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THE ARTFULNESS OF MORE-THAN-HUMAN TRACE

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This article grows out of a wider research project that investigates the artfulness of traces made by more-than-human life through the lens of ecologically inspired contemporary drawing practice. In this sense, drawing is a way of paying attention to the artfulness of an action, experience or state that leaves a trace: a mark or sign, track or trail left by the movement of life. This research concerns Indexical Drawing, a practice that makes direct contact with the world through mark-making, shifting the focus of drawing beyond the human. In this article, more-than-human traces are documented by photography resulting from a thrown-togetherness of lives through a practice of walking, paying attention and sympathy, forming new kinds of relationships with life such as gastropods, arachnids, insects and vegetation. Walking-in-place develops an investigative space for more-than-human objects to reveal their own aesthetic yield from the properties and physicalities they possess. This article challenges the anthropocentrism of the Anthropocene and aims to contribute to a rethinking and reimagining of ecological processes through a way of drawing, proposing and perceiving artfulness in the more-than-human.

Introduction

This article draws on the findings of a larger project that investigates the *artfulness* of traces made by more-than-human life through the lens of ecologically inspired contemporary drawing practice. In this sense, drawing is *a way* of paying attention to the *artfulness* of an action, experience or state that leaves a trace: a mark or sign, track or trail left by the movement of life. This research links to *Indexical Drawing*, a practice that makes direct contact with the world through mark-making, shifting the focus of drawing beyond the human. In this article, more-than-human traces are documented by photography resulting from a *thrown-togetherness* of lives through a practice of walking, paying attention and sympathy, forming new kinds of relationships with life such as gastropods, arachnids, insects and vegetation. Walking-in-place develops an investigative space for more-than-human objects to reveal their own *aesthetic yield* from the properties and physicalities they possess. This challenges the anthropocentrism of the Anthropocene and aims to contribute to a rethinking and reimagining of ecological processes through *a way* of drawing, proposing and perceiving *artfulness* in the more-than-human.

The research has adopted David Abram's term, *more-than-human* (1996), because it helps to think past the centrality of the human subject challenging anthropocentrism. Although the Anthropocene has become part of the lingua franca of the environmental movement and has gained significant cultural and academic importance the term is problematic because it continues to centre the human. Abram says that it is not our mind or our abstract intellect that connects us deeply to other species but our bodies, our animality (Abram, 2011). He suggests that if we celebrate our own materiality; it can open relationships and kinship with other bodies and fleshly presences, giving us the ability to empathise with more-than-human shapes, sentience or way of life (Abram, 2021). Through art practice, I explore this embodied experience by forming new kinds of relationships among different living objects through the expanded field of drawing, fascinated by the traces made by the more-than-human and intuitively recognising them as artful. In exploring what artful means, and how to apply it to drawing, I borrow Erin Manning's definition of *artfulness*,

'Artfulness does not belong to the artist; it is the aesthetic yield that opens experience to the participatory quality of the more-than' (Manning, 2016 p 59).

Artfulness is explored in the *aesthetic yield* of more-than-human trace that is intuitively experienced as drawing beyond human agency. My role is participatory and not the centre of the work. As I walk in the Shropshire landscape the physical traces left by the more-than-human passage into being are found and encountered through curiosity, sympathy and care. These encounters tap into my intuition through a nascent understanding of ecological entanglements and the expanded field of drawing. I am co-productive and co-dependant on the more-than-human through our entangled agencies with one another. A drawing practice that is attempting to include the *artfulness* of more-than-human trace is 'indexical drawing' originating from Charles Sanders Peirce index theory (1860s). The index is interpreted as a mark or trace of some past contact, for Peirce what chiefly characterises the index is the way it forces our attention (Iversen, 2018). In the recent writings of Mary Ann Doane, the index becomes a type of sign caught up in contingency, chance, and accident. These signs are affected by the objects that create them and are non-mimetic (Iversen, 2017). Using this notion to understand more-than-human trace in contemporary art means to 'displace image-making as representation and considering it a form of contact and as an inclusive, anti-ableist inter-relationship with the viewer' (Neves, 2021). My drawing

does not try to control or take anything from the more-than-human; life is free to be itself and leave its own mark without having to represent anything other than itself. This article examines the *artfulness* of life through field observations and photographs of gastropods, arachnids, insects and vegetation largely because they are familiar traces left in the landscape.

Walking as a mode of creative hunter gathering

I walk daily in the Shropshire countryside, UK, describing myself as a creative hunter gatherer, seeking out more-than-human trace and documenting them. Deanna Petherbridge says,

'The notion of erratic resurgences of visual fragments in the relatively spontaneous and unfettered sketches of artists – unlike the shards of past traditions that are structurally embedded in academic or mediated drawing systems – co-exist with the hunter and gatherer instincts of visual artists and designers' (Petherbridge, 2010 p 13).

