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Drawing Delicate Connections

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Abstract

This paper discusses the methodology of a current drawing research project investigating delicacy as a value through case studies in other material practices. It reflects upon an interdisciplinary approach to understanding studio practice, specifically the special relationship that would seem to exist between the delicate, the intimate and drawing.

1 Introduction

The last decade has seen the emergence of strategies and tactics that utilise visually elusive methods, material or processes to various aesthetic and ideological ends. During this period, aspects of “delicacy” have also been presented as “subversive” (Maggi 1999) “social” (Bourriaud 2002), “feminine” (Classen 2005) and “fetishised” (Derrida 2006).

Delicacy in drawing has typically been coded positive, traditionally an indication of accuracy or truth (Ruskin 1857, 1971 ed.), of dexterity and a heightened sensitivity to the minutiae (Berger 2005) or more recently, a subversive ambiguity or immateriality (Dillon 2009, Petherbridge 2006). “Delicate” can also describe the material fragility of the supports commonly used in traditional drawing (e.g. paper), which has rendered them subject to special conservational measures, conditioning viewing protocol and general access. The project discussed here evolved out of a joint interest in and dissatisfaction with delicacy as a value, in particular its relation to drawing

specifically when enmeshed in rhetoric expounding the uniqueness of this medium.

In recent years, serious interest in drawing has grown “exponentially” (Taylor 2008), with what it means to draw coming under considerable scrutiny as this activity becomes increasingly established as a discipline and area of research in its own right (Garner 2008, Dillon 2009).

While this offers enormous scope for development, a danger emerges; namely that “an immature discipline tends towards defence. It is inward looking and protective rather than outward looking and willing to take risks” (Garner 2008, p20). It seems texts often deliberate over definitions of this discipline, which, at extremes, condense to a binary logic of what is and what isn’t drawing. When values of delicacy and intimacy feature so prominently in these discourses, the effect may tend towards one of uncritical introspection.

I do not propose to deny these attributes to drawing – they are at the very core of my practice, but I believe a more critical position vis-a-vis their relationship to drawing could be adopted. So rather than focusing on comparisons internal to drawing (or even Fine Art), this project uses collaborations with other “scientific” professions engaged with delicacy, in various guises, to explore a critical understanding of delicacy in studio practice. It tests an alternative, yet hopefully complementary, strategy to the other “outward-looking” approaches emerging in this discipline.¹

To clarify, this is not a case of illustrating these practices nor about looking at how they use processes which may be considered drawing; indeed in the context of an expanded field of drawing (with its incumbent dangers of an “anything goes” mentality), this may be mistaken for an attempt to mark these various interdisciplinary practices as drawing. No. It is about looking at the activities of professions which share similar values with a particular type of studio practice: a type of activity (let’s call it drawing) concerned with damage, contact, delicacy, sensitivity, traces. Rather than simply asking that increasingly hackneyed question: “what is drawing?”; instead it looks to ask “what does drawing do?”, how does it do it?, and “what might drawing share?”.

1.1 The interdisciplinary context

That this project should be undertaken now is of some significance, at time when the relationship between art and science is receiving renewed critical attention. Even regarding the past decade, there have emerged theoretical discussions of the aesthetic dimensions of scientific practice (Rhodes 2007, Lowe 2003) and significant number of exhibitions, symposia, funded research projects and publications exploring collaborative approaches.²

The overarching aim would appear to be for broader knowledge transfer. A good example of this is the Artists in Archaeology project,³ now in its sixth year. This project has enabled teams of artists to work alongside archaeologists, observing their practices to generate artworks or ways of making. Likewise, the archaeologists benefit from the alternative ways of thinking brought by the artists to their work and the public presence of exhibited artworks. In many ways this project could act as a model for my own, the primary departure being that my project works across several fields, creating a “web” of relations as a means of interrogating particular disciplinary issues as related to my practice.

