



Drawing and Visualisation Research

BRIEF NOTES ON REPORTAGE DRAWING, VISUAL LANGUAGE AND THE CREATIVE AGENDA OF THE REPORTAGE ARTIST

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Through an exploration of my own reportage drawing and others, I seek to identify reportage drawing as an activity that is particularly well suited to the development of visual language and the refinement of not just schematic language, but highly personal mark making that is imbued with the artist's creative agenda.

Published in *TRACEY* | journal

Drawing In-Situ

Feb 2014

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Reportage drawing is a revelatory act that combines the challenges of quick, gestural drawing with some level of accuracy in the depiction of place. Add to that the complications of working in sometimes hostile or at the very least, less than ideal environments and you have a highly unique drawing act. It is difficult to discern to what degree the challenge of drawing on location informs or shapes the final outcome but one thing is certain, the depiction of that space is fated to the intention(s) of the artist. I contend this is particularly important in reportage drawing, as it is as much about selection, de-selection, augmentation, speculation and pure invention as it is about the accurate depiction of space. My reportage drawings are an extended exploration of a personal schema and visual language and, through an editorial approach to observational drawing, I am probing the potential of expressive caricature in revealing the emotional gradations of everyday living.

My drawings as a whole represent a long journey of refinement. That refinement is in a schematic language that has become more succinct and synthesized with time. Gombrich noted that schema development was essential for the artist but more significantly, that a schematic language be more than a reconstitution of established schemas. (1972, p.148) As Gombrich noted, 'We hear a lot about training the eye or learning to see, but this phraseology can be misleading if it hides the fact what we can learn is not to see but to discriminate' (1972, p.172). The vocabulary of marks in my drawings is the result of 'discrimination' in the selection, articulation, arrangement and every other on-the-spot decision made. It is a process of invention and modification of drawn marks that collectively imbue the work with an individual voice and an articulation of artistic intentions. Gombrich also noted this looking on the part of the artist as 'always an active process, conditioned by our expectations and adapted to situations. Instead of talking of seeing and knowing, we might do a little better to talk of seeing and noticing'. (1972, p.172) For my own work, this 'seeing and noticing' through observational drawing has provided a rich visual language with which to freely apply in drawing. The various schematic devices I employ in my drawings are informed by the totality of my aesthetic diet however, the refinement and development of those forms has come from invention necessitated by the demands of reportage drawing. As Ruskin notes, the 'excellence' of the artist 'depends wholly on refinement of perception'. (1971, p.12)

The formulation of my visual language happened through reportage drawing and this language, born from observation, took shape when looking became seeing and the challenge of depiction became the pleasure of invention. Ronald Searle said of his training at Cambridge Art School that it was drilled into him to have a sketchbook at all times. For him, the greatest benefit of drawing his surroundings was to attain the 'freedom' of drawing, both in terms of a practiced hand and in the confidence in rendering the various details of his observed world. Because of this, he rarely referred to his drawings once they were recorded. He had committed them to his memory. (Searle 1977, p.6) Rosand notes that Leonardo worked in very much the same way. He says of Leonardo's drawing practice

'the act of drawing served to create and record, and it was also operationally essential for the retrieval of those images stored.' (2002, p.93) This committal to memory works two ways. For one, there is a visual store of things drawn and an internalised understanding of those forms. Secondly, there is a consistency of mark that arises through rigorous drawing practice that imbues the marks with a personal signature (the maligned term 'style' is often used opaquely to identify this). This developing language often occurs in the sketchbook through reportage drawing. The language then consists of both observed forms and previously observed forms from memory. Memory acts to liberate the artist by preparing for him or her a store of observed and remembered forms for application in new drawings. This contributes to the speed with which one can work and formulates, through a consistency of observed and remembered shapes, the vocabulary of visual language. Searle's impressive reportage drawing of his time in a Japanese POW camp in World War II (see fig. 1) is a testament to his prodigious visual memory. The recorded detail in the drawing and the depiction of the space reveals a visual memory that could not only retain a wealth of information but could purpose that information towards a highly resolved scene. It is clear that the scene is constructed in some way with Searle aware of spatial depth and composition. No doubt these were observed happenings in the camp but the arrangement of these small moments into the total image is an act of committing remembered images with the confidence of direct contour line. Add to this the circumstances of the artist while creating the drawing and we can see the unique power of reportage drawing for capturing raw human experience and exhibiting the visual acuity of the artist.

