Drawing: Research, Theory, Practice

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Position Paper

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Title

A Gathering Dilemma: The Drawing International Brisbane Symposium

Abstract

As drawing researchers and practitioners doggedly pursue academic conferences and symposia dedicated to their discipline, it has become increasingly necessary to question the forms, structures and relevance of the academic conference to drawing research. One of the strengths of arts-based research is its incongruity with conventional systems and protocols in university culture. A lack of accordance yields forms of knowledge and reforms of codes necessary to a progressive position. In 2015, a biennial drawing research symposium was inaugurated in Brisbane, Australia titled Drawing International Brisbane (DIB). The event seeks to generate a model for the academic symposium in which visual practitioners, theorists, historians, curators, students and administrators can coalesce in a productive and vigorous program. Combining conventional academic papers, plenary sessions, exhibitions, artist's presentations and workshops, DIB sought to produce friction, synthesis and multiplication from components that did not radically depart from established norms. An account of one of the DIB2015 conference streams evidences the potency of this method. The stream, titled 'arena', took performance drawing as its focus and captured a plenary address by Deanna Petherbridge, a live performance drawing event, an international survey exhibition, a series of academic papers, a series of artist's presentations and a two-day workshop.

Keywords

drawing research
drawing symposium
drawing conference
drawing exhibitions
performance drawing
Australian drawing

A Gathering Dilemma: The Drawing International Brisbane Symposium

The academic conference remains the primary resource for exchanging ideas, presenting new knowledge and maintaining an all-important disciplinary relevance in university culture. Unfortunately, as is the case with so many aspects of arts-based research (ethical clearances, publication quotas, methodologies), the shifting dimensions of drawing research are wedged into rote forms that have been canonized by disciplines that can't accommodate unconventional methods and outcomes. In 2015, the Griffith Centre for Creative Arts Research at Griffith University (Brisbane) launched a major drawing research initiative—Drawing International Griffith (DIG). Its inaugural event was the first biennial Drawing International Brisbane (DIB) symposium on the campus of the Queensland College of Art. Staged in October of 2015 with significant support from Griffith University, the Queensland College of Art, QCA Galleries, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland Government, Australian National University and Brisbane City Council, DIB attracted over one hundred interstate and international delegates. The new symposium thus joins the recent history of upstart drawing conferences including Drawing Out (RMIT University, Melbourne) and Draw to Perform (London), as well as ongoing projects such as the Crossing the Line series by the Global Centre for Drawing (Melbourne). An account of DIB2015, in anticipation of DIB2017, provides the opportunity to reflect critically on the durability of the academic symposium as an effective tool for disseminating drawing knowledge.

Critiques of the structures and dynamics of academic conferences occur variously. Organisers, hosts, delegates, featured presenters, students, research centres, caterers and name badge makers will all have found ample reason to question the appeal of these events. A common lament is that the informal exchanges that occur outside of programmed sessions are the only truly worthwhile features. Are new connections, challenging ideas and important dissents fostered solely in these ex-program encounters? This is certainly the question at the root of Edward Castronova's screed against the session paper in which he writes:

We, who are supposed to be so creative, speak about our ideas in a format best likened to a vacuum globe of un-thought, an interest-void, an anti-spark, and a

negation of connection... Nothing of a thoughtful nature is stated, heard, or germinated (2013: 66).

Mark Rom's (2012) thorough evaluation of conference culture shares Castronova's premise about the ineffectiveness of the conference format, although his revisions, which include democratized voting schemes, vary greatly from Castronova's 'Ludium' games. Unlike other disciplines, arts-based research is fortunate to have in-built mechanisms for resisting the doctrinaire, even if they are underutilized in the conference format. Although practice-led research has been demonstrated to have far-reaching implications for university research culture, often through a destabilizing and praxical set of methods (Barrett and Bolt 2007; Leavy 2009; Sullivan 2005), symposia dedicated to the visual arts too often revert to forms and criteria that fail to reflect the discrepant values and motivations of their members. James Elkins' (2009) intense skepticism of PhD research in studio art captures many concerns of fusing artists and academia, not least of which is a serious questioning of the correlation between a research degree and an improved art practice. Artists with PhDs may be better equipped to organize symposia and present at academic conferences, but to what end? Although games, provocations, interdisciplinary collaborations, workshops and interactive media experiences are manifesting with increasing frequency across the disciplinary spectrum, arts-based symposia should endeavor to provide a specific laboratory in which dominant academic modes can be simultaneously deployed and interrogated.

