



Mitch Miller's Studio, Glasgow, drawing by Ray Lucas

"ALL DRAWINGS ARE FAILURES!"

On Drawing with Mitch and Ray

Extracts from an exchange recorded on the morning and afternoon of
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The drawing is the thing versus the tail that's wagging the dog

RL It strikes me that the thing we have in common is that *the drawing is the thing*:
not drawing in order to produce lots of writing.

It's interesting that you (Jen) see drawing as a visual thing as having a lack of
precision compared to text.¹ It's a spectrum in any practice. Quite often writing in
anthropology texts is not precise, it's expressionistic, trying to be evocative.

Trying to verbally describe a drawing is one of the most challenging things. I could
give you instructions for an axonometric drawing, A to A-dash, like you would
describe in a geometry textbook.

89

In terms of where I'm at just now, the commonality that I find is that these drawings
[MM's dialectograms] are describing a context. Yours are much more complete,
mine are in process. When you get to a certain point there is a rigour and a
completeness; All you really need is a title to direct people, or a location.

A lot of the discussion in the KFI Kitchen² was about trying to rethink academia, how
we do the things that we do [...] Metrics drive academia. These kinds of drawing
that I do [in that context] are meaningless; they don't represent *research* unless I
write about it. The writing is the tail that's wagging the dog, it's the thing that is
measured, the thing that counts.

Part of my agenda is to start respecting the drawing as an output *in itself*: to
say that the drawing is something that needs to be understood and read, in the
same way that an academic text is. Not everybody can read an academic text, not

¹ I was speaking about an approach to drawing that dominates some phenomenologically-
inspired artistic research. These drawing appears to lack a purpose or value after-
the-fact, since the drawing is not a 'finished' work to be exhibited or shared, but
rather serves only as record of process, the trace of a gesture. Such work tends to be
'sketchy' in it's aesthetic; usually black and white graphite or charcoal, large format
drawings scaled to the size of the human body or hand, and usually non-representational.

² The KFI Kitchen was a week-long project meeting and workshop, held in June 2016,
Perthshire.

everybody can read a drawing, but most people assume they can read a drawing. These different expertise gaps are worth investigating.

MM I'd go along with a lot of that.

First of all, academia is metric, how we measure outputs, knowledge 'impact'. These [drawings] are produced in a different sphere, [but] there is a similar dynamic to academia.

I often work in collaboration with public bodies. I just finished working for a year with a [public] library. They were exemplary in comparison with others, willing to go with process and experiment. But they still wanted a report. There was a pragmatism with that: "we know the drawing process has told us a great deal, given us engagement and opportunities to speak with people in different ways, but the people above us ...". I still have to write a report, and that's fine, but it tells you where drawing sits in those power relationships.

I was interested being at the workshop³. Of course there is this willingness amongst your colleagues to embrace drawing as an idea, to go with where drawing takes you, but at the same time at the [first] workshop the questions were: "how do we *justify* this to 'London anthropologists'?" It was a really interesting conversation. I could see it was an anxiety for people – even amongst very open-minded anthropologists there is that anxiety coming out about how we *take* drawing(s).

[temporalities]

RL The temporality of drawing is interesting if you draw in front of someone. This is a large part of architectural teaching, and I imagine a large part of other disciplines.

My argument has been that when it comes to drawing, one of the best ways to analyse it is the temporality of the drawing itself. Not looking at it as an image or even a graphic work, but *the time spent producing that work*: the qualities of the time, the pauses, the flows, the frustrations, all of those things can be described as temporal things much more accurately, much more interestingly, much more fruitfully than simply looking at the pattern that it ends up making on the page.

MM I think temporality is always interesting. I think the problem is people often see temporality as sequence; something I always come up against. The critique of dialectograms has often been that they don't show sequence very well.

To me, having been brought up looking at drawings, digesting drawings... for hours and hours, the temporality of drawing is not about sequence. You can see a line was made at some point, and you appreciate how the line was made; you know that it was a pencil line, and then an outline, and there are all these (re)visitations of that shape. There is a capacity to go back through a *performance*, but it's not sequential, it's all piled up together.