Walking provides an opportunity to engage with my hunter gatherer instincts to observe the world around me as it continually unfolds, transforms, renews and decays with an openness to discovery. The paths made when walking are not the focus of the work. Instead, I track signs of presence, hunting traces and gathering photographs that document the *artfulness* of more-than-human life. My practice embraces the random *aesthetic yield* from experience and participation and is interested in the notion of *throwntogetherness* (Massey, 2005) that describes the uncertainty and uniqueness of encounter and entanglement of exchange in place. *Throwntogetherness* can be likened to *indexical drawing* when an unexpected experience signals for a response. This signalling in my practice is perceived as the *aesthetic yield* of the more-than-human that describes an *artfulness* of a visual language that can capture my attention and stop me in my tracks. *Throwntogetherness* is in the momentary pauses of interchanges between objects and interruptions from moment to moment that makes space for close study and responsiveness. Walking opens opportunities for incidents of accident, chance and emotion, a catalyst for happenstance and aleatory connections linking to Doane's notion of the index *as a type of sign caught up in contingency, chance, and accident* (Iversen, 2017). Natural chance presentation is described by Iversen as,

'The configuration of meadow grasses, the arrangement of stones on a brook bottom and get away from the idea that an artist makes something 'special' and beyond the world of ordinary things ...there is no a priori reason why moving images should originate only with artists' (Iversen, 2010 p 40).

Natural chance presentation is crucial to the work of artists Julie Leach and Tim Knowles who explore ideas and processes of *indexical drawing*. Both Knowles's and Leach's work is generated by apparatus, mechanisms, systems and processes. They engineer a situation where the outcome is unpredictable, directed by the elements, for example wind. These operations seek to reveal the invisible forces in the world around us and investigate the nature of hidden ecological systems. Leach claims she facilitates 'nature as artist' (Leach, 2020). Her drawings are created through direct engagement with the processes of the natural world where she says she deliberately relinquishes control to nature in order to bypass the conscious brain and personal ego (*ibid*, 2020). Knowles has produced a series of collaborative tree drawings. He attaches pens to tree branches and strategically places sheets of paper to capture the trees' natural motion as well as their moments of stillness documented by the pen marks onto paper. Knowles says,

'Each drawing reveals something about the different qualities and characteristics of the various trees: the relaxed, fluid line of an oak; the delicate, tentative touch of a larch; a hawthorn's stiff, slightly neurotic scratches' (Knowles, 2008).

Process and language is key to Knowles' work, so each tree drawing is accompanied by a photograph or video documenting the location and the way it was created. Knowles' *indexical drawing* can bring together *artfulness* and the more-than-human, through an interweaving of nature and drawing; however much of this is shaped by metaphor in his descriptions such as: 'fluid line, the delicate, tentative touch, slightly neurotic scratches' My practice pushes the boundaries of *indexical drawing* by removing the human engineering element of the process and anthropocentric language of the documentation. With the notion that observing traces solely made by more-than-human life without human intervention can help us overcome our anthropocentrism of representation meeting nature on its own terms.

More-than-human trace does not originate with me as an artist, my role is participatory. Manning claims, 'artfulness activates the art of participation' (Manning, 2016, p 59). Artfulness activates a *thrown-togetherness* with other objects, where I am co-productive and co-dependant on the more-than-human through my animality and embodied experience. *Artfulness* is investigated as drawing beyond human agency, an *aesthetic yield* belonging to the more-than-human. When walking, I take on the mantra of rambles 'leave nothing but footprints and only take photographs', expressing an attitude of reverence and care towards the natural world.

A mobile phone becomes the container, a recipient (Le Guin, 1986) to gather and carry traces home in the form of a photograph or video. It becomes an exchange between the human and more-than-human. For me the photograph is not the drawing; the photograph is another form of trace, a trace of a trace, a static representation of the drawing that can be viewed again to study and share with others. The documentation of trace in this research is *a way* of sharing my entanglement and kinship with more-than-human life. In parallel to *indexical drawing*, the photograph implies proximity but in the past, contact is now absent, perceived as an echo or flashback of trace, transforming it into a new synthesis for analysis and reflection. The documentation of trace through a photograph is presented like an echo or a flash-back. This relates to Éliane Escoubas notion of the *après-coup* (flash-back) which she describes as the *après-coup* as,

'An act - the act of making - that was never seen, that was never seen in its presence... one sees therefore only in the past in memory. One does not see, one sees again' (Escoubas, 2006, p 205).

