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BRIDGING THE GAP: CONNECTING CONCEPTUAL INTRIGUE AND PERCEPTUAL INTRIGUE THROUGH DRAWING PRACTICE

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This article is an extended version of a presentation made to the Drawing Research Network conference, Loughborough School of Art & Design, 5-6 September 2016. An original pedagogy of drawing is proposed for the art schools, based upon aspects of theories of visual perception and visual communication. It is argued that drawing practice facilitates an intelligence of seeing, bridging the gap between conceptual intrigue and perceptual intrigue. These terms are defined, and the gap between them in contemporary practices is blamed upon a historical resistance to theory influenced by Barnett Newman. Newman's false logic is effectively debunked. A systemic-functional semiotic model for drawing is introduced, and related to five premises for applying the theoretical model to a teaching programme for drawing, illustrated with drawings by students and the author.

Introduction

Just like the emperor's new clothes, much recent visual art practice, according to Peter Campbell (2005: 24),

"... became famous without necessarily being seen. People felt they knew the tent, the bed, the shark, the fly-infested cow's head, whether they made it to the gallery or not. The concept was more telling than the reality. When you saw the pieces in an exhibition (and very large numbers of us did) they turned out to be more banal than you expected".

"Sometimes the gap between the philosophical and theoretical ambitiousness of a work of art and the banality of its statement grows so large that it takes itself ad absurdum."

(Ruhrberg, 2000: 390)

This article¹ proposes an art school pedagogy which bridges the gap identified in Peter Campbell's and Karl Ruhrberg's critical observations, by advocating that the degree of balance between *conceptual intrigue* and *perceptual intrigue* in drawings be considered as a main criterion of quality assessment. These two terms may be defined as how a work can afford viewers fresh mental insights on the theme or concept to which the work refers, and how the manipulation of the material qualities of the work may stimulate in the viewer perceptual experiences which cause the gaze to linger, and perceptual assumptions to be challenged. It is suggested that the perceived imbalance between the two, lamented by Campbell and Ruhrberg, might be remedied by addressing what the author perceives as the long-standing aversion to theory demonstrated by many art school lecturers. An aversion often justified by citing Barnett Newman's famous quip denigrating the relevance of visual aesthetics theory to artists, in his attempt to champion purely formalist values in painting practice against a burgeoning tendency to elaborate the importance of a sociological context – what Arthur Danto was later to theorise as the *Artworld*.

It is high time to refute Newman who, readers might recall, during debate with Susanne Langer at the 1952 Woodstock Art Conference, New York, questioned the value of aesthetics theory by comparing its worthlessness to artists with the worthlessness of ornithology to birds (Ho, 2002: 318). A superficially witty soundbite, granted, with an illusion of balanced argument, but based upon a false logic – surprising in one who had studied philosophy.

Newman's argument needs to be dismantled once and for all, since it has become the default dismissal of theory assumed by many artists with access to the teaching studios, even though Danto (1964: 571) had argued convincingly that it was precisely theory that makes something a work of art: "To see something as art requires ... an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld."

Newman's false logic tries to argue that, just as birds exist and fly without needing any knowledge of the how and why of themselves, so artists can exist and produce art without needing any knowledge of how or why. However, note the elision of the distinction between a natural phenomenon – birds exist

¹ Aspects of this article have been published in various other papers of mine, but, along with Nelson Goodman, in his *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978: ix-x) I believe "My experience with students and commentators has not convinced me that reiteration is needless."

through biological evolution – and a cultural one: art is a social construct and artists develop within a sociocultural context. Newman neatly naturalised that which is cultural. The fact that so many people, including those who teach, are still unable to recognise his argument as false, is in itself evidence of the need for art students to be properly acquainted with the theoretical underpinnings of their practice! Newman was labouring under a common, pre-1960's philosophical misconception,

... that human beings come equipped with faculties, dispositions and/or characteristics that suffice for the creation of art. Most earlier philosophers assumed that an omniscient, omnipotent God had had the foresight to create human beings with the hard-wired equipment that would suffice for the creation of art ...

