

# The Inexorable Rise of Drawing

Annabel Tilley

'Today, what constitutes drawing is being revisited as artists exploit the infinite potential of the discipline.'<sup>i</sup>

**Question:** Why is drawing relevant today?

**Answer:** Because we are still trying to define what it is, and, imagine what it might become.

**P**art of the anxiety of everyday life is about asking questions that we can't answer. In contemporary drawing circles, everyday drawing practice is a series of unanswerable questions, and over the past decade a range of drawing organisations and publications have emerged as a result of these questions:

Curator, Angela Kingston: What is drawing?<sup>ii</sup>

Artist, Angela Eames: Where is drawing?<sup>iii</sup>

Professor Anita Taylor: Who is drawing?<sup>iv</sup>

TRACEY: What is bad (good) drawing?<sup>v</sup>

Professor Stephen Farthing: Is photography part of drawing?<sup>vi</sup>

Tony Godfrey: How do we know what is a drawing and what is not?<sup>vii</sup>

In 2007, Kate Macfarlane and Katherine Stout, co-founders and directors of *The Drawing Room* wrote: 'Drawing will always be at the heart of the visual arts. The key shift that has occurred is that drawing as an activity is now believed to be acceptable for public presentation, rather than only suitable for private research or study. This is a change in perception, not just on the part of artists but significantly by museums, commercial galleries and critics.'

**T**he question I want to explore *here* concerns asking representatives of the drawing community: *Why* has there been this change in perception and *Where* is it reflected? It is a question that crosses public, educational, academic and commercial boundaries.

Macfarlane and Stout locate this change to forty years ago. 'As the object dematerialised throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, drawing became a way of recording an action or an intellectual statement. It became the medium of choice, alongside writing, for expressing art as idea.'<sup>viii</sup>

When Angela Eames started the BA in Drawing at Camberwell in 1997 and Wimbledon first offered an MA in Drawing in 1999, the perception that a drawing was just the pencil sketch for the larger work, or even a pencil sketch at all, finally disappeared, as did the traditionally-held belief that drawing was about representation. Thus, as drawing became accepted as a practice in its own right, using new materials and existing in new forms, it was also

embraced for its conceptual qualities. Today, you only have to walk round the annual *Jerwood Drawing Prize* to be privy to a whole host of witty and serious ideas – one-liners in the guise of a drawing.

In this spirit a new book, *Drawing Now*<sup>ix</sup> - concentrating on contemporary drawing practice since 2000 – makes a significant distinction when it claims to be focused ‘on the kind of drawing that derives from reflection rather than observation.’ Editors Downs, Marshall, Sawdon, Selby & Tormey say their inspiration comes from the Tate exhibition and resulting book: ‘*The Stage of Drawing* (2003), which, crucially, they see as having presented drawing in the context of ‘thinking and ideas, rather than representing the appearance of objects.’

More recently, the interdisciplinary nature of drawing - from the artist to the engineer - has been acknowledged<sup>x</sup>, while the tangible has given way to drawing’s recognized facility to allude to or describe the intangible – a way of articulating the inarticulate. Fundamentally, like some forms of poetry - you no longer have to understand drawing to be enthused or moved by it.

Indeed, it is this development in the *form* of drawing that might be considered at the heart of a change in perception, and why by 2000, drawing had become to the new millennium what digital media was to the nineties – an exciting and innovative force widely acknowledged for its infinite possibilities. This may account for why over the past decade a proliferation of drawing organisations have materialised; with *The Campaign for Drawing* (2000) and their annual *Big Draw* (2000) extravaganza, Wimbledon’s *Centre for Drawing* (2000), *The Drawing Room* (2003), *RABLEY Contemporary Drawing Centre* (2004), *The Drawing Gallery* (2004), and the *C4RD* (2004) as well as internet-based organisations like the *Drawing Research Network* (DRN) (2001) and the digital journal *TRACEY* (2000).

