

On an Account of Seeing and Not Seeing: Drawing as an Embodied Experience

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Published

2016

Thesis Type

Thesis (Professional Doctorate)

School

Queensland College of Art

DOI

[10.25904/1912/726](https://doi.org/10.25904/1912/726)

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On an Account of Seeing and Not Seeing: Drawing as an Embodied Experience

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Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctorate of Visual Art

September 2015

ABSTRACT

This research project takes drawing as the exemplar to investigate the correlation between vision and blindness, memory and remembering, and that which is determined by haptic and sensory perception. Drawing operates as the means and the medium to interrogate the subject of perception and 'ocularcentrism', a paradigm that has historically privileged sight as the dominant sense.

As part of my studio research, I examined the work and methods of specific contemporary artists who forego sight (metaphoric and actual), giving preference to those investigations that reference the body as the site of perception. This initiated my research into Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological conception of the body as "reversible flesh", which contextualises drawing as embodied experience.

The studio practice, a significant component of the research project that focuses on the object as a mnemonic device, has led me to consider ideas of seeing through non-seeing. I have incorporated the act of drawing blind, a metaphoric blindness that both sees and does not see, as the means to reflectively consider memory as an attribute of perception and as a process of engaging the body as the site of perception.

Throughout the exegesis, I interweave key writings by Hélène Cixous, who addresses the philosophical questions relating to perception, writing, and drawing through self-reflection in *Stigmata: Escaping Text*. This led me to question what is it that we see and cannot see, and is blindness at the heart of vision. These questions, in turn, address my enquiry into the subject of perception, of vision and blindness, and of memory.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Sonya G. Peters

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I can only begin with sincere gratitude to thank all those who have supported me throughout my candidature, my family, friends and colleagues whose encouragement, when what seemed an impossible task at times, gave me the drive to continue on. To my husband, Kimon, your unconditional support, in every way, made it all possible: you have been my rock. To my children, Marcus, Van, Jordan, and Sasha, whose words of wisdom and humour are what inspire me—I thank you from the bottom of my heart. To my mother Inge Pollex, and brother Dr. Michael Pollex, who on the other side of the world, were never further than an encouraging phone call away; your presence was always felt. I especially want to thank you, Mom, who never doubted my capabilities, and Michael, your passionate and always stimulating conversations that were never bound by the time restraints of an overseas phone call, I thank you. But most importantly, to my father, Paul E. Pollex, who left behind a small and insignificant box that, filled with his memories, gave our family the story of courage, determination, and that anything is possible, and for this there are not enough words: I am truly grateful. On a more formal note, I would like to thank Dr. Ross Woodrow whose passion for drawing was inspiring, thank you. And finally, I cannot go by without giving my heartfelt appreciation to my supervisor Dr. Debra Porch, who, through every unimaginable adversity, has continued to support and encourage me. For your strength, knowledge, and friendship over the years, I am most thankful! And last, but definitely not least, to Evie Franzidis, thank you!

FOREWORD

The Object of My Perception

To go off writing, I must escape from the broad daylight which takes me by the eyes, which takes my eyes and fills them with broad raw visions. I do not want to see what is shown. I want to see what is secret. What is hidden amongst the visible. I want to see the skin of the light.¹

Perception is always of something, and the object of perception is perceived in a synthesis of what can and cannot be seen. The object perceived contains more than what is given and more than what the eye alone can discern. Yet, beyond the object's physical appearance, there subsists the essence of the object itself, and, bound in its depths, a past, a present, and a future that transcend present perception. The object itself embodies both what is absent and present, the invisible and visible. In a dynamic intertwining of manifold appearances, this unfolds to complete present perception.

I am looking at a box that sits before me on the table; it is an old cardboard Leica camera box that had its original contents emptied long ago. Over time, it became home to mementos and relics, vestiges of the experiences and anecdotes of a past and long-forgotten life. The box itself remained concealed, hidden for close to fifty years along with the stories and family history that were preserved in silence and were left untold and unshared. Yet, it was this re-discovery of this box that triggered in me an awareness of seeing something for the first time, and yet not really seeing; a kind of blindness to knowing, or to an understanding of what was left behind. Blindness of this kind is not the absence of sight; rather, it is the condition of sight, a seeing without comprehending, in which non-seeing intuits another form of seeing.

¹ Hélène Cixous, "Writing Blind; Conversation with the Donkey," in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005), 115.

The box that sits before me is a discrete entity containing more than what is actually given and more than what the eye alone can perceive, suggesting that the object is indivisible from the one seeing. It comes into being through the experience of seeing, transcending observation and presupposing perception.

When I think of the box now, I am caught in the possibilities of what it holds; the mystery and secrets that lie hidden among the visible. Conjured up are the memories, the stories, the images in which the past and the present, memory and remembering, unfold in a continuum, one informing the other.

INTRODUCTION

This creative research project speculatively investigates the premise that drawing is an embodied strategy situated in memory rather than perception. The research addresses the hypothesis that seeing is conditioned, and uses the metaphor of blindness to systematically explore drawing's presumed dependency on sight.

