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## Casting a Net: Contemporary Drawing Practices and Strategies

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## **Casting a Net: Contemporary Drawing Practices and Strategies**

There can be a tendency to consider contemporary drawing (or indeed drawing) as one activity with inherent features true to all its manifestations. Now at a time when drawing could be said to be ubiquitous it is rewarding to recognise a new openness for the myriad of practices that co-exist and given the level of activity, flourish.

Identify one area in drawing carries with it the omission, possibility and absence of all the others. I am reminded of a recent interview with the scientist and leader of the human genome project Francis Collins. Collins referred to the physicist Arthur Eddington's story of the man who when he set out to determine all the creatures living at the bottom of the sea he mainly used a net with a 3-inch mesh to trawl the seabed. He scooped up all the creatures he could obtain and gave a seminar on his findings. He came to one main conclusion; that there are no creatures at the bottom of the sea smaller than 3 inches. So when thinking about or discussing contemporary drawing practices we might be tempted to choose one net and then arrive at conclusions that have already been gathered. What I wish to discuss is the potential of and for drawing in a contemporary context looking at specific art practices that realise a balance between concept and pictorial form – and hope I have got the right net.

To say that drawing is resurgent is a tautology as evidenced by so many recent national and international shows including *The Square Root of Drawing- A Survey Show* at Temple Bar Galleries, *The Secret Theory of Drawing* at The Drawing Room, *Getting on Mother's Nerves* at Mothers

Tank Station, *Drawing is a Verb – Drawing is a Noun* at The Stone Gallery, *3 x Abstraction: New Methods in Drawing* in collaboration with Drawing Center, Kettles Yard's *Lines of Enquiry: thinking through drawing*.

Heavyweights like MOMA held the three part exhibition and book series *Drawing from the Modern*, reinterpreted their own drawing collection in the *Transforming Chronologies: An Atlas of Drawings* exhibition series and supported *Drawing Now Eight Propositions* curated by Laura Hoptman. Institutions championing and supporting the role of drawing include The Centre for Recent Drawing, The Drawing Room, The Drawing Center and The Big Draw. High production drawing survey books have been published like Phaidon's *Vitamin D*, Black Dog Press's *The Drawing Book : A survey of drawing: the primary means of expression* and *Drawing Texts* and John Berger's *On Drawing*, both published by Occasional Press. BBC devoted a 4 part television series to drawing *The Secret of Drawing* and we even now have an Irish National Drawing Day. This is just a small representative selection and by no means an authoritative overview of some of the activities related to drawing that have taken place in the last few years.

And so why drawing and why now ?

There are of course pragmatic reasons for drawing becoming more prolific. As highlighted in biennials, art fairs and exhibitions – drawing is most collectable. It generally costs less to make than a technical installation. A Drawing tends to be small scale, easy to transport and insure. Drawing carries with it notions of truth, authenticity, sensitivity, direct creative expression – all very market friendly.

A drawing can shed intimate light on an artist's practice. It could be said to be where art starts from. Indeed, if we are to believe the often-quoted story

of Pliny that drawing was the first artform, realised when the daughter of a potter traced the shadow of her lover on to the wall as he slept before his leaving for war, then in art terms, drawing has the longest history.

Fortunately, it could be said, drawing was not attributed with the weighted history and legacy given to painting, since it, was never declared dead. Drawing continued and still does. It is cross-disciplinary. Historically it was shared across sculpture, painting and printmaking. In our own time it has been utilized by new art practices. Generally it occupies the provisional realm, the cartoon, the preliminary stages of a major piece, the secret working out, the practice and display of skill, the bi-product of a thought process –objective or subjective – abstract or representational, small or large scale. Michael Craig Martin asserts that drawing has “ *a modesty of means, rawness, fragmentation, discontinuity, unfinishedness, and open-endedness.*”<sup>1</sup> Emma Dexter in her introduction to *Vitamin D* highlights two main areas for drawing to exist today

*“First is the conceptual, theoretical discourse of drawing .... then there is the other, elaborately cultured aspect of drawing, not based upon a theoretical or philosophical understanding of what drawing is per se, but on the areas of human experience that drawing has come to be associated with ... immediacy... memory... narrative....  
Drawing is a feeling”*<sup>2</sup>

Dexter’s analysis highlights the position for and legacy of drawing in a post minimalist, post conceptual landscape. Her analysis allows for space and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Craig Martin, *Drawing the Line, Reappraising drawing past and present*, London: The South Bank Centre, 1995, pp. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Dexter, Emma, *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing*, London, Phaidon, 2005 pp. 6-7.

dialogue between the conceptual and serial process, as exemplified in the work and writings of Mel Bochner's "*Drawing is a verb*"<sup>3</sup> to the position argued by Laura Hoptman for the return of the pictorial. In her essay "*Drawing is a noun*"<sup>4</sup>, knowingly referencing Bochner, Hoptman places an emphasis back on the subjective, identity issues, the construction of the pictorial and the return of Romanticism as separate to a specific conceptual method. Each in effect now offers an open field to a form, drawing, that is accepted as open ended.

Could it be, perhaps, that it is this idea of open-endedness that has allowed drawing to emerge with such strength of activity? For artists working in this environment there is an awareness of both the conceptual framework, the critical discourse and the quality of image or picture to be produced. In his article "*Contemporary Developments in Drawing*" Mathew Biro in his discussion of artists Lance Winn, Japeth Mennes, Claire Brassil and Shiva Ahmadi reiterates the position that

*"... the contemporary preoccupation with drawing has given new energy to both conceptualism and identity politics. By working in a graphic medium – albeit one that is constantly being expanded to incorporate painting, sculpture and installation - ...artists demonstrate the possibilities of drawing in the current moment."*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bochner, Mel "*Anyone can learn to draw*" American Drawings exhibition catalogue Galerie Heiner Friederich, Munchen 1969. Bochner also organised the seminal 1966 exhibition "*Working Drawings and other visible things on paper not necessarily meant to be viewed as art*" which positioned drawing as central to conceptual art practice.