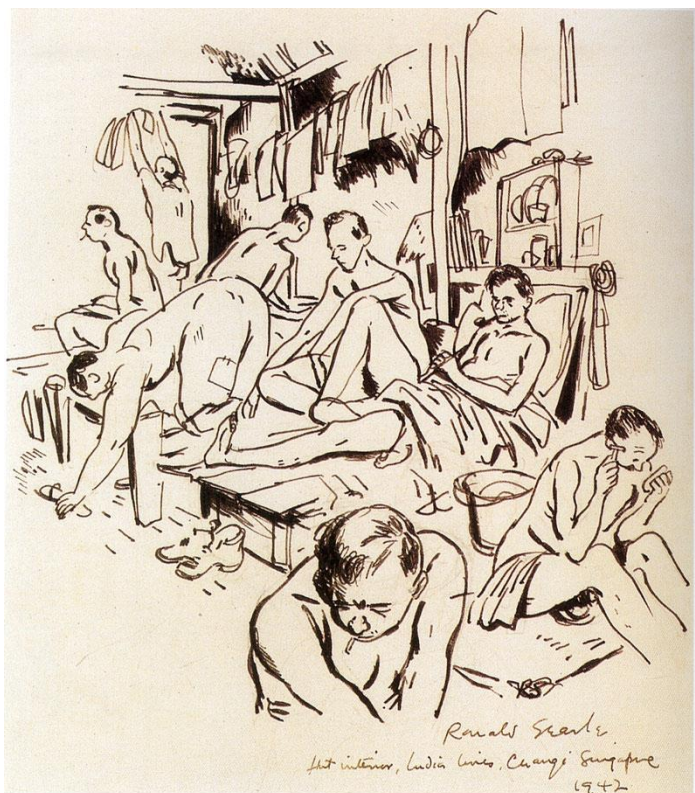


FIGURE 1 - RONALD SEARLE. SKETCHBOOK WORK IN JAPANESE PRISON CAMP IN 1942.

The seductive power of reportage drawing is in how we experience what Philip Rawson terms 'first thoughts' (coming originally from *primi pensieri*). (1969, p.294) The sketch is often mystified or under evaluated because of its representation of artistic mastery and because it (the sketch) appears 'effortless' and is often regarded as a 'symbol of genius'. (2010, p.36). But this 'casual skill' seen in the sketch is also, in Western art, seen as part of what Petherbridge calls a 'relational chain', a stepping stone towards the finished drawing, painting, sculpture, etc. (2010, p.31) Just to be clear, Rawson is not referring to reportage drawing per se and indicates the 'first thought' drawings he refers to are products of the artist's mind and are largely preparatory (even when they are never taken beyond the sketch). That being said, the reportage drawing is very much a 'first thought', although differing from Rawson's imaginative sketch as its generative impetus is more a fusion of outward and inward vision. The first thought or thoughts in reportage drawing however, have the same graphic immediacy where we find, as Rawson notes:

...in many such drawings we may expect to find errors of placing brusquely corrected, overdrawing, rough strokes standing for inventions which are left to the spectator's imagination, and in some parts the sketchiest indications of things which are to be worked out later, such as volumes without shading. (1969, p.295)

Reportage drawing, as an elaborated sketch, presents itself as a 'first thought' even though, more than likely, it reflects the accumulation of several. To see drawing in its raw, immediate state, still searching and seeking form, we are seeing drawing as Rosand notes 'appeal to the imagination of the viewer; in and through his imaginative engagement, completing suggested form in his mind, the viewer becomes a participant in the creative process itself'. (2002, p.22)