The catalyst for this research project was my re-discovery of an old cardboard Leica camera box containing mementos and vestiges from the past that have profoundly affected me. The discovery of the box initiated my enquiry into notions of perception and of seeing and not seeing. Questions were formulated, such as "What is it that we see and cannot see?" and "Is blindness a condition of seeing?" The box, as a mnemonic device, reflects notions of memory and what is remembered or forgotten—and, as became central to this research project, what is imagined. To further examine ideas of perception, my research project considers symbolic and metaphorical blindness as the method through which to examine and expand on drawing's presupposed dependency on sight. This focuses on a seeing that transcends observation and presupposes perception. The emphasis is not an attempt to negate drawing's dependence on sight, but rather to reveal alternative modes of engagement. As an integral aspect to my practice, drawing serves as the means and medium of this investigation.

The theoretical research initiated through my studio project focuses on drawing as a strategy to investigate the phenomenon of sight. In considering blindness as a central metaphor, the act of drawing blind was adopted as a methodology to examine memory as an attribute of perception and as a process of engaging the body as the site of perception. Here the line, considered synonymous with drawing, acts as the conduit to connect thought to form. In turn, the line provides form to memory to reveal what is the immaterial and the invisible.

The research project analyses the bond between drawing and sight and the privileging of sight over the other senses in defining Western thought and reinforcing the assumption that sight equates with knowledge—a premise proposed by Aristotle and Plato, who divined the sense of sight with “the creation of human intelligence”.² This assumption is examined in the creative and written exegesis, to unravel Western thinking established by early Greek philosophy. Jacques Derrida also addresses this assumption in *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins*,³ a text that has proved seminal in my research. Derrida here examines the correlation between sight and blindness—a seeing through a non-seeing—as it is mediated through the act of drawing.

Derrida’s autobiographical approach resonated with me because he interweaves personal stories and recollections with allegory and mythology, while examining ideas of perception. He considers the visual and the tactile, eye and hand, memory and remembering, through the symbolic and metaphorical premise of blindness. Derrida’s writing has provided me with the means to reflect on, interpret, and challenge drawing’s assumed dependency on sight. Central also to the research project is the writing of French feminist theorist and playwright, Hélène Cixous, who addresses philosophical questions relating to perception, writing, and drawing from an autobiographical perspective in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*.⁴ The exegesis and creative form draws from these two philosophers and embraces and proposes memory and recollection as tactics enabling subjective experience to serve as the means of investigation. The creative studio research that considers these areas of perception has revolved around the following central research question:

How can drawing, as an embodied strategy with an assumed dependency on sight, elicit a response that extends across all the senses?

² Jay Martin, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (California: University of California Press, 1994), 26.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁴ Hélène Cixous, “Writing Blind; Conversation with the Donkey,” In *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005), 115–25.

Key to exploring and responding to this question have been the methods and considerations of my studio practice; I have experimented with various materials and worked between two- and three-dimensional formats. I have used specific materials, such as cement, as triggers to provoke an awareness of the senses, and a tactile perception that may extend seeing as beyond observation. I recognise that strategies emerge through the making process that explore the interrelationship between eye and hand, the visual and the tactile, to establish and reinstate sight through touch.

The theoretical and creative components of the research project were developed simultaneously, incorporating philosophical thought within the creative discourse of the project. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology of perception underpins the inquiry and informs the methodology, which has expanded my understanding of the body as being both the subject and object of perception. I have considered phenomenology as the foundation of the theoretical and creative investigations, and I have approached it as a method of inquiry that is based on the experiential, reflection, and intuition.

In this exegesis, I analyse artists who refute sight in favour of investigating the body as the site of perception, examining the methodologies of Robert Morris, William Anastasi, Giuseppe Penone, Cy Twombly, and Joseph Beuys. Peter Greenaway's film *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1983) is also discussed, and provides an instrumental question evoked by the research project: "Should an artist draw what they see or draw what they know?"

Chapter 1 focuses on the phenomenon of sight, beginning with the early Greek philosophy that has defined Western culture's privileging of sight, and continuing through the Renaissance. The chapter examines *The Draughtsman's Contract*, in which drawing, as the central focus, interrogates the subject of perception to expose the ocularcentric paradigm; it proposes that seeing is not always knowing, and that seeing encompasses more than what the eyes alone can perceive. The chapter also examines the 'frame', a visual and conceptual construct that, as an aid to

perspectival vision, continues to influence and define what and how one sees, and is explored through the works of Penone, Twombly, and Beuys. I also discuss my work *In Dialogue with My Father* (2014), and draw from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who allude to the notion of the frame as a container that hides and conceals, outlining the connection between the perceptible and the imperceptible, seeing and not-seeing.

Chapter 2 addresses the subject of perception, of seeing and not seeing, a metaphorical blindness, through the act of drawing, and focuses on the writings of Hélène Cixous, who poignantly reflects on these ideas. I explore this through the work of Penone, Morris, and Anastasi, as well as my own that was developed through the studio research. The chapter also discusses the key writing of Jacques Derrida, who, in *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, proposes the philosophical premise that all drawing is blind, introducing the idea that memory takes over at the moment of not seeing.

Chapter 3 specifically discusses my studio projects in which drawing is the visual strategy that examines ideas of memory in relation to the found object, the mnemonic device, and the impetus to the research project. I address the various methods and modes of experimentation that have developed over the course of this research project, and interrogate the subject of perception through my visual discourse and practice.

