



Drawing Partnerships

Thinking with John Berger
at Cardiff Metropolitan University
4-5 Sept 2014

Drawing Partnerships and Bento's Sketchbook

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The 'Thinking With John Berger' conference, September 4 -5th 2014 brought immense clarity to the intent of the 'Drawing Partnerships' initiative. Although Cardiff Metropolitan University has already played host to conferences, workshops and conducted research examining the boundaries of drawing's potential as an interdisciplinary tool, the writings of Berger provided fertile ground in which to tend the aims of those practices.

The interconnectivity between 'Drawing Partnerships' and Berger's thoughts is most clearly exemplified through the pages of 'Bento's Sketchbook'¹. Here Berger's impassioned meditations summon as muse a lost sketchbook belonging to the 17th century lens grinder Baruch Spinoza; an almost fabled sketchbook, often referenced by philosophers but never found.

In Bento's sketchbook, Berger imagines how Spinoza might have employed the activity of drawing as an externalization of thought. In particular, he explores how an intensive observational engagement can enable him to gain greater insight into the subject matter of his writing, by creating the dynamic space and time in which to think freely about its possibilities.

Taking this discursive approach between drawing and writing as a loom from which to weave his observations of the world, Berger moves seamlessly between the everyday and deeply philosophical, using drawing to pause time, or at least slow down the quick succession of stages by which we ordinarily experience the world.

Drawing Partnerships Intervention

The 'Drawing Partnership' intervention, in collaboration with the conference, set out to ignite awareness and application of Berger's methods by prompting each delegate to create their own Bento's Sketchbook and invite them to doodle, capture fleeting thoughts, responses and information from the proceedings of the conference. They were encouraged to experience for themselves

¹ Berger, J. 2011, *Bento's Sketchbook*, Verso Books

Berger's approach, exploring how the activity of drawing can trigger thoughts and associations to their own discipline and research. They were asked to slow down time a little in coffee breaks, over lunch and in the evening to explore how those doodles interconnect with other thoughts and act as catalyst to new ideas.

Outcome

We are now at the stage of identifying the value of the sketchbooks beyond individual record and the knowledge(s) they contain. More than this, we need to identify from the exercise, in what way such participatory practices can be used to extend knowledge and in particular provide material for future academic research. The following visual essays and accompanying text are a brief overview of findings that contain fascinating potential for further study.

Before engaging with the imagery itself however, it is important to first consider what was achieved by devising an activity that was not the direct focus of a conference but had as its purpose recording and responding to its proceedings. It was a very particular stance to be at the same time connected to, yet separate from the conference itself. This directly impacted on the type of drawing that took place, in retaining a certain informality, an ease and humour, enabling it to fill into the spaces between set itineraries and academic territories.

The more ambiguous nature of this position was extremely important in the event's design, as it required that the drawing be responsive and reactive to any and all experiences arising from the conference. This more holistic approach required complex cognitive activity from the delegates, requiring them to move between a diversity of others' thoughts, identification of personal relevance and the technical activity of the drawing itself. An effective use of the sketchbooks meant that they entered into what Mithen claims is a prerequisite mind set for creativity to take place: the ability to combine and fluidly move between social, technical and more deeply rooted evolutionary domains; not least of these being aesthetic appreciation².

Below are a series of visual essays that demonstrate how we might access commonalities or patterns arising from this approach in the sketchbooks. There are three perspectives taken and the ways in which they explore 'cognitive fluidity' at work within the activity of drawing is explained in the accompanying text.

Gestural Doodles:

There are multiple, seemingly nonsensical doodles laced between words, more representational portraits and observations of hands and gesticulating figures. These doodles are the obvious place to start identifying 'cognitive fluidity' at work, as in order to understand their signification we must undertake our own multi-modal approach. The delegates' reference to 'Bento's Sketchbook' and the practice of entwining image and word presents us with a clear way of navigating this and identifying images as coinciding or responding to specific themes and contexts.

From an appraisal of the delegates' books, these more intuitive marks appear to occur in conjunction with more philosophical or emotive presentations where speakers presented less tangible concepts or those which hit the heart before the mind. There is one distinct surge of gestural marks arising through the books, beginning in response to James Finch's talk, often accompanying the quote "*how do you understand ideologies in action?*"³ and Maria Hayes' presentation, often accompanying the

