The relevance of traditional drawing in the digital age

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My research in recent years has focused on the relevance of traditional drawing, specifically studio based life drawing, to the contemporary digital environment. Following on from the successful exhibit of my interactive life drawing, Caryatid, at the 2009 EVA conference my aim is to open up discussion on the relevance of traditional practice within the digital arena through an examination of my own creative practice and that of other artists involved in similar fields. The paper will explore the potential for cross fertilisation of old and new technologies and the opportunities for their presentation within new media.


1. INTRODUCTION

Design, which by another name is called drawing... is the fount and body of painting and sculpture and architecture and of every other kind of painting and the root of all sciences.

Michelangelo

It is not my intention to extol the virtues of drawing per se in art education and/or the creative act involved with the production of such artworks; that, very valid, argument refers to the act rather than the nature of traditional drawing which is the intended focus of this paper. Initially we need to establish both definitions and parameters within the context of this proposal before commencing with the outline. In the seminal programme Seeing Through Drawing the late Philip Rawson (1979) asks ‘Why do we keep on drawing, surrounded as we are by photography and cinema and television?’

What can drawing still reveal to us that these more elaborate and mechanical means of expression cannot?’ This was written at a time, 1978, that could not have foreseen the creative possibilities that we now have to hand with our current technologies and the breadth of interpretation that is applied to the notion of drawing in our contemporary culture and yet with the addition of ‘computer’ to the list the question remains relevant today. It is of interest to the development of this paper that an early computer based artwork, the twelve foot long mural produced by Harmon and Knowlton in 1967 for Bell Labs was of the naked female form—as if creating an image using a traditional artists’ subject matter would somehow validate the image as an artwork. This artwork did not challenge our perception of the female form or even offer new visual perspectives but rather used the available technology as a tool to reproduce, simplistically in this case, an image in the same way that we might use a pencil and paper. Early computer generated pictures kept their subject matter and their viewing methodologies well within accepted traditional artistic parameters – to perhaps achieve some form of credibility within the art world. The body of work being considered and created in tandem with this paper could themselves be seen as digital reproduction as the marks are created outside of the computer environment – but it is the creative intention of the works and the uniqueness of mark-making that will bring them back into context.

A pencil mark is a pencil mark and will always retain its static limitations despite the length of time taken to create the drawing. My current work explores those limitations from additional dimensions, creating objects that move in both three, albeit perceived, dimensions and within time itself as an animated installation. The intention being to utilise the technologies available to challenge our relationship with drawing; to bring to the viewer a contemporary awareness of the relevance to paper and pencil.

The rationale for retaining the usage of traditional media – paper and pencil – in an age where our on-screen imagery increasingly relies on the
restraints of available software to define the nature of the image seems somewhat tenuous. An increasing percentage of the younger generation of art and design, and in particular design, students would, arguably, willingly dismiss the need to work with the aforementioned traditional media in favour of moving straight to the restrictive formats of programmes such as Illustrator, Photoshop and Maya. These students fall, seemingly unaware, into the idea posited by Jaron Lanier (2010) that technology can drive us to accept the lowest common denominator.

It is interesting to note here that the creative empire that is Disney Studios had closed down its traditional drawing studios in favour of the 3D computer based technologies used so successfully by companies such as Pixar. This decision has now been reversed and the drawing studios reopened as the 3D studios work was deemed too sanitised and lacking the ‘human element’.

In the main, the body of work supporting my ideas has developed from initial studies on the MA Computer Studies course at Thames Valley University. Later works have developed from my current practice across a range of media.

The initial forays into my fascination with the autographic mark and the digital arena came about after investigating early mechanical drawing machines and robotic ‘art makers’ some early examples of which were exhibited at Cybernetic Serendipity in 1968. Most of the early examples of these machines produced marks/splashes in response to predestined mechanical movement or random programming. More recent machines have attempted to ‘observe’ and draw in response to this observation. With regard to contemporary practice it is probably true to say that the majority of computer generated drawing tends towards the random rather than the observational.

A recent personal artwork consisted of a robot drawing in response to the existence of the model through sound sensors. My intentions focussed on the notion of a machine eliciting a genuine ‘response’ to the life model. I have been teaching life drawing for over thirty years utilising traditional methodologies and I was now working out how a machine could possibly create a valid mark making experience based on the existence of the model. The paradigm for mark making in response to the digital image—either as a scanned image or from an electronic eye—existed but was in the main dependent on the level of programming involved. During one particular life drawing class the model was moving noisily around on sheets of paper and I began to formulate the idea of a drawing created in response to the sound of the model’s movements. Life models in motion have been the staple diet of artists from Rodin to students on contemporary Foundation courses. The drawing would—by the nature of the involvement of a computer—be dependent on programming but the model, either by the artist as director or by his/her deliberate movement—would have a greater influence on the mark making itself. Various experiments evolved into the final ‘Digigraph’ and the random images illustrated.

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Drawings produced by the machine exhibited all the nuances of hand drawn mark making but were entirely independent of human touch. The Digital Nude series of drawings were still only available as recorded experiences; the final artefact was the drawn image and a short film. There was still no interaction or creative experience for the viewer this left the puzzle of how would it be possible to create a valid statement about life drawing, mark making and technology through an interactive piece.

2. CARYATID

The solution that answered this question and kindled the interactive element of this ongoing body of research is Caryatid – a stack of six iMacs each of which show an animated rotating segment of a life model. Each of the animated sections can be rotated individually with the viewer able to control both the speed and direction of the rotation. Whilst not originally intended as a sculptural form the final artwork at over 2.5 metres in height certainly has a monumental feel to it and with somewhere in the region of 46,000 million possible permutations a great opportunity for interaction. The work has been exhibited at the 2009 EVA conference and Kinetica 2010.
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Life drawing, the drawing of the nude human figure, is a fundamental and traditional act of creativity in the portfolio of the artist. The aim of Caryatid was to explore and evolve possible relationships between the primal act of drawing on paper and that of contemporary media whilst retaining the intrinsic value of each. Attempting to capture movement in two dimensional imagery has been seen by some as one of the holy grails of the art world. There is perhaps an artistic irony in trying to capture movement in the traditionally static life model in this artwork.

