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Learning drawing: Sustaining the primacy of *visualcy* within a neo-liberal artschool curriculum

Howard Riley, Swansea College of Art, University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Abstract

The article champions an articulacy in drawing – *visualcy* – as central to a visual arts pedagogy, arguing that the one domain of human inquiry which distinguishes the visual arts from other disciplines is surely that surrounding the faculty of *vision*. The ascendancy within the artworld of a relational aesthetics often devoid of perceptual insights is traced through a brief history of the relationships between visual artforms and their sociopolitical contexts, culminating with the shift of emphasis away from the perceptually intriguing and towards the contemporary imperatives of a professional practice defined in terms of the neo-liberal values permeating the UK Higher Education sector since 2010. The article rehabilitates the Formalist notion of *enstrangement* as a means of revitalizing the primacy of perceptual inquiry over ‘looking through language’, and is illustrated with drawings by the author.

Keywords

drawing
neo-liberalism
revocational art
convocational art
enstrangement
perceptual and conceptual intrigue

Introduction

According to Rawson (1979: 7) children’s drawings typically ‘objectify’ their conceptions and feelings [...] but do so in terms of ‘graphic forms’ that tend to correspond with those of speech (Maynard 2005: 138).

Here's philosopher Patrick Maynard endorsing Philip Rawson's articulation of what we all know, albeit subliminally: we look through language.

Language – the written and spoken kind – binds together members of a particular society; language forms identity; language structures our realities, it naturalizes the cultural, the ideological; and more pertinently to my argument, *language filters direct visual perception*, albeit through its apparent transparency.

This premise is explored in due course in order to justify the case for the primacy of drawing (Petherbridge 2010) in the pedagogical aim of nurturing an intelligence of seeing capable of looking without language.

Drawing is fundamental to a visual arts pedagogy, since the primary endeavour of such pedagogy is to impart knowledge of, and to encourage inquiry about, the techniques and processes of structuring light in communicable forms through the study of and experimentation with the processes of visual perception and visual communication as a means to knowledge. After all, the one domain of human inquiry that distinguishes the visual arts from other disciplines is surely that surrounding the faculty of *vision*. And the prime means of engaging with, and communicating results of that inquiry is the language of drawing (Riley 2019). This premise is in contrast with other avenues of activity practised by those *not* focussed upon the exploration and communication of visual perceptual phenomena, but who instead test – breach? – the limits of academic credibility of a visually based discipline by contriving human interactions and their social contexts exemplified by what Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) termed 'relational aesthetics', what Grant Kester (2013: 1) has called more recently 'dialogical artistic practice'; activities which I shall term *convocational* for reasons explained below. The argument is made that these practices – with their emphasis upon non-visual issues – are the consequence of the traits of neo-liberalism (Flew

2014; Harvey 2016) driven by the political policies of privatization and deregulation transforming the UK Higher Education sector (McGettigan 2013; Radice 2013).

It is accepted that no art school can operate independently of its sociopolitical context, but the traits of neo-liberalism, whilst purportedly about freedom of expression and equality, ultimately, in the forthright terms of Alana Jelinek (2013: 18), result in '[...] hierarchy and systematic exclusion, mediocrity, private monopolism and monoculturalism cloaked in values of freedom and a distorted idea of individual responsibility'. All of which raise concerns about the diminished status of perception studies.

Vocative artforms: The advent of neo-liberalism in the art schools

In a recent article, Deanna Petherbridge (2019), Professor of Drawing at the Royal College of Art 1995–2001, relates an anecdote from the period about a '[...] careless madness' to do with attitudes towards the teaching of drawing:

That madness stems from a profound late twentieth-century belief, still prevalent today, that drawing is an entirely individual practice shaped by individual ownership but so free floating that it requires no reference to any larger discourse. That is, drawing can be anything that any artist, art teacher, or museum educator cares to make of it [...] (Petherbridge 2019: 2)

A 'madness' still prevalent today, indeed! How did this attitude evolve?

