

Bento's Sketchbook: Parental Conversations

Submitted as part of John Berger Conference 2014

I want to talk to you today about a participatory project im involved in called 'Parental Conversations' and I want to explain the project in relation to the thoughts of the writer John Berger. If you haven't heard of John Berger he is a literary phenomena exploring through the most extraordinary vision, issues of art, politics, philosophy and creativity. I want to reference in particular his book 'Bentos Sketchbook' where he uses drawing as well as word to examine the world around him. It is the approaches evidenced in 'Bentos Sketchbook' that also underpin the 'Parental Conversations' project

In this book Berger summons 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.

In Berger's re-imagining of Spinoza's sketchbook, the act of drawing is entwined in the warp and weft of his personal encounters; it is both the subject of the text and the means by which he orientates and probes the world around him. Far from mere convenience or flourish, Berger describes the act of drawing as impulse, an integral force 'arising from the human need to search, to plot points, to place things and to place oneself'¹.



Before the dominance of verbal communication, this impulse enables children to explore the world. They draw as if finding another part of themselves, tapping into a hidden logic, an untaught facility that enables them to devise and impose order on an existence otherwise outside of their control. They too, in a far more ad hoc manner than Berger, conduct a form of 'living research' and through their drawings visualize equivalents to his weaving of memory, domestic and cultural references. A child's drawings, as with Bento's Sketchbook, allow us access to roam through their experiences, insight and inspiration.

In July 2014 a project engaging artist/parents and their children began, its aim: to conduct 'living research', exploring ways in which parents can collaborate and converse with their child through the activity of drawing and share that 'feeling of birds navigating in flight'². Spanning 8 countries from Wales to Puerto Rico, Russia to Singapore, artists have submitted proposals for how they intend to structure their conversations without hampering impulse or enthusiasm and what methods they might employ to engage with their children in facilitating personal, cultural and social narratives.

Simply using concertina books passed between parent and child, stories have been prompted to unfold, either implicitly or explicitly, fragmented or in sequence; 'the covers of the book ... like a

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roof and four walls' will hold truly 'inhabited stories'³.

This paper will explore thoughts arising from Berger's text '*Bento's Sketchbook*' and '*The Shape of a Pocket*' to examine the potential of the ongoing living research contained in the project: 'Parental Conversations'

Here is one example of a sketchbook currently in development:

Artist Zoe Appleby and her son Marcus aged 2 ½ <https://vimeo.com/104924194>



Introduction to the Project

The 'Parental Conversations' project aims to examine how drawing might be used to consolidate and build strong, progressive family relationships; specifically to identify a range of tried and tested ways in which drawing can be used to enhance the relationship between parent and child.

To achieve this, the project embraces a strong connectivity between arts research and the 'community' best placed to help conduct it; over 60 families have agreed to find opportunities for drawing to dynamically and sensitively 'fit into' their lives, for it to become a regular part of their routine. They decide on the nature of the topics or events shared, the duration of conversation, how verbal exchange is notated (if at all) and how the contribution of parent and child is visually differentiated and aesthetically composed.

Proposals submitted so far have been rich and diverse, reflecting a breadth of human experience and most importantly, testing out ways in which drawing can be used to record and reflect upon them; from using drawing as a pre-reflexive tool, a precursor to play, to using it as a mapping or explorative device for walking or chartering new encounters; moving house or schools, to examining family interrelationships; sibling rivalry, births, deaths.

Identifying the potential applications of findings will in the main take place when the project completes. This data will contribute to a repository of the most robust and effective uses of drawing as social tool for use in future workshop design, social engagement projects and drawing pedagogies.

For now, the books will capture a year in the lives of those families involved and reflect issues most important or prevalent in their minds, and remain their property, kept as an illustrated, vibrant reminder of this time and interaction with their children. We request only that they keep us up to date with their progress by uploading imagery at appointed times to a dedicated website to create discussion and allow documentation to be gradually compiled.

Here is one example of a drawing parental conversations actually taking place: Tom and his daughter Daisy 5 years old <https://vimeo.com/98768433>



As a 'community based research project', we could now simply twiddle our thumbs for a year and leave the parents and children to get on with all the hard work enjoying drawing together and not worry about the project until its completion in September 2016. Except that, this would be to ignore the potential of convening this talented and inspirational community. A significant strength of any Community based project is consolidation of the combined strengths of the individuals

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involved and there is imminent opportunity for our conversations to topple out of the pages of the books and into a stimulating, responsive forum⁴. In fact, to isolate the completed imagery from the context in which it was made would be to miss out on the subtleties and nuance contained in the lived experience of the engagement of drawing itself.

