

ACTS OF DRAWING SOMETHING YOU CANNOT SEE

Anthony Powis is an architect and currently PhD Researcher as part of Monsoon Assemblages at the School of Architecture and Cities, University of Westminster, where he also teaches a design studio..

They used to be called physical appearances because they belonged to solid bodies. Now appearances are volatile.

(Berger 2001b: online)

Most people who have at some point been students of visual culture will remember the moment when, either reading or watching John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), the multiple layers of image, representation, and reality suddenly delaminated from one another and stretched apart, became distant, and never went back together. Berger, as others have done since (e.g. Rattenbury, 2002), reminded us again and again that images are not the things they depict, and that representations of things are both made and read depending on habit and convention. They communicate an attitude to something, an idea and condition how we are to read the world.

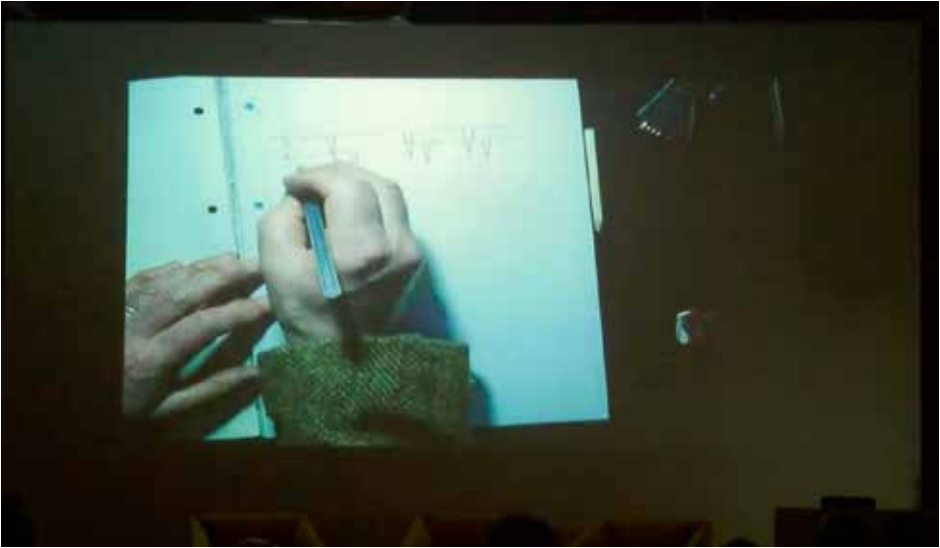
This is one interpretation: that images represent a narrow part of reality, conditioned by specific intentions and assumptions. Another, also articulated in Berger's writing, is that making images, specifically drawings, potentially opens up worlds beyond the immediately apparent. Can drawing be used to illuminate things unseen? I returned to Berger's writing in my PhD project on groundwater because of his comment that "images were first made to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent" (1972: 3), and the recognition that those images outlasted what they sought to represent. Berger wasn't thinking about groundwater, but this felt a lot like a problem with which I was confronted in my work: that groundwater research, and its dissemination, is often described as "making the invisible visible" (Nilekani, 2018: online). It chases after something which is both unseen and always in motion. This dual problem of the "invisible and capricious nature of groundwater" (ibid.) presents immediate challenges for any form of research into groundwater, particularly that which makes use of visual representations.

I have suggested that drawing is a practice of expressing ideas about objects, rather than representing objects themselves. The drawing is not once removed (i.e. a record of a thing) but twice removed. It is a description of an idea about a thing. Drawing is a method with which to understand something, but a drawing describes a theoretical idea, not a reality, albeit usually through engagement with some form of material evidence. Drawing is not simply about "reflecting and mirroring" in the sense of making a so-called accurate description, but must instead

“transgress its limits a little” (Lefebvre and Régulier, 2004: 80). To speculate is partly to show the world back to itself, but also to hypothesise, “to contemplate and theorise upon” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019). It is to enact matter, rather than simply mirror as if from a fixed position, outside of and discontinuous with the world. In this process of grasping things and ideas at a distance, drawings are thinking tools and tools for making contact. One way of expressing this is to say that drawings help us to see: they are processes which the anthropologist Andrew Causey describes as “seeing-drawing” (2017: 11). Causey defines looking as being about what we already know, but seeing is about perception (ibid.: 12), a kind of feeling towards something and bringing it into being. Drawing is a process which “envisions” (ibid.), one of “illumination” (ibid.) after a period of incubation.

Causey also suggests that ideas committed in drawings have generally been formed through visual experiences. However, drawing groundwater never derives from visual experience for it is impossible to have a visual experience of groundwater. Instead, to draw groundwater involves feeling in the dark, inferring a visual record from a non-visual experience. In this instance, drawing is a process by which I, as well as and alongside others such as scientists and activists, make information into images. In order to do this, such as when making a geological section from borehole logs, requires me to infer and fill in the blanks until I have a comprehensible picture that I can interpret in relation to things that I have had visual experience of (including other drawings). Disciplinary conventions use analogy and metaphor to comprehend via seeing that which one cannot see. This is similar to the problem in Susanne Keller’s (1998) account of the evolution of the geological section: their function is precisely to make visual something which is otherwise unseen and unviewable. This applies to well-established forms of representation, but also to emerging ones like numerically-based models which generate many thousands of textual and graphic images based upon a mixture of observation, assumption, and improvisation.