**B**ack in the early nineties Professor Anita Taylor was the head of painting at Cheltenham College of Art and Design. At the time she perceived a lack of drawing opportunities in art schools, and it was her vision, together with Paul Thomas, that changed this, and gave us what would eventually become *The Jerwood Drawing Prize*. Taylor, now Dean of Wimbledon School of Art and the co-founder and director of *The Jerwood Drawing Prize*, has always been passionate about drawing: ‘I was a student on a painting course, who drew all their way through my undergraduate course. And later, as head of painting at Cheltenham I ran a program of drawing which taught students about the different systems of drawing.’

‘The opportunity to set up a drawing competition was about two things: to find out who was drawing and where they were, and to help students to locate drawing within their practice. *The Cheltenham Open Drawing Exhibition* was started in 1994. We ran it as a professional studies project for students because we didn’t think there were any good examples of contemporary drawing for students to see,’ says Taylor.

It became *The Jerwood Drawing Prize* in 2001 and relocated to Wimbledon in 2003. As a competition open to UK-based artists, it might also be seen as an annual indicator of drawing in the UK today. 'The selection process is unique. We always have three invited selectors, an artist, and maybe a collector, critic or writer. It is a discursive system. There is no voting.' Selectors have included: Tony Godfrey, William Feaver, Cornelia Parker, Marina Warner, Angela Flowers, Peter de Francia, Deanna Petherbridge and Graham Crowley.

Another indicator in the rise of drawing is that by 2000 there were a thousand entries, but by 2007 - influenced by the spread of undergraduate degree courses in drawing - this had risen to two thousand five hundred. However, Taylor maintains: 'The odds of good work getting in doesn't change. As a judge you want more choice. The more you've got the clearer you become about what you want.'

**A**rtist, Mikey Cuddihy says: 'Drawing competitions have always been on my radar. In 1979, my work was selected for the *Middlesborough Drawing Biennale*. Later, came the 'Tolly Cobbold' (another open competition); again, I sent drawings. In the late 70's, the poet, Adrian Henri selected my paper-works for a Serpentine summer show - he came to my studio, and persuaded me to show all the tiny, folded bits of paper, pinned up on the wall and stuffed away in a plans chest, as well as larger, framed pieces.'

'In 2001, Mary Kelly selected my work for *East*, having seen a slide I sent (along with other images of more 'important' works), of a scrappy drawing, in biro on a sheet of lined A4 paper, of a pair of fancy lace knickers. That same year, a group of knicker drawings ('Nine biro drawings, black, blue, red, and one lipstick') were selected for The Jerwood Drawing Prize.'

Cuddihy suggests 'One reason for the emergence of this drawing network is a new drawing-focussed elite graduating from the specialist BA and MA drawing courses at Wimbledon, Camberwell and Kingston. These "bright young things" were the first of their kind, and could spot a gap in the market.' Wimbledon MA graduate, Meryl Ainslie, founded the Wiltshire-based *RABLEY Contemporary Drawing Centre* in 2004. The idea that a specialist drawing centre can afford to locate itself outside a major city attests to the fact that people are willing to travel to be involved in contemporary drawing practice. Before starting the centre Ainslie was the senior lecturer on the Drawing BA course at Swindon College.

**B**ack in 2000 three women, Kate Macfarlane, Mary Doyle, and Katharine Stout, came together with no money and no space but a combined fervour for drawing and a determination to succeed. 'Coming together in 2000, it was an awareness of what artists were doing in their studios, an awareness of how much artists were now using drawing as a main part of their practise, instead of as a subsidiary or preparatory domain,' says Macfarlane.

*The Drawing Room*, established in 2003 at Tannery Arts in East London, was the first not-for-profit gallery space dedicated to drawing in the UK. I asked Kate Macfarlane why she thought this 'change in perception' had occurred? 'The reason it has been picked up on now is that people are more enlightened about art. The dematerialisation of work in the 70's meant that artists no longer had to make an object. The beauty of a drawing is it can be an idea. And whereas, a video work or photograph needs authentication, you don't need that with a drawing. The artist's touch is right there in front of you on the paper, a direct manifestation of the artists thinking and feelings. The drawing is the genuine article. And a lot of work, today, doesn't necessarily feel like that,' Macfarlane concedes.

