

## MARYANNE COUTTS

Currently Head of Drawing at the National Art School in Sydney, Maryanne's drawing practices range from explorations of the contemporary potential of watercolour to animation and daily drawing projects. Her work consistently explores relationships between drawing and time. She exhibits commercially with Australian Galleries and shows her experimental drawing projects in ARIs, public Galleries and on her blog at [mcdrawingprojects.wordpress.com](http://mcdrawingprojects.wordpress.com).

## DRESS AND DEATH: METAPHORS FOR DAILY DRAWING

The impact of major 'real-life' events such as death, birth and wearing the right outfit are extreme intrusions into the art making process. In the context of my own episodic or on-going drawing projects, I am concerned with ways that drawing entwines lived experience with the things we make. In this paper, literature and video installations, journals and blogs shed light on the ways that drawing does this.

## Cliff Hangers: the end

Mrs. Tope's care has spread a very neat, clean breakfast ready for her lodger. Before sitting down to it, he opens his corner-cupboard door; takes his bit of chalk from its shelf; adds one thick line to the score, extending from the top of the cupboard door to the bottom; and then falls to with an appetite (Dickens 1961, 211-213).

With Mrs. Tope's table spread like a clean piece of paper, her Lodger draws his mark in his corner-cupboard. In this private space he very deliberately adds to an already established system of incised marks. We feel that he is adding to previous lines, preparing the rhythm of future lines that are secreted in the cupboard like those searches we make in sketchbooks and journals. We wait in unrewarded anticipation for his drawing to be revealed.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, our curiosity is never satisfied. This is the last paragraph Dickens wrote of an intriguing drama, which was unfolding in the public arena. Unfortunately, due to the author's demise, the world will never know what had happened to Edwin Drood, or what the cupboard drawing meant.

Likewise, Nikolai Bukharin's autobiographic novel *How it all Began* (Bukharin 1998) was written while he was imprisoned by Stalin. Its abrupt end, as the narration reaches the author's teen years, is caused by the writer's execution. This work has the added potency of describing actual events. Where Dickens left off in the middle of a fictitious murder mystery, the involuntary end of Bukharin's text due to his own murder, brings us spine chillingly close to an actual life.

---

<sup>1</sup> A complete facsimile of Dickens' manuscript can be viewed at the V&A website <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/c/charles-dickens-edwin-drood/>

In the future Christian Boltansky's work *The Life of C.B.* will also be framed by the artist's death. The work involves streaming live footage of his Paris studio to Tasmanian MONA twenty-four hours a day for the rest of his life. As viewers, we are inside the artwork as it is made. We don't know how long it will last, how big it will be. As the artist is being paid a fee for this work for the rest of his life, he quips that 'if I die in 3 years he wins. If I die in 10, he loses' (Glaetzer 2002).<sup>2</sup> Death, in these situations, is an intrusion of 'life' into art. It defies any artifice. The 'real' world penetrates into the place of 'art', defying perceptions that 'works of art' are formed and contained in a constructed space that is separate from the actual.

When I saw Boltanski's work, there was very little movement in the Paris studio as the mundane footage was beamed into a shed beside the exquisite Derwent River. The work documents actual studio life. It makes a grand gesture of moments that can be overlooked, highlighting the ordinary practice and 'real' place of making that is often embodied in drawing. In a far more deliberate way than the above-mentioned deaths, it brings the accidental and ordinary events of the artist's life into the public arena.

## Every Day, Every Week

Shoe-maker Ab Solomons made a drawing for his wife on his pay-packet every week from 1926 until she died in 1982. The ritual of this repetitive activity has survived in a shoe box until his nephew Danny Braverman used it as the basis for a performance work entitled *Wot? No Fish?* (Taylor, 2014). The repetitive process, which produced 3,000 drawings, appears to have been performed as a ritual for an audience of one, the shoe-maker's wife.

---

<sup>2</sup>Arguably, if art is being measured by scale or duration rather than money, Walsh might see it as being the other way around.

Each image was finished during the week in which it was made. All of them take us back to that time and the concurrent intimate events of the relationship. Likewise, On Kawara's project *Today*, has involved him in painting the date in a consistent format over the years between 1966 and 2014. While he didn't produce a work for every day, he always started and finished the painting on the date that it represented. René Denizot writes that 'Day after day, these works exhibit a consciousness of the present on the threshold of the appearance and disappearance of dated time.' (Watkins, 2002. 115).