Chapter 1

Perceiving Perception

1.1 The Ocularcentric Paradigm

The privileging of sight over the other senses is a phenomenon entrenched in Western thought that emerged from ancient Greek philosophy. In *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, David Lenin emphasises, “beginning with the ancient Greeks, our Western culture has been dominated by an ocularcentric paradigm, a vision-generated, vision-centered, interpretation of knowledge, truth and reality”.⁵ Accordingly, it was sight’s ability to know more things at once that Aristotle described as a “knowing that is more universal and extends to more things; it is more effective in knowing, because the more universal any power is, the more powerful it is”.⁶ This ocularcentric focus continues to define and reinforce cultural assumptions. For the sighted, sight is, “of all the modes of perception, the one which is primary and predominant, at least in the conduct of our everyday lives”.⁷

The favouring of sight as the dominant sense continues as the subject of analysis within contemporary thought. This analysis has extended to visual art. For example, in 1993, French philosopher Jacques Derrida curated an exhibition at the Louvre and wrote an essay in the accompanying catalogue, both titled *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. The exhibition featured drawings and prints that Derrida had assembled from the Louvre collection that depicted images of the blind and images suggestive of a metaphorical blindness evidenced through drawing. In this exhibition and essay, Derrida called into question the ocularcentric paradigm and, more importantly, positioned drawing as the method to challenge and expose the paradox. In the catalogue, he writes, “*Idein, eidos, idea*: the whole history, the

⁵ Lenin, “Introduction,” in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David M. Levin (California: University of California Press, 1993), 2.

⁶ Aristotle as discussed in, Thomas Aquinas, *Sentencia libri De sensu et sensato Commentary on Aristotle’s De Sensu et sensato*, trans. Kevin White (Catholic University of America press, 2005), 437a5.

⁷ David Lenin, “Introduction,” in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, 2.

whole semantics of the European *idea*, in its Greek genealogy, as we know—as we see—relates seeing to knowing”.⁸

Also important to the discussion is Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the body as reversible flesh—a counterpoint to the premise that sight is the privileged source to knowledge. He saw the body as the intertwining of “subjective experience and objective existence”,⁹ a notion that he would regard “as but two aspects of a single fundamental phenomenon: ‘our reversible flesh’”.¹⁰ That is, the body exists not as an object set against the horizon of subjectivity or as the interface between interior and exterior, transcendence and immanence. Rather the body is “reversible”,¹¹ it both sees and is seen, touches and is touched. Thus, the body is the subject of perception. Merleau-Ponty uses the analogy of two hands touching, articulating

if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as two halves of an orange. It is no different for the vision.¹²

This “redoubling, the reflexivity of the body”¹³ is what Merleau-Ponty names as the essence of the ‘flesh’. To recognise the body as flesh acknowledges the corporeal nature of the body, its capacity to perceive and be perceived, and “moreover . . . this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world”.¹⁴

⁸ Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 12.

⁹ Thomas Baldwin, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 2004), 248.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 133.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 248, original emphasis.

Merleau-Ponty's conception of the flesh as reversible reveals touch and sight as an unfolding phenomenon—one enriching the other—and he describes that “since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world”.¹⁵ Here Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body as reversible challenges ocularcentrism and suggests that knowledge and understanding originate from sensory perception.

Writing in 1896, philosopher Henri Bergson was one of the first to recognise the privileged position of the body as the centre of all perceptual experience. He claimed, “As my body moves in space, all the other images vary, while that image, my body, remains invariable. I must therefore make it my center, to which I refer all other images.”¹⁶ Importantly, Bergson recognised perception and memory as a single phenomenon, saying

at the outset, that if there be memory, that is the survival of past images, these images must constantly mingle with our perception of the present and may even take its place. For if they have survived it is a view to utility; at every moment they complete our present experience enriching it with experience already acquired; and as the latter is ever increasing, it must end by covering and submerging the former.¹⁷

Memory and perception, as Bergson suggests, interweave in a continuum, in which they “always interpenetrate each other, are always exchanging something of their substance as by a process of endosmosis”.¹⁸ Indeed, memory completes present perception; as philosopher Edward Casey emphasises:

The lived body is the incessant center of its multifarious maneuvers—*maneuvers without any perimeters other than those which it imposes on itself as it moves in a depth of its own making*. Dense itself, the lived body is always in the thick of things; and is remembered, it continues to be concentric for the world which it has come to inhabit.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid., 134.

¹⁶ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy M Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: The MacMillan Company, 2012), 43.

¹⁷ Ibid., 70.

¹⁸ Ibid., 72. Endosmosis is defined as the passage of fluid inward through a permeable membrane.

¹⁹ Edward Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 180, original emphasis.

The discussion on the elevation of sight in the visual arts continues with the Renaissance invention of linear perspective. Perspective established a “new means of representing visual power”,²⁰ and the eye was established as “the privileged center of perspectival vision”²¹—the apex on which everything within the visual field converges. The significance of perspective was not specifically its ability to represent three-dimensional space but the way that it instilled a specific, ordered and controlled point of view, which requires one to see “from one particular viewpoint”.²² A monocular vision was empowered by a calculated and measured eye. Robert Romanyshyn asserts,

What linear perspective vision achieves is a kind of geometrisation of the space of the world and within that space we become observers of a world, which has become an object of observation. Linear perspective is a celebration of the eye of distance, a created convention which not only extends and elaborates the natural power of vision to survey things from afar, but also elevates that power into a method, a way of knowing, which has defined for us the world with which we are so readily familiar.²³

With perspective, seeing was effectively conditioned, and became more so with the introduction of a geometrically constructed grid-like structure, an aid to perspectival vision introduced in the mid-fifteenth century by Leon Battista Alberti. Described as the ‘veil’, it was later established as the ‘window’ or ‘frame’. This ordering system subsequently conditioned and influenced perception, not only how one viewed the world but also how it was to be viewed—from a controlled and ordered vantage point—for centuries to come. As Romanyshyn asserts, the construct of the frame established “the boundary between the perceiver and the perceived. It establishes as a condition for perception a formal *separation* between a subject who sees the

²⁰ David Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 40.

