

Drawing Now: Memory, Drawing, and the Present Moment

Dr. Maryanne Coutts

Abstract.

While Drawing as a discipline is extremely difficult to pin down, Paul Ricoeur's discussion of memory (Ricoeur 2004) is an invaluable vehicle for investigating a significant function of drawing which cuts across its disparate modes of thinking, recording, looking, musing, remembering and imagining. His considerations of the presence of absence - the lingering, often visual existence of the past through memory - will be applied to the tangible immediacy of the drawn mark. This paper investigates ways that drawing engages directly with that transition between past and future.

The focus is on drawing's powerful capacity to evoke memory. It seems to engage with a fluid temporal experience as well as a conceptual fragmentation of time that can characterises contemporary experience. Using examples from Elizabeth Cummings, Jennifer West and William Kentridge, I will argue that this fragmentation has a practical and metaphorical relationship with the technology of film. Through a discussion of the nature of the present and its duration I will consider the diversity of ways that 'nowness' is experienced and highlight the capacity of the drawing process to act as a temporal record.

My interest is in drawing as a process for thought and decision making, as an object which embeds the experiences or perceptions of those thoughtful events and as a

practice which, by being present, entertains the subtleties of ways that the present is experienced. (12)

Drawing Now: Memory, Drawing, and the Present Moment

Drawing and the present moment

‘What is it for something that endures to remain?’(13 p32) asks Paul Ricoeur.

The painter John Constable hoped to give ‘one brief moment caught from fleeting time a lasting and sober existence.’(6) In the immediacy of his painted sketches and drawings of clouds I feel that brief moments of two hundred years ago are somehow rain that swept the British coast long before anyone even thought of climate change. I find this mnemonic power of drawing extremely potent.

This immediate connection drawing can have with particular moments in time, resonates with Ricoeur’s question. In this paper I hope to air my curiosity about this direct quality of drawing which can embody a ‘present’. I am curious about drawing’s duration, the ways that it contains that duration and the types of ‘presents’ that it can hold. I will suggest that drawing, in capturing those present moments can act as a type of ‘public’ memory which is sensual and subjective. This is significant in that the mechanics of that capturing, especially since the advent of film, do not only hold a trace of moments that are now past, but reflect unique contemporary ways of experiencing the present.

For Kiki Smith 'Drawing is something where you have direct, immediate relationship with the material, ... whereas with a lot of my sculpture, I have a concept, and then it's labor. With drawing, you're in the present. In drawing you take physical energy out of your body and put it directly onto a page'. (15) Unlike more formal practices like painting and sculpture, then, drawing is not necessarily about producing a finished object; it is about what happens while it is being made. Whether the drawing records someone trying to find something out or explain how to do something, the marks that make it up tend to have an immediacy that gives us a sense of the hand, or body or mind that directed the mark. That mark connects drawing with its moment of making.

That mark happens in the present and is most alive when not anticipated. As Derrida writes, when 'one anticipates the future by predetermining the instant of decision, then one closes it off'. (4) Drawing then, when it directly engages with the present without anticipation is, in Derrida's terms, about decision. This instant of decision making, which can only take place in the present, is the temporal site of art making and in its rawest, most immediate mode, drawing.

I am then, defining drawing by its ways of engaging with the temporality of making, rather than by its materials. Its materials, however, record that process, make it physical. So there are two aspects; a process which is exploratory rather than outcome driven and an object in which that process becomes embedded.

The mnemonic capability of objects is, of course, not the sole property of drawing. For instance, Tania Kovats, like many others sees similar parallels between drawing and handwriting. She writes that 'to trace by drawing a pencil or pen or the like across a surface – is the first and simplest definition of the word.' (10) So, the handwritten texts of old novels can have a significant substance to them and historical signatures seem to hold a powerful connection with past events.

But a good drawing is usually more than an idiosyncratic mark, or a signature; it needs to be a conduit for something else; some experience relating to the world. Having taught drawing for many years I have noticed that it is clear when students' drawings are honest responses to perceptions rather than assumptions about what those perceptions might be. This honesty or directness reflects the presence of the drawer to the drawing process. It records their 'here and now' of making and consequently refers to something beyond arbitrary mark making.