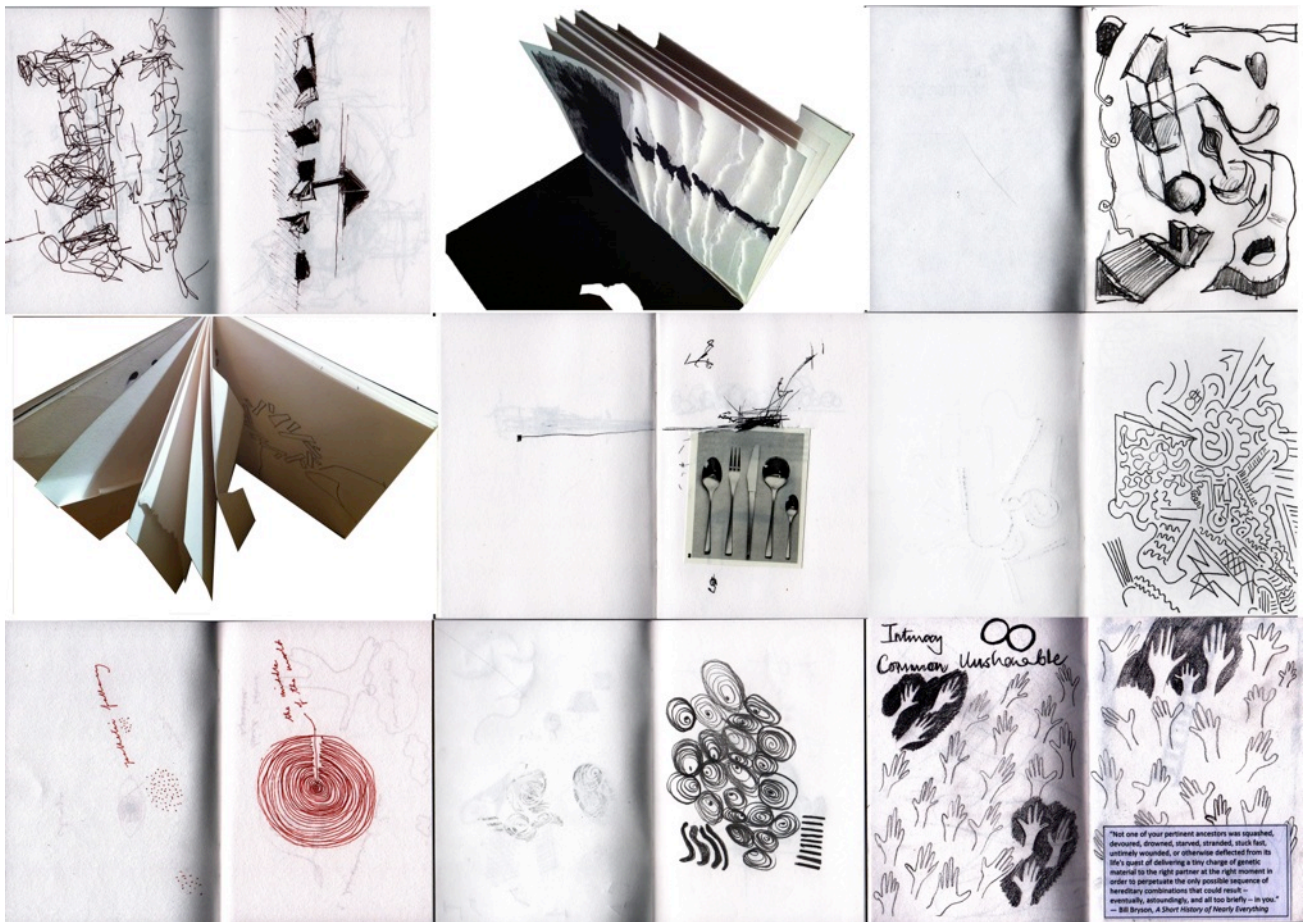
² Dissanayake, E. 2000. Antecedents of the Temporal Arts in Early Mother-Infant Interaction. In N.L. Wallin, B. Merker & S. Brown (eds) *The Origins of Music*. pp 389-410 Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press

³ A reference to James Finch's presentation at the Thinking Trough Berger Conference 2014 entitled: 'The Courbet Revival

words “*the interconnectedness principal*”⁴ and literally ripping through the paper of some books in response to Bruce Robbins, keynote speaker, as he spoke about ‘Looking at Atrocities’⁵.

The more gestural imagery accompanying Robbins’ emotive subject matter demonstrated the activity of aesthetic appreciation, not the critiquing of an artwork but rather a visualization of the relationship between image and behaviour⁶. Robbins’ use of the Berger quote: ‘*the world is not intolerable until the possibility of transformation is known and then denied*’ prompted overt interaction between thoughts or actions found ugly or compromising and a powerful emotive response, explored by many through gestural marks in the sketchbooks⁷.

Whilst in most cases there is an absence of text with these expressions, perhaps indicating a different modality at work than with word, the pages before and after locate the position of these marks within the conference proceedings. This in no way infers that everyone responded to Robbins’ so emotively nor that each gestural mark was emotively driven but it does allow us to explore the capacity of drawing to tap into different modalities and visualise cognitive fluidity at work, and this prepares the ground for both further research and future workshop design.



