Paper - A Reserve or Backgound?

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Paper: A reserve or a background? Brian Fay

Slide One
Abstract -

Using examples from contemporary practice and my own research this presentation will discuss two models for the role of paper in drawing: as background and as reserve. It will focus on Walter Benjamin's definition for the graphic lines almost metaphysical relationship to the background, and compare it with Norman Bryson's model of the paper as a reserve, for him an 'area without qualities'.

In much drawing discourse paper is frequently considered as a space of expectation - for that which is to come – this is only one model and what this paper will consider in the light of this analysis is what for the surface that already possesses an image and history.

It will further think about their definitions in the light of a surface – in this case paper - that already has an image on it as a background and consider how Benjamin and Bryson's definitions can be seen in the light of this as an operation.
1. Bryson and Benjamin and the unworked surface. How Barthes then expands this position - the accidental
2. Discuss the nature of the intentionally worked surface within drawing practices
3. Extend intentional to the use of erasure and redrawing and a ‘return’ to the empty paper via a substitutional status for the drawing

I began collecting my thoughts for this presentation with a blank sheet of paper, an empty surface that was inscribed with marks to produce another entity to offer further readings. Before any typing was done (as it now
inevitably is) marks were manually placed down on an empty sheet of uniform white A4 paper. I know that this stage is not necessarily needed anymore; one can work directly and successfully into a digital document. This system of marking point and paper are not conditional on producing the outcome of this presentation. Nor, I would acknowledge is the model of the blank paper necessarily a precondition to the processes of drawing, especially in the light of current digital practices or for instance those of

**SLIDE THREE FOUR AND FIVE**

Tacita Dean (blackboard drawings) Monika Grzymala (lines in space), Joelle Tuerlinckx (line as found object) it is however central to its attendant material and philosophical histories.

In a sense this is what both Walter Benjamin and Norman Bryson in their analyses on drawing and the role of the background (and for the purpose of this discussion please treat background as paper) propose. Paper while existing as an a-priori entity with material properties, surface quality, surface texture, handmade or mechanical production history, a fixed or amended proportion can be seen as a carrier of that which is neutral – a tabula rasa. In both essays their discussion is predicated on the background being initially and intentionally empty and that the surface of the paper contains no pre-existing image.

I will return to this as it sets up a distinct set of properties that can be reflected through drawing but it avoids other considerations for the surface that is already, as it were, activated.

**SHOW SLIDE SIX Benjamin**
In his 1917 essay *Painting, or Signs and Marks* Walter Benjamin advances a definition of painting via an attempt to distinguish drawings operation to that of paintings. His full wide ranging discussion will not be dwelt on here rather I will concentrate on the early part of this essay where he identifies the conditions for and operations of line. He identifies three semiotic classifications for line and immediately chooses to focus on just one, the graphic line. For him the graphic line beyond other forms of lines (here he identifies - the geometric and written line) has the capacity to function as an ‘absolute sign’ with distinct properties.

As Andrew Benjamin points out the designation of an ‘absolute sign’ moves ‘beyond any simple oscillation between an inside and an outside… The importance of this form of line is in how it comes to acquire its identity. Its emergence, in contrast to ‘area’, has for Benjamin both metaphysical as well as graphic significance.’

Benjamin’s claim is that there is a duality at play in the identity of the background through the graphic line. The line that is materially present functions as outline to that which may be an empty surface area yet is metaphysically present – an action not seen in the eye but through a perceptual reading of the marks and their surface.

Benjamin proposes that

*The identity of the background of a drawing is quite different from that of the white surface (weißer Papierfläche) on which it is inscribed. We might even deny it that identity by thinking of it as surge of white waves (though these might not even be distinguishable to the naked eye.)*

Again as Andrew Benjamin points out that

*A way of understanding what Benjamin means by the*
metaphysical can be located in the distinction between simple graphic presence and what is not given to the eye.

For Benjamin this operation can be seen to establish the drawn lines as a form of ignition of the metaphysical – the drawn lines become spatial. They affect the surface; and the relationship of area between those marks no longer remains blank white paper rather an identity is inscribed to it by the nature of the marks drawn – arriving at his example of a ‘surge of white waves’. The materials employed become operative to induce a form of presence outside of their individual properties.

In Benjamin’s terms there is an order of action and value – initially the blank surface/paper, the placement of the graphic line, then the resulting ignited space of the sign. This procedure confirms a procedural hierarchy of image over the background in as much that the background while active plays a more secondary role. As he states “(T)he graphic line confers an identity on its background.” In this hierarchy it is the line that grants the transformative action. That first the line must come in to play then the paper – it can be seen as the prime driver to the secondary response of the background, one that awaits conferral, then working to complete the conditions for it to become the drawing sign.

SHOW SLIDE SEVEN Bryson quote

So if Benjamin suggests that the presence of the paper is engulfed in the metaphysical shift to the absolute sign, Bryson’s identification of the background as reserve is a counter to the metaphysics of the previous model. He embeds this reserve model into a more material and
compositional/ or non-compositional context with associated temporal implications – which for him it is a defining distinction for drawing.

For Bryson drawing is constructed in a fundamentally different manner to painting. Drawing does not have to adhere to over-concealments of layers, or the stretchers ‘internal pressures’ to define an all over totality implying an all over coverage of the surface. Drawing is freer to respond to the conceptually absent reserve. While he is not fully explicit with his description of the nature of this absence is, one reading is that this blank reserve does not demand the totality of image creation that a painting does. It does not force a dynamic that compels the composition of the drawing to be considered outside of its own emerging parameters – present in its reception to and anticipation of the mark, absent in terms of its representational function until it becomes part of the drawing. The paper / reserve then becomes a series of local areas that the drawing responds to both conceptually and arguably non-compositionally as the drawing adheres to its own emerging logic in relation to the background. And this emerging or becoming exists within an ongoing state of temporal present-ness as the line is visible to us in relation to the paper and to the preceding lines that exist equally to form its composition. All seen equally all in a viewing from the present, whereby

‘the blankness of the paper exerts a pressure … it forces everything into the open … a radically open zone that always operates in real time.

SHOW SLIDE 8 ALEXANDER COZENS IMAGE

Bryson shows an awareness of this model of drawing as being solely a ‘projective’ form of drawing as in the concept is pre-existing in the artists head and is presented as a drawing by means of a set of graphic
conventions that go towards the realisation of this apriori ideal. He usefully discusses the drawing practice of the 18th century English artist Alexander Cozens and praises Cozens reversal of the preceding model. Cozens would begin a drawing not with a line on a blank surface but with the application of a blot or splash of ink and washes that acts as the impetus for the composition and in some cases the subject matter. This responsive model is on that Bryson sees as altering the model of first concept then realisation to one that is ‘more subtle: an interlacing of outside and inside, a permanent cross over between interior (artists mind, sensations, sensibility) and exterior (paper, pigment, stylus). What Bryson is moving towards but ultimately holds back from in this essay is the implication for the drawing that works from a background or reserve that has another history or where a series of marks have already been intentionally placed or perhaps unintentionally exist.

It is useful here to consider Roland Barthes’ refutation of the notion of a blank surface. In his well-known discussion on the work of Cy Twombly in *The Responsibility of Forms* (Barthes – page 162) Barthes points out that

_No surface, wherever we consider it, is a virgin surface:_
_everything is always, already, rough, discontinuous, unequal, set in motion by some accident: there is the texture of the paper, then the stains, the hatchings, the tracery of strokes ..._

Here Barthes allows us to consider the background not as a neutral image/surface but as a material presence. One that is pre-formed and actual. For Twombly’s palimpsestic drawing method Barthes’ identification of his response to the stain, stroke and accidental presences in the surface have a specific resonance. However I would also like to extend Barthes’ description of the accident to the role of the background where the intention
Different contemporary drawing practices seize of the model of the non-blank surface. In a brief look at some drawing practices that use paper that has a prior history or is used in what I will term as a 'substitutional' model (standing for that which it is not) present problems for the Bryson and Benjamin definitions and their exclusion of a posterior history to the drawing surface. I do not wish to suggest any shared conceptual relationships between these practices other than their shared and various approaches to paper.

SHOW SLIDE 9 Borremans

Michael Borremans early drawing work frequently employed paper that had a previous history to register a reading within art history and the history of image production. As Hans D. Christ observes in his text Warning! This is a philosophical drawing.1 On the Drawings of Michaël Borremans

The sheets he utilizes are not hand-colored paper but rather used envelopes, pages torn from a calendar or yellowed boxes. The visible traces of use and consumption of the sheets shift the entire program of picture generation – from the initial impression of the Old Masters to the picture quotations that transverse history – to a suggestive, apparently nostalgically transfigured space of the historical.

This practice has certain similarities with that of Cozens however the critical difference is Borremans’ use of found surfaces that are chosen to that of Cozens earlier system of programme chance. If Borremans suggests a
somewhat wry consideration of art history and the histories of image making the Chapman Brothers do so with maximum iconoclastic force.

SHOW SLIDE 10 Chapman Brothers Goya

In their series *Insult to Injury* (2004) the artists used actual objects of Art history which are then used or depicted / reshown and altered into a new context. In this instance the artists purchased a 1939 printed series of Goya’s etchings *The Disasters of War* for £25,000 from original plates and systematically drew over them, adding the heads of Disney characters and malevolently smiling clowns to the figures, covering the surfaces of the prints with gas masks, insect antennae and swastikas.

The claim here, amongst many at the time it should be said, was to pay homage to Goya who they saw as "the first Modernist artist; the first who had psychological and political depth". That aside, the work responds directly onto the surface of the original prints and consistently ties itself in with the narrative force and pictorial realities of the original print. The transgression, if indeed that is what it is, is arguably of a pictorially conservative nature, fitting into the visual lexicon of graffiti or doodling. Tellingly the drawn interventions work within the confines of the existing composition and framing, and derive their colours from what looks like a formal decision to arrive at a particular colour palette.

SHOW SLIDE 11 Chapman Brothers Hitler Slide

Similar concerns were followed through with Goya’s *Los Caprichos* series and the later 13 part series *If Hitler had been a Hippy How Happy Would We Be* using 13 of Adolph Hitler’s watercolours. In this work they added
psychedelic rainbows, stars and love hearts directly onto the surface of the original watercolours. Again similar formal conservative interventions were made to the works themselves and not a print series, within admittedly the highly provocative act of the work’s intention. Unlike Borremans and indeed Cozens; approach there is an element in this work that while the surface of the paper is historically loaded, the response to the images themselves seem more projective than a process led response. The grandiosity of the gesture results in a pre-considered engagement with the surface.

This process is similar to Bryson’s model for painting, forcing a totality of engagement for the drawn images. The formal engagement in these works while aiming for a model of transgression are pictorially composed within what Bryson might describe as ‘the totality or tyranny – of the image as overall design.’ Again formal compositional and pictorial space is adhered too and the surface of the paper is not damaged in this action. The function of the paper in this work is not one of a fragile blank or neutral. It is however I would argue still existing within a secondary status, secondary to the overpowering content of the historical and cultural connotations of that which is initially drawn on to it and the subsequent interventions to that surface. The Chapman’s were, needless to say, condemned in some corners of the press for this works on the grounds of them constituting acts of vandalism. In response they cited Robert Rauschenberg’s work Erased de Kooning drawing.

SHOW SLIDE 12 ERASED DE KOONING

Similarly in Robert Rauschenberg’s Erased de Kooning (1953) we can see the physical rubbing out of a drawing on paper given to Rauschenberg by the Abstract Expressionist painter William de Kooning. It is worth considering this particular work as providing a
fulcrum around which some issues around drawing and the role of paper can be deduced as arguably Rauschenberg’s drawing still can be seen to encapsulate many ideas and contradictions that we think of in drawing now -

It presents issues of time and labor – (seemingly 1 month of manual work and 40 erasers used by RR to erase the original drawing – however we don’t know how long it took de Kooning,)

It prompts reflections on authorship and collaboration, the work chosen was supposedly de Kooning’s choice – most difficult because of crayon mark – plus artist Jasper Johns involvement in the text and presentation,

The piece is physically small approx. 64cm x 44 yet it can be seen as a grand gesture

It is both iconic and iconoclastic, (As argued by Vincent Katz in Tate Etc article on Erasure “Erased de Kooning Drawing is iconic because it stands for an era when something seemingly negative could, in fact, turn out to have positive repercussions.”

It is both a tribute to what has gone before and a repudiation – it is a drawing history that is both added to and erased. When Rauschenberg himself was asked in an interview what he felt the work was an act of – he simply said “Poetry”, not, it should be noted a position quoted by the Chapman Brothers.

As Brian Dillon observes in his article Revelation of Erasure (2006) when discussing RR’s palimpsestic “additive subtraction” he states that

“there is always some detritus strewn about in the aftermath, some bruising to the surface from which word or image has
been removed, some reminder of the violence done to make the world look new again. Whether rubbed away, crossed out or re-inscribed, the rejected entity has a habit of returning”.

Dillon’s observation succinctly describes the central action of this work. The returning of the work from an artwork to something approaching a renewed blank sheet of paper is ontologically impossible. In a sense it reflects the problematic principle of reversibility in the field of conservation/restoration as Salvador Munoz Vinas notes:

The laws of physics demonstrate that it is absolutely impossible for an object to ever be taken back to a preceding state (Seeley, 1999),

In this case what remains is the disturbed surface of the paper and the insistence of de Kooning’s original image to be removed. The repetitive action of removal has created a tracing of two actions, the tracing of the act of removal itself and the traces of the original drawing. Each going towards creating a reverse palimpsest – one that is only barely visible. What remains is defiantly not blank it is perhaps similar in tone to what Barthes suggests for Twombly’s surface, that it possesses ‘a very faint buzzing of the surface’. Rauschenberg’s piece is a set of inscribed marks embedded in the surface of the paper that marks something that had taken place. A posterior event and not perhaps the sense of a visible present unfolding as per Bryson but an aftermath of an act that has gone before; a negative presence.

This resistance and insistence of the mark to remain embedded in the surface of the paper is something that I have observed in my own drawing practice.
SHOW SLIDE 13 OWN WORK (1)

I recently completed this drawing, which I have been working on for a number of months. The aim of this work was to create 1:1 scale drawing of Vermeer’s *The Love Letter* and to divide it into 5 temporal stages and conservation processes used in the restoration of this stolen and damaged painting. Starting with the early painting, depicted here, before craquelere patination, through to the drawing with the patinated layer inscribed onto the surface, to the damaged canvas with surface paint loss, depicted here on the original painting, to this being erased in the drawing.
SHOW SLIDE 14 OWN WORK (2)

What emerged from this process of erasure was not the full removal of the areas of my drawing that equated with the areas of the painting where full paint loss occurred, but a residual image, that resembled an infrared image of an underdrawing. Tonally muted but insistent in its lingering and quiet presence.

The paper acted as a form of material repository for the drawing work that had taken place on it over months of applying tone to its surface and had implications for the appearance of the work and the re-calibration of some of my earlier intentions. A decision had to be made as to when to stop the erasing without compromising the surface of the paper – as I was aware that each one of these areas was an area that would be re-drawn.
When working over the previously drawn areas that have craquelure the re-drawn tonal work picks up on and gathers in the incised marks from the crack line. In a sense it suggests that it might already have been there. (a rubbing becoming a line through a tonal area) This has the opposite effect to what happens in the restoration of the painting. In the painting the lost paint surfaces where the craquelure were are completely gone so an entire new surface is created, without any patina. However in the drawing the ‘scarring’ or ‘scoring’ on the paper surface where the original cracked surface from the erased areas remains and when re-drawn become pronounced with the cracks (as the line in relief is white against a dark tonal background). A different temporal reading is now suggested between
the drawing and the restored surface, chiefly through the resilience of the papers surface.

SHOW LAST SLIDE 16 OWN WORK (4)

In conclusion Benjamin’s blank background and Bryson’s non-erasure in their way are problematic for models of drawing that works over a pre-existing activated surface, or one with another artwork or a substitutional form for an artwork. If we take Benjamin’s dictum for drawing that relationship of the graphic line to the background at face value then

“The graphic line marks out the area and so defines it by attaching itself to it as its background. Conversely, the graphic line can exist only against this background, so that a drawing that completely covered its background would cease to be a drawing.”
Much of the work discussed here would then tautologically not be drawings. Similarly for Bryson the principle of non-erasure ‘*whatever the marks were made, those are the marks we see*’ present issues when it comes to work that works over or with a pre-existing image either produced by the same artist or another. However in response to these two position are the range of intentions and the use of the background that creates a form of dialogue this is derived from the intention in the work. It is here that Barthes description of the role of the wall in graffiti that can be used as a response

> it is because the background exists fully, as an object which has already lived, … it is insofar as the background is not clean that it is unsuitable to thought (contrary to the philosopher's blank sheet of paper) and therefore very suitable to everything