

Writing experiments with a lateral leaning

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Abstract

The drawing and writing experiment that I offered at the Centre of Learning and Teaching in Art and Design (CLTAD) conference in Berlin, 2010 is related to my Ph.D. research (based at Leeds Metropolitan University). The research centres around what I am calling the ‘lateral’ or supra-rational sides of designing processes. While the term ‘lateral’ was originally made popular by de Bono (1967) in his book *Lateral Thinking*, its association in the research project embraces the kinds of thinking and making connected to ideation, visualization, intuition and other elements of a sphere of practice that are harder to contain and evidence within orthodox Humanities approaches to academic research. Schon (1983) in ‘*The Reflective Practitioner*’, Law on ‘*Beyond Method: Mess*’ (2004) and tangentially, in terms of contemplating a network of practice, Lefebvre’s ‘*Rhythmanalysis*’ (1992) have all further influenced my research. The research project’s particular portrait of processes emerged, in a first stage, from interviews with design students, designers/tutors and young designers in Leeds and at the Royal College of Art. The second, more speculative stage of research asks what might happen if such subject matter and such modes of practice are imposed on writing culture. The drawing and writing experiment in Berlin was a ‘hands-on’ exploration of the theme of Observation.

Keywords

observation

drawing

experiment

participatory

discussion

writing practices

Introduction

My Ph.D. research centres round what I am calling the ‘lateral’ or supra-rational sides of designing processes and practice. While the term ‘lateral’ was originally encountered through de Bono (1967), its association in the research project embraces the kinds of thinking and making connected to elements of discovery that are tacit, experiential and heuristic in nature: ideation, visualization and intuition form other elements of a sphere of practice that are harder to contain and evidence within orthodox approaches to academic research in the Humanities. The research project’s initial portrait of practice emerged from interviews with design students, designers/tutors and young designers in Leeds and at the Royal College of Art, London. The second and more speculative stage of my research asks what might happen if such subject matter and such modes of practice are imposed on writing culture. In other words, could writing be enriched in some way by designing, thinking and making modes? Would it further reveal insights into practice rhythms? I therefore took the very broad practice of drawing and created a number of

experiments that moved from drawing responses to the themes above, to speaking and then to writing activities.

The research project itself interrogates the existing curriculum in proposing writing as something that can be conceived of as a by-product of drawing. The writing element in the experiments may include, or move beyond, the requirement for an evaluative or reflective response; they may have a totally distinct, more expressive nature, or may even be repressed, erased. These ‘experiments’ are so called rather than ‘workshops’ because their nature is essentially exploratory and open-ended; they are not designed to transmit a body of skills, for example, or to progress through exercises. In fact, the experiments have something of the spirit of CLTAD 2010 with Susan Orr’s talk, ‘Reflect on this!’ (CLTAD 2010) in that there is a prioritizing of students’ primary practice and mode of working. Howard Riley’s notion of the ‘visual essay’ (CLTAD 2010) has also taken up this baton. Indeed, there are many echoes of the 2002–2006 national project, *Writing Purposefully in Art and Design*’s forays here, for instance the imperative for writing to match the purpose of the student-practitioner rather than to resemble an inculcation into someone else’s culture. Another element of the understanding behind the experiments is that there are primary modes of thinking that are visual and that can be annexed in writing perhaps. Rudolf Arnheim’s book *Visual Thinking* (1969) emphasizes this element:

‘What makes language so valuable for thinking, then, cannot be thinking in words. It must be the help that words lend to thinking while it operates in a more appropriate medium, such as visual imagery.

Words point to precepts

The visual medium is so enormously superior because it offers structural equivalents to all characteristics of objects, events, relations [...]

To some extent then, the experiments are concerned with what is primary and what is secondary. The ‘primary’ in this project is connected with the drawing itself, visual expression, with experience and with processes of practice, for example. These might include sketching out ideas – without preamble, deliberation or conscious planning. In other words, the powers of visualization and intuition or ideation are called upon. The ‘secondary’ are words, both the verbal chatting around the images and finally the writing. While the research project is concerned with how writing is manifested after drawing and talking, this brief article will focus solely on the practical details of the actual encounter that formed the experiment ‘Observation’, and will offer up a few ‘end notes’ from the Berlin conference (CLTAD 2010). As Curtis Tappenden, the sole collaborator in this experiment, illuminates,

‘This is a working document from the conference and not one simply brought to it’.