²¹ Martin, *Downcast Eyes*, 54.

²² Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 40.

²³ Robert D. Romanyshyn, “Self as Spectator,” in *Technology as Symptom and Dream* (East Sussex: Routledge, 2000), 33.

world and the world that is seen.”²⁴ Through the systematic ordering of the frame, seeing and knowing were linked more than ever before.

1.2 To See Is to Know

Peter Greenaway’s film, *The Draughtsman’s Contract* (1982) explores Western culture’s privileging of sight. Set in the seventeenth century, the film’s central figure, the draughtsman Mr Neville, is commissioned by the proprietress of an estate (Mrs Herbert) to complete twelve drawings of the property and its gardens in twelve days, as a gift for her husband. The draughtsman values his technical skills to draw exactly what he sees; as he states, he draws without interpretation. He is referred to as a “materialist” or someone who has “the god-like power of emptying the landscape. It’s a wonder that the birds still sing. If they stopped, I doubt Mr Neville would appreciate the difference; his attitude to nature is strictly material.”²⁵ The draughtsman gives specific instructions, demanding that the twelve views he has selected to draw must be devoid of human and animal activity and everything must remain in its place for the duration of the drawings. Neville states, “If my instructions, which have been given great consideration should be observed, I am painstaking enough to notice quite small changes in the landscape, once started, I make that committal, Madame, whatsoever ensues, and I think you can surmise that it is an attitude from which I obtain great satisfaction and some entertainment.”²⁶ However, as the drawings progress, certain discrepancies begin to appear, and, because the draughtsman is committed to representing reality as he sees fit, he unwittingly is implicated in a murder.

Addressing the draughtsman, Mrs Talman illuminates the difference between drawing what one knows or what one sees:

²⁴ Ibid., 42.

²⁵ These words are spoken by the character of Mrs Talman. *The Draughtsman’s Contract*. Peter Greenaway, Zeitgeist Video, 1982. DVD. For a further discussion, see Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, ‘Translator’s Preface’ in, Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

²⁶ Character of Mr Neville. Ibid.

A really intelligent man makes an indifferent painter, for painting requires a certain blindness, a partial refusal to be aware of all the options. An intelligent man will know more about what he is drawing than he will see, and, in the space between knowing and seeing, unable to pursue an idea, strongly fearing that the discerning—those he is eager to please—will find him wanting if he does not put in only what he knows but what they know as well.²⁷

The Draughtsman's Contract interrogates the subject of seeing, and adopts the premise that seeing is not always knowing, and seeing encompasses more than what the eyes alone can perceive. It questions insight and foresight, and affirms that to not foresee effects a certain kind of blindness that can even lead to death. With drawing as the central focus, Greenaway foregrounds the 'frame' as a construct that reflexively informs perception and "the process of representation itself".²⁸ The film's premise is defined by the overarching question, "Should an artist draw what they see or draw what they know?"

The film is set in seventeenth-century England, a time described as the beginning of "the modern world",²⁹ and the era of cultural, scientific, and philosophical reforms that continued to exploit the sense of vision as "the dominant metaphor for knowing and engaging with the world".³⁰ With the advancement of scientific discoveries, "representational technologies, ranging from the telescope and microscope to perspective painting, maps, and grids, technologies . . . became the principal tools for knowledge acquisition".³¹ Technological advancement redefined seeing; what was once unknown or unperceivable was now within eye's reach. Moreover, the reliance on technological and optical devices, such as the microscope and telescope, reflexively empowered the eye. A controlled form of observation was now technically manipulated, and seeing became systemised, measured, and ordered, inevitably restricting and excluding a complete sensory experience. Michel Foucault

²⁷ Character of Mrs Talman. Ibid.

²⁸ Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, "Beyond the Frame: The Spirit of Place in Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract*", in *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film* (Charlottesville: University Virginia Press, 2010), 230.

²⁹ Ibid., 226.

³⁰ Ibid., 227

³¹ Ibid.

states, “observation, from the 17th century onward, is a perceptible knowledge [. . .] which leaves sight with an almost exclusive privilege, being the sense by which we perceive extent and establish proof, and, in consequence, the means to an analysis [. . .] acceptable to everyone”.³²

The draughtsman whose committal is to draw what he sees as he sees it, without translation or expression, believes this as the basis to truth and knowledge, and a true representation of reality. The draughtsman’s eye is the eye of reason, qualified by its ability to observe, measure, and calculate. It is influenced by the appearance of the ‘frame’, an example of which is seen in Albrecht Dürer’s illustration *An Artist Drawing a Seated Man* (1525).

In Dürer’s illustration, the draughtsman is framed by the frame, as is his vision. As a surveyor, he is positioned from a fixed vantage point; motionless and emotionless, he is distanced and disembodied from himself and from his subject, furthered by the frame-piece for the eye. Rather than possessing the two moving eyes of stereoscopic vision, Dürer’s draughtsman’s vision is monocular, an unmoving static eye. Seeing is a seeing of exclusion rather than inclusion, empowering a singular point of view from a calculated and measured eye. Similarly, for Greenaway’s draughtsman, the frame graphically contains and orders what is to be seen and not seen, and what is to be drawn and not drawn. The frame is the boundary, a physical barrier between the observer and the observed, between the seer and the seen.

