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Drawing: an ambiguous practice

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Drawing: an ambiguous practice

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Abstract

Is a lack of a definition, a position of ambiguity, desirable in response to the question: what is drawing? This paper presents a view taken from two traditionally distinct fields: art and design; design and technology. This view is formed through the research collaboration and co-editorship of *TRACEY*: the journal of contemporary drawing, and the pedagogical development of a Masters programme in visualisation by the authors. This view is that a lack of definition is not only desirable, it is also a necessity. Our position is that the ambiguity that inevitably stems from a lack of definition forms a strategy that enables and sustains drawing research.

Our collaborative experience is that drawing research is framed by assumptions that are embedded within art and design; design and technology. Historically, these fields have developed particular views about what drawing is, or what drawing is not. This paper will attempt to break down these assumptions from the place and space that evolves through the authors' ongoing experience of collaboration.

From this place and space we will argue that there are a number of art / design categories of practice and research that ultimately describe something that is bounded (area / volume). These overlap, intersect, and perhaps like some long standing boundary war, vie for ownership of each other's domains. Drawing could be seen as one of these domains. However, we will argue that drawing is unbounded, that there is no 'expanded field', and that drawing's ubiquity necessitates a lack of definition, a position of ambiguity.

> *A boundary can change over time for many reasons: a diverted water course, or a wooden fence that moves slightly every time it is replaced. The reason for such changes is rarely recorded and can lead to disputes* (RICS, 2009).

Introduction

Drawing: an ambiguous practice presents the prospect that a lack of a definition, a position of ambiguity, is desirable. The possibility is that a lack of definition is not only desirable, it is also a necessity. The viewpoint is that the ambiguity that inevitably stems from a lack of definition forms a strategy that enables and sustains drawing research[1]. This viewpoint is taken from the perspective of associates located within positional relationships arbitrarily defined as: art and design; design and technology. The perspective and successive association has emerged from research collaboration and co-editorship of *TRACEY*: the open-access online journal of contemporary drawing research (TRACEY, 2009), the pedagogical development of a Masters programme in visualisation, and the drawing of this paper. The view is becoming[2].

The viewpoint

> *"Parts lists specify all constituents of an assembled part by part reference number, quantity, part number, technical data, etc. The association between the part on a parts list and its graphical representation on the drawing is given by an identification reference. This reference can be given by a part reference or the constituent part number."* (ISO 7573, 2008)

This paper has been drawn through collaboration between the *parts* identified in Table 1. These parts inhabit disciplinary spaces that are distinct, yet have common elements, share some terminology, have stereotypical external views to which we might or might not subscribe, yet have fostered a relationship that is leading to a common view and some understanding. The spaces are influenced through the parts positions within a University structure: faculties and departments.

Part Ref.	Part Name	Qty	Reference designation	Technical data	Remarks
1	Dr Russell Marshall	1	Design and Technology (D&T)	Lecturer, Programme coordinator: MA/MSc 2D and 3D visualisation, TRACEY Journal Editor, SAMMIE Principal Developer, member of Drawing Research Group, member of the Drawing Research Network	
2	Phil Sawdon	1	Loughborough University School of Art and Design (LUSAD)	Senior Lecturer, Programme coordinator: MA/MSc 2D and 3D visualisation, TRACEY Journal Editor, Learning and Teaching coordinator, member of Drawing Research Group, member of the Drawing Research Network	
3	Common	AR	?	Associates	Use specific practice as a phrase to tie into session descriptor

Table 1. The Bill of Material (Schedule of Parts / Parts[3] or Item Lists[4]) for this drawing.

[1] Drawing research in the context of this paper takes its remit form that of the drawing Research Network: http://www.drawing.org.uk/

[2] This drawing acknowledges the work of Helen Chapman (2003) for the possibility of becoming to be a position.