The act of the more-than-human making the trace is never seen. The trace is the result of the index that signals for me to respond - an *après-coup* in my memory, visualising full or partial images, sounds, smells, physical sensations and emotions. Trace is documented digitally to *see again*, analyse, research and share with other recipients, a technique of reproduction and dissemination. Photographs are printed and exhibited as large digital works magnifying the minute details of more-than-human *artfulness*. This magnification is to encourage and engage the viewer to rediscover the *more-than-human* that is often overlooked or ignored. A discovery that can generate surprise, divergence, productive play, stimulate discussion and perhaps change perceptions.

More-than-Human Drawing

Observation relies on my participation as a collaborative object. The *artfulness* of the *thrown-togetherness* with other objects in a particular place does not belong to me but to what Manning calls *art as way* (2016). In the context of this research more-than-human life is not manipulated to be or do something by the artist but instead encountered, found, discovered and interpreted by their own actions, identified and explored as *a way* of drawing. Manning proposes a new definition of art-as-practice as a manner of process, 'To speak of way is to dwell on the process itself, on its manner of becoming' (Manning, 2016, p 47). The research explores the *artfulness* of more-than-human trace and asks if the marks presented by more-than-human agency can be a new *way* of drawing that is not controlled by humans with an emphasis on the more-than-human as artful. Instead of projecting what I do on more than human life I take inspiration from it and my attention to their ecology is a way of recognising art and kinship between other forms of life and my own. Catherine De Zegher defines drawing 'as the movement that forms a trace' (2010, p 25). The object of my artistic practice is to pay attention to the traces made by living entities as *a way* of drawing. I start by applying Timothy Ingold's definition of two kinds of trace to show examples of reductive and additive lines that can be found in the more-than-human world, starting with a snail trail - a trace left by the movement of life, described by Ingold as,

'...one or other of two kinds: additive and reductive. A line drawn with charcoal on paper... is additive since the material of charcoal forms an extra layer that is superimposed onto the substrate. Lines that are scratched, scored or etched into a surface are reductive ...traces abound in the non-human world...They most commonly result from the movements of animals, appearing as paths or tracks' (Ingold, 2016, p 44).

When gastropods leave a trail of slime on a pavement, it is additive, equivalent to a line made with charcoal onto a piece of paper seen in my photograph Figure 1: Snail (*Cornu aspersum*) Drawing onto Garden Bricks, 2022. The extra layer of mucus is superimposed onto the surface of the pavement acts both as a glue and as a lubricant helping the snail glide forward when pressure is lifted seen as a silvery line in my photograph Figure 2: Slug (*Arion hortensis*) Drawing, Wyle Cop, 2022. 'One could almost treat line as a verb and say that in the thing's growing - in its issuing forth, in its making itself visible', as Klee (Klee, 1961, p 76) would say - *it lines'* (Ingold, 2013, p 135). I use the verb to draw as a gesture carried out in time through a pulling, dragging or stretching that traces the movement of life, linking to Mannings *art as way* through *the manner of its becoming*.



FIGURE 1: SNAIL (*CORNU ASPERSUM*) DRAWING, GARDEN BRICKS, 2022.



FIGURE 2: SLUG (*ARION HORTENSIS*) DRAWING, WYLE COP, 2022.

Petherbridge claims the line 'does not exist in the observable world. Line is a representational convention...' (Petherbridge, 2010, p 90). My research agrees with Petherbridge in the context of a line drawn by humans as a 'representational convention' of the 'observable world.' Yet my practice thinks past the centrality of the human subject challenging anthropocentrism and considers the idea that a line drawn by the more-than-human reveals and presents itself as the 'observable world' from the trace it leaves in the landscape. For example, the action of a snail's body and tongue-like radula inscribes lines into the algae, the trace is reductive seen in my photograph Figure 3: Snail (*Cornu aspersum*) Drawing, Barrow Street Flat Roof, 2022. Snails graze by sweeping or rasping small particulate materials off a substrate. The marks are created by a complex structure only found in molluscs just inside the mouth called the radula from thousands of radular teeth optimised for different algal and plant types as it scrapes and gouges through leaves and algae. The recognition of the process of feeding and observing the signs from the reductive marks made by the snail offer an *aesthetic yield* that is perceived in this research as a *way of drawing*. Manning claims, 'Artfulness is an immanent directionality, felt when a work runs itself ... where it is still rife with intuition, this modality is beyond the human' (Manning, 2016, p 56). Paying attention is a form of respect for the snail's life, its process *as way* and for the *artfulness* of its drawing.