Drawing enables this exploratory, searching, investigative mode of visual thinking to remain as a material thing. This object, whether it is a hand made mark or a video, embodies its own making; a transformation that moves through the present of decision from curiosity to something more substantial, from anticipation to memory. Through the process of drawing, drawings come into being which manifest elements of the moments of their making. The 'thing' functions as a 'trace' of a decision, an event, a moment, an experience or a thought and makes the 'here-and-now' material. For instance in the work of Elizabeth Cummings the immediacy of the interaction between her body and the work is quite apparent in the way she stains

and scratches. The surprise of her marks and the sense of space give a sense that here is a response to an experience of a moment. Kerrie Poliness, on the other hand supplies instructions for other people to execute her drawings. While the marks do not have a direct material relationship with her body, they do come into being as a result of her thought and are therefore her marks. These wall drawings, then, challenge the conventional temporal relationship between making and producing a work.

Rather than in the finished works it is in this distance between thought and execution, thinker and maker that the un-anticipated decisions might occur. If the decision, the awareness, the moment of drawing is the distance between thought and marking how long is that moment? But then as St. Augustine writes, 'the present cannot possibly have duration.' (2)

The duration of the present

There is a common perception that the present is a uniform and infinitely brief intersection where the anticipated future slides into the remembered past. Paul Davies puts it like this

Most Westerners grow up with the firm conviction that reality is vested in the events of the present moment. ... It is a view of the world well captured by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who wrote: "the most insignificant present has over the most insignificant past the advantage of reality." (3 p70)

(14)

However, it is my contention that drawing highlights the impact of cultural contexts on both perceptions and records of particular presents; that the apparent 'reality' of present is subjective and variable, especially in terms of its possible duration and its ways of 'remaining'. As a way of introducing this I will briefly consider the possibility of the present having duration. For instance, Jacques Le Goff, a specialist in medieval history has made the extreme suggestion that that the 'historical present' ... in France ...begins officially in 1789.' (11)

One might consider a shorter length for the present; based on, say John Cage's 1952 work, *4' 33"*. Charlie Gere in *Art, Time and Technology* points to a parallel between this work and the advent in 1953 of the Early Warning System. Four minutes was roughly the length of time between confirmation of a soviet nuclear attack on the United Kingdom and the impact of that attack. (7. p103) Four minutes between prescience and event.

Or shorter still is Dan Graham's 1974 work *Time Delay Room* which incorporates an 8 second time delay into a video surveillance. His reasoning for the delay is that 'eight seconds is the outer limit of the neurophysiological short-term memory that forms an immediate part of our present perceptions and affects this 'from within''. (11.p167)

But even eight seconds has a time code. In filmmaking the passage of time is not only fragmented into seconds, but frames. Be it 25 or 30 frames a second, the very

nature of frames, as a measure of time, is that they are not humanly perceptible. This fragmentation of the second characterises the contemporary urban experience of time which, with ever-increased speed becomes progressively more countable. While in Galileo's age the day was measured from the variable, but actual, sunset (16), today, the atomic clock gives an illusion of absolute, universal time, which can be measured in nanoseconds. Today's time is cut off from the vagaries of human perception and experience.

In neurological terms, it takes a certain amount of time for our brains to process information from our eyes. This means that there is necessarily some time delay between an event and our perception, suggesting that it is impossible to experience anything instantaneously, let alone, 'now'. If it is the 'present' that is real, is it the 'atomic-clock-like' actuality of an event that dictates its 'presentness' or the point when we actually experience seeing / hearing /sensing it?

The physicists complicate it even more. Given Einstein's discovery that time passes at different relative paces according to the speed of movement, Davies points out that

Unless you are a solipsist, there is only one rational conclusion to draw from the relative nature of simultaneity: events in the past and future have to be every bit as real as events in the present. In fact, the very division of time into past, present and future seems to be physically meaningless. To accommodate

everybody's nows... events and moments have to exist "all at once" across a span of time. (3 p71)

Being an artist, not a physicist, my interest is not in Einstein's rationale but the relevance for art which is this; if it is possible that the present is not a unified cohesive moment spread throughout the universe, then the present, 'now' must be a subjective temporal point of view, just as 'here' is a subjective spatial point of view.

