

## **Practice-infused drawing research: ‘being present’ and ‘making present’**

**Duncan Bullen, Jane Fox and Philippa Lyon**  
**University of Brighton**

### **Abstract**

How can we understand the pivotal value of touch and collaborative processes within two artists’ drawing practice and how do we articulate the generative nature of such practice-based research? Bullen’s drawing explores the relationship between hand, breath and surface, Fox’s, the semi-resisted action of wind between paper and pencil. Both artists have a shared concern with non-representational drawing processes, an expanded notion of ‘material’ and a focus on the experience of reciprocity between the individual practitioner and the world in which they practice. These concerns are discussed in terms of ‘being present’ and ‘making present’, which this article attempts to conceptualise at an interim stage in the research with reference to theory about drawing, anthropology and meditation practice. The understanding of drawing mobilized here is one in which, as Grisewood argues, ‘seeing’ is not a prerequisite. It is a practice of drawing that is about receiving (Berger 2005) and being (Viola 1995). Lyon, Bullen and Fox are developing a collaborative methodology for this research in which their respective embodied, manual practices of drawing and writing are in dialogue.

### **Keywords**

drawing  
touch  
material  
presence  
being  
collaboration

## **1 Introduction**

Touching the World Lightly is a research project that asks: how we can understand the pivotal value of touch and the place and significance of collaborative processes within two specific artists’ drawing practice? It also raises a secondary question: how we can articulate the generative and dialogic methods and processes of this practice as research? This article discusses the development of the first phase of this project, the catalyst for which was the building of a research partnership between colleagues crossing different disciplinary and practice traditions.

In Duncan Bullen’s work, drawing explores the relationship between hand, breath and surface; for Jane Fox drawing involves the semi-resisted action of wind between paper and pencil. For both artists drawing can, potentially, bring them into an intense and greatly valued experience of ‘being present’ and ‘making present’, concepts that will be explored further in this article. They associate these experiences with a quality of engagement, immediacy and acuity of perception, in which ‘touch can be as optical as vision’ (Ingold 2011: 6), maintaining and sustaining the artists’ receptivity as the drawing unfolds. In cultivating attention to and awareness of these subtleties, the artists are able to balance agency and surrender within their practice.

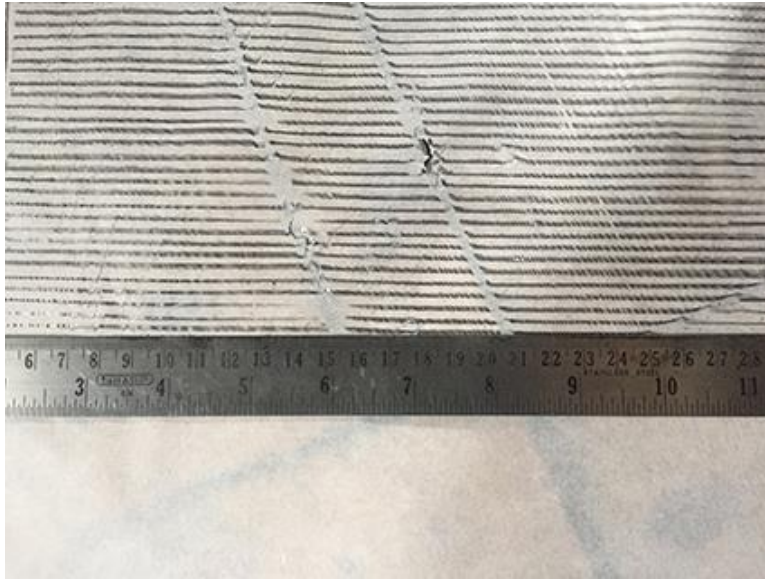


Figure 1: Duncan Bullen, *Breath Drawing*, 2015. Photographer D Bullen.



Figure 2: Jane Fox, *Wind Drawing*, Firle Beacon, 2016. Photographer J Fox.

