What shall I draw? Just a few words

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What shall I draw?
Just a few words!

Phil Sawdon

Introduction

The thoughts presented here are a summary and distillation of a futile, despondent, illusionary, circular and often ironic project/journey of diary/journal ‘drawings’ by Phil Sawdon that are a response and reply to the question … what shall I draw? And to the statement, ‘I don’t know how to draw’.

It is written from the perspective (predictable pun intended) of a person who makes pictures, sometimes using drawing, so they might therefore be called drawings. I lecture and teach in both two and three dimensions, which is a trick I learnt in the 1970’s watching a variety of ‘psych’ bands. I read about drawing. I practice my craft (is drawing a craft?) so that probably makes me a practitioner, who is becoming perfected by practice, but perhaps only in theory as opposed to fact. Drawing as practical theorising! Is theory only useful when its proof can be located in the drawings themselves?

The project and drawings are titled the Artificial Sketchbook, ‘Le singe est sur la branche’¹. The drawings are a consequence and exploration of the ‘process’ of drawing. A process that Deanna Petherbridge describes in 1992 as a ‘serial process of finding, refining, reformulating, questioning and constructing’².

The research i.e. the careful, diligent search, and studious inquiry aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts about a particular subject is so rock’n’roll. It’s very fucking fast, very fucking furious and very fucking metal.

Perhaps not, more wishful thinking really, but some gratuitous, robust language and ‘psychedelic’ word trails are a feature of both the construction and the content of this paper and by association my drawing ‘process’.

A key concept in the Art and Design community and especially the education community is that drawing is a form of language, a ‘visual language’. The phrase visual language usually refers to the idea that communication occurs through visual symbols, as opposed to verbal symbols, or words. The phrase implies syntax, grammar, vocabularies, and a system for the expression of thoughts. The Artificial Sketchbook, that is the drawings themselves, explores the questions as to whether drawing is a visual language and whether it can be demonstrated that the process of drawing can be full described. How does it do that then? Is it by the fact of its existence? The revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts (in other words research) in this instance is probably best answered by another question. Are the drawings and this project an attempt to describe a non-verbal process? If drawing is a visual language then is a series of drawings that set out to explore the process of drawing simply a form of tautology, or a case of the ‘emperor’s new clothes’?

George Whale asks:

What do we mean when we talk about visual language? Are we saying that pictures are in some way similar to speech or text? Or is the term simply a figure of speech, or worse, a piece of meaningless jargon?
In the same short article Whale goes on to ask several key questions:

When is it legitimate to speak of a drawing as an expression of visual language and what are the similarities between visual language and natural language? Can visual artists be said to employ vocabularies and grammars, and to what extent is it necessary to know an artists language in order to derive meaning from the work?  

I can begin to feel the psychedelic and circular strains of academic viability and credibility beginning to tighten, is the Artificial Sketchbook at the stage of development at which further development can occur independently of the author? Just to tighten the magic muscle a little further; ‘a visual language is a pictorial representation of conceptual entities and operations and is essentially a tool through which users compose iconic, or visual, sentences’⁴, according to Professor S.K.Chang in his Introduction to the Visual Languages and Visual Programming course at The University of Pittsburgh (USA). My panic subsided once I realised that I was in cyberspace.

The ‘Artificial Sketchbook’ acknowledges that ‘drawing is seen as the quintessential expression of creative activity’⁵ and shares the ‘commitment to drawing as a means of developing cognition, refining perception, enabling articulate and expressive visual communication’⁶. However acknowledgement is not necessarily agreement. Mark Harris writing for ‘Tracey’ asks why is drawing such a sanctified medium?

There is this aura of inviolability about its practice that puts it up there with sex as a kind of fundamental right and (rite) for young people from which good things like knowledge, maturity, and confidence will ensue. But who says this is true? Who's to say that ignorance, puerility, insecurity, and (institutionalised) abuse aren't often the result instead (as with sex)? Is it because drawing arises like a visual ur-language from early childhood and has the status of a 'pure' communication?⁷.