⁴ A reference to Dr Maria Hayes’ presentation at the Thinking Trough Berger Conference 2014 entitled: ‘Cubist Ways of Seeing’

⁵ A reference to Professor Bruce Robbins’ presentation at the Thinking Trough Berger Conference 2014 entitled: ‘Looking at Atrocities’

⁶ Orians, G.H. 2001. An Evolutionary Perspective On Aesthetics. *Bulletin of Psychology and the Arts*

⁷ Orians (2001:3) defines beauty as ‘...the product of interactions between traits of objects and the human nervous system that evolved so that objects we consider beautiful have properties that result in improved performance in some aspect of living if we respond positively to them.’

Metaphor:

Through these drawings it could be said that we are moving away from pre-reflexive gestures to witness the sensuous articulation of language. In these images Berger's quotes have often been taken directly and explored metaphorically, offering as he does, such evocative description of one thing as something else.

Image metaphors are inherently multimodal, pulling comparison between systems of reference. It could be argued however that this verbal image has more in common with the corporeality of gesture than the 'three stages' of literary interpretation. As drawings rather than words, these images are deeply affected by the conditions of their 'utterance', the overlapping of symbolism and qualities of gesture, composition and context⁸. What we are looking at are moments of cohesion between physical and cognitive action. These images are not pre-reflexive or simply pictograms but somewhere in between, a visualisation of points at which the hand has carried and extended a thought, perhaps more than gesture alone, to witness 'cognitive fluidity'.

It is interesting to note that in many cases the use of metaphor arises towards the end of the books or within the pages of a second, marking a development or confidence in visual literacy. It would be a mistake however to view any alignment with language as limiting the multiplicity of meaning they contain.



⁸ The notion of 'utterance' was taken from Foucault, M., 1994 Critical Assessments, Routledge

Representation:

It is arguably the more representational images that contain the least evidence of 'cognitive fluidity' taking place, as they arise from direct observation with limited intervention from other modalities other than skill base or quality of materials.

These images can of course be seen as coupled with emotive and gestural properties as with 'expressive doodles' and 'metaphor' but they evidence fluidity of thought to a far lesser extent. What they do register however - and it is almost as if, within the pages of the books, we have travelled from the depths of guttural utterance to more cognitive articulation in order to reach this surface of the paper - is a human connection. The other approaches are personal and responsive, yet it is most directly through the human form perhaps that we can step away from ourselves in order to view someone else objectively.



Futures:

It is Berger's honing of the activity of cognitive fluidity that enables him to examine the world so eloquently and insightfully, moving poetically between image and word, incorporating philosophical, political, literary and autobiographical reference. The 'Thinking with John Berger' conference provided the ideal conditions to explore how we might encourage this fluidity on behalf of others, to deepen their experience and exploration of ideas.

The positioning of the activity 'in-between' or 'beneath' proceedings heightened the facility of drawing to capture nuance and subtlety of reaction, when more concerted time or a more formalised position might have enforced one particular approach over another. As a result, the sketchbooks

contain pre-reflexive as well as reflexive thoughts and play host to multiple possibilities, an extensive range of potentialities to be followed rather than mere articulation of one.

But these findings are of course suppositions, assumptions as to what is taking place within the images and there are further layers to interrogate, not least of all identifications made by the participants themselves. There are perhaps images missing, images that could be selected by the participants themselves for their recollection, insight and understanding of the conference.

If we are to clearly identify which route to follow in future work, we would perhaps benefit from using the four co ordinates suggested above - *Gesture*, *Metaphor*, *Representation* and the capacity of images to trigger *Memory* - as guide. Each approach is different for the ways in which it summons 'aesthetic appreciation', and articulates response. Each approach finds affiliation with particular circumstance or context. Future research and workshop design will examine relationships between particular drawing approach and context, specifically to identify ways in which to encourage cognitive fluidity and affect a deeper and freer exploration of ideas.

The artists involved in this project included:

Emma Bolland
Jo Croft
Chris Glynn
Maria Hayes
Bella Kerr
Michelle Letowska
Jennifer Lewis
Natasha Mayo
Kate North
Arlene Pryce
Rosie Turner
Richard Turney
Oke Ugonna
Robin Wallace
Judith Walsh
Lucy Windridge
Simon Woolham

The Drawing Partnerships participation team involved in collaboration with the 'Thinking With John Berger' included:

Drawing and Conversation	Dr. Natasha Mayo: CSAD Ceramics; Drawing Research (Using drawing to create dynamic time and space to share experiences in the Domestic Sphere)
Illustration and Walking	Chris Glynn: CSAD Illustration; Illustration Research; (Uses of drawing in field notes; Walking with Illustrators towards Coleridge in Wales festival 2016)
Drawing and Allemansrätten	Rosie Turner: CSAD Illustration Student

(Using drawing to exercise everyman's right to roam)

Illustration and Persuasion

Jennifer Lewis: CSAD Illustration Student

(Using drawing to explore intersections between the arbitrary, personal and universal)