*The Drawing Room* initially came into existence in 2000 as a curatorial entity that put on shows in guest venues. Their first venture, a publication called *Drawing on Space*, featured 13 international artists including: Julie Mehretu, Russell Crotty, Takehito Koganezawa and Paul Noble. 'It focused on artists who were interested in mapping and recording different kinds of spaces. This was a fast and effective way to disseminate information worldwide about *The Drawing Room*. A show at London's fa projects followed in 2002. Soon after Macfarlane organised a residency for Alexander Roob at *The Guardian* newspaper. 'Roob is very interested in drawing as reportage, and the idea that it is a more authentic replica of what is happening because the drawing unfolds at the same time as the action.'

What strikes you most as Macfarlane talks is how the work comes first. Everything is about the work; how the artist makes it, considers it, how the work will be shown, published and preserved in the public domain. As a vanguard organisation, *The Drawing Room* commissions new work and puts on three shows a year, occasionally collaborating with outside organisations like *The Centre for Drawing* and *The Mead Gallery* at Warwick University as well as commissioning outside curators. 'These sort of collaborations are ideal because they allow a pooling of resources, funding and ideas,' Macfarlane explains.

'I believe, it has had its resurgence now, because it is not like the overblown nineties and artists like Jeff Koons. With drawing you can tackle all kinds of issues and ideas without it seeming false or overblown. For instance, Cathy Duvall's work: she calls them cloud drawings but actually they come from burning oil fields. This language of cloud drawings comes from Constable and Turner yet it is a very political work.'

'With no *Arts Council* core funding and project funds harder to procure we are constantly thinking of new ways to support ourselves, and have held a fundraiser bi-annually since 2003.' This consists of 100 drawings donated by 100 artists and auctioned to the highest bidder, and as such is a unique view of drawing practice at a given time. 'In 2003 we made just £25,000, whereas this year we were fortunate to raise four times that amount.'

**P**rofessor Stephen Farthing says: 'Perhaps the most interesting question is how people define drawing today. For instance, is photography part of

drawing? It is a way of harvesting information in the world – you put the images into your computer, shuffle them, reorganise them and make sense of it. It could be that between a camera and a computer, it is not very different from how Turner used a sketch book and brought it back into the studio’.

In 2004 Farthing was appointed as the UK’s first Rootstein Hopkins Chair of Drawing at the University of the Arts London. Farthing says: ‘I am trying to understand how drawing might be taught in art school today. Not just in fine art but across all subjects. I am looking at how people draw and moving towards what a drawing course in the 21<sup>st</sup> century might look like.’

‘One conclusion is that copying is a good way of learning. After all, the history of drawing is about people copying other people, whether they admit it or not. If you ask someone to make a drawing of a good drawing and, to try to understand how that drawing is made by drawing it, you are at the sharp end. You are trying to trace someone’s thoughts,’ Farthing explains.

Asked about the rise of drawing Farthing says: ‘By the nineties we had reinvented the romantic idea of an artist being a special person and that you become closer to their mind by looking at their drawings. This old idea has renewed currency today because people have become interested in the machinations of individual artists minds, the introspective side of artists personalities. Perhaps as a reaction against the big brave statements of Keiffer and Schnabel. Tracey Emin is a good example. The success of someone like Emin, is the degree to which people can get involved in her reaction to the world and her life.’

‘Damien Hirst was similar, he has become a showman now, but his drawings are just like Robert Smithson’s, scruffy little ideas that are put down on paper in direct form. And, as such, wonderful drawings.’ Yet, in terms of the economics of drawing, Farthing says: ‘In the 70s no-one talked about Smithson’s drawings yet by the 90s they were selling for \$50-100,000 each. Conceptual art was sold as something that wasn’t particularly underpinned by drawing.’ Farthing also cites artists like Ron Kitaj and Peter de Francia who have never stopped drawing.

‘Another cause,’ Farthing concludes, ‘is that by the end of the eighties there were a lot of deeply reactionary people in art schools who were lamenting the passing of “good” painting, etching and stone carving, and they were getting out their drawing books and charcoal ... so a lot of early networking was exactly that: *lets get back to good drawing.*’

**A**ngela Kingston’s contribution to a drawing support network came in the late nineties when Wimbledon School of Art commissioned her to set up *The Centre for Drawing* which opened in 2000 and she curated until 2002.