Setting up and first stage of the writing experiment at CLTAD 2010: Observation

Etymology of observation/observe:

Late 14th century: a watching over; to attend to in practice

16th century: watch, perceive, notice; a remark in reference to something observed'.

[<http://www.etymonline.com>]

As explained, each writing experiment is introduced via a main theme derived from the Ph.D. interview data in 2008/2009. In Berlin, the choice for the workshop was based on the intimation that, as the city itself is rich in all kinds of visual, urban stimulation, the focus on '*watching, perceiving and noticing*' would be appealing. The actual workshop turned into a dialogue with Curtis Tappenden (CT), himself a practitioner of drawing and creative writing/performance, as well as a tutor engaged in this kind of drawing-writing crossover at the University for the Creative Arts. The workshop proved to be a stimulating exchange of practice in terms of our respective research areas as well as the experiment itself. The rest of this article, then, documents what took place through drawing and discussing, and adds some simple commentaries on salient points that relate to the larger research project with its now large body of experiments.

Observation one: physical space

The allocated room was of the large, institutional lecture kind: technology facilities and large screens at one end with very long rows of identical chairs facing them. Setting up for the experiment involved screening off a part of this room to provide an empty space, slightly denuded of the larger efficiency, and slightly protected from more formal learning connotations. (In fact, for almost all the twenty research experiments, we occupied studio space or at least an informal space to spread out in).

Observation two: dual emotions

In the experiments, I became both facilitator and participant. And, based on experience, I would suggest that CT and I expressed two of the key emotions generated at the start of the writing experiments. First, some apprehension at entering unknown territory, as if being asked to perform on the spot, and counterbalanced with this, a desire, almost a dare, to see what would happen. It should be emphasized that emotions were pervasive in the experiments not just in this small regard here, but in terms of pursuing the subject matter and as evident in spoken responses. The University of the Arts' 'Unspoken Interactions' (2008), edited by Noam Austerlitz, illuminates this whole area of emotions in art/design/educational practice. However, I would suggest from the experiments that emotions not only seem to be intrinsic 'rhythms of practice', but to be almost synonymous with health, perhaps vigour. I think this is hinted at in the etymological origin of emotion – 'moving out', ie dynamic expression opposed to being stuck, stagnancy.

Observation three: richness of difference

The experiment revealed two distinct starting points for the drawing activity. Two worlds, in other words, of two individuals coming with two distinct backgrounds, circumstances and two distinct experiences of Berlin. (Had there been six participants, there would have been six distinct contributions, and so on). It will be shown that each drawing, in revealing these differences, generated different possibilities for writing: this somewhat obvious statement is included because, despite homogenizing impositions on the curricula, I still see huge diversity – as revealed through the experiments.

Observation four: concentration sounds

We had at our disposal two large boards covered in brown paper and an amount of charcoal and wax pastels. For around 20 minutes, CT and I turned to the boards to set down observations of Berlin in that time and space; that is to say, we expressed the images and thoughts that came up without pre-meditation, and without any comparison or chat. It was absorbing work accompanied by paper shuffling, scraping of charcoal across surfaces, clattering of pastels down on a table, some pauses in between. Not only an absorbing activity, but one defined by space, the sensual, the kinetic.

Discussion

Figure 1: HE's drawing experience – Layers.

Observation five: the intense and messy

HE: For me, [the drawing] looks really messy actually, but it's got a lot of things that have happened to me in the last few days. It's quite intense. [...] It's quite good actually because I wasn't sure what I was doing, you know, getting the ideas as you go along.

As with hands-on, tacit practices, the content of sketching had not been planned in advance, but was spontaneously bringing stuff up. There is a rough equivalent in verbal brainstorming for an initial generation of ideas for writings. I recognized that not knowing what I was doing was a strength – a bypassing of the conscious that Jane Graves refers to in her description of the creative process in ‘*The Secret life of Objects*’ (2007).

Observation six: composition of pleasures

HE: I did the graffiti thing because I love the graffiti and it's mad – it's just totally mad, but also, that's Berlin for me, it's just, that is the word. [...] This bed [...] is because it's been a place of serenity and great beds too – this hotel bed here is really good! Mm, so I've got all these different experiences [...] Drinking beer late at night [...] so all of those things about em, really strong impressions, really bold things, really bright things.

The intensity of breathing in the city was for me not (this time) via the greatness of Berlin or its sad history or the sublime, but of a very down-to-earth, ridiculous in parts, array (not series) of impressions and sensual experiences, and the disparate subject matter are united through that experience, captured on paper and through the overriding emotion.