The DIB2015 symposium opened with a potent collision of ideas and practices. Deanna Petherbridge (Professor Emeritus, University of the West of England, Bristol) commenced the proceedings with a keynote address titled 'Some Thoughts on the Social Co-option of Drawing', delivered at the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA). Taking aim squarely at hybridized forms of drawing that pre-empt the integrity of the drawn work in favour of the event-spectacle, Petherbridge was unequivocal in her assertion that drawing is fundamentally unlike relational practice. 'Unlike animated social practices or installations...*drawing exists as a trace of process* [her emphasis] and therefore is ontologically of another order' (2015). The keynote was a provocative challenge to many of the artists, researchers and students in attendance whose projects and practices are constructed on collaborations and blended forms of drawing and performance. The Petherbridge keynote was immediately contested, extended and amplified by the opening night exhibition titled

under arena — a series of simultaneous live drawing performances in the subterranean arcades of the nineteenth century Spring Hill Reservoirs.

Figure 1: *under arena* (2015). Exhibition of performance drawing at Spring Hill Reservoirs, Brisbane. ©Fuller, O'Dempsey, Platz, Porter. Photographers Matthew Lloyd and Emma Wright.

Following the keynote, 150 delegates and guests crossed the Brisbane River, climbed Spring Hill and descended into the chthonic space to witness four artists at work accompanied by musicians, dancers and circus performers. The durational drawing event featured the work of Zoe Porter, Velvet Pesu, Kellie O'Dempsey, Flatline (Todd Fuller and Carl Sciberras) and Bill Platz. Together, the plenary address and the performance drawing event ignited a debate at the symposium concerning the roles of live performance, documentation, control and judgement in contemporary drawing practice. Certainly, motivated antiphony is a hallmark of academic discourse. The drawing symposium should construct an environment in which practice and exhibition are brought into a direct engagement, and perhaps conflict, with the theoretical and discursive modes of academic presentation. Several of the *under arena* artists also spoke at the final plenary session in a lively and intense exchange with other delegates and the plenary speakers. The dynamic nature of this plenary, in

which practicing and exhibiting artists directly contended with the content of the session papers and keynote addresses, signalled not only the serious commitment of the artists and scholars to their methods and outputs, but also the feeble tradition of the plenary session. That this sort of serious debate and exchange of ideas seemed so novel is itself an indictment of the standard plenary panel.

There is, of course, a paradox at work in this analysis. The promise of conventional research outputs in established frameworks for rigorous scholarship is requisite for attracting a large cohort of researchers and practitioners. How then, can the structure of the drawing symposium resist orthodoxy? Models such as Memefest, organised by Oliver Vodeb (Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne), and described by him as a ‘tactical institution and network’ (2015), point to possibilities for re-framing the academic symposium as a progressive mechanism that can both accommodate established university templates and provide responsive spaces for attachment and transformation. In DIB2015, a strategy was enacted to juxtapose standard academic paper deliveries with artist’s presentations and targeted exhibitions. The ‘arena’ stream of the symposium dealt explicitly with performance drawing and collided papers such as ‘Drawing the immaterial object of dance’ by Rochelle Haley (University of New South Wales, Sydney) with artist’s presentations such as ‘Drawing, performance and language’ by Nicci Haynes (Australia National University, Canberra), a two-day game-based workshop by Ben Sheppard (RMIT, Melbourne), and an exhibition curated by Kellie O’Dempsey titled *Drawn to Experience V2* (POP Gallery, Brisbane; Australia National University Gallery, Canberra). A brief overview of *D2EV2* will illustrate the potential of symposium exhibitions to challenge and extend symposium proceedings.

D2EV2 surveyed the work of fifteen artists in an interrogation of ‘performance drawing’ as a useful framework to make and exhibit drawings. Presenting works from Australia, Poland, Indonesia, Estonia, Spain and the United States, *D2EV2* sought to respond to the content of the papers submitted to the symposium as well as allowing the participating artists to present ideas and rebuttals in programmed sessions. This mandate manifested in the work of participating artists that attended the symposium as delegates and in the curatorial sanction of works specific to the problems raised in the symposium program. Four emblematic works demonstrate the intention of this approach.