Tania Kovats (2005: 8) calls this mode of visualisation-by-analogy “a positive act of displacement” by which one thing is used to describe another. Thinking through the double meaning of the verb to draw, Kovats reminds us that making a drawing, like drawing water from a well, is an act of making something appear in the world, of taking something from a hidden place and bringing it to our attention. Drawing on and drawing up are also dependent upon selection: isolating a part from the whole, or carving out a piece of it, is a necessary condition of making something visible. This describes an always dual process of both observation and projection, which for Kovats means that “acts of drawing occur all the time” (2005, 7).



In the sense that drawing is about making contact, perhaps drawing isn't a visual (in the sense of optical) process at all. It is only ever about relating certain observations, which are to some degree mediated (whether by sense, prejudice, and/or instrumentation) to prior knowledge, in order to generate a speculative image of an intra-active encounter between multiple, indistinct matters. Such observations will almost always include haptic, audial, olfactory, and other impressions. If we think again of drawing water from a well, we realise that the drawing is not at either end (top or bottom), but that most of this process takes place in the space between the first contact of the bucket with the base of the well, and its coming to the surface. This long gestation of what it is to draw focusses on the process, the work of drawing, not the product: the time spent between drawing and drawn where the thing not yet at the surface is being brought into view by the act of drawing.

Groundwater, as a hybrid material of both grounds and waters, in rest and unrest, is never experienced or seen directly. So its being drawn is a composition of traces, which are brought together to indicate both a material state and/or its ongoing change. By doing so, each act of drawing necessarily brings to the surface only certain traces, and analogises them with something already visible. In the case of groundwater, the description of the condition is limited by the condition itself: that of inaccessibility (both visually, and physically). But at the same time groundwater is drawing itself, leaving an archaeology of movements in and through sedimentary strata, creating transient records which can be drawn up and thought with.

Fig.01. Tim Ingold projects his notepad on the wall and draws as he speaks, Monsoon [+other] Grounds Symposium, 21 March 2019, University of Westminster.

The point of this, then is not to make the claim that drawing makes for better observation, or closer looking. This isn't about saying we see (visually) better or more clearly when we draw, but that we literally create things when we draw. I find Berger the most appealing when he is seeming to suggest that drawings are not about trying to "seduce the visible" (1992: 188). Drawing is not pictorial, but starts with making "notes on paper" (ibid.), and proceeds to become more-than-record: the drawing itself is an act of making something appear.

INDETERMINACY

So much for the invisible, but what about the relation of drawing to the dynamic? Groundwater is always registered in movement. Whereas a photograph of a tree, for instance, makes a record of the tree as a thing at a moment in time and despite its constant movement, groundwater is accessed only through measures and traces of its movements, which indirectly describe certain material conditions and relations with other matter. Berger had two important points to make about this.

Firstly, if a drawing is a record of a discovery one has made, rather than received, then the drawing itself is an event which "contains the time of its own making" (Berger and Mohr, 1982: 96). Berger dwells upon this time of the drawing-making process as being the difference between making and receiving, which emphasises that drawing is about an intra-active encounter.

Isn't the act of drawing, as well as the drawing itself, about becoming rather than being? Isn't a drawing the polar opposite of a photo? The latter stops time, arrests it; whereas a drawing flows with it.

(Berger, 2005b: 124)

The processual nature of drawing, then, makes it absolutely suited to working with the processual nature of matter. Kovats opens her enquiry into drawing by giving primacy to the "liquid knowledge" which "floods and informs the work" (2005: 10). This means admitting the liquid processes that are fundamental to drawing with ink or paint, and in the production of paper and canvas (leaking, bleeding, staining, soaking, swelling, etc.) into the "congress between mark, medium and subject" (ibid.) of drawing itself. The making of a drawing, and what it depicts, are thus bound up with the vagaries of fluid motion, of "the spill, the drip, or the blob" (ibid.). This brings "the emblem of uncertainty" (ibid.) into the process of drawing.

These are forms of disrupted practice which emphasise the drawing as a unique event. Acts of drawing are complex combinations

of knowledge, surprise, chance, time, and the unknown. As the Artist Ilana Halperin writes, “drawing is a study in potential” (2003: online). It expands, not limits, possibilities, and provides a means of accessing and translating across scales.

Tectonic plates move at the same rate as your fingernails grow. Glaciers move one to two meters a day. Every moment has an infinite number of possibilities. Drawing provides a framework through which new territories can emerge
(Halperin, 2003: online)

Drawing groundwater requires practical resistance to assumed certainty, or to what Whitehead called “misplaced concreteness” (1925: 52). There needs to be some acknowledgement in the form of the drawing that what is being drawn has only been lightly experienced. In my own work, this has meant injecting other kinds of artificial disruptions into the drawing process in order to move away from the idea of the act of drawing as being to approach a known outcome. Instead, by expanding the space and time of the drawing process to allow more room for ludic creativity, or non-cognitive intention, drawing becomes an open-ended exploration rather than a pre-planned record.