## Public book, private face

Solomons' and On Kawara's works both emerge from a diaristic ritual, with even the latter embedding some personal information (his geographical position) into the fact of the date. Each has an idiosyncratic form, but by far the most common site of this habitual, ritual or practical documenting of the days, is a book. According to Jennifer New, 'They hold life in them' (New, 2005. 8).

Frida Kahlo's diary, so different in its vibrant, layered and expressive visual language to the refined nature of her paintings, certainly 'holds life'. The way that ink bleeds through from one page to another and text overlays exuberant and frightening imagery suggests the privacy of a journal that is made for the sake of its own process rather than as an 'artwork', and yet a facsimile of Kahlo's visual journal is now on many bookshelves (Kahlo, 1995).

The quality of drawing in this book is visually captivating. In the energy of interaction between text and image and as evidence of an intense presence to thought, imagination and feeling, this is a time / emotion capsule. Like ancient insects set in amber, it embeds feelings that have long since passed.

On the last page, Kahlo drew a green winged creature. Sarah M. Lowe suggests that this is the 'death that she mocked but also feared, the end she longed for but fought valiantly against'. Indeed, her commentary on the diary observes how rare it is for artists to have 'the audacity to picture their own departure from this world' (Kahlo 1995. 287).

Lowe notes that 'A number of sheets between plates 144 and 145 have been torn from the diary' (Kahlo 1995. 278). The numbering here is the editor's and Kahlo herself rarely dated the pages (Kahlo 1995. 232) so in opposition to On Kawara's strategy, the marking of time emerges from lived events rather than the cultural constructs of dates, times or even pay packets.

The sequence of a book, its additions and removals, its text or its blanks can open little windows into lived time, that is specific to books. Books that have been drawn sequentially let us move through their sequence in any direction, speed or order. Blogs and Instagram, on the other hand, are biased to the recent, with fresh posts always viewed first and the start of a project buried at the bottom of a page. The polish of the web denies access to the edits, or changes of mind. We do not see the blank pages yet to be filled at the back of a book in progress. Yet, blogs are full of ordinary, daily deeds (Figure 1).

Helen Grace posted a photograph a day on Facebook for a year. These images were taken by a camera, which was - more or less - hidden on her clothing as she went about her daily life. The work not only uses social media to make a beautiful work about apparently ordinary life, but specifically highlights the threats and dangers of surveillance, which many people in the world live with. As such, her work plays with a significant irony of social media. On the one hand many of us have the impulse to share the mundane aspects of our lives and on the other, the machines of the Internet swallow up our information into vast capitalist vats of potential sales or political ideologies (Figure 2).



Figure 1 Helen Gace, Day 192, Digital Photograph 2014.