Polish-Australian artist Gosia Wlodarczak’s video *A Room Without A View*

documents a 2013 performance at RMIT Gallery in Melbourne. The work is set inside a small, black, freestanding, purpose-built room. In the performance, the artist is alone—constantly drawing in and on her black box. She does this for six and a half hours a day for seventeen days. In *D2EV2*, the video was projected at a scale that mirrored the dimensions of the original performance space. Wlodarczak's work contrasts the drawing as resultant object with the artist's process as a remediated narrative. The looping video installation also exposed Wlodarczak's isolated labour and positioned the viewer as witness to her 'denial' of the 'complex stimuli of [her] senses' (Wlodarczak 2016). *A Room Without a View* presented a performance framework defined by the rigid geometry of the cube in unreserved correspondence with Rochelle Haley's session paper on the visual and immaterial parameters of the cube, her own work with drawing and dance, and an examination of Trisha Brown's 1975 work *Locus*. In this way, the structure of the drawing symposium sought to create synthesis in the spaces between programmed events.

Figure 2: Gosia Wlodarczak. (2013-14). *A Room Without A View*. ©Gosia Wlodarczak. Photo-documentation: Longin Sarnecki. Courtesy the artist and RMIT Gallery, Melbourne and the Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Robert Andrew's sculptural erasure machine *Transitional Text* also exposed process as purpose, albeit in a motorized performance. The work combined a substrate coated in white chalk, ochre and oxide with the relentless drone of technology and the electromechanical. A programmed mechanical arm built by

Andrew delicately eroded the fragile chalk with a fine jet of water to expose the underlying earth pigments. A descendant of the Yawuru people from Kimberley, Western Australia, Andrew's work contends directly with Australian indigeneity. Over the duration of the exhibition, *Transitional Text* slowly and methodically inscribed a Yawuru word in the white chalk, leaching wet ochre over the pristine surface. Complementing the work was Indonesian artist Entang Wiharso's performance *Eating Identity*. In the work, Wiharso uses chalked stencils of Javanese patterns on the bodies of dinner guests to manoeuvre his complex relationship with identity. Presented at *D2EV2* as a digital video and photographic stills, the displaced physicality of *Eating Identity* was amplified by its proximity to Andrew's work. In both works, the subtle manipulations of language and graphic pattern declare a fraught relationship between mark, language and self. As Nicci Haynes had earlier argued in her symposium presentation, the incommensurability of visibility and linguistic expression must result in 'an atmosphere of distress' (2015).

Figure 3: Robert Andrew. (2015). *Transitional text*. ©Robert Andrew. Photographer Lisa Kurtz.

In contrast to these active performance frameworks, *Graphite Falls V* by Jaanika Peerna (Estonia, New York) was installed as a towering course of looped

Mylar sheets. The sheets, inscribed with vertical lines, floated above a mirrored floor surface reflecting an infinite cascade of graphite lines. Peerna's method of using fistfuls of pencils and the weight of her falling body to draw long lines provided a vital proclamation of the integrity of the physical drawing object in the context of performance. *Graphite Falls V* provided a point of articulation for negotiating the terrain of the live, the mediatized and the material. It is a basic premise of studio research that practice transforms theoretical and contextual knowledge, and is transformed itself by alternate forms of knowledge. *D2EV2* presented a motivated response to the theoretical issues of liveness, documentation, authorial control, isolation, collaboration, materiality and language and enabled a reciprocal dynamic to emerge between text, speech, presentation and exhibition.

Figure 4: Jaanika Peerna. (2015). *Graphite Falls V*. ©Jaanika Peerna

DIB2015 included the work of thirty-six artists in fourteen exhibitions spread across university galleries, private galleries and public spaces. In addition to *under arena* and *Drawn to Experience V2*, other highlights included *casting body* (White Box Gallery, Brisbane), *Something to do with Multiphrenia* (Project Gallery,

Brisbane), *roughing out* (Queensland College of Art, Brisbane), *Graphesis—Instrument and Li(n)e* (Bosz Gallery, Brisbane), *On Account of Seeing and Not Seeing* (Webb Gallery, Brisbane), *Intervention* (Woolloongabba Art Gallery, Brisbane) and *BYUB No. 3* (projected on the William Jolly Bridge, Brisbane). The symposium also featured keynote addresses by Hannah Mathews (Senior Curator at Monash University Museum of Art) and Barbara Bolt (Associate Professor at Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne), and a significant paper by Chris McAuliffe (Australia National University, Canberra) on William Dobell's television drawings.

In addition to providing a platform for artists and academics to disseminate their research, Drawing International Brisbane seeks to consider the form of the academic symposium as a means of producing and exchanging knowledge. When practice-led research collides with the rote form of an academic symposium, can the resulting amalgam deliver specific benefits for the participants and impact the broad compass of drawing research culture? Looking forward to DIB2017, it is incumbent on us to reflect critically on the structures and opportunities implicit in global drawing research symposia if we wish to see them thrive and multiply.

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