FIGURE 3: SNAIL (*CORNU ASPERSUM*) DRAWING, BARROW STREET FLAT ROOF, 2022.

In my photograph Figure 4: Snail (*Cornu aspersum*) Drawing, Greenhouse Roof, 2021. The drawing is created by snails grazing algae off the glass surface through reductive scraping. An equivalent human artistic process is *grattage*, a technique introduced by surrealist artist Max Ernst that involves laying a canvas prepared with a layer of oil paint over a textured object and then scraping the paint off to create an interesting and unexpected surface. According to Rosalind Krauss, artists such as Max Ernst made use of indexical procedures as a formal means of subverting pictorial conventions and artistic autonomy (Iversen, 2017). This may suggest a long tradition of art imitating techniques created by more-than-human activity in the observable world.



FIGURE 4: SNAIL (*CORNU ASPERSUM*) DRAWING, GREENHOUSE ROOF, 2021.

Snails use their radula to make holes in leaves, stems and flowers seen in my photograph Figure 5: Snail (*Cornu aspersum*) Drawing, Broccoli Rabe (*Sylvestris* var. *esculenta*) Leaf. These marks are neither additive nor reductive as described by Ingold but created by a breach through a surface, similar to Tilmann Zahn's torn-paper works that straddle drawing and sculpture. He makes his art by using his hands to tear individual pieces out of paper to create a structure. The research makes a parallel with Zahn's torn-paper works and the torn traces snails and slugs make with their radula into plant leaves, interpreted as drawings ripped by human hands and more-than-human teeth into surfaces.

The outline around the snail's hole is slightly raised, the plant is perceived as participating collaboratively with the snail through a *throwntogetherness*. Plants have various mechanisms for compartmentalisation, a defensive process by which boundaries are formed to isolate the injured tissues so that the living cells behind it do not get infected. The raised, pale green, contour line drawn around the snail's hole made by the plant's defensive system has an indexical quality that captures my attention creating the *aesthetic yield* that is recognised as *artfulness*.



FIGURE 5: SNAIL (*CORNU ASPERSUM*) DRAWING, BROCCOLI RABE (*SYLVESTRIS* VAR. *ESCULENTA*) LEAF, 2021.

Ecologically slugs and snails are essential in decay, regeneration and are a major food source. The lines on the leaf seen in my photograph, Figure 6, are made by a moth (*Stigmella aurella*) - a common leaf miner in the UK that mines bramble (*Rubus ulmifolius*) leaves. The larval stage of the moth lives in and eats the leaf tissue, it mines by burrowing and feeding between the upper and lower leaf surfaces, this lets in air, making mining lines. The larva grows then hatches as a moth. Similar blurred lines can be seen in my photograph Figure 7: Leafminer Sawfly (*Phytomyza ilicis*) Drawing, Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) Leaf, 2022. Unfortunately, these lines are generally deemed unsightly to a keen gardener and the advice is to exterminate the larvae by using insecticides or crushing them between the leaves, even though they are thought not to cause any major damage to the plant. Perhaps if we saw these lines as drawings, we would have a deeper appreciation for them. Numerous species that have recently arrived in this landscape including many new leafminers are contributing to the rapid changes in biodiversity and ecology. I am fascinated by traces left by new species and what this might mean to the future ecology of the places I walk and my *thrown-togetherness* with them.



FIGURE 6: BRAMBLE (*RUBUS ULMIFOLIUS*) LEAFMINER MOTH (*STIGMELLA AURELLA*) DRAWING, 2022.



FIGURE 7: HOLLY (*ILEX AQUIFOLIUM*) LEAFMINER SAWFLY (*PHYTOMYZA ILICIS*) DRAWING, 2022.

More-than-human Thread

When exploring spider webs and other living threads, I am reminded of fungal mycelia and roots. I am fascinated by the striking indexical qualities of spider webs which seem to be full of *artfulness*. When I am paying attention to spider webs, I am reminded of Ingold's two major classes of line that he calls threads and traces. Ingold distinguishes threads as,

A thread is a filament of some kind, that may be entangled with other threads or suspended between points in three-dimensional space...An observant walk through the countryside will reveal any number of thread-like lines, although much of the linear order of nature is hidden underground in the form of roots, rhizomes and fungal mycelia. Above ground plants sprout stems and shoots (Ingold, 2005 p 4).

