

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

H A N D

The Studio
(*Brush, masking tape, scissors, etc.*)

The Artists Hand

Drawing Exercises

A Point to Consider.

The Studio

(*Brush, masking tape, scissors, etc.*)

Early in 2015, I was packing up my studio to relocate to another workspace.¹ While I sorted through tools and materials, considering what ones were useful or necessary to my work and what ones weren't, I was reminded of Bruce Nauman's famous quote "If I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art".² While his statement inevitably suggests the studio is a place of *possibility*, it also implies that the studio is a *constraint* upon the making of art. Tools, while providing creative options, could also be seen to impose a limit to the production of such work. Perhaps this sentiment stands in alliance with Ludwig Wittgenstein's claim that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world".³ Possibilities within the studio, in this sense, are intertwined with the limits of possibility itself.

It took one full carload to transport my studio from one place to another. Before moving in I made a video of a

¹ This studio was situated in a building referred to as *The Old Museum* - a delightful coupling! Daniel Buren discussed the incommensurability of the studio and museum in an essay called *The Function of The Studio*. He describes how the studio and the museum are conventionally (and I would argue, contemporarily too) *separate* spaces. The space of *production* kept invisible, distanced from the space of *exhibition*.

² As cited in Robert C Morgan, *Bruce Nauman* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 122.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* trans. Pears/McGuinness [Originally published "Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung" 1922]. (London: Routledge, 2001). 86,

selection of hand-sized tools and studio instruments. Positioned against my studio wall, and holding each object in turn, I would extend my right hand into the camera's frame. In the centre, the hand pauses briefly and then retreats. Later I duplicated this video and mirrored one side, in effect producing a left/right hand pairing.

In the corresponding diptych video *Brush, masking tape, scissors, etc.* the two separate video channels run on their own loops. Tools and objects are drawn towards each other, at moments caught in a simultaneous pause, and then drawn away from each other again. I played it back to myself in the studio and watched the tools tick over. It was a prosaic archaeology of my studio and its contents.

At first glance the work appears as an instructional YouTube video gone wrong, stuck in its introductory phase. The two hands put forward separate ideas, between them suggesting incongruous creative activities. In other words, I interpreted this work as presenting forward a selection of actions or *verbs* rather than a collection of tools as objects or *nouns*.

I gathered together all possible studio actions at my disposal: to tie, to cut, to paint, to sand, to adhere. In this way, I found these videos referenced a 'keystone' work within the canon of drawing history - Richard Serra's *Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself*, 1967-8. In pencil on two pieces of paper, the work consists of four columns of handwritten text where the artist details more than 80 processes - 'to remove', 'to mix', 'to support' -

and over 20 states or conditions - ‘of grouping’, ‘of felting’. Serra described the drawing as “actions to relate to oneself, to material, place and process”,⁴ and used it as a guide with which to make subsequent works in other mediums.

I consider how my studio tools in *Brush*, *masking tape*, *scissors*, *etc.* similarly operate as a list of verbs, communicating to its viewer an array of possible actions. As the two videos roll on, tools are posed together in bizarre couplings. I want the viewer to be able to contemplate on implied relations between these combinations. Like *Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself*, the work could operate as a generative resource. It is a drawing to *work from* as well as a final piece.

While I consider the role of *action* [see: **DOINGS**] in Serra’s work, I realise that *Brush Masking Tape Scissors etc.* also demonstrates a sense indecision and inactivity. Here, the artist’s hand is not that which chooses a tool and creates, but rather that which questions - setting up a situation for response and reading. It seems that the hand, the aspect of this work that I thought played a supplementary role, perhaps had much greater importance.

⁴ As cited in Benjamin Buchloh, ‘Process Sculpture and Film in the work of Richard Serra’ in *Richard Serra*, Hal Foster and Gordon Hughes ed. (Cambridge. Ma: MIT press), 7. For a reproduction of Verb List see page 8-9.

The Artist's Hand

Traditionally, it is the hand that makes drawing possible. A drawing, as a moment of contact between implement and ground, is a mediation of the hand. Supported by the thumb, middle finger and index finger, the implement is alternately put under pressure and released. Resultant marks retain an indexical connection to the artist's touch, like an autograph holding an existential relation to the artist's body. Historically, this "valuing of the touch of the artist, this investiture of meaning into the personality of the mark was [...] reinforced by the artists signature"⁵ in which the artist's 'self' was referenced.

The centrality of the artist's hand increasingly became a subject of critical inquiry during the 20th century through the framework of drawing practice and also art practice at large. As some artists experimented with drawing *outside* the limits of the hand⁶, others conceived of the hand as the subject of drawing in itself.

I became interested in drawing approaches that consider the hand as an object of drawing, approaches which explore the outstretched hand *as always already drawing*. Catherine de Zegher asserts that drawing is constituted by the outwards

⁵ Gregory Burke, *Drawing Analogies: Recent Dimensions in New Zealand Drawing* (Wellington: Wellington City Art Gallery, 1988), 3.

⁶ For instance, see the drawing methods explored by Trisha Brown, Rebecca Horn and Matthew Barney.

gesture⁷ where the hand gestures away from the bodily axis. It is with this in mind that I reflect on *Hand Movie*.