[3] *Parts lists specify all constituents of an assembled part by part reference number, quantity, part number, technical data, etc. The association between the part on a parts list and its graphical representation on the drawing is given by an identification reference. This reference can be given by a part reference or the constituent part number* (ISO 7573, 2008)

Art and design and design and technology are but two disciplines that could be identified that use drawing. Indeed, it is possible to identify a significant level of common thinking, process, and application in the use of drawing across many different disciplines. However, the notion of different disciplines and their common use of drawing is an area for debate in itself. The viewpoint afforded by belonging to a particular discipline is likely to determine whether different disciplines are actually different and that any artificial boundary about a discipline is not in fact discrete. Discipline boundaries viewed to overlap could suggest that drawing activity is intra-disciplinary. Where no overlap is present drawing may be interdisciplinary. The use of art and design and design and technology as disciplines is potentially just an 'arbitrary' distinction, and thus structure, that has led to the formation of two entities as opposed to one.

At Loughborough University art and design exists as the Loughborough School of Art and Design and is distinct in both remit and location from the department of Design and Technology. Both entities are part of the faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. The context in which drawing is seen within these two entities and the disciplines embodied within them is very important. Experience shows that drawing(s) tend(s) to take up a particular role within a particular discipline when viewed externally to that discipline. It could be argued that the use of drawing with design and technology is seen as a tool, where drawing is used in its 'verb' sense. The drawing itself is not the end product those in D&T would not put their drawings 'on the wall', or at least if they did the association with drawing would potentially have been lost and replaced with some other terminology such as rendering.

Within art and design drawing could also be seen to share the 'verb' sense using drawing as part of a process. However, art and design also embrace drawing as an end product. In this case drawing may be seen in its 'noun' sense, where the act of drawing is sufficient, not requiring a further stage on which to lead.

The viewpoint held by the common *part* is grounded in collaboration in three main activities. The first is as individual members of the University's Drawing Research Group. This research group is an informal group of interdisciplinary researchers with a shared interest in drawing in all of its forms. This group forms the framework for drawing research within the University and actively encourages and supports collaborative working both internally and externally to the University.

The second is editorship of TRACEY: the online open access journal of contemporary drawing research. TRACEY is dedicated to the presentation of drawing and the discussion of drawing practice. Representing a range of perspectives on drawing TRACEY is interested in the nature of drawing activity through physical, cognitive and creative processes. TRACEY's remit includes embracing new and alternative notions and questioning preconceptions associated with drawing.

The third is joint programme coordination of a new Master's level programme in 2D and 3D Visualisation. This collaborative MA / MSc programme represents a broad and inclusive approach to visualisation addressing the development of a

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[4] *Item lists are complete lists of the items constituting an assembly (or sub-assembly), or of detailed parts, presented on a technical drawing. It is not necessary for all these items to be detailed on an end-product drawing. The association between the items on an item list and their representation on the relevant drawing (or on other drawings) is given by the item references. On the basis of the item list, other lists may be established which are required for different purposes, as for example, time keeping, stock-taking, etc. Such additional lists should not be included on, not form part of, end-product drawings* (ISO 7573, 1983).

personalised visual language with which to articulate an engagement with visual thinking.

The common viewpoint is embodied in developments particularly associated with this programme. Originally discussions were held around a working title of Visualisation through Drawing. All three words were key to the premise of what the programme was aiming to achieve and the interests and beliefs of the people involved at that time. Visualisation provided a common term in which all visual research and outcomes could be located. Drawing in its broadest inclusive sense that was identified as a common activity across many Loughborough University Departments (and all three faculties) including: Geography, Maths, Information Science, Chemistry, Physics, Materials, etc. Of fundamental importance was the 'through' word where the travelling, the passing, the overcoming of barriers, implicit in the notion of a journey was important in the linking of common drawing activity to the equally or possibly even more common or accessible visualisation.

The outcome of these collaborative activities established a common viewpoint: that drawing is an ambiguous practice (Sawdon, 2007).

Defining drawing?

The common part's experience of their parent disciplines suggests or encourages the definition of unknowns and the minimisation of ambiguity within research methodology. This is often seen as necessary to allow parties to understand what is being discussed, researched etc., to provide context and to provide a clear research direction. In the context of drawing research, it may therefore seem appropriate to begin with a definition of drawing, to provide that context and allow all those involved in the research to understand the research direction.

There is a body of research that exists that has looked to debate and answer the question "what is drawing?". Indeed contemporary research is ongoing that looks to explore and unpack how drawing may be defined and its position in the context of other mark making activity.

