because of, bodies, minds, marks, and materials working in concert through a semi-structured inscriptive practice.

A range of definitions of *mapping* operate here: “A diagram or collection of data showing the spatial arrangement or distribution of something over an area”; “To associate (a group of elements or qualities) with an equivalent group”; or, from mathematics, “An operation that associates each element of a given set (the domain) with one or more elements of a second set (the range)” (Oxford Dictionaries). Similarly, the choice of *common* references myriad aspects of the project, and resonates with almost every definition of the word. One sees the *prevalence* of the marks, whether the frottage-generated dots numbering in the thousands or the lines connecting them, the *simplicity* of geometric forms and the adoption of a *basic* gestured vocabulary of spiral, square, circle, triangle, or the deployment of *familiar* graphic images of eyes, hearts, and hands. A trademark of the drawings is an often-*unsophisticated* mark, a quality due in part to the material used (wax crayon), the time constraints imposed (often strict), and the prior artistic training of the participants (sometimes little to none). The marks are *shared by, coming from, or done by more than one person*, and the drawing’s production relies upon *collective and communal* marking. Choices about how to proceed with the drawing are made by *popular* agreement, with a majority decision pointing the way forward. The paper surface itself is equivalent to *a piece of open land for public use*, and, in at least one instance early on, succumbed to a tragically overworked fate (Oxford Dictionaries). Finally, *gesture* is cast in multiple roles as well, as “a movement of part of the body, especially a hand or the head, to express an idea or meaning” (Oxford Dictionaries), but also in the drawing-specific context of the line that works to capture the essence of that which is being observed or expressed.

## Project Background

I designed and launched the *Common Gesture* collaborative drawing process in 2009, and have facilitated eighteen workshops to date in the US and UK. It emerged directly out of my studio practice, one driven by large-scale recursive organic patterning, mixed-media gestural marking, and social interactivity and engagement. As a collection of layers of inscribed gestures, debated aesthetic decisions, and communal symbol-making, the *Common Gesture* drawing process offers insight into how groups may generate a shared and internally-referential language of mark. Participants devise graphical games and strategize with partners and teams as they seek ways to create dynamic compositions, a sense of visual space, and color harmonies within the physical arena of the paper. During production, we discuss how body, mark, and material work in concert to create images that are imbued with intention and, by extension, meaning. Every drawing shares a similar set of rules of execution, which results in drawings that are nearly identical in process yet quite different in visual outcome, each a non-linear document of collaborative movement, marking, gaming, and choice. The drawings provide a structure to democratically and experientially arrive at a vocabulary of drawn symbols and patterns that can be accessed by each drawing participant, a network of marks that replicate and evolve in relation, and in response, to one another. Understood as a whole, a *Common Gesture* drawing is an auto-figurative record of shared bodily, conceptual, and material experience and, by its very nature, phenomenological. In “The Common Gesture: Drawing in Relation,” included in *Gestures of Seeing in Film, Video, and Drawing* (Gronstad et al, 2017), I presented a method for producing these drawings executed through both aleatory and intentional means, using simple and highly adaptive drawn gestures of sign. The eighteen collaborative drawings executed over the past decade were each created under a variety of circumstances, in periods of time ranging from three to twenty hours, in spaces from cavernous galleries

to intimate classrooms, working with as few as twelve to over two hundred participants, from college students claiming no artistic skill to professionally-trained artists.

The drawing unfolds through a series of guided directives. In each directive, participants are asked to generate a particular kind of mark, to develop and play a graphical game, or to discuss, advocate for, and replicate a particular pattern of symbols or colors. Makers are encouraged to adhere to directives as closely as possible, while embracing the possibilities within each rule. Conversation, deliberation, and reflection occur between each of the latter stages of production, as we analyze the drawing and determine by majority vote how the formal design and conceptual logic of the drawing will proceed, based upon what is currently manifest on the page and the capabilities of the materials at hand. Each *Common Gesture* drawing is executed on a large roll of black paper, with the smallest dimensions of 5'x20' up to 11'x40', using white wax China markers and color and black oil pastels as the only marking materials.