A literal exploration of the mechanics of drawing, Yvonne Rainer's *Hand Movie* from 1966 focuses on the artist's right hand. The five-minute footage depicts a sustained close-up shot of Rainer's hand against a grey background, her fingers slowly stretching and contracting, bending and pointing in a poetic yet everyday dance.⁸ Throughout this video her gestures slip into and out of performing a type of silent articulation, and I think about the finger gestures so commonly used to exemplify speech and speaking. *Hand Movie* both forms and deforms the figures of this language.

This association between the use of the hand in drawing and the use of the hand in communication is similarly implicit in Bruce Nauman's⁹ two-channel video installation *For Beginners*, 2010. The work depicts two pairs of the artist's outstretched hands, moving systematically as they exhaust all 31 possible combinations of eight fingers and two thumbs opening and closing. Rather than performing unique or expressive gestures, Nauman exposes the hand as that which is - like the artist - bound to a finite system of language. (Wittgenstein's *the limits of my language mean the limits of my world* might be useful here.) This finite language available to the artist establishes "the limits of the

⁷ Catherine de Zegher, 'Drawing as Primary Medium.' *Walker Arts Centre Lecture*, 1:12:42, November 6, 2006.

<http://www.walkerart.org/channel/2006/drawing-as-primary-medium>.

⁸ 'Yvonne Rainer: Hand Movie', *UbuWeb*, accessed March 16, 2015.

http://www.ubu.com/film/rainer_hand-movie.html

⁹ A pivotal figure in any discussion on the hand in/and art.

worlds of art”¹⁰ and the limits of the worlds of communication simultaneously.

Both drawings, Nauman’s *For Beginners* and Rainer’s *Hand Movie*, retain their indexical relationship to the artist’s hand so crucial to a conventional understanding of drawing. The traces of the artist’s touch, specific movements and gestures, are directly captured and recorded (albeit through different means). By shifting the role of the artist’s hand and analysing the mechanics of this drawing implement, these works can be seen to explore drawings’ possibilities and limits.

I’m interested in this shift where drawing itself becomes aware of its capacity to produce meaning; where drawing becomes positioned as a site of and for reading.

De Zegher says as the drawing hand gestures outwards, away from the bodily axis, it penetrates into the space of the other. At the extremity of the artist’s body, the hand confides, “I exist, but only in relation to you”¹¹.

¹⁰ T. R. Martland. ‘On: The Limits of My language mean the limits of my world’ in *The Review of metaphysics*. Vol 29, number 1. (1975): 19.

¹¹ Zegher, ‘Drawing as Primary Medium.’

Drawing Exercises

I want to treat the hand as you would a pair of scissors or a roll of masking tape - as a tool to work with. I begin to explore the hand in a way that felt both central to a notion of drawing while also bringing on performative, image-based and sculptural concerns and questions. At some points, I wondered how much I was leaving 'drawing' behind.

In my studio I began to carry out 10 minute drawing exercises, *performing* a kind of drawing with my fingers and wrist and my right arm propped upright or sideways against my studio wall. Within the camera's frame I set upon exploring the varieties and capacities of gesture. I thought about the limits of this drawing implement - four fingers, one thumb and the wrist as an axis. I thought about these fingers that were bound to moving in relation to one another. These drawing exercises provided me with a way in which to explore drawing as something provisional, rather than final. By the time I had done many exercises and reflected upon the series, some of them had started to hold an ambiguous intentionality of their own, sometimes one that was difficult to read.

A Point to Consider

Parenthetically, I found a rock whose peculiar surface and skin-like texture lent it curious readings. I was interested in our relationship, how neither one of us was particularly dominated or subsumed by the other. By virtue of its shape and weight I found our relation was compatible - my right hand could just bear it.

(On the one hand, does not everybody want to be a rock? I have always considered the rock to be a metaphor for western conceptions of identity; solid, hermetic and immutable. Yet on the other hand, I find this rock to also be a stand in for *the other*. It poses a challenge to my hand. It confronts it.)

In my studio I made drawing exercises with the rock-thing. My outstretched hand explored various positions from which to hold it. For five minute intervals I'd attempt to keep our position still, this simple task inevitably compromised by the rock's weight and the failing strength of my hand beneath. Together we made an image of confrontation.

The next day my arm ached from the action, from the inaction, from the negotiation.

The video plays forwards and backwards in a loop. The seam dividing beginning from end becomes invisible. The short

exercise now depicts a Sisyphean¹² state - a constant and infinite negotiation between body and other.

Within the image, the rock is a graphic point in the thereabouts centre of the frame. Its position subtly shifts. Each moment in this composition records a decided task. In amongst the exertion and tension is the production of a different kind of residual mark, a mark supported by a trembling hand. In this, I have found a way in which to consider composition, form and movement.

In a room as a projected image, this struggle is made literally immaterial and not present. An image comprised simply of light, the rock's gravity becomes weightless.

As I reflect upon the limits and possibilities of art and communication...

(emergent sculptural concerns; concerns of weight and form; concerns for the hands that bind me (for better or worse) to language, and the other; the problems and possibilities of reading)

...the rock shifts slowly in the containment of the frame.
In the room I feel I am likewise - a rock-thing.

¹² In Greek mythology Sisyphus was a king who was punished for his actions by being made to roll an enormous boulder up a hill, only then to watch it fall back down. His punishment was to be carried out for eternity, an existence of futile efforts and unending frustration. In the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus uses this myth as a metaphor for the 'absurdity' of human existence itself.