The common parts will deliberately not look to explicitly contribute to this debate. Indeed, it will not just not contribute to research looking at ~~the definition of~~ drawing but seek to subvert that research direction. Oh the irony!

However, the common parts would ask why? To what end or gain? Would not a definition, by its very existence be exclusive and also immediately out of date?

It is recognised that *if* you can get a definition then you can avoid the problems of talking at cross-purposes and misunderstanding. However our view was that this was not helpful in drawing. The process of trying to define drawing was, in fact, obstructive and that we should be brave enough not to try to define it. If you agree that a definition will never be reached or acceptable to everyone (or enough people) then accepting a lack of definition, or ambiguity might also avoid these issues. The use of 'ambiguity' and how it may be applied to drawing and seen as something to be celebrated and not shunned, or worked to be removed. The ambiguity of what drawing is or what drawing can be. Alternatively, the cross purposes / misunderstanding may actually be beneficial or interesting (but possibly not helpful?).

A boundary war

In the common part's efforts in developing interdisciplinary intersections this work originally investigated the AAH 09 (Association of Art Historians) session: Drawing in the Expanded Field where questions such as: *is a definition of drawing worth attempting and if so what might be its foundation? What is lost or gained by expanding a conception of drawing beyond its familiar moorings in paper and line?* were key areas for discussion. An underpinning of this direction was the 1979 essay by Rosalind Krauss entitled Sculpture in the Expanded Field (Krauss 1979).

The common part's expanded field is visualisation through drawing. This is not taken in the Krauss (Klein) model of relationships in the environment but that visualisation encompasses all approaches to making manifest. It is possible that visualisation could be mapped using group theory of a higher *order* than that of Krauss' exploration. The question is whether this has any benefit ("extremely important to map that structure") or merit? It may be an interesting exercise to explore the relationships between illustration, product visualisation, geographical visualisation, software visualisation etc. but does this lead to any greater understanding of the field. Is visualisation so ubiquitous as to make boundary searches redundant?

Krauss identifies two features within the expanded field: practice and medium. The common part's initial approach that led to visualisation as an area of interest was that it encompassed many practices and many media (possibly). Within this we identified a sub-set of common interest, that of drawing.

Do we see drawing in the same *order* as visualisation, or as perhaps sculpture? Drawing seems to be prone to the same argument Krauss levels at sculpture, the "all things…" issue. Is this fair, is this even fair of sculpture. Does our broadening of interpretation lessen the 'category'. Perhaps this is where the intersections become apparent and important. There may be a number of art and design based categories of practice / research that ultimately describe a (historical) boundary (area / volume). Clearly these overlap, intersect, and perhaps like some long standing boundary war, vie for ownership of each other's domains. Are visualisation and drawing two such categories, or is one a category and one some other definition that defines a set that overlays the categories (painting, drawing, sculpture??). Alternatively can drawing smooth the transition between the categories that may be identified within visualisation such that *drawing through visualisation* adopts a significance that marks the boundaries as ambiguous.

> *Accurately identifying the boundary between two properties often requires specialist knowledge.*
>
> ***The red line drawn around a property*** *on the Land Registry plan only shows the general boundary. It does not identify whether the boundary runs along the centre of a hedge or along one side of it.*
>
> *Ordnance Survey maps are equally unreliable because, as part of the mapping process, they do not mark exact property boundaries. So a line surrounding the property is not necessarily the property boundary (RICS, 2009).*

Assumptions and fallacies

It is recognised that the underpinning of much of the argument made within this drawing is based upon assumptions both, made by the common part, and by the disciplines outlined earlier (or at least assumed to be!).

This concept drawing is becoming (see later). It is open to being disputed, erased, etc. and whilst the drawing invites critique it is based upon experience and is aware of drawing tradition.