Secondly, Berger describes the encounter of drawing-making as always unfinished. The act of drawing is forever reaching out at something, as opposed to a recreating or capturing it. “Real drawing” is not about supplying an answer but instead “is a constant question, is a clumsiness, which is a form of hospitality towards what is being drawn” (Berger, 2001a: 75). This openness or hospitality generates a kind of “collaboration” (ibid.): we are not only “always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (Berger, 1972: 1), we can also say that neither element precedes the encounter (Barad, 2007).

In this interdependence of the seen and the seeing, drawing “approaches something which is eloquent but which we cannot altogether understand” (Berger, 2005a: 80). It is a kind of never-ending catching up, of foregrounding the unfinished, of the remainder through which the drawing never quite corresponds with its subject. Drawing is the opposite of permanence or record, which is not to say it is inaccurate, but that it must combine great attentiveness with an awareness of the limits of perception. My interest in geological and archaeological drawings comes from their ability to reconcile the precise and the ambiguous: whereas many architectural drawings tend to render liquid, mucky things with imagined precision, other forms of drawing leave space for the unfinished. Since they aren’t the end of a process, they are situated within a conversation with the material, rather than being observations from outside, from a completely different realm. “There’s not really a



point where you realise that there's nothing more to correct—and if you were aware of that, it would probably be very bad” (Berger, 2011: online).

The idea of never being fully able to draw something, then, is important when drawing groundwater. Berger's assertion that arriving at a final “answer” (2001a: 75) would be a very worrying thing, refers to the impossibility of absolute depiction, and the necessity of ongoing collaboration. There needs to be something left over, some residue, something unresolved in the drawing.

If something is complete in itself, perfection, nothing is left over, there is an end of it. If there is a remainder there is no end to it. So the remainder is the germ and material cause for what subsists. It is the concrete reality of a thing.

(Kramrisch, 1946: 45)

Matter is incomplete, in both formation and degradation, and so drawing matter must be too. Just as Elizabeth Grosz describes the human body as being “incomplete ... a series of uncoordinated potentialities” (1992: 243), if a drawing is about resolving the space between the observer and the object, it can never reach resolution because if it did, that would be the end of collaboration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay was written during my tenure as a PhD researcher as part of Monsoon Assemblages, a research project supported by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement no. 679873).

All photos and images are by the author

REFERENCES

- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berger, J. (2011). 'Ways of Seeing, being an artist, and Marxism.' *Newsnight*. BBC. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5y7QRt2bws>.
- (2005a.) 'Branching Out.' In *Berger on Drawing*, Savage, J. (ed.), 78–83. Aghabullogue, Co. Cork, Ireland: Occasional Press.
- (2005b.) 'Lobster and Three Fishes: A Dialogue between John and Yves Berger.' In *Berger on Drawing*, Savage, J. (ed.), 119–45. Aghabullogue, Co. Cork, Ireland: Occasional Press.
- (2001a.) 'Drawing: Correspondence with Leon Kossoff.' In *The Shape of a Pocket*, 69–84. London: Bloomsbury.
- (2001b.) 'Steps towards a Small Theory of the Visible.' In *The Shape of a Pocket*, 9–24. London: Bloomsbury.
- (1992). 'Drawing on Paper.' In *Keeping a Rendezvous*. London: Granta.
- (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. Great Britain: BBC and Penguin Books.
- Berger, J., and Mohr, J. (1982). *Another Way of Telling: A Possible Theory of Photography*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Bergson, H. (2007). *Creative Evolution*. A. Mitchell (Trans.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Causey, A. (2017). *Drawn to See*. Ontario: University of Toronto Press.
- Grosz, E. (1992). 'Bodies-Cities.' In B. Colomina (Ed.), *Sexuality and Space*, 241–54. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Halperin, I. (2003). 'Integrating Catastrophe. A Talk on Drawing.' http://www.ilanahalperin.com/new/drawing_talk.html.
- Kovats, T. (2005). *The Drawing Book—a Survey of Drawing: The Primary Means of Expression*. London: Black Dog.
- Kramrisch, S. (1946). *The Hindu Temple*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.
- Lefebvre, H. and Régulier., C. (2004). 'The Rhythmanalytical Project.' In *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Elden, S. and Moore, G. (Trans.), 73–83. London: Continuum.
- Nilekani, R. (2018). 'Rohini Nilekani Dreams of Making Invisible Water Visible.' *Livemint*, August 10, <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/7ztndZVQNJFd9HVtfn9vnl/Rohini-Nilekani--Making->
- Oxford English Dictionary. (2019). "speculate, v." *OED Online*. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/186112>.
- Rattenbury, K. (2002). *This Is Not Architecture: Media Constructions*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1925). *Science and the Modern World*. London: Macmillan.