Whilst they carry out their practice on an individual basis, the artists' common concern with touch and presence, and their shared interest in pursuing a deeper understanding of it, emerged through discussions with a third researcher, Lyon. Her research into pedagogical and explanatory manual drawing practices in health and education settings has, until this point, been carried out from a constructivist paradigm, often involving observation and interviews. From the genesis of this project, there has been an integral concern with what it means to move between different paradigms of research, and to research across different forms of practice. In this project, then, the three researchers are exploring how creative and critical modes of writing, discussing, visualizing and drawing can be applied as collaborative and immersive research inquiry into artistic practice. This is research that, as Borgdorff has described it:

does not assume the separation of subject and object, and does not observe a distance between the researcher and the practice of art. Instead, the artistic

practice itself is an essential component of both the research process and the research results. This approach is based on the understanding that no fundamental separation exists between theory and practice in the arts. After all, there are no art practices that are not saturated with experiences, histories and beliefs; and conversely there is no theoretical access to, or interpretation of, art practice that does not partially shape that practice into what it is. (2007 Borgdorff: 5)

Collaboration is therefore a key element of the research, both in terms of being an important dimension of the two artists' respective practice and in shaping the methodological approach to the research.

The first section in this article sets out the emergent methodology and methods of the team; the second section discusses the development of theory about and through Bullen's and Fox's drawing practice so far.

## 2 'Seeing methodology through an artful eye'

To welcome the arts [...] as a *mode* of inquiry (original emphasis), requires deep consideration. Seeing methodology through an artful eye reflects a way of being in the world as a researcher that is paradigmatically different from other ways of thinking about and designing research. (Knowles and Cole 2008: 1)

In this project, the researchers began by asking how they could understand the pivotal value of touch and the place and significance of collaborative processes within Bullen's and Fox's drawing practice. The drawing practice and the approach to the research in this project require constant attention to the idea and experience of 'being in the world', here referred to by Knowles and Cole in the context of arts-oriented qualitative research but identified as a core philosophy within Bullen's and Fox's making. In the context of this project the three researchers have come to understand drawing, from their different disciplinary and practitioner identities, as a bodily and experiential practice in which the relationship with the world is subjective, objective and collaborative.

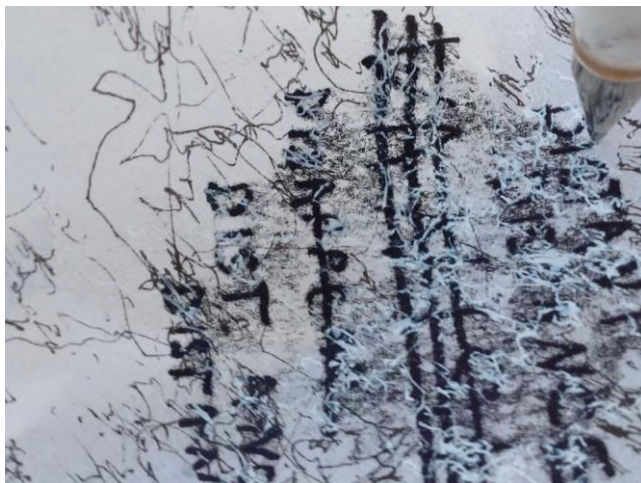


Figure 3: Jane Fox, Wind Drawing IV Bantham, 2016. Still from moving image, J Warr.

The practitioner both has and does not have (can relinquish) agency. The researchers thus began with a shared ontology, a crucial starting point in responding to the secondary research question: how can we articulate the generative and dialogic methods and processes of this practice as research? From this, the epistemology that has emerged is based upon the notion that both drawing and writing, particularly as manual processes, are dialogic and embodied. It is through conscious and guided interaction between these practices, involving an openness of each practitioner to the practices of the other, that new knowledge can be identified. The concept of drawing that has been a catalyst for this research is non-representational. Drawing is not seen as an object to be decoded or, indeed, a system to be recommended, but as a process and an experience, a point articulated by Grisewood in terms of latency:

The emphasis is on latency, not so much on what the line is, but what it can do or be, where drawing is predicated on touch and derives from thought and memory, rather than appearance or observation, indicating that the condition of 'seeing' is not a prerequisite: drawing exists with and without seeing.  
(Grisewood 2012: 1)