The common parts claim that this paper, this writing, these 'spoken words' are drawing as simultaneously both noun and verb assumes an acknowledgement of the intimacy and complexity of the relationships in art history of drawing and writing. The not so simple or minor matter of a history of human mark making. Drawing becoming writing. Drawing in parallel to writing. Assumptions that drawing is a spatial system for representing meaning and that writing is a linguistic system and a system for calculation. Terms such as proto-mathematics, proto-writing phonograms, and pictographs are the tip of a very large stick in the dust or finger on the wall. Let's not forget that the essence of writing according to Roland Barthes, does not reside in its form, nor in the message or meaning it might convey, but in the gesture involved.

As an aside this begs the question whether it is possible for a drawing to develop an argument or to hold a position with an argument. So can a drawing have a point of view?

Anything up to three points is actually common place. Three point *perspective* provides depth in both the horizontal plane and in the vertical supporting a more realistic view. Two and one point perspectives reduce the realism progressively towards a more ambiguous representation.

The three point perspective embodied within this work assumes that the realism is embodied in the combination of multiple perspectives where two is more real than one and so on. However, the realism is also ultimately ambiguous, perspective, originally defined as projection is essentially ambiguous in nature (Talbot, 2006). Multiple perspectives equally serve to reduce the clarity of a single point of view. Perspectives expand from or contract to vanishing points. Whilst multiple perspectives may lead to a greater realism they also include more points at which the ? vanishes. Indeed vanishing points may lie well above or below the horizon and may not even be on the piece of paper or relevant support.

The common part's experience is that drawing research is framed by assumptions that are embedded within art and design; design and technology. Historically, these fields have developed particular views about what drawing is, what drawing is not, what drawing might entail:

- That research into drawing must be framed by what drawing is.
- That different interpretations of the of the verb drawing exist both within and across disciplines.
- That different interpretations of the of the noun drawing exist both within and across disciplines.
- That drawing done 'elsewhere' is somehow different to drawing done in art and design.

- That drawing is done for different reasons directly associated with the discipline within which the drawing is created.
- That drawing is not universally seen as being capable of holding an argument.
- That drawing is not always seen as an end in its own right.
- That the language or communication component of drawing is not always perceived.
- That drawing is a traditional practice.
- That computers are not used for drawing.

In addition assumptions have been and are made about visualisation. Visualisation has been discussed in its relationship with drawing and questions raised about the nature of the two. However, even the phrasing of the questions is based on assumptions about the nature of visualisation. Again, the common part's experience suggests:

- That visualisation is possibly not as broad, or as encompassing an activity as it might at first seem.
- That visualisation has been rather hijacked by computer based activity.
- A reluctance to use the terms drawing and visualisation in the same sentence.
- That whilst drawing stems from, and inhabits a, largely art and design domain, visualisation is situated more within an explicitly functional and commercial domain.
- That visualisation is or has become more accessible to and embraced by disciplines outside of art and design effectively picking up a role that was once associated with drawing.

It is clear that it would be a fallacy to take these assumptions as fact or to draw broader conclusions from their existence. These assumptions are based on experiences and whilst there are demonstrable examples of their existence or application they are, and by inference the common part is, guilty of a number of fallacies. The fallacies of composition and division and as already introduced, begging the question, are all relevant here.

For example:
If the parts of a set X have characteristics A, B, C. then the set X must have characteristics A, B, C.

Where: X = the art and design drawing community
A = the need to define drawing
B = that drawing is a traditional practice
C = that drawing and visualisation are unrelated activities

The inverse is also true:
If a set X has characteristics A, B, C. then the parts of set X must have characteristics A, B, C.

Also if I and J are propositions then[5]:

J only if I.
I.
Therefore, J.
(unspoken) I only if J.

Where: J = Drawing is an ambiguous practice
I = Drawing cannot be defined

Fallacies are also capable of introducing ambiguity. Fallacies of ambiguity allow apparently false ideas to appear to be true if the problematic definitions are not closely scrutinised.

Thus it is possible, if not highly likely, that the fallacy of begging the question is again applicable to this drawing as it is important that clear definitions are established to avoid fallacies of ambiguity. Yet, the common parts advocate a lack of definition in drawing through visualisation. That drawing is an ambiguous practice.