‘In order to create the first specialist drawing centre in the UK,’ Kingston says, ‘I questioned the idea that an art school would want to imitate the straightforward model of a gallery that just brings in work? I wanted to work

with the characteristics of drawing and the rhythms and nature of the art school. We created an in-house gallery space that held a series of six-week drawing residencies for invited artists.<sup>xi</sup> The original remit was to test 'what drawing is' under the condition of an individual or a group practice – an idea borrowed from *Matts Gallery*, London and *PS1*, New York.'

Today *The Centre for Drawing Project Space* is co-ordinated by Wimbledon's Professor of Drawing, Avis Newman. It prides itself in being a laboratory test environment that asks questions like: Who is drawing for? How is it being used? and What does it do?

As a curator, Angela Kingston is keen to emphasise that drawing in itself as an artist-led activity has been developing for at least two decades: 'Drawing was becoming crucially important in the mid-eighties. Suddenly a lot of women artists were drawing as their main thing. Women drew because painting had such a loaded history and drawing seemed to be light on its feet and more possible for women to venture into. The work of Sue Arrowsmith and the large drawings on canvas by Avis Newman seemed massively important. I believe drawing developed in prominence at this time as an antidote to the super-confident and self-important YBA work of the late-eighties.'

Kingston is also keen to reiterate that 'drawing can be fantastically boring, academic and sterile, and a retreat from the world but quotes the drawings of an artist like Zoe Mendelson: 'drawings straight out of soft-porn, as important in blowing apart that sincerity and authenticity angle.' She says: 'Drawing has all sorts of serious and non-serious non-art places. It can be a map to show you where the pub is, an engineers drawing or a scientific diagram.'

Over lunch at the *Tate Modern*, artist, Zoe Mendelson wryly recalls her student days at Chelsea in the late nineties when 'Drawing was seen as an "anti-macho reaction" to the Matthew Barney and Damian Hirst school of 'big boys making things', and when artists like Chris Offili & Peter Doig taught there. 'There was a continuum of serious notices that announced *the death of painting*'. This, she says, 'together with the death of the support, and the idea that the language of painting was an archaic response in a digital world' have all contributed to drawing's rise.'

Mendelson speaks of the 'wonderful poverty of materials that drawing demands. I love the idea that you don't have to go shopping to start drawing.' Mendelson talks about drawing in eloquent short bursts, reiterating at every stage her good fortune in finding that over time her desire to paint diminished and her practice became dominated by drawing. 'It was a realisation that came late. It wasn't until I saw *Vitamin D*<sup>xii</sup> in 2005, that I realised the impact drawing was having. This wasn't a localised phenomena but a whole movement happening all around, in the UK and, in Europe. Of course, drawing was all around me, we were all drawing. But it was this spread of what had been an intense private activity – suddenly, it had become public, and drawing was everywhere.'

Mendelson continues: 'It is a generational thing. There were all these 30-something artists of my generation drawing. She mentions Canadian-born artist, Marcel Dzama, US artist, Matt Greene and Polish-born artist, Dorota Jurczak. She laughs: 'What happened, did we ingest the same air, read the same children's books?' Their art, like Mendelson's portrays alien characters, sometimes half-animal in strange, sinister imagined flat lands in ambiguous situations, and often using the genre of soft porn.

**G**aia Persico is part of a new breed of artist/curator that have emerged over the last decade. We meet at the *ICA* café soon after she has curated the highly successful *Isobar* drawing show at *The Fieldgate Gallery* in London's Whitechapel.