Here are some more things you need to know about the Artificial Sketchbook before we carry on.

- Drawing is a picture or plan made by means of lines and marks on a surface especially one made with a pencil or pen. A record of a tool moving across a surface. A verb and a noun.
- Artificial is defined as produced by man, made in imitation, lacking in spontaneity, insincere and assumed.
- A Sketchbook is a book of plain paper containing sketches, rapid drawings and brief outlines of theories and works. It is defined by the Harvard University Art Museums in their Guide to Drawing Terms and Techniques (E. Saywell, L. Straus and P. Straus) as ‘a book that contains drawing paper for sketches. It differs from an album in that the drawings are not adhered into the book but drawn on the actual sheets.’⁸. The ‘Pages’ of this sketchbook are a series of free hanging works.
- Pages are one side of the leaves of a book where such a leaf is considered a unit. The pages of the Artificial Sketchbook are presented as a series, regularly issued and consecutively numbered No. 1 to 11. They serve as a ‘serial process of finding, refining, reformulating, questioning and constructing’⁹. A succession of related drawings arranged in a particular
order. Here there is an inherent irony as the increasingly cyclical nature of the 'process' is contradicted by the linear and descriptive nature of the Artificial Sketchbook format.

**Artificial Sketchbook: Page 1**

The content and format of the project/journey to try and answer the question of ‘what shall I draw?’ and its partner ‘I don’t know how to draw’ is established on Page 1 where items are listed as a checklist or inventory, in other words a detailed list. It is argued therefore that the first phase (Page 1) in the ‘serial process’ of drawing might be to identify and manifest an inventory of issues and items requiring actions and decisions. Richard Wollheim in his essay ‘Criticism as retrieval’, a supplement to his book ‘Art And Its Objects’, argues that ‘criticism’ is ‘retrieval’:

Retrieval, like archaeology, and archaeology provides many of the metaphors in which retrieval is best thought about, is simultaneously an investigation into past reality and an exploitation of present resources.

The task of criticism is the reconstruction of the creative process, where the creative process must in turn be thought of as something not stopping short of, but terminating on, the work of art itself. It is a deficiency of at least the English language that there is no single word, applicable over all the arts, for the process of coming to understand a particular work of art. To make good this deficiency I shall appropriate the word ‘criticism’, but in doing so I know that, though this concurs with the way the word is normally used in connection with, say, literature, it violates usage in, at any rate, the domain of the visual arts, where ‘criticism’ is the name of a purely evaluative activity.

In other words understanding the work comes through the retrieval of the creative process.

So it’s back to the trowel and archaeology then.

The inventory referred to earlier is both ‘written’ and drawn in pen and ink on paper. This deliberately raises the question of whether handwriting is drawing? I will try and talk about autograph and by association, style later in the paper. The items are deleted and identified as appropriate. They are the visual triggers for the content of the subsequent pages. This also includes the title, Artificial Sketchbook. The inventory includes the following handwritten ‘text’ items:


There are drawn elements such as a ‘pen’ and a ‘bottle of ink’, a pastel figure blowing a trumpet, another pastel figure ‘dancing’, a series of frames and a life-size outline of the artist/authors head. How do you make pastels?

Blending dry powdered pigments with a non-greasy liquid binding medium such as gum arabic makes pastels. The resultant paste is usually rolled into a stick and then dried. A wide spectrum of pastel colours is thus possible, and by the eighteenth
century, artists actively sought to imitate the fluid handling of oil painting through a
colouristic and painterly style of draftsmanship. Although no actual examples are
known today, sixteenth-century sources suggest that the earliest use of pastels was by
Leonardo da Vinci at the end of the fifteenth century.

Fucking hell it must be more interesting than this. To your trowels!