The activity of drawing was specifically chosen for this project for the immediacy with which it can enable response to everyday thoughts and activities⁵. In this way, it can be understood as inextricably bound to the activity of thinking as both its catalyst and record⁶. Drawing can create tangible evidence of the thinking process taking place, in fact it can enable us to get closer to the details of those ideas, give them particular focus and concentration⁷. It is this facility of drawing that Berger so readily employs in 'Bento's Sketchbook' using drawing to examine thoughts and experiences that otherwise would speed by so fast they would be missed or forgotten altogether. He uses the activity of drawing to pause time or at least slow down the quick succession of stages by which we ordinarily experience the world. He uses drawing to think:



The clusters of four, five or six fruit grow like handfuls from small shoots of the trees branches. From a single tree hang hundreds of handfuls. ...Early one morning I decide to draw a cluster, perhaps to understand better why I repeatedly say 'handfuls'⁸.

This elongation of time enables other opportunities arise, it is as if such periods of concentration enable another layer of reality to be released, one heightened in the peculiarity of the focus given to the drawing - albeit the succulent colour of the plums, their jostling form or weight or the splitting of skin in the first stages of decay. This emphasis imposes one aspect of an experience over another, amplifying what perception of the fruit might otherwise have been if the continuum were maintained.

In this way, the act of drawing is interrogative, framing and re-framing the perspective from which the concrete is viewed. As one aspect of an object is registered onto paper, a shift in vantage point can then allow the artist to move and examine with accumulated understanding, the potential of the knowledge the object contains.

In his book 'The shape of a Pocket' Berger describes how this intensity of concentration can almost agitate a response from the object, and:



'whenever the intensity of looking reaches a certain degree one becomes aware of an equally intense energy coming towards one through the appearance of whatever it is one is scrutinizing'⁹.

As with writing, Berger uses the activity of drawing to liberate the deeply philosophical from the everyday; choosing as his focus the mundane to establish familiarity, a relatable premise from which to weave connections to otherwise profound and distant thoughts. His drawings serve precisely the same purpose, an activity of such intense focus that it can prise free thoughts

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embedded in ordinary things.

Drawing is used here not simply to create pretty pictures but rather as a mode of communication, a conversation between the artist and the objects or scenes they are exploring, a progressive oscillation of thoughts in the pursuit of meaning. This is the way in which drawing will be used in the project 'Parental Conversations':

For adults, this practice can be a hard won, demanding skill and discipline, it is curious to consider therefore, that it is almost the natural disposition of a child. A child's ability to harness the capacity of drawing to transport them from the kitchen table and into outer space is exactly what compels them to draw. In drawing they find an ally, a companion to accompany them as they traverse the real and the imagined; it is the act of drawing that so often facilitates their first and treasured interactions with the world. Berger writes of this more intuitive nature, how a child feels other ways of ordering the world beyond our favoured vision,



'that by habit of hiding behind things they are able to discover the interstices between different modes of experience'¹⁰.

Perhaps a child's realities are not yet fixed in place as they are so often in an adult, like a synaethete, there is flexibility between perceptual modes, the imagined and the real overlap and in their fluid state conjure ever new configurations, new worlds of experiences. Children are naturally predisposed to employ drawing in this enquiring manner, when as adults we can often find this 'in between' state as more disturbing:



It is as if, at the brief moments I'm talking about, suddenly and disconcertingly we see *between* two frames. We come upon a part of the visible which wasn't destined for us. Perhaps it was destined for night-birds, reindeer, ferrets, eels, wales... *Our customary visible order is not the only one. Stories of fairies, sprites, ogres were a human attempt to come to terms with this coexistence*¹¹.

Berger attributes this 'in between' as being 'what any true painting touches'¹², and therefore what any 'true' artist examines. He describes art as an exploration of an absence,



'an absence of which, without the painting, we might be unaware. And that would be our loss'¹³.

But is it possible for those inexperienced in traversing the concrete to enter into such an exploration? For a child, drawing offers a safe space in which to explore the real and imagined when the spoken word might feel too abrupt or out of reach. It offers a shared language in which, unusually, a child can be more confident and articulate than an adult. The more poignant question perhaps should be, can a parent allow themselves to be guided by their child into this co-existence of other modes of experience, to have awareness re-awakened and enlivened within them.