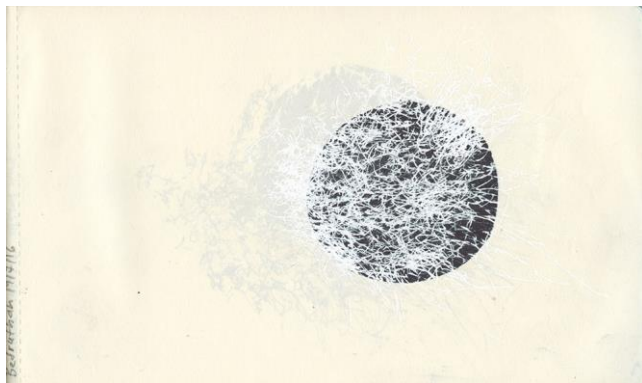


Figure 4: Jane Fox, Wind Sketches 1 over 2, Bedruthan, 2016. Photographer J Fox.

The research process developed to investigate these ideas within Bullen and Fox's practice has involved two main interconnected strategies: proliferation, in which the team concentrates on generative and accumulative thinking in order to gather ideas and explore a range of connections (patterns); and a more iterative focussing strategy, designed to clarify and hone concepts.

One example of the methods involved in the proliferation strategy, which seeks to bring to the surface some of the tacit knowledge within the two artists' practice, is dialogic visualising. This involves each member of the team in turn writing a word they felt held significance to the artists' practice, and placing it on a board, until all key words had been included and a visual cluster had been constructed. This was done mainly without talking, in a gallery space where the researchers were able to add words to the board with a rhythmic regularity and where they could physically stand back or pace around, enabling maximum concentration and focus. The team then viewed and noted the potential patterns and groupings within this cluster; disassembled it and repeated the exercise, this time photographing it within the application Glimpse, so that it could be viewed as a film.

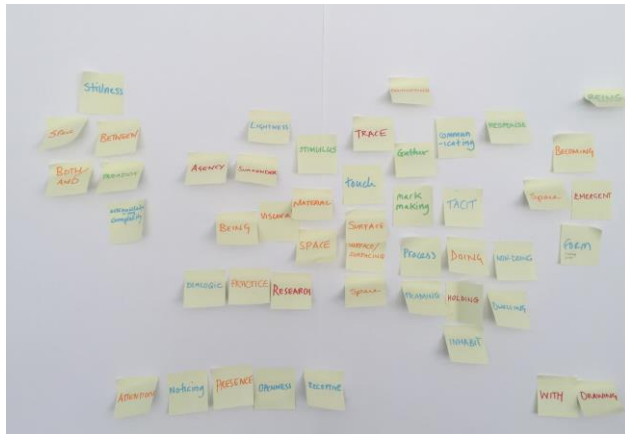


Figure 5: Dialogic visualising research process, Map 1, April 2016. Photographer D Bullen.



Figure 6: Capturing the dialogic visualising process, Map 2, April 2016. Photographer J Fox.

This method was extremely constructive in working by an associative rather than narrative logic. It was inclusive by nature, enabling each member of the team to propose ideas for consideration on any basis: instinctive, experiential or cognitive. The cluster map of terms produced was treated as fluid, to be revisited at further stages throughout the project, yet has enabled the team to identify potential patterns of themes and concepts. This has been informed and challenged by the focussing strategy, which weaves throughout the research. This involves regular semi-structured dialogue between the three researchers, in the form of an iterative process where question and response aims at achieving greater clarity and precision. In this way the team gradually works towards a common understanding and vocabulary. This focussing will continue to be challenged by the proliferation strategies until the team identifies a point of stability (or of being stable enough). The still malleable theorising of the second section of this article is offered as a means of sharing what has been developed at an interim stage in this project. The methods described are also being extended by means of a research team blog, which is being used as an informal journal, a repository of documentation and a portfolio of emerging drawing practice.