The sum of my sketch is about pleasure and celebration; about registering but not evaluating. Perhaps in the disjuncture away from formal prose is a space for the effusive.

Figure 2: Berlin centre.

Observation seven: on words

HE: At first, I thought the words are oppressive – I don't like the words – but actually it went into German because I quite like speaking some words of German so –

I relish an escape into something that is not ordered by words as I spend a lot of professional time trying to ease art and design student practitioners into academic writing culture. This leaning against such order is reflected not only in the nature of the experiment, but in my attraction to visual practices in art and design and the challenge inherent in my Ph.D. question (how might designing modes impact writing?). Here, the German words are enjoyed as part of the stimulus and as a fabric of the city – the words are part of a sound-visual stream.

Observation nine: art school tensions and metaphor

HE: And then I've got the art school. This is the 'art school', from the name of the talk that I went to today, [what is an ideal art school? CLTAD 2010] and I've got this feeling about the conference you know that people are kind of getting out, moving out getting to – just a stretching thing although the belts – the belts are here, on the art school, so that went into it.

There is an indiscriminate working across strata of experience in the sketch that has no parallel in conventional academic writing in which singling out threads is preferred.

While Berlin the city created a major impact, the talk on the art school reminded me of some of the ideals – and research sources – I shared and how many people at the

conference were looking for viable ways forward despite the ‘belts’ (Foucauldian?)
constraining the institution.

The sketch may also reveal inclinations to connect outside the institution. In any case, it has the quality of operating as a metaphor, suggesting and evoking on a number of layers simultaneously.

Observation ten: the purposes of drawing

On my not being trained in drawing skills, CT infers,

CT: It's not an issue, it's about getting it out, it's almost like a primal language.

HE: Yes, it was that thing about ‘what's come up for me? What have I observed in the last few days?’

I did urge a ‘no apology’ principle for either drawing or writing in the workshops and, in the main, this worked, for myself as well, shedding embarrassment. Obviously there are multiple forms of drawing (drafts, models, sketches, first ideas, design diagrams, maps, illustrations, etc) and while many of these are now performed routinely via computers, everyone in the twenty workshops managed to draw in one way or another, and mostly appreciated this unusual space. I became most enthralled, however, with the totality of what was witnessed through the drawing effect and the degree of insight that was raised through the experiments, so CT's word ‘primal’ certainly had resonance.

Observation eleven: drawing compared to writing sketches

CT: Would you have written this in a notebook in a similar way? [...]

HE: Not at all, not at all the same. Because I don't know here – these are images – these are er – OK, these, most of these are words, but er, em, the colour and the line and the strength of the images, I can't do that straight into words – I don't – it's not the same, it's something different but I do want to write from this.

CT: Mm, so it would be like a springboard prompt into[...] [writing].

There is an element of shooting myself in the foot in this extract. The richness, not the 'language' (the word is too restrictive), in a drawing is of a different and incomparable dimension to words in a string on a line on a page (something that will be dealt with in the Ph.D. thesis). While the drawing would make an excellent kind of springboard for writing in various contexts, the notion behind the experiments is not 'draw first, write second' in the sense that the drawing is merely a 'prompt', although that may be an excellent practice. It is rather that there is a richness in the drawing that can impact writing, ie when writing is seen as a by-product and not a compulsory outcome.

Figure 3: CT's drawing experience – the crack, etc.

Observation thirteen

CT: I'm here with my family. We've had a number of conversations over things because my daughter is twelve and my son is nine – and they ask – they are asking questions and many of the answers I don't have because it's too complicated but it's forced me – I was reading last night about the complexities of what - we've all been thinking a lot about it.

CT's individual drawing investigation, then, has begun from another angle altogether: a subjective one this time derived from family discussions and a need to understand. It is the personal motivation to find out that has led to reading around Berlin and has then been absorbed into the drawing to some extent. This archiving of Berlin, the city, has gone back into history, huge tensions, and inevitably into the notions of fundamental splits rather than the more sensual appreciation of my own drawing.

Observation fourteen: listening to cities

CT: I listen to cities.

HE: Yeah, that's a good expression, actually.

CT: Because cities talk to you.

The mention of listening, just a brief remark about how cities talk suggests a way into writings that might be polyphonic, a dialogue, a monologue and so forth. CT connects the polyphonic direction to the jester in Observation sixteen.