Here we can witness this negotiation between mother and child – although scripted it gives an

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example of an expectation being set <https://vimeo.com/104930675>

Artist Beverley Hicks and her daughter Phoebe 13 years old

What begins the impulse to draw?

It is hoped that the Parental Conversations project can potentially voyage into such absences, and illuminate otherwise missed opportunities and hidden experiences within the domestic sphere. To achieve this, it simply asserts the importance of taking time, of slowing down time a little, to identify with the world and to find our place within it:

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to find a crystal or a poppy beautiful means that we are less alone, that we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe¹⁴.

The project seeks to harness the potential of the ‘companionship of drawing’ by finding ways in which the activity might be shared. This is not without difficulties! A visualised conversation, as with its verbal counterpart, confronts one thought process with another, offering an alternative positioning and delivery. What was otherwise an independent process on behalf of the artist, now encounters additional and unfamiliar stages of interpretation and there needs to be a period of adjustment, for the artist to find or reclaim their voice within this new context. For a while at least, they will experience standing outside of their usual way of practice until a method or rhythm gets going incorporating another voice.

There is advantage in this however, as this awkwardness will be exactly the experience of non-artists engaging in future adaptations of the project. It is the responsibility of the artists involved in ‘Parental Conversations’ to devise ways in which to re-establish ease and flow. The resultant drawings will be testimony to this having taken place but not necessarily *how* the adjustment was negotiated. To pin down strategies, the project needs to gather more overt testimony of this negotiation taking place. This is tricky. How can we compile a toolbox of ways that drawing might enhance experiences between parent and child, when the process of drawing is so often intuitive? As Berger writes:

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The human imagination (As Berger writes)... has great difficulty in living strictly within the confines of a materialist practice or philosophy. It dreams, like a dog in its basket, of hares in the open¹⁵.

This is part of artistic practice that artists often feel fiercely protective about due to fear that definition might somehow pin down their ability to freely manoeuvre between the objective and subjective worlds. Yet the project requires precisely this, an identification of methods for use by those not necessarily even acquainted or gifted in the arts.

To negotiate this balance therefore, the project will not attempt absolute definitions of how the drawing process should take place but rather, attempt to compile multiple frameworks that demonstrate how drawing can be used in building strong, progressive interactions. In many ways it takes as its cue the ethos of ‘unschooling’ in finding ways to create space for purposeful play to

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explore and learn with a child¹⁶.

Artist Joanna Grace and son Heath 8 weeks old <https://vimeo.com/103912701>

The frameworks will be compiled from the artists proposals; their identification of opportunities and use of drawing to explore them – **and where ever possible example use of film to document the interactions actually taking place.** These submissions will then be subjected to narrative analysis quite simply giving attention to the relationship between form and content; the told (the content of what is said) and the telling (how it is told).

And from this a tool box of methods compiled.

This approach is already reaping rewards in regard imagery submitted – as you can see by those films already submitted - and the range of potential applications of these methods is becoming clear,

This is the website onto which all imagery and film will be uploaded,

The artists involved

working across a number of International Art Schools, the rationale for this being, that smaller communities of discourse can be nurtured and distinct ethos in approach established The schools include: museums of children's art in Samara Russia / Finland and Puerto Rico -

Whilst each artist has an individual¹⁷ presentation of slides for their work and opportunity for film/audio

The blog is where the 'knowledge arising' from submissions is compiled:

And potential methodologies and social applications have been already identified such as:

Problem Solving through play: whereby the book poses scenarios to be completed – responded to or worked through

A Teenagers Voice: as one submission states: at a time when communication between myself and Lucy is becoming increasingly circumspect drawing provides a forum for prolonged engagement and interaction.

Here the visual conversation does not take place in the same room but rather thoughts and reflections are offered via the book...it becomes a conduit, a silent facilitator...

Pre-reflexive Interaction: Joanna is a specialist in 'Sensory Stories' story telling through the senses as well as word in set in relation to early infancy presents a qualitative submission to the project

Cross Generational dialogues: drawing as a means of sharing life stories passed down through generations.

And so it has begun. The Parental Conversations are taking multiple voyages into hidden opportunities, using drawing to release, to prise free thoughts arising from intense, playful,

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periods of focus. They are all beginning to experience an enhancement or embellishment of family interactions. As¹⁸ Berger writes:

I began to make drawings prompted by something asking to be drawn. As time goes by, however, the two of us – Bento and I – become less distinct. Within the act of looking, the act of questioning with our eyes, we become somewhat interchangeable. And this happens I guess, because of a shared awareness about where and to what the practice of drawing can lead.