Memory and Drawing

It would seem that however fleetingly we may experience this 'now', the present, which I am calling a temporal 'point of view', we can re-experience it through memory, as well as, I am arguing, by looking at drawings. How, then, does this subjective temporal point of view, that we know as 'now', become embedded in a material object as drawing?

If drawing is a record of events as they happened, it functions as a kind of public memory. Ricoeur's discussion of memory and imagination (12) could, on many levels, be translated into a discussion of drawing. Indeed Ricoeur's text overflows with visuality. It is full of words like inscribe, imprint, impression, copy, mark, image and representation, just as Aristotle uses drawing as a metaphor for the representational qualities of memory (12. p17). He suggests that

We can read this drawing in two ways: either it in itself, as a simple image drawn on a support, or as an *eikon* (a copy). We can do this because the inscription consists in both things at once: it is itself and the representation of something else. (12. p17).

The relationship between drawing and representation is a difficult one. The thing being represented can only ever be experienced through the 'here and now' of someone, a witness. No matter how accurate an observation seems, drawing will always be subjective. In *Memoires of the Blind* Derrida uses the idea of blindness to

illuminate the problematic exercise of taking an impression of an event or capturing a 'fleeting time' in terms of this experience of vision and sight.

"the draftsman who trusts in sight, in present sight, who fears the suspension of visual perception, who does not want to be done with mourning it, who does not want to let it go, this draftsman begins to go blind simply through the fear of losing his sight." (5)

Ryan and Trevor Oakes are grappling with this blindness when they build a curved easel in an attempt to be able to trace the vision of a single one of their eyes (each eye is so individual that one easel has to be designed to suit one particular eye.) The fragmented nature of the finished drawings highlights the impossibility of completely recording what one sees. (1) This impossibility of grasping all that a drawer sees or thinks or imagines is what becomes concrete in the moment of perception, or non-perception. The resultant drawing as an object becomes the repository for the trace of the search. Just as it is impossible for the drawer to fully realise, perceive or experience a subject, when looking at a drawing we can never enter the exact moment of that making. The object or drawing however, might act as a conduit between presents.

Keeping, containing some experience in a material object as drawing does, brings past presents into the present. The question is 'How?' What are the visual mechanisms that enable the decisions, thoughts, experiences and perceptions that

are lived in a present moment; the something else that is represented, to be inscribed in something which is in itself, matter? More potently, do these mechanisms reflect and / or mould the contemporary ways of experiencing the present?

Contemporary mechanisms for embedding presentness.

Ricoeur's question, 'what is it for something that endures to remain?' is distinctly analogue. It considers our experience of time as organic: not made of discrete measurable components but sliding seamlessly between future and past. This un-compartmentalised conception of time is akin to the smooth trace of a mark on paper, of a direct response to a thought, of the transition of a line or shade. Unlike the mechanics of film all is present at once and a drawn line is evidence of an intangibly smooth transition into memory.

Conversely, film functions in what might be described as a digital manner. It fractures time into discrete frames which can be separated and viewed as distinct points in a narrative or movement. When viewing film these frames are indiscernible due to their speed and yet they have a great deal more material retention in that they never cease to exist as independent images. Unlike traditional drawing, a moments' duration has precise edges; can be measured.

For me this is suggestive of the contemporary experience of time which is based in a perception or belief in an atomic-clock type of absolute time which is modular, digital. This idea is beautifully expounded in Charlie Gere's *Art, Time and Technology*.

