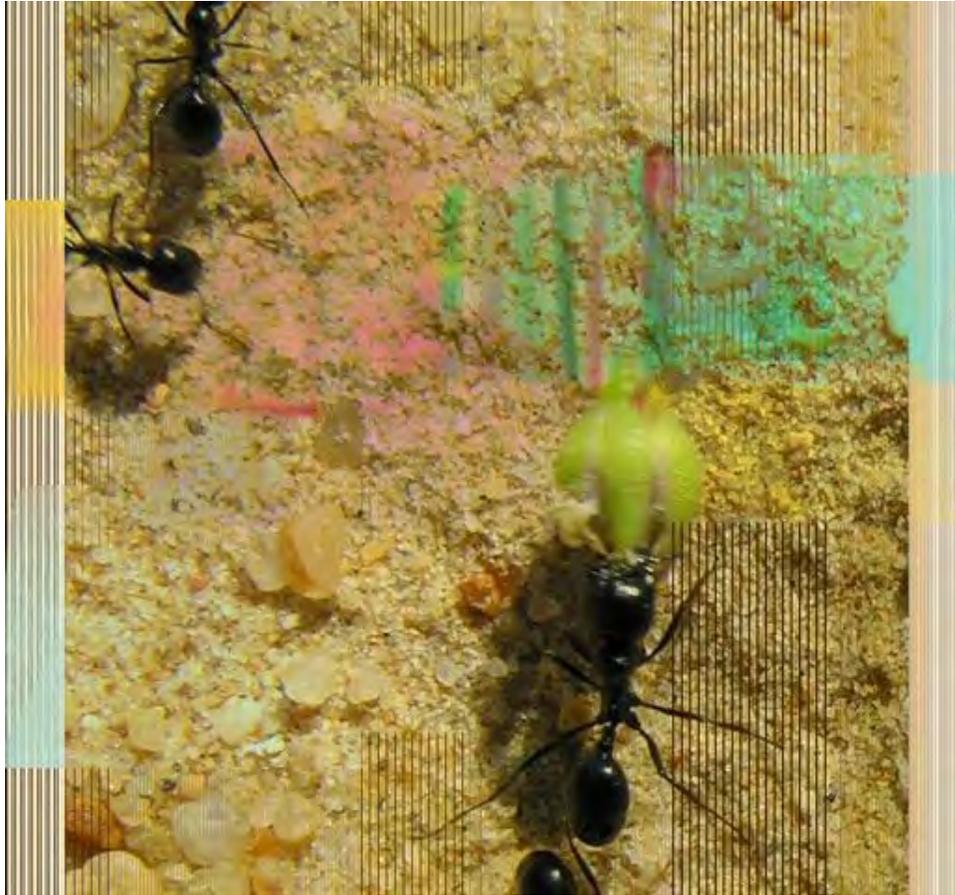


Drawing lessons for ants

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James Faure Walker Ant Postcard 1 2006 16" x 16" (40 cms x 40 cms) archival Epson print

Why ants? And why should they need drawing lessons? Let me try and explain. We normally see ants from an aerial point of view, as lines of dots on a flattish plane. The connection with drawing - you may think - must be to do with laying trails of sugar: the paths they make in sand, a miniature Richard Long walking drawing seen from the sky; or perhaps SimAnt, Will Wright's predecessor of the Sims; or the 'marching ants' of the selection tool. But here I am speculating about drawing, about the clash of values between digital drawing and supposedly traditional methods.

What if we took this quite different perspective, the ant's point of view? What would ants' feel about the drawing process? Perhaps they follow unquestioningly a rigid dogma. Perhaps they don't think about it at all. I am not an ant expert. They may well be communicating something to each other that counts as drawing, but that we would fail to recognize as such. They may be immersed in their art history, their own personal mark making. But I doubt whether they would take any interest at all in our culture of life drawing. Observational drawing would not make much sense. They really do see the world differently.