The opening lines of the *Isobar* catalogue read: 'In recent years, drawing has been the focus of contemporary art. No longer considered a secondary expression ... its position has been promoted to become a mode of expression so inherent and important to artists' practice to deserve its own status and institutions.'<sup>xiii</sup>

Persico says: 'The idea for *Isobar* was about attempting to redefine drawings outer limits. To look beyond the purely two-dimensional surface and traditional methods of representation.' *Isobar* artists included: Claude Heath, Susan Collis, Catherine Bertola, Sarah Woodfine and Tim Knowles. 'All of whom', Persico says, 'question what might constitute a drawing in the context of the materials and methods used.' Angela Kingston writes: 'In *Isobar*, the ways in which drawing must necessarily go beyond itself are exploited to the full.'<sup>xiv</sup>

Asked about the resurgence of drawing, Persico says: 'It is a big question, but must be seen as a reaction against the YBAs and their in-your-face projects, always so big and brash and finished,' says Persico. We discuss, in contrast, the instant, often unfinished nature of drawing, 'that makes it like a journey, and so different to the often laboured and self-conscious stuff around making a painting.' The idea of the journey is embedded into Persico's own body of work – a series of delicate line drawings that appear on small individual sheets of thin Hotel headed notepaper.

Persico laughs and says: 'Of course you don't know about my alter ego as an airhostess. I work long haul, four or five days a month, travelling to America, and the Far East. The job provides the perfect conditions. My hotel bedroom becomes my studio. The view becomes my subject. I make drawings using only the materials in situ, like the hotel biro and headed notepaper, or with my laptop I create cityscapes – my "computer paintings". It is all left to chance and keeps the work fresh. I don't know, in advance, what room I will have, or what the view will be. I just draw what I see. The piece is finished when I run out of time.'

**DRN** and **TRACEY** are two on-line drawing research initiatives. *DRN* was formed in 2001 'to develop the dialogue between drawing education and drawing research' says Dr Steve Garner, a senior lecturer in Design and

Innovation at the Open University. 'Today, *The Drawing Research Network*, is a collection of over 350 academics, students and practitioners who use the email forum and website for news and debate regarding drawing research.' *TRACEY* is an internet research journal established in 2000 by Loughborough University and concerned with asking questions about contemporary drawing practice. The current question, open for discussion at *TRACEY* asks: 'What is bad (good) drawing?'

**T**he *Centre for Recent Drawing* was founded in 2004. Director Andrew Hewish maintains: '*C4RD*'s aim is to represent the breadth and variety of current drawing practice. The idea is simple and involves a physical space and online site where drawing in all its forms can be seen and responded to. The best dialogue for drawing is to experience drawing, and to respond by drawing. Our new building in Islington, North London, means we can exhibit as well as offer specific studio drawing residencies. An off-site residency in Kingston will be available from April 2008, writes Hewish.'

Asked if there is a new economics of drawing? Hewish, maintains: 'If there is, it is a gift economy. *C4RD* is an entirely volunteer run not-for-profit organisation, from the trustees to the interns. It operates on a slim but sustainable budget that is topped up by private anonymous donation.'

He continues: 'I hope *C4RD* represents drawing as an approach, a way of thinking fundamental to our consciousness ('the exercise of imagination on line'); and that we can demonstrate an inclusiveness in the variety of drawing shown, teasing out the boundaries as to where and how drawing might exist. We have an open proposals policy to assist this. We also have a punishing exhibition schedule because drawing needs to be shared and experienced in order to thrive,' says Hewish.

**I**n writing this article I have been struck by the passion and warmth of the drawing community who have offered a variety of views as to why drawing has become a high profile practice over the past decade. However, whether we consider the rise of drawing and its associated networks a result of increased Further Education opportunities, a response to the slick finishedness of the YBAs and their 'big boys' art, or an anti-reaction to the sophisticated hands-off digital age, what we actually have is not a flash-in-the-pan fad but a sustained rise, resulting from thousands of years of stolid looking, thinking, and mark-making. Today Draw-ers, show-ers, look-ers and buyers are united in accepting drawing as a practice in its own right.