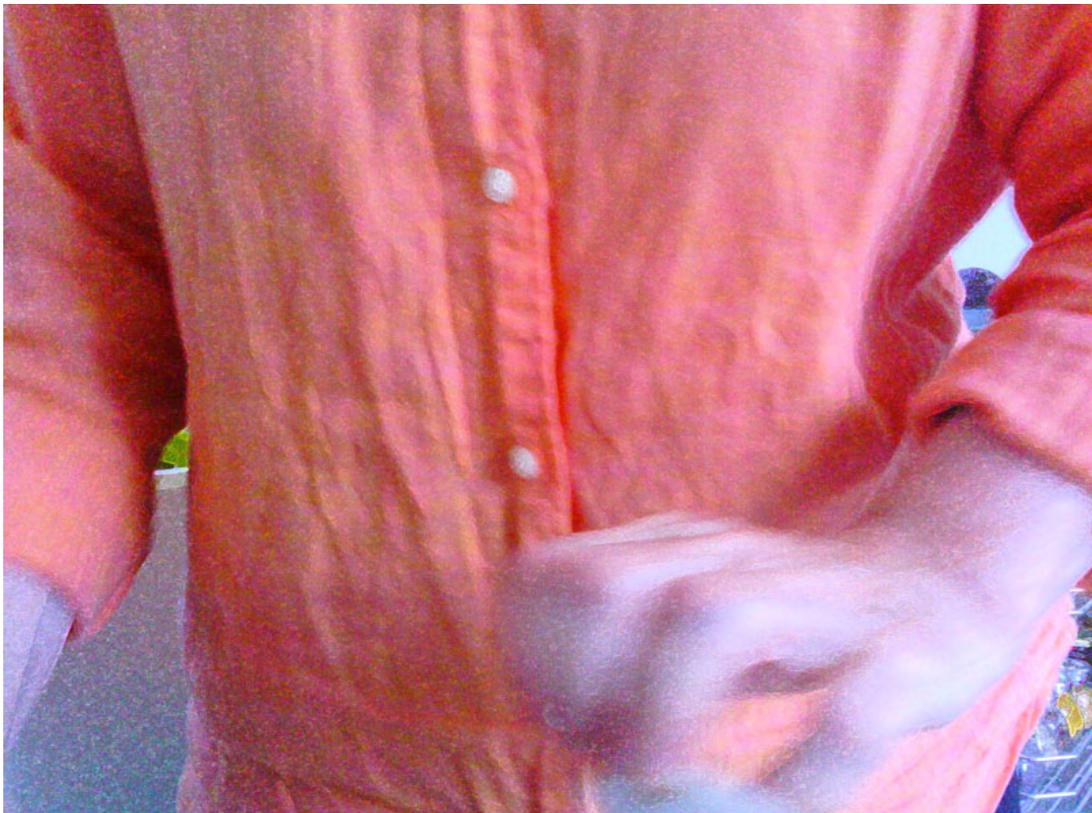


Figure 2 Helen Gace, Day 198, Digital Photograph 2014.

Barbara Campbell's, now complete Web and performance based work, *1001 nights cast* also exists on line, but in a much more controlled context.

For a thousand and one days she invited a writer to produce a story based on her daily ritual of extracting and drawing a phrase from news stories of the Middle East. Campbell then webcast her reading of the stories at sunset of the day in question. She writes that 'the stories, as spoken, could only be witnessed in real time, but in text form, they remain on the website as ghosts of their one-time voicing' (Campbell). This highlights that interesting tension between the trace or ghost, of making and 'real time' art. Here, what remains of the performance has been crafted into a form that continues to be accessible and intriguing (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Barbara Campbell, "carefully crafted image", writing prompt for performance #11 of *1001 nights cast*, watercolour on paper, 8 x 10.5 cm, 01 July 2005.

I find these remains of the thousand and one performances that sit now in cyberspace tantalizing in the way that they connect to a unique moment in the past. This work was made by Campbell as a way of emerging from her husband's death, and as such it bears witness to the continuation of life as her work endures beyond its performance, giving it the haunting quality of work that is completely interwoven with lived experience (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Barbara Campbell, "billowing cloth", writing prompt for performance #16 of *1001 nights* cast, watercolour on paper, 8 x 10.5 cm, 06 July 2005.

## Dressing down, Marking up

Art intrudes into my life all the time, and my life often disrupts my art. I go to do the vacuuming and find myself with a brush dipped in blue. I sit down to draw blue and the roof leaks. But every day I get dressed and that regular spark of aesthetic choice has become a drawing project (Figure 5).

More than two years ago, I started drawing what I was wearing every day. I can't remember why, on the nineteenth of April 2013, I drew my baggy grey and black striped shirt and French patterned tights. Then, on the twentieth, when I was wearing red boots and gold raincoat, I did another drawing. Five days later, when a friend visiting the studio enjoyed them, I felt inclined to continue. I started a blog. After six months I showed what I had done to date in a bookshop in King's Cross. The parameters have changed in subtle ways, but I continue (Figure 6).

This project, *Dress Code*, functions as a diary where pictures inspired by clothes are markers of time and colour. The drawings are personal and yet I post them on a blog (albeit not the secrets I write on the back, or the keys to codes and symbols). As such, they are like the clothes themselves that rub against my skin at the same time as they are public and visible.

On January the 1<sup>st</sup> 2014 I started a second project. Every day in 2014, I made a ten-centimeter square watercolour on white paper of the clothes of someone who was in a news story of the day. Then, in July I started a second - and currently unfolding - version of this project on black paper. Unlike *Dress Code*, which has few stylistic parameters, a consistent structure provides a backdrop of unity for the diversity of experience that the drawings respond to. Where *Dress Code* is the clothes I feel, *White News* is the clothes I see<sup>3</sup> (Figure 7).

---

<sup>3</sup> On July the 1<sup>st</sup> 2015 I (will) commence a sister project on black paper.



Figure 5. Maryanne Coutts, *Dress Code* April 14, 2013. Gouache on paper.  
<https://mcdrawingprojects.wordpress.com>.



Figure 6. Maryanne Coutts. *Dress Code* August 14, 2014, Collage and crayon on paper, <https://mcdrawingprojects.wordpress.com>.