My NYC drawing of tourists in Times Square (fig. 2) gives some credence to this notion that the sketch has a distinguishing graphic quality and brings us closer to the artist's thinking. Although it is one of the most unresolved of all of the drawings, the 'sketchy indications' of forms and unfinished areas leave the viewer to bridge implied forms with their own understanding of the place. The graphic qualities of the marks themselves also play a role in making the sketchy reportage drawing appealing and making the artist's hand selfevident. It is perhaps this communion with the artist's process that makes the sketch and reportage so engrossing. We are not just seeing visual language writ large but we are seeing the fundamental triumph of artistic activity in the translation from idea to image, especially when it is not brought to completion.



FIGURE 2 - THE AUTHORS REPORTAGE DRAWING. TIMES SQUARE, NEW YORK, USA.

George Grosz's work is also instructive in revealing the links between observation in the form of reportage drawing and the formulation of visual language, even the mature work of the artist. Looking at his sketchbooks, it is clear that his topography of a failed society is born in the act of reportage. Grosz applied a 'businesslike' dedication to his sketchbook work, tirelessly observing his environment and honing his skills. (1993, p.44) This can be seen in figures 3 and 4 in which Grosz's sketchbook shows that certain archetypes that will be familiar to those who know his work, were first drawn and cultivated through reportage. These sketchbook works often became 'schematic restatements' in his finished work, clearly drawing a direct line from his observational drawings to his social commentary work. (1993, p.46.) This can clearly be seen in figure 5 in which we have a constructed scene

likely based on observed characters. Here the characters are re-purposed in a composition that collectively speaks to the grim realities of the street. Grosz was particularly passionate about his work coming from the observed world. Later in his career he stated 'all of our newer art suffers from too much fantasy, invention, instead of nature.' (1993, p.127) It is clear that Grosz saw nature (arguably human nature) as his greatest inspiration but this does not, I believe, mean that observation is lacking invention nor do I think did Grosz. In fact, I believe that the act of reportage drawing is innately inventive and the matrix of quick, responsive, intuitive marks that are made from fleeting observation and more often, remembered, residual gestural forms, constitutes more pure invention and raw imagination than many intentionally fantastical works (that surely rely on some concrete observation for believability).