While I facilitate the overall drawing process, the decision-making that determines the specific form and content belongs wholly to the participants, yielding results that are unique to each iteration of the drawing. It is vital to have drawing unfold in time, through physical drawing experience and engaged deliberation as it occurs between participants, as opposed to showing a finished work and saying this is the objective toward which the group should be working. In the life of the drawing, there is an overall movement from visual chaos to some kind of overall compositional order. The question pervades of what is gained and what is lost in this movement, and recognizing into what graphical habits and impulses our drawing bodies may default.

### Directive One: The Dot Matrix

Each drawing starts by covering a hard floor surface with thousands of grains of rice and the contents of participants' pockets, typically coins or keys, anything that can lay flat and not be damaged if stepped upon. These randomly-distributed elements are then completely covered by the roll of black paper. Each participant is given a white wax China marker to break into small pieces. Using the flat edge only, and working on hands and knees, the goal is to rub with enough pressure to bring forth the textures of the elements beneath the page, creating a frottage drawing of the rice and coins that fills the entirety of the page. Participants may alter the speed and pressure of the mark and the expanse of their reach. They may layer upon on another person's set of marks or break the crayon into smaller parts to change the width of the mark. Given that the wax material is indelible, and the paper quite sturdy, participants can walk or sit on any part of the drawing without risk to the image. If working with an 11'x20' page, one must physically walk or crawl upon the drawing to cover the entirety of the surface. Marks are often more concentrated closer to the edges, reflecting early hesitation to mount the page as a way to expand one's physical reach.

In this first phase, the drawing approach is workman-like and proceeds quickly, as drawing on hands and knees can be physically uncomfortable (adapted positions are available for those who cannot work on the ground). The bodily gesture in this phase is one of kneeling, crawling, and sweeping the wax crayon, finding the limited number of ways to make the mark, and often colliding with other bodies performing same action. The resulting marks are chaotic and display little to no sense of organization. There is some slight differentiation and variation of mark quality, mainly due to physical pressure and speed of marking. Material and body are the main factors in play: the China marker that is quickly worn down through abrasion, the black paper, the frottage elements under paper, and the kinetic actions of

crawling, stretching, and rubbing. Participants often observe that the initial page of marks resembles a star field, with thousands of white dots in a black expanse, linked by gauzy traces.

### Directive Two: The Laying of Lines, The Tying of Knots

After the frottage material is removed from beneath the marked page, participants take up positions on the edges of the paper, directly across from a partner situated on the opposite side. The instruction is to chart a path through the thousands of marks using a line that meanders from dot to dot, always moving toward a dot that is located spatially in front of the previous, traveling from paper's edge to the middle. The aim is for each player's line to intersect their partner's line at the same dot, near the middle of the page. When players encounter each other's lines, they then are asked to "draw a knot", however the partners choose to interpret the structure and meaning of a knot. After drawing a knot of line, each drawer's line then proceeds back to the paper's edge, following a different path from the first. This sequence is repeated two and a half times within the range of bodily reach, with each round establishing a different chain of connected dots, and coming to rest near the center of the page with one's partner, five lines later. There are a fairly limited number of ways this can be executed, yet the variety of mark that emerges is greater than in the first phase, depending on each drawer's individual choices around pressure, speed, angularity of line, and strategy for which dots to connect. The process produces an organic gridiron of meandering, loosely parallel, lines, with a chain of bundled, knotted, marks distributed roughly through the center of the page.



FIGURES 1 AND 2: DIRECTIVES ONE AND TWO, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

### Directive Three: Invent Game. Draw, Teach, Repeat.

Once paired drawers meet in the middle a third time, they must then devise a game to be played between them that builds upon the framework of existing marks and lines. The game must be predicated on a set of articulatable rules and involve inscribing marks on the paper surface that layer upon the existing graphic landscape. It can be based on established games, mazes, or puzzles that involve pictorial or written language, and "winning" is not a necessary condition. There is no spatial limitation as to where the game can be played on the page, but it must remain within the physical boundaries of the

paper. Each player abides within the drawing and the traces of process; the gaming of the page through drawing both opens the potential of the marks and limits the play to what is suggested by drawing and drawers alike. The game is played for approximately fifteen minutes, generating traces of its playing, *through* its playing. The relationship to Gadamer’s theory of connection between the human act of play, the experience of a work of art, and phenomenological notions of auto-figuration are perhaps most present in this act. In “The Play of Art,” speaking to artistic creation, he states:

*For in human fabrication as well, the decisive moment of technical skill does not consist in the fact that something of extraordinary utility or superfluous beauty has emerged. It consists rather in the fact that human production of this kind can set itself various tasks and proceed according to plans that are characterized by an element of free variability. Human production encounters an enormous variety of ways of trying things out, rejecting them, succeeding, or failing. ‘Art’ begins precisely there, where we are able to do otherwise. Above all, we are talking about art and artistic creation in the preeminent sense, the decisive thing is not the emergence of a product, but the fact that the product has a special nature of its own. It intends something, and yet it is not what it intends. (Gadamer 125).*

At the conclusion of fifteen minutes, each pair of drawers must join with an adjacent pair to negotiate how their two separate games may be combined into one. Rules evolve, emerge, drop away, or are reconfigured to allow the foursome to play the new drawing game together for another fifteen to twenty minutes. Here, the marks are often at their most liberated, complex, and expressive. The games generate geometric figures, elaborate visual patterns, bodily outlines, scrawled signatures, renderings of realistic subject matter, combinations of letters and numbers, all manifesting as self-contained logics of play. Play is continued until the surface is layered with the visual traces of collective gaming. The material of the wax crayon is such that all traces are visible, with accumulation being the only method of obscuring a mark.



FIGURES 3, 4, 5: DIRECTIVES 3 AND 4, LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY

## Directive Four: Seeking Gestalt

Participants then walk both the surface and perimeter of the drawing to survey the evidence of their drawn games from every angle, occupying the role of critical viewers of the drawing as a whole. The drawing at this stage is typically visually jarring and muddled, with no obvious unifying design or compositional principles in operation; marks read as disconnected in both form and intention, with shared gestures dominating discrete spatial areas. It is a collection of sets of unrelated symbols and traces of play, often united only through simple recurring geometric forms: circles, squares, triangles, polygons, and spirals, the most fundamental of Euclidian shapes, and common elements of several otherwise disparate games played in white wax crayon on the black ground.

The question for group debate is then raised: what patterns generated within the individual games are seen as both visually and conceptually compelling to the majority of drawers, and why? Compositional integrity is introduced as an eventual goal for the drawing as a whole, with emphasis placed on creating visual passages and flows to unite the image from side to side, edge to edge. Asked to shelve the agenda of perpetuating one's own game, drawers nominate, discuss, and vote upon the top three existing visual forms to be replicated throughout the whole, to be drawn by the entire group. Based upon those selections, three teams of drawers are formed, with each tasked to repetitively draw one of the three elements, further overwhelming the surface. Questions of scale, thickness and quality of marked line, contrast, and directional movement are all part of the conversation. Clear emphasis is placed on cultivating awareness of what the drawing itself suggests as the next formal steps, and participants are asked to react to what they perceive are the most compelling needs of the image as seen within the present, experienced, moment. Gestalt design principles of similarity, continuation, closure, proximity, figure/ground, and symmetry/order are all evoked in conversation as new guides for the group discussion in the playing of this now greater drawing-as-game. (Creative Bloq).

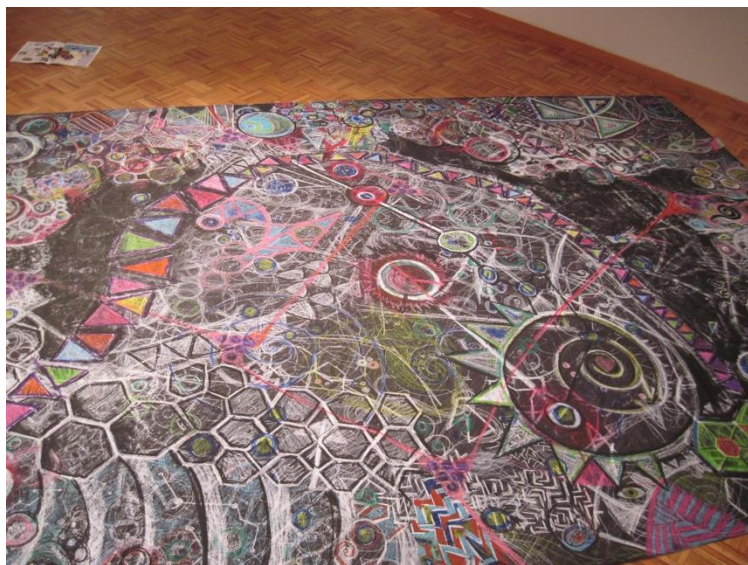
From this point forward, there is a fluid movement between drawing and discourse, with the group pausing regularly to visually examine and evaluate the drawing in its entirety and determine by majority vote what would best lend a sense of wholeness and dynamism to the evolving image. This phase is marked by extensive discussion, and often "leaders" emerge from the group who are quick to identify and articulate what they believe will most benefit the drawing. I will often act as mediator between competing ideas. Again, the strongest suggestions for the next steps are embedded within the visual matrix of the surface, to which the artists are kinetically responding.