Figure 7. Maryanne Coutts, *Black News ...*. Gouache on paper,  
<https://mcdrawingprojects.wordpress.com>

Where *Dress Code* embeds mundane fluctuations of the every day, the experience of drawing *White News* has been more confronting. Here the imagery is (within a scope of daily choice) imposed on me. While some events are expected, each day I don't know what will happen; what plane will crash, who will protest, what will explode, who will be born, or die. I had to trust that the formal structure or 'rules' of this way of working would ultimately bring it together as a whole (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Maryanne Coutts. *White News*, Oct 21 2014, Watercolour on paper, <https://mcdrawingprojects.wordpress.com>

## Conclusion

The story goes that the making of TV show *Lost* started without a script. As Frank Rose writes ‘ There was a risk that they wouldn’t *have* a story – that the series would dissolve into incoherence because not even the producers knew what was supposed to happen’ (Rose 2011, 150). The type of drawing that I am interested in here is like that. On the one hand it is play, exploration, thinking, the ‘what if’ and when, which is very often about being in a particular moment and not knowing where that will take us. On the other, drawing is an art form, with

conventions that concern a 'finished' piece, that *'have a story'*, can engage an audience, that *'speak'*.

From the serial publication of Dickens' novels to Christian Boltanski's video stream of his studio in France across the globe to Tasmania's MONA, ongoing projects have been available to curious audiences. When any sort of mark bears the imprint of the actual moment of its making and while thoughts or experiences are still evolving – drawing is a way to investigate our experience of time as it passes.

A drawing, in a certain sense of the word, is something that is made now. Each mark is like painting a date. More like a book, than a blog, the early marks are often as readily available as the finishing ones. The time unraveling is evidenced in the layers of touch and as Dinezot writes, 'Consciousness is the double play of limit and threshold, which both organizes time and throws it into crisis, exposing the passing of time to the impasse of an untimely present' (Watkins, 2011. 115).

For me, as I contribute to daily practices, the issues are twofold; I want my drawings to entwine in my lived experience and to grow elsewhere. On the one hand, they are simply about me; on the other, they seek community. The strange tension in the way that the intimacy of one's own computer is connected to the world wide audience lets me do projects which are archived online, but made for myself. For me this is a fine line, an awkward balance, but one for which the idea of clothing is a profound metaphor.

As I set out to write this, I had no thoughts of death. However, the essay is about ways that drawing shapes and is shaped by life, and as such the ending ultimately intrudes.

## References

- Bukharin, Nikolai. (Trans. George Shriver) 1998, *How it all Began*. New York: Columbia.
- Denizot, René in Jonathon Watkins. *On Kawara*. London: Phaidon.
- Dickens, Charles. 1961. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. New York: Signet.
- Glaetzer, Sally. 2002 <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/national/artist-christian-boltanski-sells-his-entire-life-to-highest-bidder/story-e6freooo-1225815354192> (accessed 14.5.2015).
- Graffito Books. 2008. *What I wore today: Fashion remixed online from Beijing to Berlin*. London: Graffito.
- Kahlo, Frida. 1995. *The Diary of Frida Kahalo: an Intimate Self Portrait*. New York: Abrams.
- New, Jennifer. 2005. *Drawing from Life: The Journal as Art*. New York: Princeton Architectural.
- Rose, Frank. 2011 *The Art of Immersion: How the digital Generation is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories*. New York: Norton.
- Taylor, Andrew. <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/wot-no-fish-explores-marriage-love-and-hardship-20141216-127rnz.html>. Accessed 14.2.2015.

## List of Images

Figure 1 Helen Gace, Day 192, Digital Photograph 2014.

Figure 2 Helen Gace, Day 198, Digital Photograph 2014.

Figure 3 Barbara Campbell, "carefully crafted image", writing prompt for performance #11 of *1001 nights cast*, watercolour on paper, 8 x 10.5 cm, 01 July 2005. Figure 4 Maryanne Coutts Dress Code.

Figure 4 Barbara Campbell, "billowing cloth", writing prompt for performance #16 of *1001 nights cast*, watercolour on paper, 8 x 10.5 cm, 06 July 2005.

Figure 5. Maryanne Coutts, *Dress Code* April 14, 2013. Gouache on paper.  
<https://mcdrawingprojects.wordpress.com>.

Figure 6. Maryanne Coutts. *Dress Code* August 14, 2014, Collage and crayon on paper, <https://mcdrawingprojects.wordpress.com>.

Figure 7. Maryanne Coutts, *Black News ....* Gouache on paper,  
<https://mcdrawingprojects.wordpress.com>.

Figure 8. Maryanne Coutts. *White News*, Oct 21 2014, Watercolour on paper,  
<https://mcdrawingprojects.wordpress.com>.