2 Undertaking the case studies

The case studies were designed as an opportunity to gain access to areas outside fine art to collect information relevant to a focused research agenda. The studies formed a series of field visits and correspondences undertaken over a period of three months in the early stages of the project across the fields of medicine, costumes conservation and archaeology. Professions were decided on the grounds of pre-existing ideas around areas of shared values; what was important was that in each there was some engagement with delicacy or fragile materials. I worked predominantly with curators at Kensington Palace, archaeologists excavating at Hadrian’s wall, Manchester Museum, and the Centre for Clinical Anatomy at Lancaster University.

Visits typically involved discussions and observing practice, during which visual and textual notes were made, compiled in a series of notebooks and supplemented by photographic and filmic material. I should perhaps point out at this stage that drawing is frequently considered as a form of touching or contact and it is within such a framework that my practice operates. Consequently, I focussed on how things were handled, and the issues

surrounding visibility and damage. The agenda was kept as open as possible with the purpose to really look and find out what went on. I would work through the available equipment or use the limitations of the environment to determine the way that studies were made (Fig.1). For example, in the case of costumes archives, the drawings were dictated by the need to wear gloves and work in pencil.



Fig. 1 Working in archives

These experiences were then transported back to the studio via the notes, sketches and photographs. A process of brainstorming, list making and material experimentation ensued: a physical or material cross referencing (see Fig. 2). The studio itself became a kind of lab or sorting ground for sifting through and testing the material. The method also took on the characteristics of the other scientific practices I had observed, especially in terms of the rigorous documentation. Activities included a type of reconstruction of activities observed on the visits; for instance, working through microscopes, using processes of enlargement and precise recording techniques, working on a section rather than a whole, using light to reveal and make visible the form.



Fig. 2 Testing in the studio

The “drawing” became a means of making connections between seemingly disparate material. Through testing the aesthetics of these processes, visual and conceptual elements began to emerge that were common to all case studies, for instance: (in)visibility, control, light, damage, or distancing: the wearing of gloves being a prime example of the latter. The question became: how might these elements be developed into a coherent body of work that would comment on the information gained? To illustrate this concept more tangibly, I will focus on the development of one particular series of work: *Patina*.

2.1 The *Patina* series

In archaeology there is “preservation by record”, a recognition that the process of excavation is ultimately one of irrevocable destruction but that this is essential to further knowledge. The documentation of the process of uncovering becomes the means by which artefacts or objects are then known and preserved. In effect conditions of the artefact are replaced by processes of human intervention. This series of work developed around the idea of damage and the balance of human intervention in the struggle to control fugitive elements.

I had firstly attempted to work *with* the systems of preservation, as was the case with the gloves and hard pencil – taking the systems to the

extremes – using a pencil so fine the marks were barely visible, to map out, to scrutinize the surface of the archival garments, a process of measuring or tracking. However, this obedience soon gave way to curiosity: drawing is a medium of marking- what if these precautions and preventative measures were inverted to be actively deployed as a mark making system? If factors such as light, acid, damp, greasy fingers and heat are all hazardous to archival garments because they *cause marking*, how might these be used to “draw”?

Ideas began to condense around the concept of “patina”, an aging that can seem (perhaps perversely) to add a sense of value (Sartwell 2004). Remaining with the interest in handling, the series responded to the damages caused by grease in touching. The image is painstakingly mapped out with a syringe to issue carefully moderated deposits of grease (Fig.3). The obedience of the rule-bounded system of working discussed above becomes somewhat farcical given the detrimental purpose to which these rules are now put. The process itself becomes a struggle between chance and control, evidenced in the image by the occasional blot or run, an aesthetic “error” which builds up to create a sense of density or form. Light is also significant: this is an image revealed through light (it is projected), displayed by light and literally made by it as the sensitive paper will eventually discolour as a result of the harmful rays. Hung suspended, unframed in space(Fig.5), this material vulnerability becomes omnipresent, a spatial metaphor for the limbo in which the archival artefacts exist.