(Dickie, 2001, p. 9)

Even though – perhaps because – Newman had studied philosophy (in the mid-1920s at the City College of New York) and ornithology (he was elected to the American Ornithologists Union in 1940), he had failed to understand

... that art is a collective invention of human beings and not something that an artist produces simply out of his or her biological nature as a spider does a web or as a bower bird does a bower. The production of an artwork, unlike the production of a bower, does not appear to be directly connected to behaviour closely tied to the evolutionary process as the bower of a bower bird clearly is because of its role in the reproductive process.

(Dickie, 2001, p. 10)

Surely these days we recognise that even though birds don't need ornithology, it is imperative that artists understand their cultural and theoretical milieu? This article argues that students' practices would be empowered by a pedagogical model which integrates, rather than denigrates, the theoretical bases of drawing practice – especially those of visual perception and visual communication – within the curriculum, and which provides the means to understanding the socio-political contexts in which contemporary drawing is produced, positioned in the public domain and evaluated. One such model is a derivation of systemic-functional semiotic theory:

The Provenance of Systemic-Functional Semiotics

Semiotics is generally understood as the study of *signs*, and the discipline was first mooted in Europe by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1916). Semiotics is often used to analyse how meanings are negotiated within the process of communication, but can also be useful as a means of synthesising work...

A *sign* is anything that can be used to stand for something else, or as Umberto Eco (1976:7) quipped "Semiotics is...the discipline studying everything which can be used to tell a lie...", illustrated, for example, in Magritte's famous warning about the treachery of words and images:



FIGURE 1 RENE MAGRITTE 1929 *THE TREACHERY OF IMAGES* OIL ON CANVAS 60x80CMS LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART.

As a linguist, Saussure realised that language was (and still is!) a system of arbitrary signs, *symbols* (written words, spoken sounds) which bear no relationship to their referents in the world: the word *pipe* bears no relation to a real pipe, and neither does the word *Ceci*, or 'this', as Magritte asserts. To that extent, Saussurean semiotics would seem of little use to visual artists. However, the American philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce (1867), working much earlier, had already devised a taxonomy of signs, including some which actually do bear relationships with their referents: *iconic* signs, which resemble their referents – as does Magritte's image resembling a pipe, and *indexical* signs which are caused by their referents, as Magritte's handwriting points to – indicates - the speed and pressure of the hand that made it. A synthesis of the insights of Saussure and Peirce affords the possibilities of a visual semiotics which *can* be of use to visual artists, and it is this potential we shall explore in this article.

Functions of Communication

Saussure's work influenced the Russian Formalists, who were theorising language and literature around the time of the 1917 revolution. Roman Jakobson (1958), a founding member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and later a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, developed a model of six *Factors* involved in the process of communication: the *Sender* and *Receiver* of the *Message*, within a *Context* involving the necessity for *Contact* and the sharing of a *Code*. These six factors have their corresponding six functions of communication: the *Emotive* drive of the Sender and the willingness – the *Conative* drive – of the Receiver to negotiate the *Poetic*, the function which draws attention to the Message itself, which is normally *Representational* of its subject-matter. The *Phatic* function ensures Contact is maintained, and the *Metalingual* ensures both Sender and Receiver share the same Code:

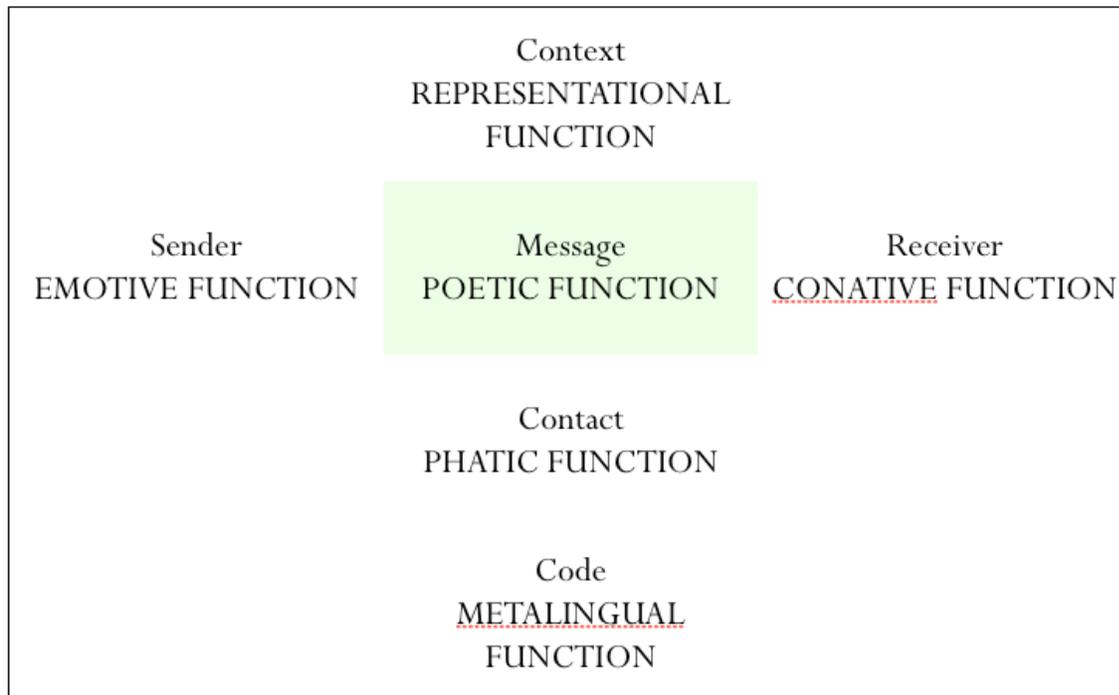


FIGURE 2 ROMAN JAKOBSON 1958 MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

For the purposes of visual art, the Sender becomes the *Artist*, the Receiver becomes the *Viewer*, and the Message becomes the *Artwork*.

Systems and Functions in Semiotics

Systemic-functional linguistics is a theory of language derived and refined from Jakobson's model by Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday (1978) in the 1960s and 1970s. Essentially, Halliday noted that the Emotive function and the Conative function might be combined into an *Interpersonal* function. Jakobson's Representational function is re-named the *Experiential*, since what is represented are our experiences of the world, and Halliday recognised that the crucial function for any analysis of the arts – Jakobson's Poetic function – is actually about drawing attention to the formal qualities of the work, so although Halliday, working with language and written text, termed this function 'Textual', we shall retain Jakobson's original term, *Poetic*, for the model presented as Figure 3.

The term *system* in systemic-functional semiotics stands for the ranges of compositional choices available to us. It is a term introduced by Halliday's teacher, linguist John Rupert Firth (1957) who also introduced the term *sociological linguistics* to locate the study of language within its social perspective, suggesting that social context and language are *interdependent*: social context influences use of language; language-use influences social context. This interdependency is referred to by linguists as *register*, a concept equally applicable when visual artists consider how to compose a drawing suitable for a particular age-group, for example, or viewers from a specialist discipline. Firth followed the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin (Holquist 1981) and members of his circle formed around 1917, who had recognised that communication in all its aspects was always *dialogical*, Bakhtin's term to explain the context of situation between the participants in any act of communication.

A Systemic-Functional Semiotic Model of Communication applied to Drawing

Finally, in this potted provenance of semiotic theory, during the 1980s and up to the present, Michael O'Toole (2011), a pioneer of visual semiotics working at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia, has argued that Halliday's model for language is equally potent when adapted for the analysis of visual codes of communication, and demonstrated this by analysing examples of painting, sculpture and architecture. In general terms, humans have devised visual codes of communication expressed through a variety of media and processes – for example, drawing, painting, photography, film - which function to make tangible to others our moods and attitudes towards the experiences represented. Specifically, in illustrative terms, we compose images which represent our experiences, or simply tell stories, and the processes of composition – our selection and combination of visual elements – affect the viewers' attitudes towards what is represented.