³² Foucault, “III Structure,” in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 144.



Figure 1 Albrecht Dürer, *An Artist Drawing a Seated Man*, 1525, woodcut. Source: <http://www.all-art.org/baroque/portrait1.html>.

Greenaway's draughtsman's eye is also fixed behind the eye-frame, staring straight ahead; "such an eye by definition does not wander over the landscapes of the world, nor does it get distracted to wander over and about things which lie off to the side of its vision [. . .] it dispenses with the surrounding context of things, and in so doing it is strengthened".³³

Ultimately, because the draughtsman is conditioned to see what is presented within the parameters of the frame, he cannot and will not see what is happening outside of it. With eyes fixed straight ahead, the draughtsman becomes out of touch with the surroundings and with what is transpiring around him. Recalling Derrida, the frame for the draughtsman has become like a blind, a veil that excludes rather than includes, that contains rather than reveals. As such, vision is a vision of blindness—a blind eye that in the end sees nothing at all. And as Greenaway reveals at the end of the film, the price exacted for lack of sight, lack of foresight, is blindness and death.

³³ Robert D. Romanyshyn, "The Window and the Camera," in *Technology as Symptom and Dream* (East Sussex: Routledge, 2000), 47.



Figure 2 Film still from *The Draughtsman's Contract* 1982 (dir. Peter Greenaway)

1.3 Drawing: Un-Framing the Frame

Michael Carter writes on the frame's impact on contemporary art practice, arguing it is a significant element to the representation of pictorial space: "the appearance of precise boundaries, or edges, to the picture space is important for the representation of space and spatial relations for, without such boundaries, it is difficult to see how the particular elements of an image could ever be interpreted in spatial terms".³⁴ However, artist Avis Newman argues that the frame is "a way of confirming" the space—this is not part of drawing's language. The condition of boundaries is that they are dissolvable."³⁵ The very nature of drawing itself, encoded in the temporal—of movement and gesture—defies the idea of limits, of an inside and an outside, and of being bound by borders, boundaries, and edges.

³⁴ Michael Carter, *Framing Art: Introducing Theory and the Visual Image* (Marrickville: Southwood Press, 1999), 73.

³⁵ Avis Newman, "Conversation: Avis Newman/Catherine de Zegher," in *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act Selected from the Tate Collection* (New York: Tate Publishing and The Drawing Center, 2003), 167.

That is, characterised by the line, drawing is always in the process of becoming, unfolding, and transcending temporality. The line is neither past nor present, but rather persists as a continuum of nascent possibilities, of limitlessness that defies the condition of boundaries. And lines, as Newman continues, “define a position across the surface and are not registered in relation to limits”.³⁶

The idea and provocation of the line as limitless is the core of Giuseppe Penone’s work *Propagazione (Propagation)* (2012). Here, the single touch of a fingerprint, an imprint of the skin, begins as the point of departure and the centrifugal force that Penone continues to draw from. The lines of the imprint are connected, drawing and circling outwards in a continuous motion. Beginning on paper, the lines continue moving outside of and beyond the edges; they sequentially unfold onto the walls, limitlessly, as Penone mimics the visible growth lines of a tree. The line mediates as the material trace, between a visual and haptic experience, and, as Penone describes, above all else, drawing is about line—“a mark that is arranged on a surface. This makes it an intentional mark [. . .] that implies an intention or action and makes it a live motion. Therefore, it becomes a human action.”³⁷ Embedded in the line are action and reaction, sensation and sensuality, the intimate, tangible and tactile. *Propagazione (Propagation)* is “a model of propagation that you see in a tree when you cut a section in the wood, but which is also present in sound and water [. . .] It is a shape that is integral to the universe, that starts with a single fingerprint, but is representative of the whole”.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid., 166.

³⁷ MOMA, “Giuseppe Penone, *Propagazione (Propagation)* 1995–2010,” *Behind the Scenes: On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, video 2:41, www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/131/820.

³⁸ Lowenna Waters, “Giuseppe Penone: Circling at the Gagosian Gallery,” <http://www.apollo-magazine.com/review-giuseppe-penone-circling-gagosian-gallery-london/>.



Figure 3 Giuseppe Penone, *Propagazione (Propagation)* 1995, typographic ink and graphite on paper, felt-tip pen on wall. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2011. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar. © Giuseppe Penone.

Cy Twombly's *Leda and the Swan* (1962) similarly interrogates the limitless potential of the line. Twombly's lines are scratched, gouged, inscribed and marked onto the surface as they erupt in an explosion of energy, acting and reacting with and against the surface structure of the canvas and against the edges that would operate to limit and contain. The lines register the process of being, as their temporal presence merges and converges, making it difficult to distinguish the first line from that of the last.



Figure 4 Cy Twombly, *Leda and the Swan, Rome*, 1962, oil, pencil and crayon on canvas, 190 x 200cm

1.4 Perceiving the Imperceptible

In reflecting on my research, I have realised that the frame mirrors blindness in concealing the memories and the secrets of the past. To extend the ideological import of the frame, it can also refer to something that contains, conceals, and hides—a receptacle, as in the case of the Leica camera box. I envision there are memories that cannot or are unable to be told, and yet, in the fear of being forgotten, they are contained and sealed in a box. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari state, they are the “imperceptible, unassignable: not a given of the past but the ungivable”.³⁹

³⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 197.