FIGURE 3 - GEORGE GROSZ SKETCHBOOK WORK FIGURE 4 - GEORGE GROSZ SKETCHBOOK WORK

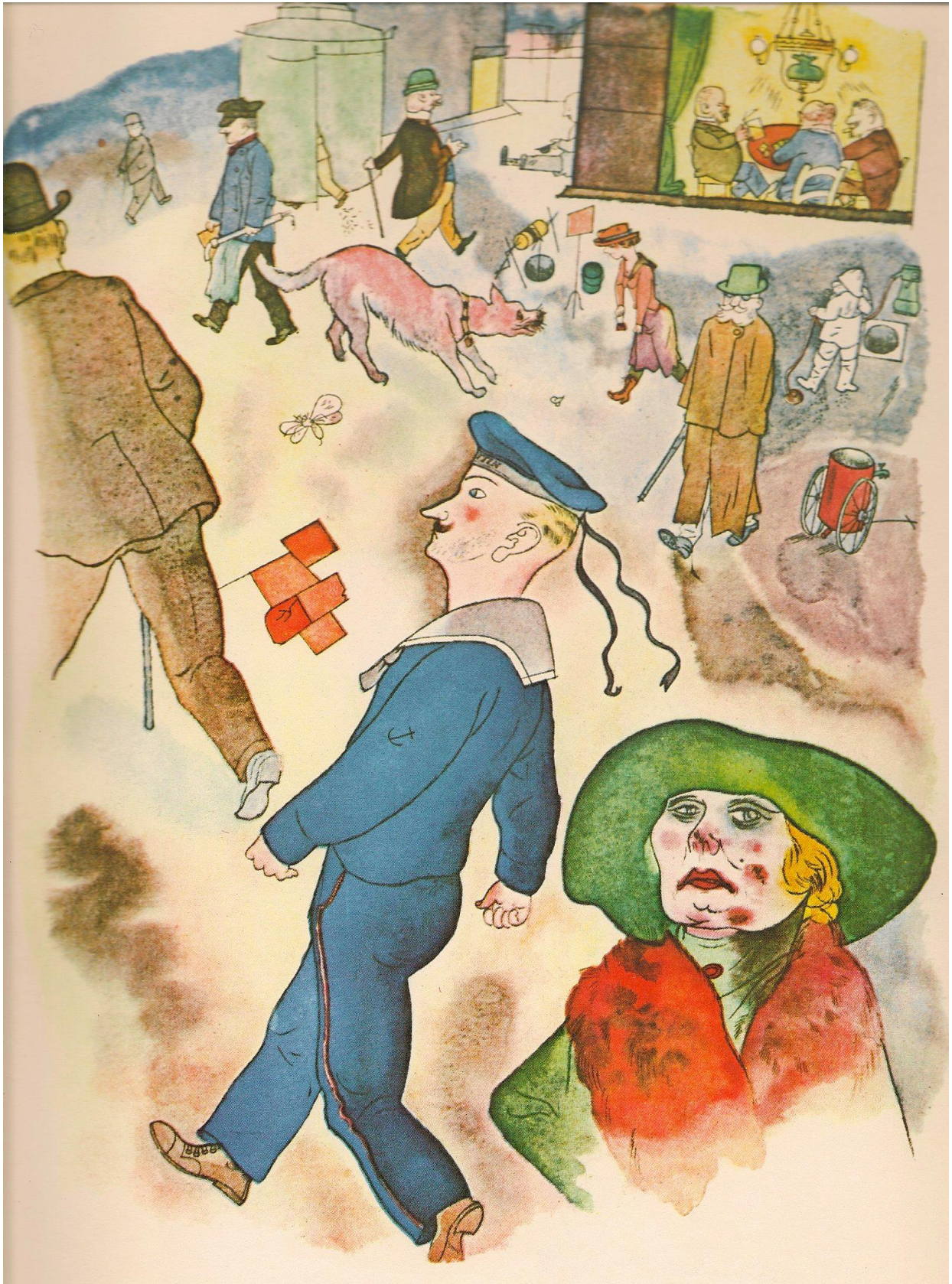


FIGURE 5 - GEORGE GROSZ IMAGE FROM ECCE HOMO

Grosz's sketchbook work, like my own, contains much highly experimental and tangential work, outside of concrete observation. It is not always schema refinement that is present and for the sketchbook and reportage drawing to be judged solely on its exposure of indicative visual language is limiting. As Deanna Petherbridge states, the sketch represents the 'freedom to play with and subvert the formalities of finished graphic style.' (2010, p.29) It is important to mention that reportage drawing (at least the highly personal work of Grosz and others) is informed by an aesthetic that is not solely anchored to the demands of the location in which it is made. What I mean is that the vitality of the gesture and the resulting immediacy of the marks are not the only stylistic identifiers of reportage drawing. Figure 3 and 4 shows this clearly as Grosz explores observation through a highly stylized lens. Grosz was an avid collector of children's drawings and toilet graffiti and his drawing, although inspired by observations of real people, were very much influenced by the raw honesty in readily available public and even popular graphic culture of his time. (Rewald et al. 2006). The aesthetic of reportage drawing is often similar because of the demands of the act. However, these are the works of artists' whose visual diet is highly individual, therefore, the work, particularly that of established artists, has the imprint of a creative agenda.