In terms of drawing practices, Firth's notion of *system* includes the range of mark-making media, the range of grounds, the range of compositional formats and sizes, the range of line qualities, textures, colours, in other words the elements of visual language available for selection and combination into a visual means of communication. Such choices carry the potential for meaning, *where there is choice, there is meaning*: for instance, the mark of a 6B pencil carries more potential for gestural connotations than the mark of a 2H pencil. Their potential for meaning comes from their differences.

Figure 3 represents a model of communication, adapted by the present author for the study of drawing from O'Toole's own adaptation of Halliday's model for language. In this model, the three functions are arranged horizontally, and the varying degrees of attention at which any work may be scrutinised are here arranged vertically and labelled *Levels of Engagement*, from the level of detailed scrutiny of individual marks within a work, right up to the work in its wider social context, where systems relating to display - of framing, lighting, or the placement of the work within a print format or on screen - might be studied. The matrix thus formed by these two axes contains the systems – ranges of choices – appropriate to each level of engagement:

Function Level of Engagement	EXPERIENTIAL (<i>what</i> is represented: experiences of the world)	INTERPERSONAL (<i>how</i> the viewer is <i>positioned</i> in terms of <i>mood and attitude</i>)	POETIC (<i>how</i> perceptual and emotional experiences are represented)
Drawing as Displayed	<i>Proximal</i> Perceptual Values. Theme Narrative Genre Representational/abstract Interplay of Episodes.	Attitude, Modality: Intimate/Monumental Public/Private Active/Passive Rhythm/focal points: Dynamic/Static Calm/Agitated	Overall format and size. Gestalt relations: horizontals, verticals, diagonals . Framing devices. Colour palette . Systems of Geometry: persp, ortho, axo, etc.
Episodes of the Drawing	<i>Distal</i> Perceptual Values Primary Geometry (layout of surfaces and edges) Actions, events central to narrative. Distance between Surfaces in the Scene.	Position relative to scene.(Orientation of viewer). Gaze/eyework . Modality: happy/gloomy, calm/excited etc.	Secondary Geometry: (perspective/non perspective projections). Interplay of figures/passages Contrast of tone/texture
Combinations of Marks (sub-assemblies)	<i>Haptic</i> Perceptual Values Edges: occlusion of surfaces Direction Transparency/opacity Atmosphere Time of day	Sense of 'affordances' in the scene. Heavy/lightweight Flatness/illusions of depth	Textural Qualities of Media/Ground. Relative Positions of Marks. Relative Sizes of Marks. Division of Picture- Plane: ratios, angles. Overlap of shapes/tones
Individual Marks	Effects of light on surfaces in the environment. Spatial Depth. Scene Primitives.	Sense of textural differences. Indices of mark- maker's movements: speed, pressure.	Position and Size of Marks within Picture Plane. Interaction between Medium and Surface. Picture Primitives.

FIGURE 3 A SYSTEMIC-FUNCTIONAL SEMIOTIC MODEL FOR DRAWING.

Having introduced the systemic-functional model and indicated its provenance, it is time to demonstrate how it might be used to facilitate the negotiation of meanings available in drawing practices. This in part entails the identification of the formal compositional means through which an artist positions the viewer; "...to lay bare the device," as the leading Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky (1929: 147) advocated².

² In his seminal history of the Russian Formalists, Victor Erlich (1965:182) explains:

"It is worth noting that this typically Formalist phrase (laying bare the device) is a free translation of a passage from William James' Psychology, dealing with the impact of verbal repetition on the perception of individual words. The passage was quoted by Lev Jakubinski in his essay on 'The Sounds of Poetic Language' in Poetica, 1919. The original text reads as follows: '...it (the repeated word) is reduced, by this new way of attending to it, to its sensational nudity.' (William James 1928 Psychology New York p. 315). The Russian translation of James' work, Jakubinski's direct source of reference, actually anticipates the Formalist terminology: '...having thus looked at the word from a new viewpoint, we have laid bare (obnazili) its purely phonetic aspect'".