FIGURE 6: DIRECTIVE 4, LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY

#### Directive Five: Enter Color and Black

The final drawing phase is the addition of color and black oil pastel. At this point in the drawing process, the group's language for discussing how it should proceed has become refined through multiple rounds of practice, and there is a much easier and clearer sense of how to negotiate and draw as a collective. The aim in this stage is to determine if, why, and how to use color in the drawing, and to devise a strategy for its application. Black oil pastel may be used to add depth to the picture plane by introducing cast shadows, or to create more obvious relationships between figure and ground by manipulating tone and contrast. The success of this phase often hinges upon the prior artistic training of the participants, and their ability to readily recognize and respond to the options inherent in the drawing. Playing backwards from the end of allotted time for the session, the drawing is taken to a point where the majority of the group declares it to sufficiently "work" as an image that manifests design integrity and wholeness.





FIGURES 7 AND 8: DIRECTIVE FIVE, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – OSHKOSH



FIGURES 9 AND 10: DIRECTIVE FIVE, PRINCETON HIGH SCHOOL

Seen from the perspective gained at the conclusion of this sequence of drawing experiences, the Gadamerian position on game-play and the experience of an artwork now appears even more relevant:

*The overall argument is not that game or artwork cannot be reduced to intention, material or convention but rather that each of these elements comes into their own when taken up within the playing of the game or in the practice which is art. It is the playing that draws spectator, player, intention, equipment and convention into the one event. This promotes an interactive view of art as a communicative event. It lends a dialogical dimension to art. An artwork involves more than one voice as, indeed, the word inter-pretation implies. Furthermore, the conception of art as an event requires a different ontological structure to those standard accounts of aesthetic experience grounded in subjectivity alone. (Davey 2016).*

### TRACEY 2017: Activating Common Experience

A gathering of professional art scholars, educators, and artists, the two-day 2017 TRACEY Conference combined scholarly presentations and hands-on drawing workshops into an active forum for drawing researchers and practitioners to probe questions central to the idea that markmaking, given its immediacy, materiality, and fluid play between perception and experience, may in itself be considered a form of phenomenology (Harty 2017). Given the *Common Gesture* workshop's position in the schedule as one of the closing activities, it was possible to consider the directives that guide the drawing process as frames through which to reflect on and integrate concepts from the preceding talks. I modified two elements of the drawing process so as to incorporate references to my colleagues' work, affording a physical moment for participants to draw from, and across, conference content. Within the larger context of the Conference, the three-hour workshop also offered a framework for continued consideration of one of the key premises, the question of how (potentially all) drawing processes are by nature phenomenological, as embodied tracings and graphic evidence of lived experience.

Duncan Bullen's *Drawing Presence*, a meditative drawing project emphasizing mindfulness and breath, was incorporated as a condition of Directive Two. When participants were asked to draw lines to connect dots from the edge of the page to the middle, I added the instruction to mark each segment of line on

the body's exhale or an inhale with pauses falling on the dots, thus echoing Bullen's practice. This lent an additional level of body-awareness, of both self and other, as one worked to coordinate internal respiratory rhythms to an external material trace. Eleanor Morgan's *Fixing the ephemeral: the materiality of sand drawings* provided additional grounding for the next set of marks in Directive Two. Rather than generate random line-knots, I asked participants to integrate the visual logic of the Vanuatu sand artists, as presented by Morgan, into their knotting game, resulting in an array of symmetrical curvilinear forms drawn with increasing sophistication as the game progressed. The presence of both of these added directives altered the experienced nature of the drawing, as it was an occasion to recognize and manifest timely and relevant echoes of colleagues' research, and see these ideas-as-marks evolve on the page as the drawing progressed.