(7) He suggests that Samuel Morse made a more significant contribution to the direction of art by inventing Morse code, than he did through his profession as a painter. The modern movement towards subdividing the world into components is wide-reaching and impacted on nineteenth century artists directly as mass produced paint colours and the typewritten word emerged alongside photography. He cites Fred Kittler who suggests that 'writing was no longer the handwritten, continuous, transition from nature to culture. It became a countable, spatialized supply'. (9)

The persistence of hand made marks in both still and moving contemporary drawing practice indicates a continuing engagement with and curiosity about ways that we experience time as organic, analogue beings. In particular, film technology enables many vital approaches to drawing. For me the most interesting ones highlight the modular nature of film by working directly with individual frames in ways that reflect on, challenge and embody the present moments of making. For instance, William Kentridge uses film to capture the evolution of the lines that are intrinsic to drawing. By letting the drawing unfold in time before us, the ways that the process of drawing is embedded in a drawing is made literal.

'Direct' or camera-less film is a less representational version of the moving image.

Treating film as a person drawing might treat paper generates random abstractions which cut across the segmentation of time that is characteristic of film. Paradoxically

the time flow in camera-less films is often more fractured than in conventional film, highlighting the nature of the process. Following in the traditions established by Len Lye and Stan Brakhage, Los Angeles artist Jennifer West is known for treating her 16mm film with domestic materials such as Jack Daniels, espresso coffee, purple metallic eyeliner and cleaning materials.

The painterliness of this approach, resonates with the more traditional approach of painters and drawers like Elizabeth Cummings who continues to use still images as traces of their experiences and thoughts, to enable moments to 'endure, persist, remain.'(12 p32) While contemporary time might be fragmented and separated into measured compartments of seconds or nanoseconds, drawing continues to make marks on paper and on film which move smoothly across the individual, separate presents that follow each other through time just as Len Lye paints lines which flow across many frames. In both West's films, which I consider to be drawings and the drawings of Cummings there is something which, in their impulsive immediate response to life, draw us into the experience of the moments of making. In physical terms drawings let us be in own present as we fall into theirs.

Drawing, comes into being between event and trace; it embeds memory through its materiality. A drawn mark can contain or hold a moment of decision. It can embody a persistent experience or perception. This embodying of the transition between future and past is varied and exploratory. Drawing can explore, engage with and capture the nature of the present; the ways that it might either have distinct

durations or flow fluidly between the past and the future in intangible and otherwise unmeasurable ways.

Drawings enable the present to 'endure, persist, remain.'

1. Archibald, Sacha "Double Vision", *Modern painters*, May (2009): 30.
2. Augustine, (Trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin) (1961) The Confessions, New York: Penguin, cited in Paul Ricoeur, (Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer.) Time and Narrative, Volume 1. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) p32
3. Davies, Paul About Time, (1996) New York: Simon and Schuster, p70
4. Derrida, Jacques, Negotiations, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) Pp231-2 in Charlie Gere, Art, Time and Technology Oxford: Berg, (2006) p27
5. Derrida, Jacques (trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas) (2007) Memoires of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins, Chicago: Chicago University Press, p48
6. E.H. Goffman, (2002), Art and Illusion: A study in the psychology of pictorial representation London: Phaidon Press.
7. Gere, Charlie (2006) Art, Time and Technology Oxford: Berg, p27
8. E.H. Goffman, (2002), Art and Illusion: A study in the psychology of pictorial representation London: Phaidon Press,
9. Kittler, F. (1990), Discourse Networks 1800 /1900, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 191. in Gere 54

10. Kovats, Tania, (Ed) (2007) The Drawing Book: A survey of Drawing as the primary means of Expression, London: Black Dog. p9
11. Le Goff, Jacques (Trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman) (1992) History and Memory, New York: Columbia University Press, p1.
12. Paul Ricoeur, (Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer) (2006), Memory, History, Forgetting, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p32
13. Paul Ricoeur, (Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer.)Time and Narrative, Volume 1. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) p32
14. Schopenhauer, Arthur (Trans. E.F.J. Payne) Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical essays, Oxford: Clarendon Press, (1974) Quoted in Davies. p70.
15. Smith, Kiki, in Kovats, Tania, (Ed) (2007) The Drawing Book: A survey of Drawing as the primary means of Expression, London: Black Dog. p250
16. Sobel, Dava (1999) Galileo's Daughter, New York, Penguin.