**F**inally, let us not forget the obvious, Kate Macfarlane and Katharine Stout write: 'In searching for reasons for this renewed enthusiasm, the fact that drawing is fundamentally a pleasurable activity should not be disregarded.'<sup>xv</sup>

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Kate Macfarlane, *The Drawing Book* ed. Tania Kovats (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007) p.16.
- <sup>ii</sup> Angela Kingston, *What is Drawing?* ed. Angela Kingston (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2003).
- <sup>iii</sup> Angela Eames, email correspondence, 21<sup>st</sup> Sept 2007.
- <sup>iv</sup> Professor Anita Taylor discussing the origins of *The Jerwood Drawing Prize* in the early nineties. Interview, Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2008, Wimbledon School of Art.
- <sup>v</sup> TRACEY – on-line research journal – 2008 website question.
- <sup>vi</sup> Professor Stephen Farthing, interview, Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2008, Wimbledon School of Art.
- <sup>vii</sup> Tony Godfrey, writer and selector of the *The Jerwood Drawing Prize*, 2004. Jerwood catalogue essay, 2004.
- <sup>viii</sup> Op. cit., *The Drawing Book*, p.14.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Drawing Now* (ed.) Downs, Marshall, Sawdon, Selby & Tormey [London: I. B. Tauris, 2007].
- <sup>x</sup> See Tania Kovats: introduction to *The Drawing Book*.
- <sup>xi</sup> Project results and artist interviews can be found in *The Centre for Drawing: The First Year* and *What is Drawing?* Both edited by Angela Kingston.
- <sup>xii</sup> Vitamin D - *New Perspectives in Drawing* (London: Phaidon Press, 2005).
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Isobar* exhibition catalogue. *Isobar* (ed.) Gaia Persico, (New Malden, Surrey: ARTTRA, 2007) p.7.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *ibid.*, *Isobar* catalogue, p.16.
- <sup>xv</sup> Op.cit., Macfarlane, p.40.

## Selected Bibliography

- Drawing Breath* – ten years of The Jerwood Drawing Prize (London Wimbledon School of Art, University of the Arts, 2007) Exhibition catalogue with essays
- Drawing Now* (ed.) Downs, Marshall, Sawdon, Selby & Tormey [London: I. B. Tauris, 2007]
- Drawing Breath* – ten years of The Jerwood Drawing Prize (London Wimbledon School of Art, University of the Arts, 2007)
- Drawing: The Network* – A one-day forum on drawing research, Wimbledon College of Art, 2007 (London: CHELSEASpace, 2007)
- Isobar* by Gaia Persico, (New Malden, Surrey: ARTTRA, 2007) Exhibition catalogue with essays by Angela Kingston, Gaia Persico & Laura Gonzalez
- The Centre for Drawing: The First Year*, (ed.) Angela Kingston (London: Wimbledon School of Art, 2001)
- The Drawing Book* ed. Tania Kovats (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007)
- The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act (ed.) Catherine De Zegher (London and new York: Tate Publishing and The Drawing Centre, New York, 2003)
- Vitamin D* – *New Perspectives in Drawing* (London: Phaidon Press, 2005)
- What is Drawing?* ed. Angela Kingston (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2003) Essay & interviews with artists, Claude Heath, Lucy Gunning & Rae Smith.

## Drawing - Organisations & Links

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**The Drawing Room** – Gallery

Tannery Arts  
Brunswick Wharf  
55 Laburnum Street  
London E2 8BD  
0207-729-5333

[mail@drawingroom.org.uk](mailto:mail@drawingroom.org.uk)  
[www.drawingroom.org.uk](http://www.drawingroom.org.uk)

**C4RD** – Centre For Recent Drawing – Gallery & on-line residency

2-4 Highbury Station Road  
London N1 1SB  
0203-239-6936  
info@c4rd.org.uk  
www.c4rd.org.uk/

**TRACEY** - <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ac/tracey/>

On-line research journal where artists can respond to questions like: What is bad (good) drawing ?

**DRN** - Drawing Research Network - <http://www.drawing.org.uk/>

A network of 350 artists, students, lecturers & researchers who use drawing as part of their practice

**The Campaign for Drawing** - <http://www.campaignfordrawing.org/home/index.aspx>

Home of *The Big Draw* and other campaigns to get everyone drawing

**RABLEY Contemporary Drawing Centre** - <http://www.rableydrawingcentre.com/courses.htm>

Gallery and drawing centre offering regular programme of drawing and printmaking courses

**This is the full text of an edited article that appears in [Garageland issue 6](#)**