### 3 Drawing: being present, making present

#### 3.1 Space, touch and presence

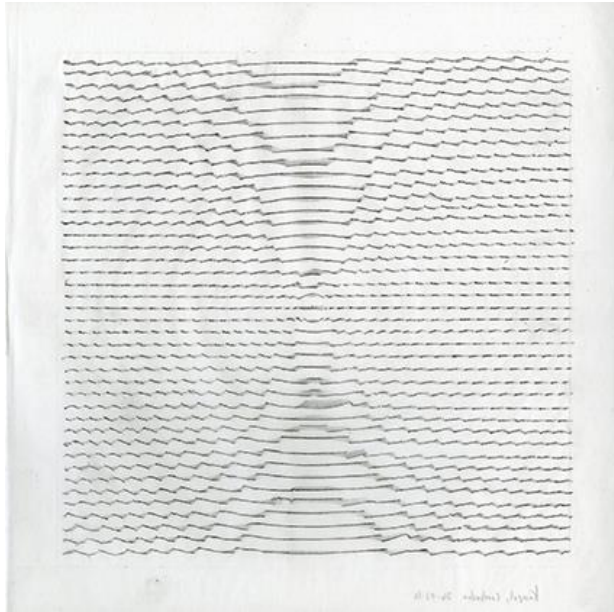


Figure 7: Duncan Bullen, Breath Drawing, Kampot 1, 2016. Photographer D Bullen.

Through touch and engagement with all the senses, both artists explore reciprocal relationships with the world and their sense of being in the world. Bullen describes the experience of spending time dwelling in a particular space and beginning to draw using paper, ruler and pencil. As he was drawing, he became less concerned with what the drawing looked like and more with the process, the action that he felt led to an integrated mode of being in the world or 'being present'. This was drawing to gain understanding, not simply in an intellectual sense but as awareness of a felt, embodied sense: an awareness of the nature of how things are, rather than what things might mean or represent. To this extent Bullen was not looking at the site or space within which he was drawing, but looking with it. This became a dynamic interchange in which consciousness was extended, through sitting still in the space: in this context the space became an empty site of possibility that Bullen experienced as acting upon him in unexpected ways. In both artists' drawing practice the aim is not to depict, imagine or express but rather to bring an inaccessible or intangible quality out. This involves a cultivation of receptivity characteristic of meditation practice and a trust in the results as they unfold, particularly through a focus on the sense of touch. For Bullen, this involves staying close to the surface, exploring both the surface on which marks are drawn and taking account of the reverse, where the consequence of the drawing activity can be apprehended. This approach invokes Dean Hughes' thinking about creative pedagogy, in which he advocates 'restriction and limitation' and 'an attitude that is concerned with dwelling and being resident' (2014: 74).



Figure 8: Duncan Bullen, Breath Drawing 03.07.16 30x30cm (detail front).  
Photographer L Eason.



Figure 9: Duncan Bullen, Breath Drawing 03.07.16 30x30cm (detail back).  
Photographer L Eason.

The poetic and philosophical resonance between Bullen's and Fox's articulations of their drawing practice and theory about meditation and touch invites deeper investigation. Skin and paper are often spoken of in relationship to one another and each possesses rich metaphorical power within the artists' practice: skin can be papery or likened to parchment and paper can be referred to as 'skin'. Human skin is alive to the sense of touch. As an organ skin is bi-directional, being receptive of information as well as presenting a boundary or, more accurately, an interface between our bodies and the wider world. As Lakoff and Johnson point out, as a consequence of this idea of ourselves as a container with a surface, 'we project our own in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded by surfaces. Thus

we also view them as containers with an inside and an outside' (2003: 29). For both artists, there is therefore a central focus on the necessity of the direct and physical process between the skin, the hand, the drawing material and paper and the positioning of the body in space. As the research continues, these aspects will be explored in relation to the body of literature on touch as one of the 'central forms of perceptual experience' (Fulkerson 2015). This will begin with consideration of Merleau Ponty (2004) and Derrida's work on Jean Luc Nancy and others (2005) as a means of navigating some of the philosophical issues raised.

### 3.2 Material and presence



Figure 10: Jane Fox, Wind Sketch 2, Cuckmere Valley under High & Over, 2015. Photographer J Fox.

In Fox's practice, wind is understood as a kinetic agent that activates the site of drawing, but importantly, wind is also understood and used as material. In *Being Alive*, Ingold asks what might be considered to be available when we think about materials and landscapes: 'What then is this material world? Of what does it consist?' Asking whether sunlight might be included, he goes on to analyse the implications of this:

But if sunlight were a constituent of the material world, then we would have to admit not only that the diurnal landscape differs materially from the nocturnal one, but also that the shadow of a landscape feature, such as a rock or a tree, is as much a part of the material world as the feature itself.  
(2011 Ingold: 21)

Ingold goes on to extend this line of thinking: What, then, of the air? When you breathe, or feel the wind on your face, are you engaging with the material world?' (2011, 21).

