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**R E A D I N G**

Into Drawing

Writing and reading

Drawing Together Four Texts

*Looking At and Talking About*

## Into drawing

I had come back to art school to do my masters at an odd time. From 2010 to 2014, I had been working in collaboration with artist Annsuli Marais. The viability of collaborative practice had interested me: *What did it mean to collaborate with another person? How could it be possible to make a mark with another person?* Collaboration complicated any clear sense of authorship, bringing up problems and questions around authorisation. This is to say, art school was an opportunity for a break or rupture into my practice rather than any kind of mastery or resolution.

During the first few months of my thesis project in early 2014, Annsuli had sent me a Nietzsche paperback - *Man Alone With Himself*.<sup>1</sup> In my new studio, I would consider how meaning was subjective and mutable. What I would see and say was never what Annsuli would see and say. I think maybe this collaborative practice put me in the position from where I wanted to play; rather than capture 'meaning', injecting a poetic in the mix. It taught me to make allowances for miscommunication, at times to crave its incursion into everyday life.

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<sup>1</sup> *Man Alone With Himself* is a Penguin Great Ideas book - a selection of text from Nietzsche's *Human, All too Human*.

Over the past two years I have decisively moved between different methodologies, media, and presentation strategies. This body of work - comprised of publications, videos, sculptures, drawings, prints, installations and writings - reflects a research based creative practice formed and informed by philosophy, art-history and semiotics. Although it may be said that my practice is interdisciplinary and relates to more than one body of knowledge, the notion of *drawing* (in it's many guises) provides an interesting platform from which to consider it. As I see it, to talk about drawing is an oblique way to address the 'the artist' and 'the artist's hand'. Drawing asks, *what does it mean to make a mark? To make communication?*

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The word drawing itself has multiple meanings. In its everyday usage, it is a noun, *a finished drawing*; a verb, *the act of drawing*; an inference to pulling, extracting and/or dragging. In the language of sport, *the match ended in a draw*. In relation to the lottery, one is *in the draw to win*. Suffice to say the notion of drawing, seemingly simple, can be disarmingly complex and oblique, its movements hard to track.

The word drawing in contemporary art discourse is ubiquitous. Many artists draw or use ideas related to

drawing, yet as Jerry Saltz observed in 2003, *nobody really* calls himself or herself ‘*a drawer*’.<sup>2</sup>

Through my explorations into drawing history, my understanding of the boundaries that define the medium and practice has become quite fluid. In my research, I have considered traditional conceptions of drawing alongside works that challenge a conventional definition of what drawing is. As Bernice Rose asserts, drawing can at once be the most conservative, but also the most subversive of approaches to art making.<sup>3</sup>

Within this project, I did not set out to investigate what the essence of drawing *was*, or to demonstrate some amount of mastery. Rather, I was propelled by an interest into what drawing could *be*. I wanted to explore the ways in which boundaries defining drawing practice had been drawn and redrawn, and wanted to trace out drawing’s connections to installation, performance, sculpture and writing.

I attempted to construct contemporary ways of approaching drawing, challenging conventionally held notions of the medium. I pushed the idea of drawing to its limits by working against its expected materiality, presentation and scale.

I see this body of work as an investigation into art-making and writing via the use of drawing-related concerns.

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<sup>2</sup> Jerry Saltz, ‘Good on Paper’ in *Seeing Out Loud: The Village Voice Art Columns. Fall 1998 – Winter 2003* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Bernice Rose, *Allegories of Modernism: Contemporary Drawing* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 10.

Accommodating play, process, and a poetics of the future, I wanted to draw-out drawing, drag it and pull it apart.

## Writing and reading

Throughout my creative practice, I have maintained a strong interest in the sometimes-fragile relationship between the work and the supplementary text. On the one hand, a text is able to take you closer to an aspect of the work, but on the other hand it also - necessarily - takes you away from the work, away from the matters at hand. Although drawing and writing both have roots in the activity of line-making,<sup>4</sup> reading a text and reading a drawing (both activities of comprehending lines) have very different terms of engagement. The viewer is unable to engage with visual language and written language simultaneously and is asked to *reconcile* these different temporalities. No longer is it a matter of the work and its autonomy, the text ultimately adds something more to the presence of the work. Here, you negotiate a space of what you see and what you read.

When writing alongside a drawing there are aspects of the work that cannot be fully encompassed by the written text. (I say *alongside* instead of *about* as writing can never

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<sup>4</sup> The essay *Drawing, Writing and Calligraphy* by Tim Ingold is an excellent analysis on the distinctions between drawing and writing.

assume the role of *knowing* the drawing.) There is “always a remainder - an excess - after any given interpretation.”<sup>5</sup> When it comes to writing, or ‘when writing comes to *it*’, a drawing instantly reveals its mutability. This may not be a dominant aspect of the work, but it is an inevitable one. To write is never a matter of defining ‘what the work means’,<sup>6</sup> rather giving the drawing a text adds another language - a language that wasn’t initially there.

In the accompanying text to British artist DJ Simpson’s painting/drawing exhibition *A Mead Gallery Exhibition*, writer Simon O’Sullivan states, “It can only be to write with painting, to follow painting’s own lines and gestures with lines and gestures of its own”.<sup>7</sup> O’Sullivan produces multiple segments of text, arranges them as isolated islands across the pages. He refers to these texts as ‘fictions’, casting off any claims to ‘truth’ that may be attached to them.