So this paper is something of a thought experiment about viewpoints, and views about drawing. The worlds of drawing and new media have drifted apart. Drawings, in the form of lines drawn by pen-plotters, were shown at early ISEA exhibitions. I first exhibited in the ISEA exhibition at Groningen in 1990. The 'algorists' form the core of the Patric Prince collection of early computer art at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Ten, twenty years ago conversations at ISEA conferences were about emerging sub divisions - generative art, multimedia, interactivity, virtual reality, web art - and gradually 2D art got left behind. Would 'digital art' be a separatist movement, or would it be absorbed into the mainstream of contemporary art? With so few artists using computers, talk of the elite pioneers, a 'digital avant-garde' seemed to make sense. 'Object-based art' would wither away.

We could be now in a phase of mutual tolerance where several incompatible philosophies coalesce. There does not now appear to be much of a belief in digital art as a movement, yet alone as the portal to a future of virtual art, something quite different from 'art as we know it'. On the other side, attitudes opposed to technology have softened, though a colleague remarked that once you get recognized as a digital artist, you only get proper recognition when no one notices that the work is digital. There are still underlying divisions. If you are on an MA Digital Arts course you can be as unconscious as an ant of any past, whether it be Gothic Architecture, Victorian painting or the texts of post-modernism. Nor would you need to draw.

Likewise the ant, in this conjecture, would just be programmed to serve the whole community – a model sometimes proposed for the socially conscious artist attempting relational aesthetics. Is there evidence of obsolete art forms dropping out of sight? Not really, given the chatter on painting blogs. Painters have mobiles, websites, and produce inkjet editions. Could there actually be a drawing renaissance? The online drawing community does have a 'born again' new confidence: belief in drawing as a standalone art form; the Green agenda; antipathy towards techno art; the growth of collaborative and performance art drawing; educational reform; and intellectual muscle represented in the blossoming of drawing PhDs. 'Get Drawing' campaigns argue that it is the basis of visual thinking, the discipline that underlies every other art form. Drawing exhibitions are announced on Facebook. New media have not supplanted old media; they have served to enhance them. The types of drawing that find favour do reflect this particular ethos, with a preference for the organic over the artificial, the hand-woven over the synthetic, the primitive over the graphic.

You might argue that here is a case of the 'art instinct' breaking through the veneer of technology; just as the ants carry on indifferent to terrain - kitchen or sand dune, it is all the same - so humankind needs to make its mark on the cave regardless of the technology at hand. But if this were just instinct would you need to educate the artist, or train the ant? I wonder, by the way, what the phrase 'classically trained', applied to artists, actually means. Can a

draughtsman be 'trained'? We also speak of drawing software that learns, and can be trained. This leads to the question of whether, or how a drawing method can be codified in a manual. In effect you read and then teach yourself by picking up the tricks of the trade. And how do drawing concepts and assumptions shape drawing software? Do software manuals take the same approach as how-to-draw manuals? Could you really learn to draw simply by following instructions, or by learning software? Have art schools been right in keeping computer graphics off the curriculum? For decades drawing manuals – called book academies - were banned from the Royal Academy. They threatened the authority of the professor. I have heard opponents of the art school studio system, where tutors teach the subject person to person, call it the 'magic dust' method. What they prefer is a more regulated system, not necessarily with shelves of technical manuals, but certainly with a shelf or two of art theory. They do not have an answer for how to integrate digital tools in the studio. Significantly, computer rooms in art schools have been dark, cramped, inhospitable and called 'labs'.

I had been wondering how to write my own book on digital drawing. It was not going to be an instruction book; it was not going to be a survey; and somehow it would have to deal with these swirling questions. It is a fascinating but elusive subject, and inevitably the question of how and what to draw rises to the surface. Initially I planned to examine how the language of drawing had expanded the horizon, the new complexity, the reaches of scale, potential subjects - all way beyond what is possible with pencil and paper. Like many others I find the natural way to draw is through the line, pattern, shape, colour of Illustrator, Photoshop, and Painter. But the how-to books that accompany upgrades target the amateur artist market: portraits, landscapes and pets. They rarely mention abstraction. For their part the more sophisticated surveys of digital art simply skip over 2D digital art. It is easier to suggest digital art is a different species, without any art history in its DNA.