For Fox, this expanded concept of the material world facilitates the inclusion of phenomena at the fringes of experience and implicitly argues that materiality does not have to be reified in the world. This is core to Fox's practice, in which she attempts to make something at risk of being disregarded, overlooked or forgotten, visible: this is described as 'making present'. Sound is created at the interface of the work and serves to make the drawing process audible. This alerts Fox to environmental sound carried on the wind. Fragments of sound and voices conducted from elsewhere allow Fox to



make a set of connections between the act of drawing and memory, a process of bringing to mind.

The act of drawing therefore focuses and ‘makes present’ in brief and fleeting ways. The significance of making visible or making present is core to Bullen’s work, too. In order to make his drawings, Bullen lays paper onto a surface. To draw a straight line is rarely in his grasp because of the resistance and disruption of the surface on which the paper is placed. Consequently, each line becomes a record of the moment of its making, determined by factors that send the line in directions beyond his control. This act not only leaves a visible line on the paper, but also a physical embossing and occasional rupture to the surface.

Within this reciprocal interaction between artist, space and process, materials have specific qualities that are chosen and worked with. The Japanese paper that Fox uses is thin, translucent, flexible and robust: selected to meet the wind on more equal terms. This is a process that in another key metaphor Fox likens to sailing, in which when the paper flaps consistently and is fully engaged with the wind, marks happen rapidly upon little slack. When slack occurs through a drop in the wind there is a prolonged contact with the paper and a slippage becomes visible on the page. The unpredictability of the wind and the sensitivity of human touch bring this process alive. The paper can move freely to generate a rhythmic movement, which makes and breaks contact with the pen. The pen itself releases ink to surface by the slightest touch and a balance is achieved between the movement of the paper and the way that the pen is held. It can be held lightly, with a relaxed precision that enables the paper to do the work and a second layer of drawing appears in the form of the creases and folds that are blown in and beaten out, softening the surface and building line. The process is akin to highly attentive listening or ‘tuning in’ to being present; alert to maintaining the possibility of touch that can make a trace.



Figure 11: Jane Fox, Wind drawing II, Bantham, 2016. Photographer J Fox.

### 3.3 Drawing and being

‘To draw is not only to measure and put down, it is also to receive.’  
(2005 Berger: 77)

In the artists’ drawing practice, the aim is not to depict or imagine but rather to bring something out that is already there, yet intangible. Through the making of these drawings there is recognition in each practitioner of a felt sense of touching a particular environment and an awareness of being touched by a particular space. Why is this regaining of the sense of bodily experience important? It is connected, for both artists, with the facility to move between rationality or agency on the one hand and the surrendering of agency to chance on the other. Fox describes how drawing with this level of responsiveness enables ideas to remain within the flux of lived experience. As Viola puts it:

The intellect can give you the misconception that you understand something simply by thinking about it analytically, so that we forget that these are not questions to be answered through discursive logic, not problems to be solved but, rather, areas to be inhabited, to be encountered through Being.  
(1995 Viola: 273)

The drawings thus become a means through which to explore productive tensions between knowing and unknowing, between objective and subjective experience, between external and internal stimuli.

Articulating and framing practice through acts of making can be seen as a way of developing mind, body and habits. In this, it has an underpinning connection with the thinking behind the practice of meditation:

The ability to be present while getting the self out of the way is the great discovery that meditation makes possible. We think we are necessary but are startled to find out that we are not. Meditation teaches us how to put ourselves aside, and it shows us that when we achieve this we do not disappear, but we open to a more creative relationship with our minds, our feelings and the world  
(2010 Epstein: 48)

This putting aside of the self through making is closely connected to the idea of being present through practice. For Bullen in particular drawing has become a way of slowing down the making process, allowing him to explore with an economy of means graphic, meditative, temporal and sensory possibilities. In his practice, drawing is reduced to the elementary activity of making one mark after another in repeated sequence and he draws with a rhythm that is concurrent with his breathing, each line being drawn on the in-breath, as one might count the breath in mindfulness meditation.