### Embodied Spectacle

The final stage of hanging and interpreting the drawing is the phase where the work expands, temporally opens, and integrates Gadamer's state of play as one that encompasses the spectator in the act that completes the work. As a function of the method of its making, the drawing is one that can be interpreted widely and experienced on both intimate and grand scales. Analogies are often drawn to galactic and terrestrial maps, symbolic narratives, music, pan-sensory explorations, psychological states, architectural structures, and biological systems. There is a movement between familiar, or common, gestures and highly-individuated marks and signatures, present in varying measure.

Again, Gadamer's development of the "play" of the work of art encompasses the spectator as a vital figure, a key relationship in which the "between" is an activated space for creating meaning:

*The analogy with drama and, indeed, sporting events, implies that art is eventual, an occasion that consciousness surrenders to and participates in. Spectatorial participation (like much art research) demands immersion in that which cannot be fully anticipated or controlled by individual consciousness. The game and the artwork are both forms of self-movement which require that the spectator play along with what they bring into being... Gadamer asserts the 'primacy of the play' over consciousness: 'the players are merely the way the play comes into presentation'... Participation takes the individual players out of themselves. The individual subject is that upon which success, satisfaction or loss is imposed from within the game. By analogy, the work of art is also 'the playing of it'. An autonomous event comes into being, something comes to stand in its own right which 'changes all that stand before it... Like the ancient theoros, the spectator not only participates in the event which is the artwork, but is potentially transformed by it...' (Davey 2016).*

Within the unique context of the TRACEY Conference, drawing scholars' contemporaneous presentations lent added perspective to the collaborative drawing as an "autonomous event [that] comes into being", as participants physically experienced (the) drawing as a forum for exploring bodily expressions of sensory engagement and awareness of the drawing self and other, material, surface, as manifest within the evolving image. As the workshop participants were all skilled drawing researchers and practitioners, the level of engagement deepened as it became evident that, as seen within the time and space of its making, the drawing enacted and embodied a number of the conference's key themes and questions.

Traces of both Juliet MacDonald's and Clive Cazeaux's talks preceding the workshop were particularly manifest throughout the drawing process. Cazeaux's *A phenomenology of indexical drawing* brought

keenly to bear a consciousness of auto-figuration, the lived history of evident marks, materiality of trace, and the physicality of the gestures that figure the space of the page. MacDonald's *Retracing the drawings of a chimpanzee* investigated typologies of visual relationships, the use of repeated gestural configurations, the following of pattern, and an awareness of a drawer occupying a state of wonder, versus a state of knowing, all of which may be reflected within the making of each *Common Gesture* drawing. MacDonald also raised the question of whether, as sentient marking beings, we all share a particular habit of drawing. That question is, I believe, borne out here in this shared act of drawing, in which recurring patterns become readily manifest, particularly if an objective is to create a drawing in which all drawers can participate. Individuation of mark is still present, but it is often absorbed within a mass gesture of recursive shapes and patterns. Within a *Common Gesture* drawing, participants are able to perceive both unique signature gestures of the individuals and their unification throughout the whole.

As drawing does more than illustrate a concept, it can enact the idea itself within, through, and often well after, the time of its making. Each *Common Gesture* drawing I have facilitated has afforded multiple glimpses into how this particular sequence of drawn actions performs and embodies ideas including, and beyond, the phenomenological. While these collaborative drawings are generally humble in their ambition and execution, they can nonetheless birth and nurture concepts with deep roots in the history of thought, manifest within their lifespan. When taken within the context of the 2017 TRACEY Conference, the drawing afforded a unique opportunity to draw (from) an experience in common.



FIGURE 11: *COMMON GESTURE* DRAWING, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – OSHKOSH (PHOTO ALLISON WELCH)

An archive of *Common Gesture* workshop images is located at [www.saraschneckloth.com](http://www.saraschneckloth.com).

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