Five premises for a 21st-century curriculum

A curriculum for the studio teaching of contemporary drawing practice could be structured through five specific premises derived from the two fundamental theoretical bases relevant to drawing production: those of visual perception and visual communication.

1. Seeing and believing

If students are to develop the capacities necessary to manipulate the balance between the conceptual and the perceptual in drawings, it is essential from the outset that studio projects are designed to encourage students to understand that perception is a) culturally conditioned,

and b) capable of being 'tuned' to different levels of attention. How we see the world is conditioned by what we believe. This is easily illustrated for students by showing the variety of ways that different cultures with differing belief-systems about space–time, for example, have devised to represent the relationship in drawings (Figure 4). Once students are aware of their own ontological constructs, they become more flexible about recognising the validity of those of others and also more capable of inventing alternative constructs that can inform the creative production of art.



FIGURE 4 RYUEN (SHINTO ARTIST) c1330 *DIAGRAM OF SHINTO SHRINE*. NOTE HOW THE VARIETY OF GEOMETRIC PROJECTION SYSTEMS POSITION THE VIEWER AS MOVING TOWARDS, AROUND AND THROUGH THE SHRINE. RYUEN BELIEVED THAT WE EXPERIENCE THE WORLD VIA A MOVING PATH OF OBSERVATION.

2. Levels of perception

Three levels of visual information crucial to a visual art can be identified in the structure of the light arrays arriving at the eyes (Gibson, 1979). These may be explored in studio or elsewhere through exercises designed to focus attention on: the *haptic level*, at which information about surface qualities which indicate texture and colour may be accessed (Figure 5):