Mario Minichiello's work as a reportage artist and educator has shaped my thinking and his reportage work is a compelling example of highly personal observation. As a student of his inaugural illustration programme at Loughborough, what I gained was a re-appreciation of drawing as a transformative act for the artist not just in terms of skills gained, but also in the clearer articulation of thought and indeed, the total expression of self. Mario's work, as seen in figure 6, bristles with a sense that we are experiencing, on a very sensory level, an actual event. Although my own work is admittedly 'constructed' reportage, there seems to be in Mario's work a desire to reveal the hand and the 'in the moment' quality of experience (through a deceptively simple contour line). He says, referring to the distinct quality of drawing compared to other media, 'drawn imagery seems to allow the viewer to start internalising information gained not just through what they directly see but they are also able to connect to their own experience and imagination.' (Minichiello 2006, p.145) The highly synthesized line exhibited in his drawing brings us closer to how the artist experienced the event. Besides the quirky unfinished lines and range of graphic marks, we see drawing as a lens of human experience that has a corporality that a photographic image could not. Its power is in, as mentioned before, the awareness of the hand and that for me is the seductive power of these images.



FIGURE 6 - MARIO MINICHELLO. THE ARREST. REPORTAGE DRAWING FROM APEC CONFERENCE IN SYDNEY

The drawings below are from Long Beach Island, New Jersey, New York City and Bath are from late July 2013. Using a square sketchbook, the first consideration of the drawings is to demark some vague concept of the composition. This however does not always happen in a considered manner. What is more common is that one observed character is resolved and either surrounding figures are sketched in or, other observed people are repositioned to 'fill out' the composition and create contrasts that I feel strengthen the spatial depth in the image. Figure 7 is a good example of this as I did the close up of the older woman and added the hairy man afterwards to create the intimate, and, in this case, the somewhat unsettling effect of the cinematic close up. Contrasts abound in this and other images. In this image, like others, the foreground character is more richly detailed which further creates the illusion of depth.



FIGURE 7 - THE AUTHORS REPORTAGE DRAWING. LONG BEACH ISLAND, NEW JERSEY, USA.

Spatial depth is a significant focus of the drawings as I am interested in the viewer entering a space in which these characters, although mostly unrelated beach goers and city dwellers, are juxtaposed to make commentary about beauty, the grotesque, frivolity, decadence, decay and blissful ignorance. With some sketchy indication of a background with a shoreline, umbrella or wave, my aim is to give just enough context to place the characters in a setting that is familiar. It is important that the space of the drawing can be entered so creating foreground, middle and background elements is essential (although not always all three). Additionally, this placement of figures enables the viewer to feel immersed in the scene and as illustrated in figure 8, the viewer has a distinct perspective akin to occupying the same space as the drawn figures. These drawings represent a shift in

my reportage drawing towards much more constructed scenes as seen here. This orchestration is no less anchored in reality but the arrangement of the figures and their haphazard relationship to one another is often a total fabrication.



FIGURE 8 - THE AUTHORS REPORTAGE DRAWING. LONG BEACH ISLAND, NEW JERSEY, USA.

The aim for the drawings is to capture a real or imagined moment of rapturous joy and or, the contrasting weightiness of some profound reckoning; both captured in a quick responsive drawing. The drawing (figure 9) illustrates this well with a canoodling young couple at the feet of an older matriarchal figure. The smooth supple skin of the young couple contrasts with the hardened face of the mother or onlooker. There is much ambiguity in the expressions of the characters in this drawing and the others. This openendedness is intentional and lends the drawings some level of realism not in the

manner with which they are depicted, but rather the frankness of their expressions (both facial and through body language). Figure 10 is also a good illustration of this as both characters are essentially expressionless although independently believable as a person engrossed in a book or staring out to sea. This is the twofold power of reportage drawing. In terms of content, we have two equally influential things to consider. One is the drawing itself and the other is what the drawing represents. Because we are ascribing to the artists vision in drawing, we are guided by both how the drawing was made and what we perceive the artist intends for us to think. The true interpretation of the work is ultimately highly subjective and therefore sustains our interest because it is not, and cannot, be fixed with meaning.



FIGURE 9 - THE AUTHORS REPORTAGE DRAWING. LONG BEACH ISLAND, NEW JERSEY, USA.