In post-Enlightenment periods of history, one of the social functions of art had been to challenge the conventions of visual representation in particular and the *mores* of the artworld in general; those ideological constructions which are so embedded within their cultural contexts that they appear natural. Certain strategies have been developed at certain periods to this end; for example, in his book *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Jacques Ranciere (2009: 49–52) updates Bertolt Brecht's neologism *Verfremdungseffekt*¹ as *distanciation*, to identify a period in time when '[...] humorous distanciation² takes the place of provocative shock'. A period of what I shall describe as *revocational* art, superseding the Modernist era of what Robert Witkin (1995: 57) termed *provocational* art. (These terms draw attention to the

essentially *vocative* nature of all artforms. A full discussion of Witkin's taxonomy of artforms related to social structures and my own extrapolations from it may be found in Riley (2013).

'Provocational' art was motivated not by calling on any religious or spiritual source such as, for example, Leonardo's versions of *The Virgin of the Rocks* (c. 1492 and c. 1508) exemplifying the 'evocational' art of the Renaissance period (Witkin 1995: 56), or the earliest period of human image-making when cave drawings invoked – realized – their referents, but by the humanism that evolved from the Enlightenment and socio-technological revolutions of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in northern Europe. Such art shifted the representational emphasis from the relationship between the work and its referent altogether, and drew attention instead to the *process of signification* itself in an effort to 'distantiate' or estrange the conventions of the time. The primary function of art was no longer to do with representing anything, but a means of provoking the viewer into a state of awareness of their own responsibilities for making sense of artworks. Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* of 1919 was the *agent-provocateur par excellence!*

My term 'revocational' art is typified by a Postmodern period that saw the development of a plurality of approaches to art practice and an eclecticism of styles. This period was one in which the constructions of individual identity were complicated not only by the fluctuating states of possibilities of relationships between individuals, but also by a range of available social positions made possible through an expanded awareness of the multiplicity of ideological positions. Such art revoked all previous laws and restrictions of conventions so that contradictions and contravisuals abound, realities may be virtual, and the virtual becomes a reality. Attention was drawn to the very membranes that separate internal from external, signifier from signified. In a postmodern period, the Saussurean sign itself had been split, and signifiers floated free from signifieds, all Derridean differences and deferrals available

once more for our reconsideration and restructuring. For example, we walked around – and through – Damien Hirst’s pair of segmentally shuffled cows in his 1996 installation *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything*, where the strategy was not only to challenge traditional boundaries between inside and outside, but also conventions of front and rear, which were reversed, interpenetrated. Similarly, we were denied entry to Rachel Whiteread’s *House (de)constructed* in 1993, whilst, paradoxically, having access to the interior surfaces of the rooms which formed the exterior of the sculpture. Neither nurtured an intelligence of seeing, no matter how conceptually intriguing.

So, what of the present period? Post-revocational, a ‘post-Postmodernist’ time, one that has been identified as ‘Alter-modernism’³ in which Government legislation from 2010, driven by neo-liberal values, withdrew direct funding allowing (encouraging? forcing?) UKHE institutions to triple fees (Kenning 2018: 2), and in which institutional bureaucratic responsibilities (marketing, recruitment, retention, even monitoring foreign students’ movements) are offloaded to academics (Martin 2016: 2).

Consequences of these trends, influenced by neo-liberal values permeating higher education in general, include the advent of modules in fine arts curricula exhorting notions of ‘enterprise’ and ‘entrepreneurship’ related to ‘professional practice’⁴ in an attempt to align the curriculum with commercial artworld trends whilst abrogating responsibilities for nurturing visualcy *via* the teaching of drawing.

Endorsing Bourriaud, Ranciere (2009: 56) describes the activities of this Altermodernist period as ‘relational’, typified when a practitioner – he cites Rirkrit Tiravanija as an example – assumes the role of *social convenor*, setting up a meeting place and encouraging visitors to engage in social relations of some kind (making soup in an art gallery) with the ultimate aim of promoting the practitioner’s profile in a commercialized artworld. Extrapolating further from Witkin’s typology of artforms, I shall label such art ‘convocational’, in the sense that it

purports to call together disparate social groupings. Many examples of convocational art aim to ‘fill the cracks in the social bond’ as Bourriaud (1998: 36) himself put it, and demonstrate socially motivated intentions, often critical of neo-liberal values: at its best, as Grant Kester observes:

Frequently collaborative in nature [...] (a new area of dialogical artistic practice) [...] is driven by a common desire to establish new relationships between artistic practice and other fields of knowledge production, from urbanism to environmentalism, from experimental education to participatory design. (2013: 1)

But such activities do little to advance understanding of visual perception processes which, I maintain, is fundamental for cultural practices identified as the visual arts.