You have to get rid of that sequential idea and just appreciate that time is not going to be presented to you in a package, it's going to be a different way of looking at time. That's what drawing can do very well. That's how drawing lets you access ideas of temporality best.

If you are trying to make drawing sequential there's ways you can do that with layering, and different techniques, but it's never quite as interesting to me as getting into a drawing, and looking at the gestures, and the various techniques that have been brought to bear, the performance of it, what has made the drawing it's final shape.

All drawings are failures

JC The idea of performance is interesting. I'd like to know what you mean by that Mitch? I also want to ask a wider question about decision-making, a kind of analysis as-you-go.

RL I think the presumption of *not* analysing when drawing could only be made by someone who doesn't draw. Not all writing is analytical, not all drawing is, but drawing certainly can be. If you look at the sketchbooks of Corbusier, as he travels around Europe⁴, he is interrogating everything that he sees. He uses drawing as resource, recontextualising and abstracting, and then gives back to us in a transformed way.

But it's difficult. It takes time: it's a struggle. There's often a presumption that you're just enjoying yourself but you're tearing your hair out! It's hard, and it never comes out the way you want it to:

"Do not, therefore, think that you can learn drawing, any more than a new language, without some hard and disagreeable labour.' (Ruskin 1971:26)⁵

³ The workshops JC and others organised on 'Graphic Anthropology'. See introduction.

⁴ E.g. Jeanneret, C. (aka Le Corbusier). 2002. Les voyages d'Allemagne - Carnets. Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier & Elektra Architecture. Corbusier's houses are documented in: Benton, T. (Ed.). 1991. The Villas of Le Corbusier 1920-30. Yale University Press.

⁵ Ruskin, J. 1971 [1857]. The Elements of Drawing. New York: Dover Books.

JC About it not turning out the way you want it to...

MM All drawings are failures!

JC Perhaps this also gets at the critique of the idea that drawings somehow begin as a vision “in your head”. Across different artistic practices, people might have an idea of what they want to get to, but in the encounter with the material something else happens. Does there have to be something you are aiming to get to? What might it mean to ‘get it right’?

RL Whenever I’m drawing I have two competing ambitions. One is that there is something about a drawing that I want to communicate– and that’s where the potential failure comes in. The second thing I want to do is discover something more about what I’m drawing, and that’s often more interesting, but that co-exists within one drawing. Quite often you fail to get across what you intended, but you become fascinated with something else and devote more attention to that.

[...]

RL I include watercolour in my range of drawing practices. I love forests, I love being in forests and I’m always trying to capture those kinds of scenes. They never work, the quality of light is so particular, the greens, you just can’t find...

MM They’re beyond your perceptual range, beyond the materials.

RL Yes, and you go to very particular places like the moss garden in Kyoto, and you’re bathing in this green, all these different shades of it, and you know that this manufactured viridian green doesn’t work. What is actually that colour? You get into this real frustration over replicating the colour that you’ve seen.

RL There’s a money-exchange stall at the market in Seoul. The geometry of it was so complex that it took me 4 or 5 attempts, drawing it, re-drawing drawing it, re-drawing [as another example of ‘failing’].

It started as an L-shape, and had all these little accretions that didn’t match up, odd little facets that have grown out of it over time (a little air-con unit, Perspex shield, a desk at the back...) All of these things were in a position for a very particular reason, everything was modified, shifted to and added to as required.

The modular carts have been appropriated, misused and broken in all sorts of interesting ways. There’s a series of interesting social relations that build up between these: the way that people look after each others pitches, you see that in

the arrangements of spaces, these negotiations.

RL I go back to an appalling statement by Pevsner⁶, that Lincoln Cathedral is architecture, and a bicycle shed is just a building. There is a big dividing line, on aesthetics but it depends on the bicycle shed in question. There have been other architects who have that kind of temporality built into their work, like Cedric Price⁷.

If you consider that nobody is going to do what you think they will with anything you build, you can start to relax, build some affordances into it, reconsider the options a space build you. It’s not about the building having all of the agency, the building forcing you to act in a certain way.

Getting at something

MM That’s what I find interesting, you are using architectural techniques, using the language of architectural drawing, but it’s about the use to which that language is put; you’re saying that if we use the vocabulary, this way, we can get to things.