There is always an applied gloss surface somewhere within every ‘Page’ as a literal
and metaphorical reflection, and as a cosmetic sheen, superficial and attractive. Pages
2 to 11 inclusive develop aspects from the inventory list in a visual form. If one
accepts that to illustrate is to clarify and explain by the use of examples, analogy
etc.then it can also by argued that the Artificial Sketchbook is a series of
‘illustrations’ that explain the text through pictures.
The next section of this paper will attempt to summarise the stages and decisions of
the serial process in order to answer the question, ‘what shall I draw?’ whilst
acknowledging that I don’t know how to draw.

Artificial Sketchbook: Pages 2 to 10

The ‘Pages’ develop an aspect of the process and inventory in visual form so for
example Page 2 silhouettes and ‘traces’ the author/artist contemplating and drawing
the incomplete phrase ‘Pen and’ where a ‘Pen’ is the implement for drawing using
ink, consisting of a metal nib attached to a holder. Graphic crosses mark the graves of
numerous failed starting points.

The metal pen was not widely used until the second quarter of the nineteenth century
when advanced techniques for stamping, bending and grinding became available.

‘Pen and’ is also contained and repeated as ‘drawn handwriting’ within the drawn
author artist silhouette and repeated in pastel across the banner frame. A dog sits.
Page 2 is a penned composition. The ‘Page’ starts the drawing process by selecting
the materials.
Page 3 completes the phrase ‘Pen and Ink’.
Ink is a fluid for drawing.

Apple Green, Black Indian *Blue, Brick Red, Brilliant Green, Burnt Sienna, Canary
Yellow, Carmine, Cobalt, Crimson, Deep Red, Emerald Gold, *Nut Brown, Orange,
Peat Brown, Purple, Scarlet, Silver, *Sunshine Yellow, Ultramarine, Vermilion,
Violet, Viridian, White Liquid Indian ink (Non-Waterproof).
*Available in 14ml & 30ml bottles.
Black only also available in 30ml bottles with dropper cap and 250ml or 500ml
bottles

How might we identify ‘traditional’ drawing inks in the Artificial Sketchbook and
also in … old master drawings? Jan Burandt can help:
Bistre, carbon, sepia and iron gall inks are all present in old master drawings. The manufacture and characteristics of these inks are discussed and visual clues, which aid in the identification of the media, are reviewed. Drawing inks of known composition were analysed with x-ray fluorescence spectroscopy and Fourier-transform infrared spectrometry. Case studies of examinations of ink drawings are presented to illustrate how these methods can be used together to identify inks of unknown composition.

Now I have the tools, pen and ink and paper ‘what shall I… Draw?’

Page 4 is the/my uncertainty and ‘doubt’. The repetition of the phrase ‘and what shall I’ together with a graphic deleting of all the proposed ‘subjects’ within the drawing. To be able to understand the process of drawing is one of the practitioner’s tasks to come to terms with doubt and make it central to the act of drawing, with doubt working to prevent the securities of a lapse into style? Doubt as an unresolved point, uncertainty as a constant. Michael Phillipson (Painting, Language and Modernity) when talking about Philip Guston describes his practice as a ‘restless movement, a ceaseless quest’14 If we refer back to Petherbridge’s earlier list of ‘finding, refining reformulating and questioning’ then an itchy arse might be an advantage. Phillipson’s ‘lapse into style’ is obliquely referred to within Petherbridge’s serial process of drawing and so to that extent it is a feature of the Artificial Sketchbook.

Petherbridge uses the phrase ‘Questions of style and autograph’15. What are the ‘Questions of style and autograph?’ I don’t know. Yes I do. No I don’t. Yes I do. No I …but within the Artificial Sketchbook I have included stylistic gestures (Pages 5 to 9 inclusive.) Are they ‘tricks of the trade’, in which case we are moving back to the argument as to whether drawing is a ‘visual language’. Gestural flourishes with a pen and some ink as part of a grammar or syntax within mark making. Is this style and if so is it separate from content? The conventions of expression, are they separate from intrinsic content and meaning? Nicos Hadjinicolao in Art History and Class Struggle (London, 1978), which I will paraphrase, argues that style i.e. the way in which formal and thematic elements of a picture are combined on each specific occasion is a particular form of the ideology of a social class. Therefore style is visual ideology. Visual ideology is the style of a social group. It is a specific combination of the formal and thematic elements of a picture through which people express the ways they relate their lives to the conditions of their existence, a combination that constitutes a particular form of the overall ideology of a social class. A shame then that he also states it is not an objective fact nor can it be identified with a fact such as a visual image and that it is not of the individual and it goes beyond the limits of a picture. Oh shit! Hang on though; I’m sure Michael Phillipson has something to add:

There can be no final distinction between practice and theory. Each breaks up, fragments the other. Theory does not stop at the frame….