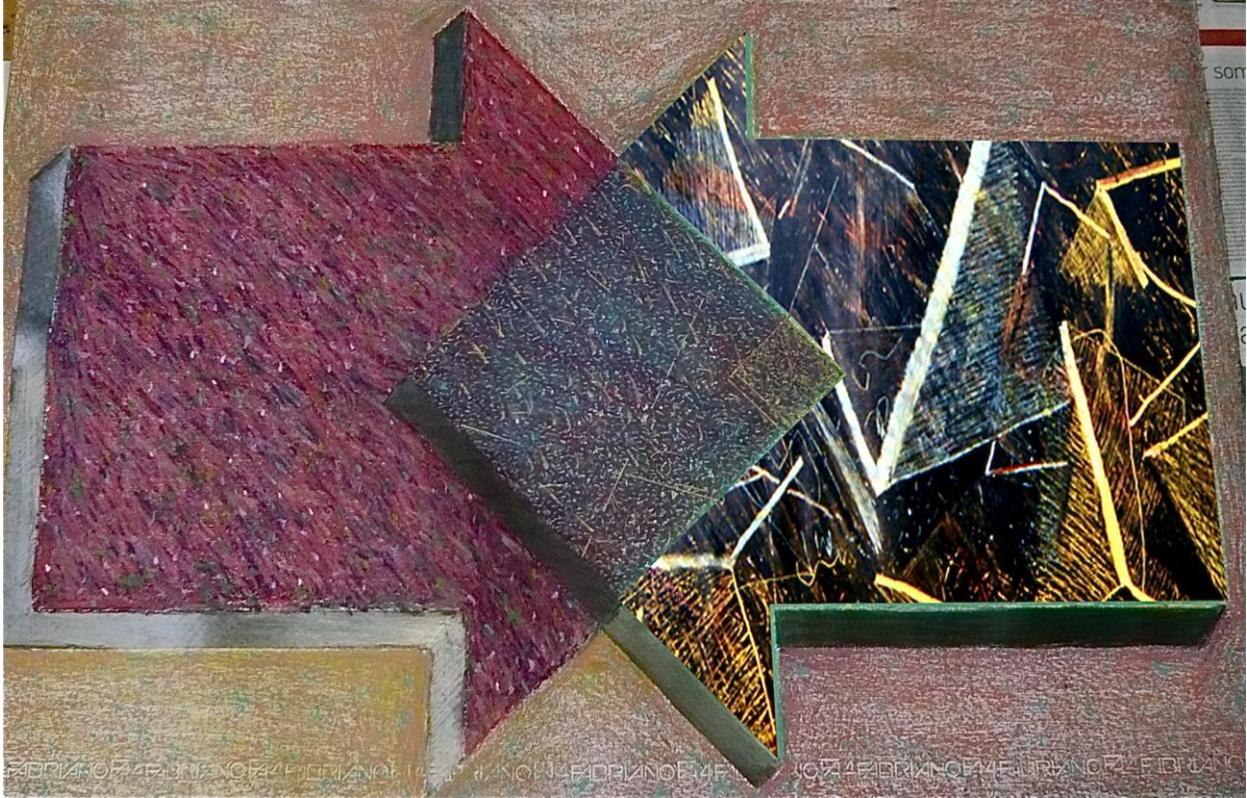


FIGURE 5 HOWARD RILEY 2008 *VISUAL DELIGHT* OIL PASTEL, CHARCOAL AND GRAPHITE ON PAPER.

The *distal level*, to do with information about relative distance, size, scale and depth of field (Figure 6), and the *proximal level*, which provides information about the overall pattern and rhythm relationships in the visual field as a whole (Figure 7).

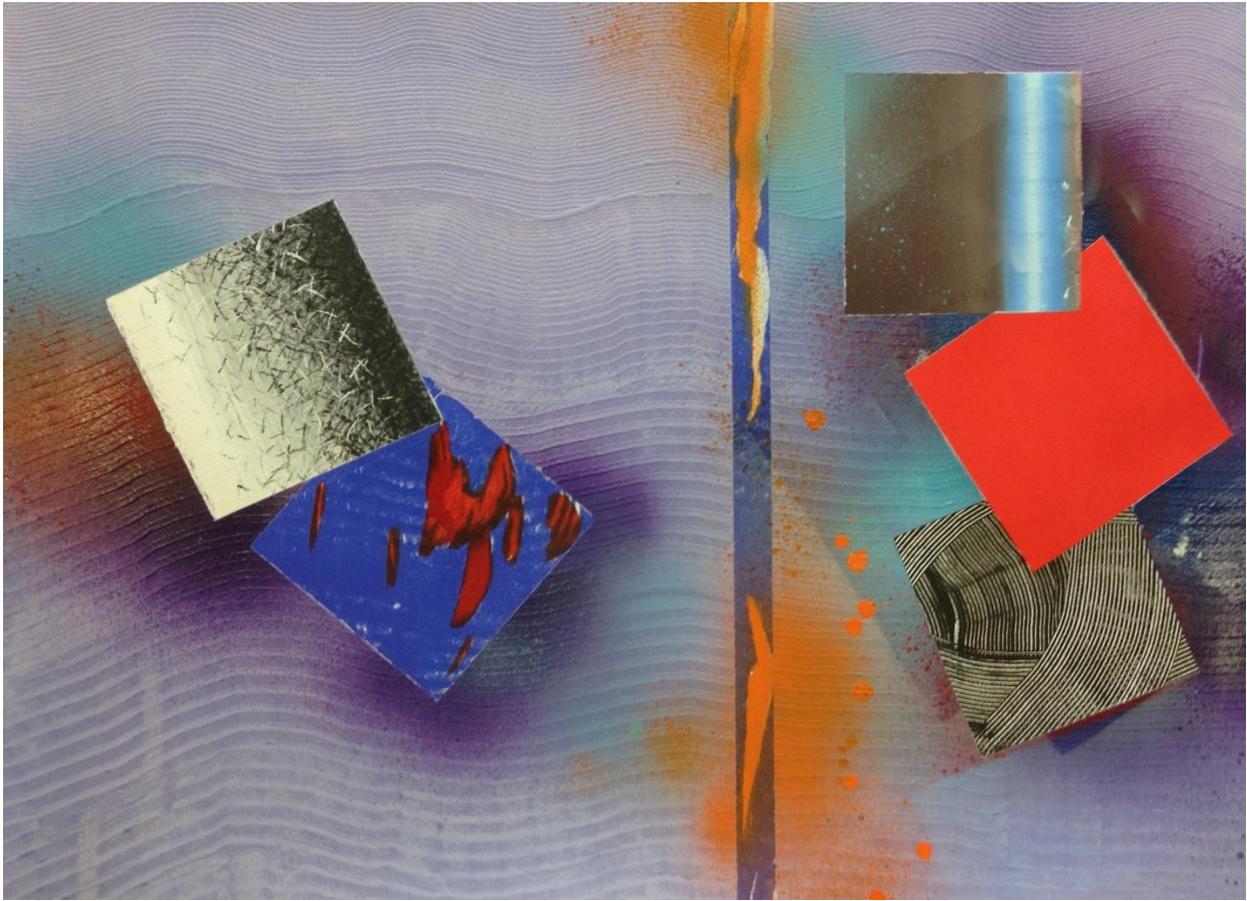


FIGURE 6 LON RILEY 2016 *CONTRAVISUAL* ACRYLIC ON PAPER.

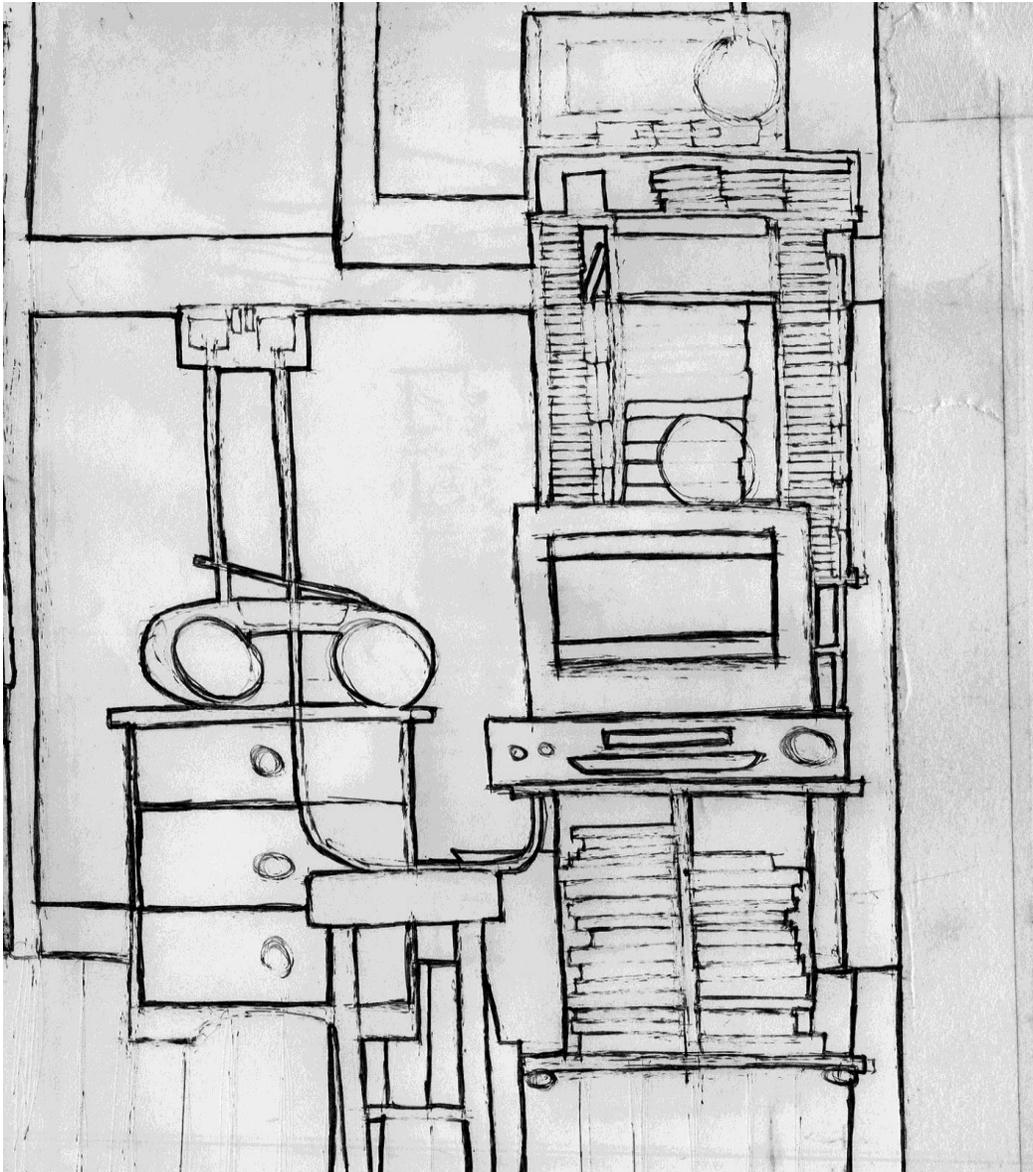


FIGURE 7 RICHARD MONAHAN 2005 *LIVING ROOM 2* GEL PEN ON PAPER.

The honing of such an *intelligence of seeing* (Riley 2008) is crucial if students are to manipulate and control the degree of perceptual intrigue in their work.

3. Functions of drawings

Alongside the exploration of perceptual values, students would be introduced to the theoretical bases of visual communication via either set projects or student-driven projects. Students understand at an early stage that a mental concept, an idea for an artwork, needs to be transformed into visible, tangible form in order to be shared within an artworld. The teaching challenge is to impart practical methods which can facilitate such transformation. Michael O'Toole's (2011) systemic-functional semiotic model of the visual arts is a proven valuable aid to structuring studio practice (Riley, 2016). He introduces the interrelationship between the

representational function: the content carried by the mental concept; the compositional function: the practical processes of selection and combination of visual elements, materials and media in order to realise – make visible – the concept; and the modal, or interpersonal function: how those compositional choices might affect viewers, positioning them in terms of mood and attitude towards what is represented. Such clear structuring of the drawing production process may be imparted both through illustrated talks and one-to-one discussion over the student's work.

4. Strategies of creative communication

Roman Jakobson theorised the two poetic devices of metaphor and metonym as characteristic realisations of the two fundamental processes of selection and combination through which the poetic, or compositional, function of communication operates. Metaphor, of course, refers to the substitution of one sign for another from the same paradigm; metonymy refers to the process whereby one sign becomes contiguously associated with another. The poetic function foregrounds the equivalences between visual elements of a drawing, producing visual pattern,

rhythm, symmetries and harmonies (or their opposites) that draw attention to the look of the work. In Jakobson's (1958: 358) famous phrase: "*The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.*"

An understanding of the power of these devices as vehicles to make visual equivalences of conceptual ideas will surely empower students' practice. Other rhetorical tropes can also be employed to good effect in drawing practice, and so oxymoron, irony and pun might usefully be introduced and illustrated in visual work.

5. Art production as a process of transformation

Ultimately, drawing practice is construed as a process of transformation:

- Transformation from concept or percept to artwork via systems of geometry, (the tradition of representationalism).
- Transformation of individual perceptions into social communication (the tradition of expressionism),
- Transformation of cultural values into material form (the tradition of art as socio-political comment, or, more contemporaneously, intervention in the social process through site-specific installations, performances, multi-media presentations which often include drawing works).

Upon these five premises it would be feasible to build a teaching programme for a theoretically-informed course in contemporary drawing practice, one which allows – positively encourages – debate around the efficacy of the various theoretical positions, including an acknowledgement of Newman's warning about too heavy a reliance upon socio-political theory at the expense of the fundamental formalist nature of all visual art practices.

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