<sup>4</sup> Hoptman, Laura "*Drawing is a Noun*" in *Drawing Now Eight Propositions*, Museum of Modern Art, NY 2002 pp 11 – 15.

<sup>5</sup> Biro, Mathew "*Contemporary Developments in Drawing*" *Contemporary* 21 Issue 83, London 2006 pp 20 –23.

The possibilities of this ‘current moment’ allow for both an historical examination of the production of drawing and future production in the light of current technologies.

John Beattie outlines that his practice “ *explores and observes the drawing and painting process in various contexts such as the studio space, the gallery space and the public space. I employ video, photography and other forms of information such as drawing.*” This interdisciplinary examination of the painting/drawing process has resonances with other artists’ work that have placed drawing as a central element to their practice. In a recent conversation with Beattie, focusing on his piece in *The Artists Studio Series* using the motif of the studio as a box on the artist’s head with a small video monitor projecting his attempt of drawing a tree using an elongated drawing tool while standing in the garden, Beattie explains that he is exploring issues of programmed chance, control and the function of the artists hand. The concerns and methodology of this work bring to mind that of English artist Knowles creates drawings independent of his own hand, using elaborate apparatus and time consuming practices. In a recent presentation of his work he outlined the centrality of

“ *... Chance and Process ... to my artistic practice. Akin to scientific experimentation and investigation, the results of my projects [although operating within carefully developed controls and parameters] are unpredictable and outside my control.*”<sup>6</sup>

Knowles has developed strategies such as attaching 100 pens to the tips of the branches of a weeping willow tree recording the action of the wind,

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<sup>6</sup> *Drawing Now? Examining Issues in Contemporary Drawing Practices* Speakers were Catherine de Zegher and Tim Knowles, Dublin, 25th November, 2006. Drawing Lab at the Dublin Institute of Technology in association with Temple Bar Gallery and Studios

placing a drawing machine in a racing car and driving it around Brands Hatch racing track and instigating Postal Projects drawings that spend days travelling through the post and are a visual record of their own journey. He stated the importance of the viewer's understanding of the process of the various drawings production. Frequently his work is presented in an installation using multiple means; video, photography, residue of particular materials shown together as one to convey the method used to produce the drawing. This sensibility of showing the stages of how a work is made is shared with Beattie. Beattie in a presentation on his work quoted Sol Le Witt who said that

*“... If the artist carries through his idea and makes it into visible form, then all the steps in the process are of importance. The idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product. All intervening steps, scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed work, models, studies, thoughts, conversations are of interest.”*

Similar again to the distancing of the artist's hand from the construction of the artwork and referencing preceding conceptual processes is the work of Japeth Mennes. Mennes employs multiple small elementary battery-powered drawing machines called 'motorheads' that repeatedly create circular scribbled patterns on a drawing surface to establish a framework for programmed chance. While no doubt aware of the potential outcomes dictated by the amount of 'motorheads', the distance between them, the choice of ink in the pens, the longevity of the batteries and the reach of the circumferences Mennes' drawings display a frail, intimate, sensitive mark system, the virtues usually attributed to the individual's hand rather than the impersonal, multiple mechanistic process he employs in his art. No

discussion on parameters or restraint, either physically or conceptually could be complete without mention of Mathew Barney's ongoing *Drawing Restraint* series. Informed by his experience as a wrestler and as an American football player, Barney developed the concept from physical training: resistance it seems must be encountered to gain muscle growth. He has transferred this ethos into his art practice. Since 1987 Barney has created scenarios that make the act of drawing physically difficult to achieve. In early versions of the series he attempted to draw on the floors, walls and ceilings of a studio while constrained by elastic straps to furniture, the other side of the room or in one case to a piano. Frequently this activity was carried out alone and documented on video. However, in more recent versions the production has become more elaborate and cinematic while remaining loyal to the basic principle of a self-imposed resistance. Activities in the earlier parts of this series, like Beattie's work, look at the notion of the artist in the studio, the activities that are played out there, the need and role of the viewer and the line between the supposedly heroic artistic struggle and the possibility for the absurd.

In conclusion and returning to Francis Collins' scientific net; it might be that there is no clearly defined major narrative for drawing as was considered to have existed in the past. Rather the saving element of drawing now is its reflective and reflexive open-ness, its quickness to respond, its sheer diversity of its expression and materials, the non-verifiability of the range of evolving drawing activities that are taking place. Perhaps, with drawing, there are creatures at the bottom of the sea smaller than 3 inches, still waiting to be discovered.



Brian Fay

**Brian Fay** is an artist and lecturer in Fine Art at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). His most recent solo exhibitions are *Some Time Now* (The LAB, Mermaid Arts Centre and Solstice Arts Centre 2007) and *Web* (Butler Gallery 2005). His work has been added to New York's White Columns Artist Registry and Pierogi's *Artist Flat Files*. Drawings by Fay will feature in the forthcoming book '*Drawing Now: Between the Lines of Contemporary Art*' published by Tracey / I.B. Tauris (2007). He recently co-curated the drawing show "*Pleasures and Days*" at The LAB (2007). He has been invited to curate *Milestones*, the Black Church Print Studios 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary show later this year. He is the co-founder of the research initiative *Drawing Lab* at DIT and Board Member of Visual Artists Ireland.