A pedagogy of *enstrangement*

This Section advocates a reconsideration of the notion of ‘enstrangement’, leading to a demonstration of its application in a pedagogy of drawing focussed upon the nurturing of an intelligence of seeing, rather than any artworld entrepreneurial fashion.

The Russian Formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky (1917) first championed the social function of art as *ostraniene*. Benjamin Sher ([1925] 1990: xviii–xix), explains that there is no such word in Russian dictionaries; it too is a neologism (coined well before Brecht’s) which may be understood as a mixture of *stran* (strange) and *otstranit* (to remove, to shove aside) which Sher translates as *enstrangement*. Shklovsky’s approach was not simply from the ‘familiar’ to the ‘unknown’, but from the ‘cognitively known’, that is knowledge derived from symbolic formulae, convention, requiring only minimal mental effort, to the ‘familiarily known’, real knowledge that serves to expand and recognize our complex perceptual processes in the use of metaphor and other poetic devices.

Shklovsky advocated that all formal structural devices such as rhyme, rhythm and pattern, change of viewpoint, focus, change of format, scale, together with rhetorical tropes such as metonymy and metaphor, function to shock the reader/viewer out of a state of anaesthesia.

According to him, the essential function of art is to counteract the staleness of our conventional, everyday ways of seeing: the complacency of what may be termed an anticipatory mode of seeing in everyday life anaesthetizes us. On the contrary, the aim of art is to ‘aesthetise’:

As they become habitual actions are automatised. This is a process ideally typified by algebra where objects are replaced by symbols. Through this algebraic mode of thinking we grasp things by counting them and measuring them; we do not see them, but merely recognise them by their primary features. The thing rushes past pre-packed as it were; we know that it is there by the space it takes up, but we see only its surface. This kind of perception shrivels a thing up, first of all in the way that we perceive it, but later this affects the way we handle it too. Life goes to waste as it is turned into nothingness.

Automatisation corrodes things; clothing, furniture, one’s wife and one’s fear of war. And so that a sense of life may be restored, that things may be felt, so that stones may be made stony, there exists that which we call art. (Shklovsky 1917: 35)

We can now address a major example of the anaesthetization process mentioned earlier: the way language itself serves to obfuscate the Shklovskian function of art, which is to impart the sensation of the world as it is *perceived*, not as it is *cognitively known* through the filter of symbolic codes such as language.

Enstrangement strategies in practice

My contention, as a tutor of drawing, is that by demonstrating one’s own exploration of enstrangement techniques through practical drawing projects driven by theoretical issues raised in lectures and seminars, students may be encouraged to embark upon their own explorations. The drawing tutor who turns up in the lecture theatre, and the theorist who turns up in the studios – when they are one and the same – tacitly demonstrates the dialectic relationship between the two activities.

The teaching of drawing entails the engagement of *haptic*, *distal* and *proximal* states of awareness accessible within the process of seeing; haptic awareness relates to the textural qualities of the scene, the distal relates to the layout of surfaces in space, and the proximal

relates to the overall pattern qualities of the visual field. Drawing is the most direct means of exercising these channels of perception. It is therefore best positioned to be the means of release from our language-based complacency of vision; it is the primary means of enstrangement [...].

The anaesthesia affected by language upon our perceptions of the world is a challenge for teachers of drawing: can compositional devices of enstrangement make visible this deception of our own making in order to aesthetise our perception, as Shklovsky might have put it? To that end, Figures 1 and 2 from the series of images, *Seeing Through Writing* (double *entendre* intended!) illustrate visual equivalents for an abstract proposition, one at the heart of my argument: the stimulus for the series was the recognition that language structures our realities, implying that we use it to structure order out of chaos, and also to remind us that it was our prior facility for iconic depiction that enabled the emergence and development of written symbolic codes. *Visualcy* facilitated literacy (Riley 2019).

The comments related to each illustration are not intended to stabilize absolute meanings, but are offered as pedagogical examples of how the ‘poetic’ function of communication – the application of compositional devices which draw attention to the formal attributes of the work in question – might stimulate students to negotiate their own interpretations, their own modal responses to the ultimate goal: looking without language.