Observation fifteen: Berlin history of the crack

CT: Mm. The – the beginning of it was a crack –

HE: Yeah, nice. Yeah, nice.

CT: Because you've got two halves – you've got east and west – yeah, it's the city first of all [...] although bits of the conference do feed into it because the crack is obviously a huge divide. I was just amazed – I was looking through the book last night and realising how, em, a place that was together as republics then divided then unified then broken

then unified can actually really be unified. And although you've got something going across, there's still a crack in the middle. And even with the walls down, there are still people trying to climb to get to somewhere here, I think. But also, I'm alluding to what we're doing here which is we're trying to climb with our knowledge.

Figure 4: Photograph of the wall, restaurant, Bundestag, Berlin.

CT has documented in his drawing the crucial divide in Berlin the city. Then there is a parallel allusion to the 'academy' and the notion of climbing up – a synchronicity between our two sketches, even while CT's is an espousal of knowledge and mine a hastening to lose it outside the academy. There are the multiple layers again, visual metaphors: whereas mine is concerned with the sensual layers, CT's is concerned with historical ones – and that very graphic crack. CT comments:

'I believe us to be vitally grounded and rooted in our histories, upon which we build, then move so as to change the space upon which our two feet stand. [...] This adherence to the historical as an underpinning base for my drawing and writings is for me a key discipline, which although it may affect my free expression, offers me the permission to explore within and beyond. I like the tension of these boundaries and freedoms'.

What is interesting is how CT asserts his respect for knowledge whereas I am bound (in this experiment) to expressing experience: I can imagine these two threads leading to

divergent written outcomes. These might be most obviously more reflective and critical in CT's case; more expressive and poetic in my own (this, just one possibility).

Further, CT's emphasis on the more intellectual enquiry behind who we are that enters the drawing is something I need to counterbalance against my own enthusiasm for the 'primary' of drawing and a strong leaning towards ideation.

Observation sixteen: the jester

CT: There are a number of cross- allus- allusions going on. We – this was just in my mind about the juggler, the spinner, the jester, but actually, he's looking up, motivated to move on – perhaps that's the optimism in the city. Spinning the plates.

CT's jester brings another dimension, potentially a narrative: a symbolic character that hints at another kind of myth, or non-historical force. CT therefore manages to convey a tension (always exciting) between two opposing forces in the city, one of the past and one of the present. He adds, *'The jester connection has found its root in what Mikhail Bakhtin wrote about the Carnival; that the power lay in the polyphonic voices of the participants, many voices and expressions expressing diversity but with a forward purpose of mind, a unified gathering which expresses truth'*.

Observation seventeen: an angel

CT: When the taxi driver [...] brought us back, and she was really proud of the fact that the golden angel is over Berlin: she looks over us, she watches over us and I felt that was optimism. So there's kind of optimism and a little bit of negativity.

The angel in the drawing was observed, pointed out, an actual statue, and it connected to the family experience and the taxi contact, as well as representing a strong sense of an optimistic mood. In other words, there is a sense of condensation here, or meanings held together in one image – both real and metaphoric.

End notes

The sketches are governed by individual circumstance and experience. One is more sensual and layered with pleasures; the other is more narrative, illuminating a crack of history and an inherent tension. On another occasion, in distinct circumstances, the content could be worlds apart from these two. Whatever the case, such a visual record is rich and provides rich pickings.

Seeing drawing through such experiments is to witness its strengths in terms of ideation, as a trace or document, a generator of something whole; it can in addition prove a compelling medium for communication, where writing becomes a fruitful (not compulsory) by-product.

Ironically, the practice of 'design time' meant no writing was produced within the allotted time – the title of the workshop thus becomes a misnomer. Or was this just part

of a deferral tactic: a desire for the peculiar closet-space of solitary writing? Drawing and speaking appear generally to be much more seductive and group-friendly. In fact, there are three texts emerging from this particular experiment: this piece for CLTAD, a poetry piece envisaged by Curtis Tappenden and a sound-image piece waiting for a post-thesis breathing space in my own case.

Observation eighteen: beyond experiment and conference

CT: So, that was kind of it, really.

HE: In fact, we – we've spoken our writing.

CT: We have, yeah, yeah. And there's a poem in that, or there's a piece of short writing in it –

HE: Maybe we can do it – maybe we can send each other something that comes up from – so that we have a bit of a –

CT: It'd be good.

HE: I think so.

TC: Good.

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