I have realised through this research that secrets are themselves imperceptible and hold a “privileged, but quite variable relation to perception”.⁴⁰ The secret itself always relates to someone or something, to specific content that, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, is either, “too big for its form” to hide, cover up, or cover over, “or else the contents themselves have a form, but that form is covered, doubled, or replaced by a simple container, envelope, or box whose role is to suppress”.⁴¹ Out of fear of being discovered, “the secret moves toward an equally secretive perception, a perception that seeks to be imperceptible itself”.⁴²

In approaching the concept of memory—or what is remembered, what is forgotten and what is imagined—I considered the following questions: How can one see what one does not know? And how can you know what you do not see? Is it possible that drawing can provide the means of perceiving what is imperceptible?

The body of work *In Dialogue with My Father...* (2012), which was exhibited in the *Line* exhibition at the Webb Gallery, Queensland College of Art, stemmed from these questions and from the important discovery of a black-and-white passport photo and newspaper clippings concealed within the Leica camera box. The box that contained the history to a past, hidden by secrecy, forgotten, was the impetus to my research.

The newspaper clipping gives an account of the passage of a stowaway who, after the Second World War, “stole a ride” on the Finnish freighter *S.S. Frostvik*, loaded with a cargo of cement. The youth, as the article describes, was discovered twelve hours later at the first port of call, “covered in a fine cement powder, sitting on top of the cargo”. The newspaper clipping along with a small black-and-white photo of a young man, who I recognised as my father, prompted a multitude of emotions and questions that could yield no answers, only imagined possibilities. Edward Casey proposes that remembering and imagination are distinct from one another as well as

⁴⁰ Ibid., 286.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

from perception and yet “they prove to be part of the very fabric of human experience—including perceptual experience itself”.⁴³



Figure 5 “Jottings from the Docks: Life Behind the Iron Curtain” and “Rather Die Than Return to Red Rule,” *The Natal Mercury*, 21 June 1949

In the work of artist Christian Boltanski, the ‘box’ often operates as a mechanism for memory and is inherent in many of his works. For Boltanski, the ubiquitous biscuit tin, a common household item from his childhood, served as a container to store the memorabilia and small treasures of a family household. Boltanski refers to the singularity of family memories as

“little memory”, an emotional memory, an everyday knowledge, the contrary of the memory with a capital M that is preserved in history books. This little memory, which for me is what makes us unique, is extremely fragile, and it disappears with death. This loss of identity, this equalisation in forgetting, is very difficult to accept.⁴⁴

⁴³ Edward S. Casey, “Imagining and Remembering,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, no. 2 (December 1977): 189.

⁴⁴ Christian Boltanski, “Christian Boltanski’s Island of Death,” *Phaidon*, 2012, <http://au.phaidon.com/agenda/art/events/2012/march/12/christian-boltanski-island-of-death/>.

The 'little memories' that Boltanski refers to are significant to the foundation of the family unit, and of human experience. Curator Catherine Grenier elucidates on Boltanski's work, saying

He adopts the strategy of storytelling and formulates indirect answers set in imaginary worlds inhabited by both the questioner and the artist. The anecdote will come from an extensive, oral repertory he has acquired over time [. . .] All are concerned with transmission, with memory or human relationships. They all converge, however, on one central idea: that memory is possible through telling and only through telling.⁴⁵

In my work *In Dialogue with My Father...*, the telling and re-telling is visually expressed through the mechanical means of reproduction. I employ the process of photocopying in which multiplicity in repetition is integrated as a method to examine the memory of the family stories left forgotten and untold.

Artist Bracha L. Ettinger also uses photocopying in her work; she compiles found images and photographs from archival sources and newspapers, and, similar to Boltanski, copies, imprints, erases, and draws on them to expose and interrogate the subject of memory as collective memory. Significantly, she draws from her family stories of migration following the Second World War.

Of the exhibition, *Alma Matrix, Bracha L. Ettinger and Ria Verhaeghe* (2010), Catherine de Zegher writes,

Driven to leave their relatives and friends, neighborhood and land—in other words, their familiar networks—by forces beyond their control to settle in a foreign country, they inevitably had to deal with loss, rejection and separation. In the past, through family stories, affectionate attachment and shared experiences, through traditions and rituals, these networks had provided them with some support and continuity [. . .] Traumatic as these events were, they left indelible traces on both artists' families.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Catherine Grenier, "There's a Story," in *Christian Boltanski*, trans. David Radzinowicz (Paris: Flammarion Contemporary, 2010), 5.

⁴⁶ Catherine de Zegher, "From Notes to Nets," online exhibition catalogue, *Alma Matrix, Bracha L. Ettinger and Ria Verhaeghe*, 14 May–1 August 2010, <http://www.fundaciotapies.org/site/spip.php?rubrique953>.

Importantly, I draw comparisons between Ettinger's story and methodology and my own studio research; in both, the photograph signifies loss, absence, and recovery in relation to "storytelling and connecting".⁴⁷ The found black-and-white passport photo of my father instigated the process of photocopying, an attempt to recover or rediscover the past. The photo was sequentially reproduced; a copy of a copy of a copy was made, a technique I also used in my MVA research project.⁴⁸ Over multiple copies, the image itself began to deteriorate and alter, exposing an appearance of dissimilarity as opposed to similarity, difference as opposed to sameness. Although each image was reproduced from the one proceeding, each new image became a haunting echo of the previous—a residual trace of what once was.