FIGURE 10 - THE AUTHORS REPORTAGE DRAWING. LONG BEACH ISLAND, NEW JERSEY, USA.

Memory plays a significant role in how my reportage drawings come to life. After many years of practice, I have developed a clearer picture and means of transferring mental images into drawings. What I have found is that the image that I am working from is already a drawing in my mind. Sometimes, the observed character is not immediately drawn and is drawn later. The image needs to be held onto until the opportunity arises to get it down on paper. This mental image is a residual gesture, a snapshot with a varying degree of detail. Figure 11 was executed in this manner as the two older ladies waiting on the TKTS queue in Times Square had quickly moved out of view in the cacophonous crowd. My drawing was led by the guiding mental image of the two ladies whose sweet powdery faces seemed to typify that older New Yorker that spends their time seeing cheap Broadway matinees.

These drawings require considerable confidence in the durability of the mental image and with the residual memory of the gesture as the only guide, the drawings are often highly inventive.



FIGURE 11 - THE AUTHORS REPORTAGE DRAWING. TIMES SQUARE, NEW YORK, USA.

That guiding mental image is anchored to a strong gesture. The gesture for me is the single most essential foundation of a good drawing. The pointy nose or the curvaceous body are the parts of the drawing that I find most pleasurable, idiosyncratic and serendipitous. Often the discovery of the true character of a person is in how the gesture synthesizes the essence of the observed person. Although often a simple understated line, it is this observed and applied line that gives solidity to form and elevates the drawing from

ungrounded cartoony excess towards penetrating caricature, grounded in observed reality. Figure 12, like many others, was very much driven by the gesture. The two figures contrast each other greatly and the foreground figure was the first drawn. My interest in her was the gesture of her unsheathed older body and how it expressed both a stark sense of mortality and, a defiance of that mortality in her spritely gait. The contrasting large woman behind her is all curves but her gesture points toward the ruinous absurdity of the overweight body. The gesture enables the capture of the inherent energy of the figure and pose without fixing it in place. This is the strength of the best drawings as even after execution, they crackle with infused life and indeed the implication of movement (even to thoughts of their next step).



FIGURE 12 - THE AUTHORS REPORTAGE DRAWING. LONG BEACH ISLAND, NEW JERSEY, USA.

In reportage, we see the demands of the task necessitating invention, therefore, new language and applications emerge. In the act of reportage drawing we are being flexible thinkers, making things up on the spot as the need presents itself. The demands of time and circumstance make first, second and third thoughts come at lightening speed and with little interference from an interrupting mind that normally imposes reflection. This reveals a snapshot of not only the creative activity of capturing a place, but it reveals the priorities, selections, inclinations, and ideas the artist is imparting in the total image. Of course the limitations of time in reportage drawing demand consideration of the totality of the design. However, the total design is often considered in an intuitive and responsive manner considering the quick selection of subjects and the complexities of set and setting. Gesture drawing enables this, allowing the vigorous notation of forms and a rapid realization of the total design. This design reveals with some clarity how the artist approaches complex problems and allows us to discern his or her compositional intent. While the reportage drawing may be quickly executed with little further working into or, a much more finished work with previous marks still apparent, the reportage drawing is a record of activity that combines intuitive observation and the artist working against his or her own limitations. It is perhaps the furtive desperation of drawing on location that reveals that idiosyncratic mark that I am calling visual language.

In our sped up world, reportage drawing gives us, with great immediacy, a window into how artists' see the world and the fundamental visual language they use to construct it. Drawings are imbued with the intention(s) of the artist and because it is both the representation of an idea or ideas and, a series of marks (intentional or not) on a piece of paper, looking at drawings is a multifaceted experience. It is only until we look and reflect on drawings that we fully understand what it was that others or we actually intended for them. Much has been said about how drawing is a revelatory process and I can't agree more. As the drawings above attest, quick observational drawings can speak, with great clarity, to our core understandings about the world we live in and, how we translate that complexity in drawn marks.

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