Figure 1: Howard Riley, *Seeing Through Writing 1*, 2018. Oil pastel, graphite, charcoal, pencil on Saunders Waterford 300gsm paper, A3 size. © Howard Riley.



Figure 2: Howard Riley, *Seeing Through Writing 4*, 2019. Oil pastel, graphite, charcoal, pencil on Saunders Waterford 300gsm paper, A3 size, with reflections from glass. © Howard Riley

When the viewer engages with the drawings at the level of general composition, then a common syntax may be discerned, most clearly in Figure 1: the central position of the square, resting on a horizontal line effectively dividing background (in western convention, the upper section of the picture-plane) from foreground (lower section of picture-plane), connotes physical stability and epitomizes visual balance. The square invites metaphoric interpretation as the visible representation of the stability and dependability of our innate structuring capacity; through this compositional syntax, the variety of transformative changes from background to foreground, from the chaos of random scribbles to order in the form of symbolic writing, is illustrated.

But each illustration has variations in the perception of the individual marks. For example, in Figure 1 the sharpness of the contrast boundaries separating shapes of tone and texture indicating multiple layers within the central square, and the apparent transparency of the symbols in the foreground (through which we glimpse the material chaos represented in the background) invite connotations of the multiple varieties of language available to structure chaos into order.

However, once the drawings are glazed for exhibition as in Figure 2, and the positions of viewing the surface textures and edges are explored, then alternate visual relationships between the drawing surface, the viewer and their environmental context, hitherto suppressed, become apparent. Glass, an ambivalent material, both transparent and reflective rather like language, and often regarded as a hindrance to the direct perception of artworks, here ironically affords multiples of visual focuses, a metaphor for the layers of meaning available to the viewer once the foregrounded filter of language has been dissolved. And of course as the viewer shifts position, a constant restructuring of the arrays of light arriving at the eyes, both from the reflective glass and the textures of the drawing itself, stimulates enhanced perceptual intrigue conducive to challenging the complacencies of seeing.

These ambiguities raise questions about the direction in which our capacity for structuring operates: do we see the world through language, or language through the world? The foregrounded emergent symbols in Figure 2 are embedded, integrated, within their spatial contexts: language and the material world become one – which is matter, which is meaning? (Halliday 2005).

Symbolic language, in all its written forms, appears to have emerged from a world of visual ambiguity, *via* our innate capacity for structuring chaos into order, and has permeated our observations of the material world to such an extent that the two have become one: language

is the filter through which we perceive the world, it becomes transparent, interwoven with our perception of the fabric of the material world, yet its visible form – writing – remains forever arbitrary, forever open to negotiation.

The compositional devices illustrated and discussed here serve to estrange writing from its referents, thus drawing affords, reveals, a recognition of the treason – not of images (*pace* Magritte) – but of language.

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Contributor details

Howard Riley (Ph.D. MA[RCA] CertDes FRSA FHEA) studied at the Hammersmith College of Art, Coventry College of Art, and the Royal College of Art. He holds a doctorate of the University of Wales in the practice and pedagogy of drawing. His drawings have been exhibited in Australia, Malaysia, Finland, Serbia, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Drawings: <https://howardriley.wordpress.com>

Contact: E-mail: howard.riley@uwtsd.ac.uk

<https://orcid.org/>

Notes

¹ Brecht first used this term in an essay of 1936 titled ‘Alienation effects in Chinese acting’.

John Willett defines it thus:

Playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience’s subconscious. (1964: 91)

² This version of the French common translation of Brecht’s neologism *Verfremdungseffekt* is favoured by Ranciere’s translator, Steven Corcoran (Ranciere 2009: 49).

³ ‘Altermodernism’ is a term coined by curator Nicolas Bourriaud in 2009 on the occasion of the Tate *Triennial* to identify art made as a comment on standardisation and commercialism, in the context of neo-liberalism and globalization.

⁴ *Professional practice* has become what is considered as a necessary component in the education of visual artists. In contemporary usage, the term refers to the acquisition of skills and attitudes deemed useful in negotiating a competitive market economy, for example, business acumen and strategies for self-promotion. These, it is argued, are necessary for successful visual arts practice in what is commonly referred to as the ‘real world’, a term which describes one particular construction of reality in which visual philosophy is usurped by commodity aesthetics.