Figure 6 Sonya G. Peters, *In Dialogue with My Father ...* 2012, 5 light-boxes, photocopy, cement, dimensions variable, Detail Installation view, Webb Gallery QCA.

Subsequently, the material substance of cement was used in contrast to the mechanical detachment of reproduction. The working/drawing back into the cement-coated images aroused a sense of intimacy and connection that became apparent through my haptic sensory perception. Touch, the tactile and the tangible, was made prevalent through the physical properties of the cement; the work became a visual dialogue that elicited a sensory experience—haptic perception.

⁴⁷ de Zegher, "From Notes to Nets."

⁴⁸ Sonya G. Peters, "Liminal Spaces and the Interrelationship between Body and Mind: Where the Corporeal Form Embodies the Essence of the Lived Experience," MVA Research Project, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, 2008. The research project was based on observation, drawing from the found object the remains of local fauna found in the natural environment investigating the transience of the corporeal form.



Figure 7 Sonya G. Peters, *In Dialogue with My Father ...* 2012, 5 light-boxes, photocopy, cement, dimensions variable, Detail Installation view, Webb Gallery QCA.

1.5 Embodied Experience

Hélène Cixous articulates that the idea of drawing is an extension of the body, in which the act itself comes from somewhere much deeper than visual perception. Cixous elaborates, saying,

it's from inside the body that the drawing-of-the-poet rises to the light of day. First it exists at the torment state in the chest, under the waist. See it now as it precipitates itself in spasms, in waves, the length of the arm, passing the hand, passing the pen. Eyes open wide in the night, staring wide-eyed with hope, the one who draws follows the movement. S/he obeys. Ecstasy: technique. Because not seeing doesn't impede the pen from noting. To the contrary.⁴⁹

Cixous's description traces drawing's process as beginning from somewhere deep inside the body and unimpeded by the eyes. As a visceral response, drawing stems from some innate place that extends beyond conscious thought and the visual; drawing derives from an embodied experience that is felt and lived. Avis Newman also believes that drawing can come from somewhere deeper, instinctual and

⁴⁹ Hélène Cixous, "Without End, No, State of Drawingness, No, Rather: The Executioner's Taking Off," in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, trans. Catherine A. F. Mac Gillivray (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), 17.

intuitive; there are “certain actions that constitute residual traces of primitive bodily movements, the significance of which is deeply rooted in our gestural acts”.⁵⁰

Drawing as an extension of the body and from the body is defined in Penone’s work, *Pelle di Grafite—Palebra (Skin of Graphite—Eyelid)* (2012). Focusing on the eyelid, Penone begins with an imprint of the skin of his closed eyelid. The delicate eyelid membrane is magnified hundredfold and transposed directly onto another surface: the membrane of canvas. Penone describes the closed eyelid as a “curtain, screen, projection of the glance; it defines the limits and space of thought or the fullness of sculpture as opposed to the emptiness of seeing”.⁵¹ That is, for Penone, the eyes/sight are but a singular aspect of the senses, whereas “the notion of touching is something basic in the conception of reality for a person [. . .] the act of touching is an act that helps [in] understanding the reality of things, the strength of materials, the peculiarities that are missed by the glance”.⁵² In magnifying the imprint, the subtle surface matrix of the skin emerges as a vast landscape in which the invisible, and the intangible, is made visible and tangible. *Skin of Graphite—Eyelid* incites an awareness of the senses that cannot be ‘missed by the glance’; this tactile perception extends seeing beyond observation. The corporeality of the flesh, as Penone states, “gives us more precise information in comparison to the visual perception. Therefore touching is complying with reality, in a more precise way rather than with our eyes”.⁵³

⁵⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁵¹ Giuseppe Penone, cited in the press release for the exhibition, *Giuseppe Penone*, 18 March–25 April 2015, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, http://www.mariangoodman.com/exhibitions/2015-03-18_giuseppe-penone/.

⁵² *Giuseppe Penone Documentary Part 1* YouTube video, 11:00, posted by “mastaja,” 18 February 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Fo-76Gfg3w>.

⁵³ Ibid.



Figure 8 Giuseppe Penone, *Pelle Di Grafite – Palpebra (Skin of Graphite - Eyelid)*, 2012, graphite on black canvas 200 x 200 cm each. Photo courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.



Figure 9 Giuseppe Penone, detail of *Pelle Di Grafite – Palpebra (Skin of Graphite - Eyelid)*, 2012, graphite on black canvas 200 x 200 cm each. Photo courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.

1.6 Drawing the Invisible to the Visible

Drawing is a reflective and reflexive response to “movement, space and time-intuitions of forces beyond the visible”⁵⁴ because it marks and registers the kinesthetic position of the body, apprehending the invisible in the visible, thereby giving form to thought, memory, and the imagination. Newman suggests that drawing is the “essence, the materialization of a continually mutable process, the movements, rhythms and partially comprehended ruminations of the mind: the operations of thought”.⁵⁵ For Newman, drawing is the manifestation and personification of thought. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty writes “there is no vision without thought. But *it is not enough* to think in order to see. Vision is a conditioned thought; it is born ‘as occasioned’ by what happens in the body: it is ‘incited’ to think by the body.”⁵⁶ Drawing, then, as Newman infers, is “the articulation of thoughts and ideas as a way of seeing what one is thinking”.⁵⁷ Newman discusses the writings of Merleau-Ponty, articulating,

I would not want to use a definition that suggests a dichotomy, but would rather say that thought in respect to drawing is a mental process of formulation connected to the organisation and coordination of manual acts. What I am alluding to is Merleau-Ponty’s consideration of “vision as an operation of thought”, where the body “sees itself seeing, . . . touches itself touching, . . . is visible and sensitive to itself”. The experience of that self is simultaneous with the process of formulating and responding to work.⁵⁸

For Newman, drawing is an embodied experience operating as the connective link between the body and the mind and between thought and action, with the body perceived of as the active and reactive agent in the drawing process.