Like the wayward marks of Simpson’s work, it is not a matter of following O’Sullivan’s text systematically as there is no set order in which they *should* be read. Every text picks up anew and with a separate voice and idea establishes oblique connections with the rest. The viewer/reader has to negotiate a range of temporalities, O’Sullivan’s lines of thought mapping their logics across DJ Simpson’s. In this, a

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<sup>5</sup> Simon O’Sullivan, ‘Science Fiction (or Painting; The Abstract Machine)’ in *DJ Simpson: Works* (Warwick: Mead Gallery, 2007), 81.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *From Work To Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977) 155-65.

<sup>7</sup> O’Sullivan, ‘Science Fiction (or Painting; The Abstract Machine)’, 81.



viewer is required to draw disparate lines together and establish connections between.

### Drawing Together Four Texts

Upon reflecting on all the works and investigations I have endeavoured upon this year and considering how to account for them, I realised that there in fact was no beginning and no end. These different investigations existed side-by-side rather than in a chronology.

I realised that it would not be appropriate to write one single or definitive text. Instead I set on to explore how a structure of multiple texts, multiple entry and exit points,<sup>8</sup> could hold together moments of simplicity with moments of complexity in a way sympathetic to my creative work. I wanted such a structure to be exploratory in nature “allowing for moments of signifying clarity of conceptual work, and moments when it stops making sense.”<sup>9</sup> As no

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<sup>8</sup> Deleuze and Guittari had similar intentions with their book *A Thousand Plateaus*. In their introductory chapter ‘Rhizome’ they describe a model that works in contrast to a linear and binary tree-structure model of thought. With multiple entry and exit points, the basic principles of a rhizome are *connection* and *heterogeneity*. As opposed to fixing an order *the points in a rhizome can be connected to any other point*. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guittari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capatalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004) 3-6.

<sup>9</sup> O’Sullivan, ‘Science Fiction (or Painting; The Abstract Machine)’, 81.

chronology or order is fixed upon your reading of the books, you may approach the chapters in a similar way to how you might listen to an album of music; there is no inappropriate order by which to experience it's entirety.

In his *Poetics of the Open Work*, Umberto Eco describes the principles and characteristics of an 'open work' evident in certain forms of cultural production which give a considerable amount of agency to the viewer in their construction of an experience. Rather than something fixed or stable, an open work is *in movement* - offering up a number of possibilities, different ways in which it can be played out. "The poetics of the 'work in movement' [...] sets in motion a new cycle of relations between the artist and his audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception, a different status for the artistic product in contemporary society [...] It poses new practical problems by organizing new communicative situations."<sup>10</sup>

Treating this text as an open work, a moveable and constructable system, I have chosen to write 4 texts. They have been opened up and set in motion, structured towards resisting a fixed or final closure. *In any particular order*, this is an invitation for you construct for yourself an experience of the work.

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<sup>10</sup> Umberto Eco 'The Poetics of The Open Work' in *The Open Work* trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 22-3.

READING

HANDS

OTHER

DOINGS

## *Looking At and Talking About*

Over the past few years I have investigated the idea of *the text* in a number of ways, exploring the possible positions it could take alongside the experience of art. I am concerned with how the text can activate an engagement with art, rather than explain or resolve it.

For a group exhibition in 2014, *It's Not Me, It's You: A Group Show*, my contribution was the supply of a small set of exhibition publications titled *Looking At and Talking About*.

*Looking At and Talking About* required an absence of curatorial text, wall-texts, pamphlets, and required that none of the artists' names be attached to the exhibition. In their place, *Looking At and Talking About* established an institutional relationship to the exhibition, appearing to come from a Department of Audience Engagement.<sup>11</sup> In the publication, each page featured one line of text: *What can you tell about the person who made this? When do you think this was made? What is Hiding? What stands out the most when you see it?* What may seem to be easy or simple fast became complex when attended to with seriousness.

As a tool with which to navigate the exhibition, *Looking At and Talking About* responded to the viewer who asked 'I want to understand more about the work', with 'we want to understand more about you'.

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<sup>11</sup> The work of Visual Thinking Strategist Phillip Yenawine became very influential during the process of developing this work.

Months later, this work was developed into a walking museum tour for Nga Toi | Arts Te Papa within the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Three works were selected from each of the current exhibitions in the gallery: Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (We Are Unsuitable For Framing)*, 1985; Peter Robinson's *Tongue of the False Prophet*, 1992; and Bill Culbert's *Jetsam Flotsam*, 2013. Throughout the tour, the tour guide asked the attendees questions from *Looking At and Talking About: What can you tell about the person who made this? When do you think this was made? What is Hiding? What stands out the most when you see it?* These questions provided a basis for conversation and discussion. Rather than contextualizing the works with the use of the artists' name, the work's title, its materials list or a curatorial wall-text, the tour-goers were presented with the language of line, form, colour and composition. It could be said that this tour became a sort of *detour* from the art historical canon, works in the museum fast becoming unfixed. In this, the museum becomes a place for speculation, play and the generation of new thoughts.

If the job of a conventional text is to clarify or decipher the work, *Looking At and Talking About* complicated hope of any such efficient meaning-making process. Through attempting to make the text something that generated the activity of thinking, the experience of art became active. Within this work, I sought more from both the viewer and the artwork. *Looking At and Talking About* utilised visual language, affects and signs within images and objects,

drawing attention to the frameworks in which their meanings are produced.

My drawing investigations this year developed as a result of thinking through these *Looking At and Talking About* works. It seems that in both art and in life, it is your responsibility to navigate yourself through your surroundings. You both use the signs at hand, and *produce for yourself* the signs at hand.

Even if within your experience you find connotations that are - at times - complex, ambiguous or obscured; what really matters is how you conceive, connect and contain.