Go for it Mike….

We need it and already have it in play in moving within the frame, but then our theorising will be confronted by the work itself, will be forced back on itself, will be split into oppositions, tensions, confusions, elisions, and so on16.

Trowels!
‘Autograph’. Is that a person’s handwriting or signature? If so it is a preoccupation of Pages 6 to 9 (inclusive) with the inclusion of transcripts of the Loughborough College of Art and Design Drawing Steering Group’s minutes in my handwriting. One of the group’s roles was to develop and promote what became the Drawing Across Boundaries conference and exhibitions at Loughborough in September 1998. The symposium was set out to take a critical look at the nature and value of drawing activity across a broad range of contemporary art and design activity.

Pages 8, 9 and 10 contain a previous screenprint by the author/artist that together with the history/archaeology of the written ‘Steering Group’ notes are ironic statements as well as a metaphor. The ‘signature’ is a white ink handprint on Page 7 with which I try and refer to the tradition of drawing history via the handprint of cave painting.

A pointed hat features on numerous pages most particularly 5, 6 and 2 on the author/artist. The ‘style’ is both a dunce’s cap a conical paper hat once placed on the head of a dull child at school and a witch or wizard, outstandingly clever in their specialised field. Incidentally in the sixteenth century Dunses or Dunsman was a term of ridicule applied to the followers of John Dunscotus a scholastic theologian. Trowel! Is this what Richard meant by archaeology?

As the tasks that the Artificial Sketchbook attempts become increasingly more complex and cyclical the author/artist attempts to summarise through collage and text the position that has been reached.

Page 10 is a drawing and collage. It includes the text: ‘Pen and’, ‘Ink’ ‘and what shall I’. Collage is a technique that can be described as collecting together unrelated things. There are drawn snails and their ink trails; these are a metaphorical reference to time both within the ‘serial process of drawing’ and the ‘institutional’ framework of some of the Artificial Sketchbook’s content. It is a snail trail of ink and words. An earlier version of Page 10 is included within the Loughborough College of Art and Design (now Loughborough University School of Art and Design) Research Report for 1996. It is printed upside down alongside the following text:

Drawing is concerned with clarity, or with the act of clarifying where language cannot adequately perform that function.  

Artificial Sketchbook: Page 11.

Page 11 is the final ‘Page’ in the Artificial Sketchbook. The ‘Drawing’ as a noun after the verb and the answer to what shall I draw? The consequence of and the answer to ‘and what shall I? Whilst always acknowledging that I don’t know how to draw. It is both the product and part of the ‘serial process’. Is it a set of visual symbols belonging to a system indicating aspects of meaning not otherwise conveyed in language? It is literally a sheet of drawn and traced silhouettes of an author/artist ‘drawing’ an author/artist ‘drawing’ an author/artist. Infinity. What shall I draw? I shall draw the state or quality of being infinite in that there will be no limits or boundaries in time or space, extent or magnitude, but fortunately I don’t have to worry because I still don’t know how to draw.

Artificial Sketchbook: Post Script.
The use of quotation marks in a text is acknowledged, as sometimes being an ironic reference and also a misnomer. ‘Drawing’ in this paper is no exception. Pictures are a representation they are an illusion, the author/artist in the ‘Pages’/pictures has never been actually drawing in any of the ‘Pages’, it is an imitation, possibly insincere it is Artificial and ‘la souris est sur la table’.18

Notes:
