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## Temporalities and the Drawn Response to the Conservation and Restoration of Paintings

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## *Temporalities and the drawn response to the conservation and restoration of paintings.* Brian Fay

This paper will consider how the stages of a conservation act can provide further temporal readings for drawing using two paintings by Johannes Vermeer *The Girl with the Red Hat* (c.1665-67) and *The Love Letter* (c. 1667-1670). It will discuss this while considering three propositions; George Didi-Huberman's observation on the role of the detail in painting, Norman Bryson's model of becoming in drawing as it relates to the liminal state of an artwork while being conserved, and suggest scope for questioning Walter Benjamin's definition for drawing with its implication for a drawn response to a painting. For brevity, while acknowledging their different functions and activities this paper will use conservation to stand for both conservation and restoration acts.

### SHOW SLIDE TWO

Before these three areas are discussed it is perhaps important to ask the question— Why Vermeer as a source for a temporally focused body of drawings? **Briefly stated there are three reasons – Vermeer and Conservation responses, Vermeer's relationship to Drawing and the rhetoric of time in his work.**

Firstly, in terms of Conservation, due to the status and value placed on each work almost all are housed in major Museums and large collections. Their 'trophy like' status and potential for economic benefit to their respective institutes has resulted in the commissioning of major conservation projects with extensive scholarly and technical material published. Examples include the *Woman in Blue Reading a letter* (Rijksmuseum Technical Bulletin 2011/12) and *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (*Vermeer Illuminated* - Maurishaus 1994/95). This high level of value and status led to many paintings undergoing a range of conservation processes due to deliberate and non-deliberate acts of change. Whereby deliberate is understood as for example, stolen (*A lady writing a letter* - twice) or slashed (*The Love Letter*), and non-deliberate as unintentional patina, damage through poor restoration or environmental conditions and decay prompting a variety of well documented conservation treatments and technical investigation.

Secondly, Vermeer's practice is thought to have used very little drawing, if at all. Conservator Karin Groen (2007) points out that

“..... no drawings on paper by Vermeer exist and it is not clear whether they ever existed. No punch marks or black dots, evidence of transfer of a drawing from paper to canvas, were detected in his paintings.”

A large amount of Vermeer scholarship focuses on image construction stemming from the well known suggestion that he used optics. This has resulted in much technical analysis and data revealing his limited use of underdrawing. Vermeer scholar Robert Wald reiterates this point in his essay *The Art of Painting. Observations on Approach and Technique* (2010) stating that

*‘To date, very few indications of underdrawing(s) have been detected in the works of Vermeer.’*

He qualifies this with rare exceptions from technical analysis conducted by Groen (1998) that “*some particles [were] found in cross sections*” and Melanie Gifford (1998) that “*some are evident from ‘glimpses .... afforded within the open contours of some of Vermeer’s works.*”

Thirdly, when considering the paintings content there is a consistent rhetoric of timelessness of and in his imagery. For example frequent phrases refer to *an arresting of time* (Claudel, 1964), that his work *freezes a moment* (Westermann, 2003), that it provides; *the captured moment* (National Gallery of Art Washington on their Vermeer collection), and that “*Vermeer’s painting offers itself to vision as a “stilling of time,”*” (Didi Huberman, 2005) and not least the 11 separate mentions of Vermeer’s paintings in Moncrief’s translation of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*.

Underpinning these 3 points is that in using specific art historical works one can initially structure a temporal framework that provides a fixed historical point (the moment/era of the paintings construction), its attendant histories and discourses (subsequent to its creation) and the potential for an engagement in the present. In her PhD dissertation *Vermeer in Dialogue: From Appropriation to Response* (Marguerite Anne Glass, 2003) suggests that

*“the act of appropriating the art of Vermeer is itself a form of engagement that, though acted out in the present, offers a pathway back to the past..... [it] is a form of dialogue, a discourse, an active connection with the past in the present, and a process and response shared by artists across time.”*

I would contend that the models of temporality can be more complex than suggested here, however the overall dialogical proposition stands.

**SHOW SLIDE THREE**

In returning to the use of the two paintings it is necessary to distinguish the method of both drawings construction in relation to specific conservation acts as they provide distinct temporal stages. The first piece *Girl with a Red Hat* uses secondary imagery generated through technical conservation analysis. In this case a composite of Infra red plates revealing a work beneath the finished painted surface that was not by Vermeer simultaneously with the finished image. The second *The Love Letter* uses an act of vandalism and the paintings subsequent conservation process to provide a method that informs the temporal stages of the drawings production.

### SHOW SLIDE FOUR

Painted on a vertical grained oak panel and one of Vermeer's smallest works *The Girl with the Red Hat* has, as published conservation notes state, remained in relatively good condition. There is evidence of retouches to the mouth and some minor treatments were documented in 1933 and 1942. Of interest here is the previously mentioned under-painting revealed by Infra Red documentation. The painting beneath the surface depicts the head and shoulders of a man with a large hat, wearing a sweeping scarf across his shoulders, not Vermeer's work (Gifford). So what is being drawn is not the surface of the painting itself but the photographic documentation of the overall piece, including wood, underlayers, early and finished layers. Each element has a different temporal stage and operation in the painting yet when it is sequentially photographed, composed and assembled they each contain an equal value, values we can not see from the viewing of the painting itself.

The drawing process then seeks to echo the conservation documentation sequence by drawing each of the smaller plates one at a time. The drawing is therefore made up of 15 separate drawings drawn simultaneously, to form a single image yet still acknowledging the separate plates. A contradiction is intended by the chronological sequence of the work being echoed in the drawings construction which is at odds to the a-temporal presentation of the infrared image. This distinction seeks to consider Didi Huberman's question of "*what does it actually mean to have a detailed knowledge of a painting?*" (2008 *The Art of Not Describing*) Huberman draws a distinction between the role of the detail and the fragment. He emphasizes the contradiction of understanding the whole by cutting up our viewing of an image. The detail he contends is this cutting up of the overall picture yet it *imposes presence* of the full work as opposed to a fragment which suggest the *absence* of the image. The infra-red arguably provides a dual operation – the cutting up of

the surface (15 plates) gridlike imposing the overall presence of the material and image yet the finished image/surface is absent.

### SHOW SLIDE FIVE AND SIX

A doubled temporal reading to the work is literally presented by the attempt to exactly repeat a drawing from the same image and have the capacity to arrange them either chronologically or non chronological. The intention here being to propose that the act of conservation is itself a form on non-chronological action on a painting.

Perhaps what links both of these pieces in Norman Bryson's temporal classification as drawing as becoming as opposed to paintings form of being.

Bryson in his 2003 text "*A Walk for a Walk's Sake*" writes that drawing

*"...always exists in the present tense, in the time of unfolding...Painting, relatively speaking, exists in the tense of the **completed past**: We know the image only in its final arrested state, not in the ongoing present of its coming into form. If painting presents Being, the [drawing] presents Becoming. Line gives you the image together with the whole history of its becoming-image ... Line can no more escape the present tense of its entry into the world than it can escape into oil paint's secret hiding places of erasure and concealment."*

In *The Girl with the Red Hat* infra-red what is presented is a clear chronological format a preliminary to a late stage frozen in a liminal status – with everything presented at once, everything claiming an equal value even if our knowledge of the finished piece seeks to override this. A double action Becoming and become. An aim of the drawn response is to register this temporal action and extend it through a temporal ontology of drawing as proposed by Bryson.

### SHOW SLIDE SEVEN

In the case of *The Love Letter* What then for a drawing work that attempts to reveal a paintings 'erasures and concealments'? perhaps similar in intent to investigative analysis and restoration treatments of a painting. When the source of that image is a 'closed' painted surface that leads to a closed surface of an all over 'finished' drawing then surely that open definition of drawing could collapse. Where finished means both technical resolution and an end point. Yet Bryson opens up space for this by proposing that

*‘ However definitive, perfect, unalterable the drawn line may be, each of its lines - even the last one that was drawn – is permanently open to the present of a time that is always unfolding.’*

As the drawing is based on an existing artwork, what are the implications for the line that retraces a preexisting mark? is it becoming a version of something already there or is it also becoming itself – both a thing signified and signifying?

Similar to the task of the restorer the marks that are to be made are in a sense pre-determined, decided apriori. The line and tone must echo and or directly describe the marks from something that is already pre-existing. Arguably their becoming has a fixed point of destination. It either responds accurately to the original mark; it must describe or it does not – there is a predetermined external criteria to consider the relative success’ or failures of the work. Its becoming with its mimetic endpoint could be argued to have already become. Yet perhaps this overstates the case. Drawings attendant history carries its own set of procedures and protocols. The becoming model is embedded in the operations of drawing. Work based from a painting could be seen as a sub-set, or smaller classification within an overall trajectory of drawing and therefore within an overarching narrative of drawing, becoming. The source material differs from representational work drawn from nature. While not static, the artwork however maintains a stillness, a fixed sense of structures and outcomes already decided by someone else’s hand, both original producer and subsequent restorers.

#### SHOW SLIDE 8

Unfortunately for *The Love Letter* many hands were involved in forming its condition. The painting was severely damaged in a botched theft attempt in 1971 its was removed from its frame, cut down from its stretcher and then rather ignobly ended up down the trousers of the would be art thief. Recovered two weeks later the painting was in very poor condition and a major restoration work was commissioned by the Rijksmuseum.

An International advisory restoration committee was established and a 3 stage restoration process was agreed. To consolidate the painting layer  $\frac{3}{4}$  of which was loose, to reconstruct and reline the painting and finally to repaint the paint layer as ‘invisibly’ as possible.

#### SHOW SLIDE NINE

The drawing response in this case was informed by these stages and developed their own implications.

Stages for the drawn response -*The Love Letter*

1) 1:1 Drawing of the original painting – using a range of pencils and image sources from different publication dates. Then photographed.

**(This origin is anachronic in that there is no single source that definitively represents the problematic ‘true state’ of the painting. Sources do include reproductions from before 1971. – Curiously a 1967 Italian publication which was also cited in Didi-Hubermans image references)**

2) Drawing of the craquelure patterning to be mapped over the drawing. Then photographed.

**(to provide an entropic system and reading to the drawing from the original painting )**

3) Erasure of all the damaged areas of the painting from the drawing. Then photographed.

**(to re-enact the damage to the original painting)**

4) Redrawing the damaged areas of the painting back in to the drawing – upside down. Then photographed.

5) Presentation of the drawing with 4 x 1.1 reproductions of the 4 previous stages

**(this format was mentioned in a conference panel discussion at Conservation Dilemmas 2010 where a speaker described a conservation solution and convention whereby a drawing or etching of a particular painting in its ‘original’ condition was exhibited with the conserved version)**

### SHOW SLIDE TEN

Certain parts of its production also contend with processes during a conservation treatment such as the sourcing of multiple images for correct tonal information.

This drawing process will become to some extent a mirrored embodiment of a particular history of the painting: from original artist – vandal – other conservators. The early line drawing itself denotes a temporal duality marking what is a trace of the history of what has gone before and the demarcation for tonal and erasure work to come.

### SHOW SLIDE ELEVEN

Drawing must remain unfixed so it can be erased, therefore only details can be seen at any one time.

Working on the drawing vertically similar to small easel painting conservation act where the work remains on the easel.

There are areas in the painting where pentimenti and transparency of pigment has occurred. The choice of what value to ascribe to these areas has temporal implications.

### **SHOW SLIDE TWELVE**

Due to the heavy build up of tonal areas – the act of the hand going over the drawing rubs away some of the tone. So masking off or areas is needed. This then affects the tonal work you can see in the overall picture as areas have to be masked off to protect the existing tonal work.

Use of enlarged prints is important for the generation of accurate descriptions of key elements in the painting. Similar to conservation methods for infilling or repainting and to Didi-Huberman's discussion of the detail and its functions in painting.

### **SHOW SLIDE THIRTEEN – FINISHED TONAL WORK**

The production of the 1:1 drawing reads as a creation of the copy which suggests a previous role of drawing as a way of disseminating the original, through portfolios or prints. Perhaps this form of work is more akin to the preservation of film, where the first act that takes place is the creation of a copy. It is then this copy that is worked with. However, and aware of a sliding scale of value, what is being created in the drawing is intended to also be an artwork. Not as valuable and therefore valued (or fetishised) as the original but none the less a one off fragile artwork with to a lesser degree needing a sense of care and protective protocols that need to be observed.

### **SHOW SLIDE FOURTEEN – CRACKED LAYER**

There is also a desire to distinguish this form of drawing from an autographic model –where an attempt is being made similar to that of a restorers to be implicated but absent from the painting.

### **LAST SLIDE**

In concluding this process has to date, led to a consideration of Benjamin's (1917) distinction between drawing and painting. For him

*“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.”*

*On Painting or Signs and Marks' 1917.*

When the drawings intention is to describe a painting in an all over – edge to edge manner and the background support in the painting is not revealed (although the paper is still there as a form of border outside of the drawn image) does this, in Benjamin's terms, still remain a drawing? Ontologically it does. If the intention is to place it within the context of drawing then arguably de facto it is a drawing. The materials used are those associated with drawing, the original painting is translated into tonal dry material from a set of chromatic/tonal wet materials onto a paper support. While acknowledging the Metaphysical implications that he wished to subscribe to the role of the background; the relationship with a background is intrinsically different to that where the support is revealed.

END

While this second drawing and others are still in progress, I am conscious that the temporal and material dualities in drawing as applied to conservation processes still has much to be explored.

As Alain Badiou observed that *‘A true Drawing is not a copy of something. It is a constructive deconstruction of something ....’*

there is perhaps (hopefully) there are grounds for drawing a constructive reconstruction of something.