Becoming drawing

From the discussions thus far it is clear that this area of research is very context sensitive and also governed by the perspective or viewpoint of the people involved. The ambiguity formed between these positions can lead to confusion and is possibly the primary driver for looking to confirm a definition of drawing. This definition then, apparently, removing the ambiguity. However, the common part's experience is that an acceptable, inter/intra/cross-disciplinary definition will never be reached. Thus, a lack of definition should be embraced. This lack of definition can then transform from being a compromise position into more of an opportunity.

This position, and the opportunities it affords, is not fixed. It is not a position to be defined, it evolves from not looking to define. The evolution is naturally ongoing. Drawing is becoming, as opposed to being. Where becoming embodies the opportunities of not being constrained by a formal definition, and of not having arrived. Whilst this suggests that becoming drawing is a point of view, that point of view is also not fixed, which is clearly an ambiguous position to take and by extension takes from the fallacy of begging the question into the fallacy of circular reasoning.

Circular reasoning is where two conclusions are directly or indirectly based upon each other. Thus, if you follow a line of reasoning, one of the conclusions is presumed by an earlier conclusion. Whilst a fallacy, circular reasoning can actually be a useful tool. The reverse of various logical or mathematical arguments can be proven through its use, where otherwise this proof would be very difficult (Wikipedia, 2009). The logic presented here is that the reverse of defining drawing is *proven*.

[5] Part 1: "Drawing is an ambiguous practice." Part 2: "Why?" Part 1: "Because drawing can't be defined?" Part 2: "Why can't drawing be defined?" Part 1: "Because the definition would be ambiguous."

The reverse of defining drawing is not, however, a position where drawing can be anything. Or at least the common parts are not sure it is. Given the becoming nature proposed of drawing, the liminal territory it inhabits[6,7], drawing may become broad enough to be anything at some point. It may also ebb and flow from this over time.

From the common part's position we would coincide, at least for now, with the position held by Taylor (2008). Whilst drawing may be very broad in its remit it is essential that drawing research acknowledges disciplinary boundaries and that in a process of becoming does not throw the baby out with the bath water.

The perspective of becoming is that the focus of drawing research acknowledges where it is, and allows itself to be comfortable with what it is. From this position the view should then be forward, looking to what can be as opposed to what is. So the need to establish points, ideas and definitions is replaced by a focus on the opportunities of truly interdisciplinary drawing research.

Perspective itself, as a drawing convention, supports such a view. Perspective supports a rationalised and ordered representation that on the surface provides a comforting stability. However, as we have already outlined, perspective is in fact ambiguous in nature. In this way it is becoming, perspective advocates fixed points, rules and embodies assumptions in establishing a form of understanding. Yet, the perceived ordered nature of the perspective system is illusory, it is a deliberate distortion, a compromise, to represent a three dimensional subject in a two dimensional medium.

What is key is the accessibility of the view. All drawing systems are artificial in nature. Perspective represents a comfortable, accepted, de facto position that is easy to interpret and yet is a deliberate distortion. The immediate accessibility is compromised by the constraints imposed. The alternative is inevitably much less accessible. For example, Cubism advocates a simultaneous multiple viewpoints superimposed upon one another. This results in a significantly more complex view, yet one that is much less tied by constraints. Thus, if it is possible to look beyond the complexities, to embrace the unconventional, this 'truer' view opens up many more opportunities.

Indeed, this truer view has now been embraced through various new mediums and has become the basis for some of the fundamental underpinnings of visualisation techniques. Hence, Visualisation through Drawing is an example of an interdisciplinary intersection. Visualisation through Drawing is not an immediately accessible term and yet is seen as a truer view that is outward facing, that is interdisciplinary and is not constrained by discipline boundaries, and that recognises and embraces the opportunities of intersection, of becoming.

Drawing: an ambiguous practice … drawing an analogy.

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[6] Liminal: 1: of or relating to a sensory threshold. 2: barely perceptible. 3: of, relating to, or being an intermediate state, phase, or condition : in-between , transitional in the liminal state between life and death (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2009).

[7] *Trying to nail down the subject of drawing leads us into liminal territory, the ambiguous if vibrant threshold between states of definition, identity and transition. Perhaps drawing, in all its multifarious manifestations in art and design can never be defined: but as the object and subject of study it is just waiting to be nailed* (Petherbridge, 2008).

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