It is clear that the autographic mark and the digital arena have areas of commonality and when embarking on the practical research the intention was to explore how the digital arena could enhance – if indeed it could – the experience of both the artist and the viewer. Animation was a possible solution and it is clear from, for example, the animated work of William Kentridge (2009) that there are many possibilities already being explored, however these areas are predominately conventional in that there is no sense of interaction with the work.

Artists will always respond with a contemporary understanding of technology and it is perhaps true that this understanding may in fact be a limitation as the work is tailored to be achievable within that technology. The possibility of banality, in terms of surface quality, is always present if software is allowed to dominate the creative process. The reluctance to challenge the process to achieve what is desired rather than an acceptance of what the artist knows is possible is often seen in the early stages of digital artworks.

An essential element of the work produced in exploration of this paper’s thesis is that the mark making should retain, as far as possible, the intrinsic qualities of traditional drawing in relation to surface and the unexpected qualities of marks produced by the pencil and rubber. This, of course, changed with the realisation that the digital environment offered the possibilities of visualising the creative act through film and sound. John Berger (2005) stated that ‘Image making begins with interrogating appearances and making marks’. This paper is concerned with the end result and the demands that may place on the spectator.

3. FIVE MINUTE LIFE DRAWING

Creating artworks that were essentially sound pieces moved the physical act of drawing away from the observable results expected at the commencement of this journey, i.e. the drawing on paper. The sound piece 5 Minute Life Drawing allows the observer/listener to experience the visceral quality of the act of drawing, the everyday sounds so revered by the Futurist movement as personified by Russolo’s The Art of Noises manifesto (1913). The observer/listener can experience the sound of the pencil, hand and rubber being dragged across the surface and can experience both the moments of calm contemplation and the frenetic action as decisions are made and acted upon. The work forces the viewer to engage with the image and to imagine the – never seen – outcomes. The nature and image of the final outcome can only be imagined, and therefore seen, in the mind of the observer/listener thus immersing the, possibly, non-artist in the creative act of drawing. The only clue to the observer/listener as to the possible outcome is in the title of the works which define them as observations of the creation of life drawing studies over specified periods of time.

Furthermore, this aural representation of the creative act can be taken into the visual as in ‘Two Minute Sketch’ whilst still retaining the mystery of the act in that the actual image created remains unseen. The performance piece Digital Nude reverses this concept by using the sound of the
model herself digitally translated into movement to create a visual response to the existence of the life model to produce an ‘abstract’ drawing which still fulfills the criteria of being a life drawing. The work was intended to force the viewer to consider revising their perceptions of the reality of the drawn image in the light of technological intervention. Linking the traditional artist’s tools of pencil and charcoal to cutting edge digital sensors programmed to respond to the existence of the model by driving motors in a variety of directions will create unexpected marks that will, as the machine drives backwards and forwards over them, echo the autographic quality of human mark making without the expectation of observation and emotion.

The idea of interactivity is also an emergent concept for the viewer and with artworks such as Caryatid there are a number of barriers to overcome in the way that, for example, interactive artworks that resemble elements of the gaming industry may not have to deal with. There is the taboo of approaching nudity—the viewer is required to approach and touch the artwork—being essentially three dimensional the viewer does not have the safety net of that arguably exist when viewing a traditional framed drawing. The original concept considered the use of touch screens which might amplify the issue. The roles of artist/viewer have been explored by Lovejoy (2004) from the point of view of the loss of control experienced by the artist as the imagery is handed over to the viewer. With Caryatid there were certainly moments when I felt dismay at the way a viewer had left the artwork after their interaction with it.

It is important to place the current work in context. Unlike a physical drawing – pencil on paper – when these works are switched off, as with all video/screen-based artworks, they no longer exist in their intended form. Does this reduce their value as artworks? It does, of course, raise issues as to their longevity as the software/hardware required to display them may no longer exist in the near future. Does upgrading the artworks’ physicality to compensate for this phenomenon alter the artworks’ intention?

4. CONCLUSION

A static drawing is a natural ‘limiter’ of the observer’s experience. The artist has made the final decisions regarding how the work will be viewed, if not read, and has thus defined the parameters of its existence. By introducing elements of interactivity to the artwork it therefore moves significantly beyond the artists’ control and by implication one’s relationship with one’s own mark-making is irrevocably changed. Moving beyond the technological limitations the artist is, as always, confronted by the questions of ‘what it is that I want to say and what do I want the viewer to think’. To a greater degree the introduction of interaction can obviate these questions as the unexpected can place itself between the artists’ intentions and the interactor. The younger generation in particular equate interaction with gameplay and can, therefore, approach artworks from this somewhat frivolous intention – wanting to be entertained rather than challenged on an intellectual level. Changing that perception and convincing the viewer that this is not primarily entertainment as with most interaction runs the risk of alienation rather than attracting new audiences to the art gallery paradigm. The concept of time in front of the object as a neurological and creative didactic experience rather than a transient gaming ‘high’ would not be one familiar to many visitors to the V&A’s Decode: Digital Design Sensations but it may be that this notion of art as entertainment will eventually lead to a greater acceptance of the creative arts in the 21st century.

Drawing is not what you see but what you make others see.

Seeing Through Drawing – BBC 2 1978

5. REFERENCES