Figs. 3 & 4 Making the *Patina* series.



Fig. 5 Installation view



Fig. 6 Detail of Fig 5.

2.2 Reflections on studio outcomes

In many ways this image presents the tension of display and decay, as much a part of traditional drawing as to the archival artefacts. In doing so a parallel dialogue is established between fields of practice, one which might then comment on the tensions involved in preservation, and hint at discourses of power or control.

While this can be gleaned from the outcomes, matters of process are of equal significance. To borrow a phrase from Avis Newman(1994), “the construction of the image - the process of sifting, tracing, manipulating, modifying, placing, displacing – is as important as the image itself” . It is in these stages and processes that approaches and shared practices were most evident. Perhaps this is an example of what has been called drawing “blurring distinctions between art and everyday usage” (Petherbridge 2006). It is also performing a kind of embodied deconstruction, a means of picking apart and understanding relationships between the material collected, then rebuilding it and reforming it to reflect on emergent themes, much in the same way one would do when writing a report or summary of research. This process might constitute a visualised version what Bruno Latour (2005) has called a “hidden geography”: a hitherto invisible space created by mapping overlapping concerns (p15).

3. Implications

I must reiterate here, as a project this remains in its early stages, with little to offer at this stage in the way of generalised conclusions. There are however, certain implications of the information discussed.

This project set out to be, and still remains focussed on implications for art. Yet it would seem to raise awareness of the visual and methodological dimensions of other practices, perhaps presenting an example of an approach to transfer between art and science disciplines.⁴ Perhaps most obviously, by making visual work which reflects the processes or values of these professions, outcomes can as a communicative tool, can bring these to public attention, reaching wider audiences.

Perhaps the most pressing concern is that the acceptance of studio practice as research remains a contested area. One of the problematic factors is the secrecy that surrounds studio methods. Claiming studio knowledge as distinct, separate or incompatible may be effectively jeopardising opportunities for real sharing of knowledge and acceptance within the research community (Sullivan 2005). Therefore, if studio methodologies require wider understanding to be valued and contribute to interdisciplinary knowledge (Sullivan 2005;DeFreitas 2002), perhaps a model such as I have discussed with its case studies and intensive, open documentation may present one useful way of opening up relationships by

making visible these processes without sacrificing the essential creative core.

In entering dialogical relations with other material practices, this interdisciplinary approach falls in stark opposition to drawing as a secretive, private studio based dialogue between artist and page. Moreover, it challenges the suggestion of drawing being unique in these characteristics, looking instead “to suggest the borders where the drawing world abuts the world of other disciplines, and to suggest where we might or should explore” (Garner 2008, p13). Yet while it is outward-looking, seeking to make connections and establish relationships, these remain firmly grounded within the histories and issues internal to itself.

I recognise the potential danger of over simplifying relationships resulting in only superficial significance. Yet perhaps this tentative, rhizomic structure is what would be expected of the “hidden geography” of an interdisciplinary community. As Latour (2005) has argued, “there may be no continuity, no coherence in our opinions, but there is a hidden continuity and a hidden coherence in what we are attached to” (p15). For him making visible these connections is about inciting fundamental change. So, if drawing, in its multiple manifestations, does blur distinctions between art and everyday activities (Petherbridge 2006), maybe it presents useful strategy through which to enact this.

¹ e.g. (Davies & Duff, 2005; Duff & Sawdon, 2009)

² e.g. *Art and Science Now The Two Cultures in Question*, Symposium, Tate Modern, 24 Jan 2009, *Experimentality* project 2009-10, IAS, Lancaster University.

³ *Artists in Archaeology*, Online: www.artistsinarchaeology.org (accessed: 04/12/2008 17:41)

⁴ E.g. Images and information generated through the project are being included into databases within the fields, suggesting mutual gain.

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