In my own less respectable way, that’s also what I’m trying to do. It’s not that diagrams don’t work, or that plans or photography are worthless. It’s about deciding what you want to get at, and then trying at it through those visual languages, interesting things start to happen.

I like what Ray said earlier, that *a drawing is getting at something*, it is analysis.

[NM In drawing, rather than writing, the analysis is done quickly, lots of decisions one on top of each other... I’m more comfortable drawing than writing. Writing is more difficult, the clock is clunking away as I try to fashion something. I sketch a lot to help me think quickly through multiple decisions.]

The good thing about a dialectogram is that there are at least 4 or 5 stages of analysis. By the time I put ink on, we’re getting to the last stages, but the ink is analysis as well. It’s about saying that pencil line is what I’m going to decide on, that, delineates and describes this place the best, here.

JC The best here?

⁶ The architectural historian Niklaus Pevsner famously declared that: ‘A bicycle shed is a building. Lincoln cathedral is a piece of architecture.’ (2009:10), elaborating to position building in a decidedly inferior light. Pevsner, N. 2009. An Outline of European Architecture. London: Thames & Hudson.

⁷ See Hardingham, S. (Ed.). 2015. Cedric Price Works 1952-2003: A Forward Minded Retrospective. Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, for a complete survey of Price’s writings and designs.

MM It's best here, not there. Not a millimetre away. Just the way it is.

MM If I'm an artist, I'm a graphic artist as well, and that means I also write. What is interesting to me is this perceived tension between text and image. Text as it is, battered on a keyboard, has issues in relation to the image, [requires] a certain headspace. It was hard writing a thesis about these things.

That's the thing, that's it [the drawing]. Having to write about it the drawing process is murderously difficult!

I think there can be conflict between text and image, difficulty reading between the two. There are certain *types* of text though, types of textuality, scribed textuality, [that] can be very sympathetic to drawing. For me they go hand in hand; going between text one moment and back to drawing the next, then describing shapes. I see it all as a graphic process.

It's like the forest

MM I like the idea about socially created things, trying to get to those is hard, but very rewarding when you do. That's often my endpoint: do I get to something like a depiction of that in one of these works? Do I get close? Some I don't, some I feel I haven't really grasped the *social architecture* (a problematic term). That's what matters more to me than representational drawing.

It's like the forest, sometimes, the social interactions, the impressions and the behaviour in a place are really difficult to get in there, but if you get something like it, something like that colour, then you're doing alright, but half the time I'm not.

I can look at one and I can see the shite, which is the failure to do that. And the failure might be quite pretty. Some of the prettiest parts of the dialectograms are the parts I feel I've failed, I've put something pretty in to cover up my perceived failure. It's interesting, how these things all interact for me. But I think intention also changes. My intention is never the same at the end as when I start. Obviously If you're drawing properly, the drawing is working, and you're in the right frame of mind, then you're learning as you go, and you're changing your view as you go, and you're changing your position as you go; if you're not, then it's probably not interesting then.

RL The discoveries do lead to to refocus, to rethink.

MM It's exploration.

[We have a long digressive and interesting discussion after lunch, on buildings, graphic design, design thinking, ethnography, drawing/thinking, and find our way back to the 'forest' via wallpaper in modernist buildings]

NM Talking about the forest, I feel that even a photo doesn't capture it in any way adequately; it's not a weakness, it's not just prone to drawing, the ability to capture something.

MM [This relates to] the aestheticisation of ethnography. It's interesting now where we are: there is a lot of talk about interdisciplinarity and that's good in principle but often there is a failure to really engage with the difficulties of each others disciplines. While anthropologists are arguing about the ethics of knowledge appropriation, I don't see enough of that coming back. I see that as essential to understand where we're going.

JC I think it's not only about a blended space of experimentation, I'm interested in the encounter, and maybe also to work out the core values, differences for different disciplines

NM As long as you don't view discipline as a fence, but as a bridge, we start to get interesting conversations, debates

MM And the dialectogram [does that]. It's not a consensus, but an argument or an agreement. My job is to prevent easy consensus: I often note controversies along the way, and ask: do we really want to show it this way? Keep it as open as possible. That's not easy, but that's my job.