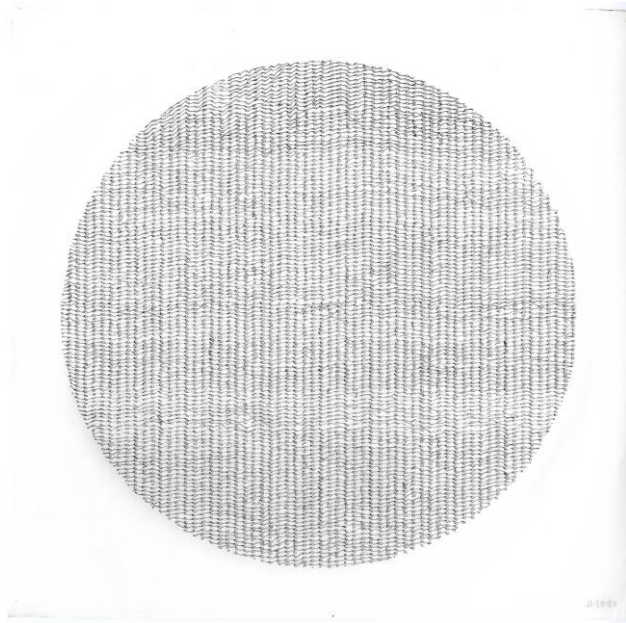


Figure 12: Duncan Bullen, Breath Drawing 03.07.16 30x30cm. Photographer D Bullen.

#### **4 Conclusion**

At this stage of the project, touch has emerged as a key concept, relating as it does to the importance of drawing as being in the moment, or 'being present', but also to the centrality of skin and the sense of touch as a site of reciprocity. The continuing research process will involve further consideration of the way in which the artists experience drawing in the moment as bi-directional, an act of making which is, at the same time, an act of receiving. Together with an expanded conceptualization (after Ingold 2011) of material that enables, for example, wind to be viewed as a drawing material, the drawing practice explored here can begin to be understood as collaborative. The process of researching this drawing practice has been one of making what were often tacit, felt experiences tangible, by for example focusing on and investigating the core metaphorical structures of the artists' thinking and practice. To this extent the research process is also a process of 'making present' so that a deeper understanding of this drawing can be made available verbally. The research is premised on the basis that art (drawing) practice, academic writing practice and theorization occur in interconnected ways and that research methods need to facilitate this.

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**Institutional and biographical information**

The Touching the World Lightly project received internal start-up funding from the Arts Practice and Performance Initiative of the College of Arts and Humanities of the University of Brighton in February 2016. All three researchers are members of the College of Arts and Humanities Drawing Research Interest Group (DRIG).

**Duncan Bullen** is an artist, academic and writer. His research encompasses the meditative, durational and sensory possibilities of drawing and printmaking both in terms of the activity of making and visual acuity. Bullen is interested in how we, as makers, not only shape the object made but also recognize how this shapes us, our world of work and the environment. He is a Principal Lecturer in the School of Art in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Brighton, where he is currently Academic Programme Leader of Fine Art.

<http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/staff/duncan-bullen>

**Jane Fox** is an artist and Senior Lecturer on Fine Art Printmaking in the School of Art, College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Brighton. Her arts practice embraces drawing, print, found matter, installation, and walking. Processes of exchange and collaboration are central to her research interests. Fox is an experienced facilitator who has worked in a wide range of educational and community settings and with collaborative installation works.

<http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/staff/jane-fox>

**Philippa Lyon** is a Research Fellow in the School of Art in the College of Arts and Humanities in the University of Brighton. Her main current research activity is in the field of applied drawing, where she focuses in particular on the impact of cross-disciplinary drawing education and the use and value of the manual drawing that occurs within clinical consultations. She convenes a cross-disciplinary drawing research group at the University of Brighton and has a particular interest in arts-health research collaborations.

<http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/staff/philippa-lyon>

**Address for correspondence:**

Dr Philippa Lyon  
School of Art, M55, College of Arts and Humanities  
University of Brighton  
58-67 Grand Parade  
Brighton BN2 0JY

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