How to explore this missing link between drawing software and drawing thinking? The Drawing Research Network¹ is an online resource that represents the drawing community. Digital drawing does get the occasional mention, but as something outside its orbit, and the conversation soon drops off. When I gave a talk called 'digital drawing: does it exist?' at a DRN conference several people politely told me they would miss it because the subject did not interest them. Digital drawing may mean anything from sharing scanned drawings on the web to processing, to nothing at all, but as far as the drawing purist was concerned it was to be avoided. Purists believe that drawing must be natural and human, with deep foundations in the soul.

We draw from the human figure because we are human figures ourselves. Any book on digital drawing would be in trouble because computers, even laptops and mobiles, are not designed with observational drawing in mind - you could work from a photo or a scanned drawing, but that would negate the point. Instead you start from lines and shapes, the components of drawing, playing with the grammar, treating it as a musical structure, in the manner of Paul Klee. For several years I taught on MA Drawing courses. This spectre of technology as 'inhuman' was deeply ingrained in the students' minds, yet it had little basis in the actual history of drawing, that is to say in its tradition. The drawing aids advertised in the Studio magazines of the 1900s

¹ <http://www.drawing.org.uk/>

demonstrate an enthusiasm for gadgetry – from the airbrush to the autolytus to specialized cameras². The idea of what is modern and what is traditional switch around from decade to decade. The themes that define drawing today – the body, observation, natural process, performance – took second place to questions of technique. The point of view expressed in the drawing manual of the 1900 to 1920 period has little to say about being human, but quite a lot about botany and about drawing animals. A study of facial expressions takes as its subject a nun. A demonstration of delicate pencil shading features a battleship in the mist. The drawing from memory exercise is based on a 1900 fire engine. There is controversy about using a ruler to make a straight line, and whether it is better to work in a studio or in the open air. Those manuals could be myopic, at odds with new technologies and with ‘modernist’ thinking, but they do contain the occasional insight that is still valid today. They let you peer into a different drawing culture, and – of course - you could make a book just from their illustrations.

I had tackled the question of the overlap between computer graphics and painting in ‘Painting the Digital River’ published in 2006³. That book had been my way of exploring questions about digital painting. As a painter I had a vested interest in arguing for the integration of computer graphics. So the next book should be on digital drawing. Drawing is still the first step many of us take. I feel uneasy about the commercial logic of graphic packages, where you turn a photo into a water colour, make a line drawing through a filter, and take shortcuts so you never need to learn to draw. I feel uneasy about the contradictions in teaching drawing in schools, where ‘drawing skill’ means filling in the detail, and ‘understanding’ means ticking ‘learning outcome’ boxes. In a world of cameraphones and graphics software drawing, street scenes in a sketchbook cannot have much appeal to the inquisitive student. And yet many involved in art education who attempt to cultivate visual intelligence – analyzing the way an advert is made, a photo cropped - will argue that drawing what you see in front of you, with pencil and paper, remains the best and simplest way to acquire that expertise.

The ant is constantly mobile, expert at social networking, and would not be fixated on pencils and life drawing. The ant probably can get along fine without any need of drawing instruction. For the moment I cannot even contemplate a coherent course for our own human students. ‘Digital’ would not work in the book title. It would alienate the target readership. But a better understanding of the potential of digital tools might well liberate the way we draw - without in any way disregarding the past. It is just possible ‘Drawing Lessons for Ants’ might be viable, but again it might not reach its intended readers.

² See Faure Walker, J, "Pride, Prejudice and the Pencil" in Garner, S, (ed.) *Writing on Drawing: Essays on Drawing Practice and Research*, Chicago University Press, 2009

³ Faure Walker, J, *Painting the Digital River: How an Artist Learned to Love the Computer*, Prentice Hall, 2006.



*James Faure Walker Miniature Suite 2009 27" x 36" (69 cms x 92 cms) archival
Epson print*