Ingold's definition of thread could be applied to a spider's web, as spiders are said to 'draw' silk thread from their bodies using their legs pulling threads of silk from one point to another that grows to form a structure: a linear web that traces the spider's movement. I use Paul Klee's comparison of the point in relation to drawing, 'The point sets itself in motion and an essential structure grows' (Klee, 1992, p 21). A spider traces its movement from the strands of silk thread pulled from her body. The connecting lines of silk from one point to another form the sticky droplets of glycoprotein that act as a glue, an outer coating on the thread produced by the spider's aggregate gland. The spider's glue could be compared to the viscous coating on the adhesive sided tapes used in artist Monika Grzymala's drawings to attach to the walls. Grzymala drawings are a movement away from marks on a substrate, the marks are suspended in space supported by walls similar to the spider threads seen in my photograph Figure 8: Spider (name unknown) Drawing between Ivy (Hedra helix) Garden Wall, 2022. Her site-specific drawings leave the page and continue onto walls occupying two and three-dimensional space she calls 'Raumzeichnung' (spatial drawing). Grzymala uses polypropylene tapes with an acrylic adhesive to trace the movement of her body in space where she engages in a full body act of drawing - sticking the tape to the wall's surface then pulling, dragging and stretching the tape, fixing it to adjoining walls. Manning claims 'Artfulness is an immanent directionality, felt when a work runs itself ... where it is still rife with intuition, this modality is beyond the human' (Manning, 2016, p 56). My objective is not to try to prove that more-than-human life for example the spider intentionally or unintentionally draws but explores more-than-human trace as *artful* aligning to *a way* drawing. The direction of *art as way* seems to involve the artist participating in as yet unnamed ecological relationships. There is not currently a name for more-than-human drawing. However, there are traces left by the rhythms of more-than-human agency that feel as if they are *artful works that run themselves*. Grzymala's drawings offer an *aesthetic yield* so why can't a spider's webs irrespective of intention be regarded as artful and can be similarly recognised. What is important in this research is the *aesthetic yield* of the trace and not necessarily the identity of the maker.



FIGURE 8: SPIDER (NAME UNKNOWN) DRAWING, IVY (HEDRA HELIX) GARDEN WALL, 2022.

My research challenges the anthropocentric statement by Karl Marx:

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality (Baird, 1999).

It may not be known whether a creature imagines the traces that its activity produces, but why should it be necessary to do so? This takes me back to an interview with Abram (2021) where he states contrary to René Descartes famous quote 'I think therefore I am,' that it is unethical to conceive oneself as an autonomous mind inside our bodies and asks us to explore the word 'consanguinity' - meaning sharing the same flesh, the characteristic of having kinship with other life (*ibid*, 2021) which I now recognise as *throwntogetherness*. This notion lies behind a way of paying attention, observing gestures, actions and traces - a shared awareness with more-than-human life. As part of my practice, it is important to think not only with my brain but more importantly to feel with my body exploring my own embodiment, my animality. Abram says,

'If the body is my very presence in the world: if without this body, in other words, there would be no possibility of experience - then the body itself is the true subject of experience (Abram, 1996 p 85).

If my body is the subject of experience then too are all the other entanglements with other bodies for example spiders, slugs, snails, sawflies and plants. It is their lives and experiences that are the agency behind the making of trace.

Concluding with care

I may never have the answers to some of the questions that arise from this research. But as I walk daily, it is becoming apparent to me that drawing is everywhere. As an example seen in my photograph Figure 9: Ermine Moth Caterpillars (*Yponomeuta padella*) drawing onto Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*). These striking webs hide thousands of caterpillars of a group of moths called Small Ermine Moths, a species widely distributed across the UK. The moth's larvae are leaf-webbers and can be found on hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and wild cherry (*Prunus avium*). The dense, white, silk stretches, pulls and trails over hedgerows as the caterpillars take refuge to protect themselves from predators whilst eating the plant leaves from within. Once they hatch as moths these drawings slowly fade and disappear. If drawing can be recognised as an artful language alive in the world around us created by all life, then a better understanding of our entanglement with the more-than-human may have a positive effect on human behaviour. The idea that the artfulness of more-than-human trace may enable a greater attentiveness and compassion for the world on the brink of ecological collapse. Manning says, 'Sympathy allows the movement to be felt, opens experience to the complexities of its own unfolding' (Manning 2016, p 50). Perhaps through these experiences humans can establish a deeper empathy and thoughtfulness for the more-than-human by changing habits and perceptions, meeting nature on its own terms through art. The aim is to contribute to a rethinking and reimagining of ecological processes through care, kinship and *thrown-togetherness* by proposing and perceiving *artfulness* in the more-than-human as *a way of drawing*.



FIGURE 9: ERMINE MOTH CATERPILLAR (*YPONOMEUTA PADELLA*) DRAWINGS, HARLEY BANK, HAWTHORNE (*CRATAEGUS MONOGYNA*). HEDGEROW, 2022.

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