⁵⁴ Jean Fisher, “On Drawing,” in *The Stages of Drawing: Gesture and Act* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 217.

⁵⁵ Newman, “Conversation: Avis Newman/Catherine de Zegher,” 67.

⁵⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Primacy of Perception, And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 175, original emphasis.

⁵⁷ Newman, “Conversation: Avis Newman/Catherine de Zegher,” 77.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

German-born artist Joseph Beuys (1921–86) described drawing as a “direct link to thought”.⁵⁹ In an interview with curator Bernice Rose, Beuys described drawing as “the first visible form of the thought, the changing point from the invisible powers to the visible thing”.⁶⁰ Drawing, Beuys asserted, employs the senses of sight and touch, as well as memory, intuition and imagination, and is the point when “everything comes together: the thought becomes modified by the other creative strata within the anthropological entity, the human being”.⁶¹

Beuys’s *Blackboard from the Office for Direct Democracy* (1971) was the first in a series, and in 2008 the work was also included in the 16th Sydney Biennale, *Revolutions—Forms That Turn*. Upon seeing this work, I was struck by the immediacy of Beuys’s mark-making, and the diagrammatic markings that were imbued with the gesture of the making and thinking process, from thought to form, temporal and spatial. They captured a moment in real time and evoked Beuys’s physical presence, writing and drawing, talking, writing, moving back and forth between the “head of office” and the blackboard.

In the Biennale catalogue, Johannes Stüttgen writes on Beuys’s work: “This blackboard was created in preparation for an information leaflet on Joseph Beuys’s concept of ‘Direct Democracy.’ It was intended for the public and in particular for the head of the office of the ‘Organisation for Direct Democracy’, Karl Fastabend.”⁶² The drawing served to explain Beuys’s concept of a “tripartite division, a threefold social order, [. . .] a guiding principle of his political action, a central aspect of his project for a radical new definition of society through ART [with an extended idea of art]”.⁶³ Beuys’s articulation of his thoughts and ideas emerge through the drawing process as a way of seeing what one is thinking, and thinking what one is seeing.

⁵⁹ Bernice Rose, “Thinking Is Form: The Drawings of Joseph Beuys,” *The Museum of Modern Art*, no. 13 (Winter 1993): 17.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶² Johannes Stüttgen, “Blackboard from the Office for Direct Democracy” in *Revolutions – Forms That Turn: 2008 Biennale of Sydney* (Victoria: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 132.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

In this chapter, I have examined the subject of perception, the ocularcentric paradigm, and its impact on contemporary thought and the visual arts. It specifically focused on the frame, which began as an aid to perspectival vision and has become a conceptual construct that continues to define how and what one sees. This idea is encapsulated in the film *The Draughtsman's Contract*, and is defined by the overarching question, "Should an artist draw what they know, or draw what they see?" As Avis Newman has argued, the frame is not part of drawing's language; drawing derives from sensory perception in which the body is the conduit in an all-perceptual experience.

Chapter 2

Seeing and Non-Seeing: A Metaphoric Blindness

2.1 Seeing Blind

Not seeing the world is the precondition for clairvoyance. But what does it mean, to see? Who sees? Who believes they know how to see? All human beings are blind with respect to one another. The 'sighted' do not see what the blind see and do not see. Non-seeing is also a kind of seeing. The blind person sees. I who am not blind do not see what the blind person sees. I am the blind for the blind. To be neither blind nor very nearsighted causes a sort of blindness.⁶⁴

Cixous's self-reflection poignantly questions vision—what does it mean to see, what is sight, are we all blind but seeing and what is it that we see and do not see? My investigative research into perception, of seeing and not seeing, and what may be a metaphorical blindness, is interrogated through the act of drawing reflects Cixous's introspections, and forms the basis of this chapter.

Cixous reinstates the idea that seeing is much more than what the eyes alone can perceive; clairvoyance, intuition, insight, and foresight are all forms of seeing, but seeing based on 'non-seeing'. This form of not-seeing can be distinguished as seeing with another eye—the inner or mind's eye, an inner vision—in which aspects of sight (clairvoyance, insight, memory and imagination) extend beyond the eyes' external faculty. As Merleau-Ponty states, to envision—to have vision—is to immerse oneself; to see more than just the "exterior envelope".⁶⁵ It is to "live it from the inside"; in other words, vision has "the power of showing forth more than itself".⁶⁶

In a personal account, Cixous describes her inability to see clearly, being short-sighted from birth. This caused a type of blindness and, as she reveals, it was the

⁶⁴ Cixous, "Writing Blind," 115.

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty "Eye and Mind," 178.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

secret to her clairvoyance. Indeed, it was a near blindness that opened the possibilities to other modes of seeing—a seeing that occurs once the eye is closed. Behind the eyelid, the other side of perception is another space/place, an “elsewhere”⁶⁷ in which Cixous reveals she is taken and in that “elsewhere there reigns another light”.⁶⁸ This ‘elsewhere’ echoes curator Jean Fisher’s words on drawing:

The impulse to draw is not to capture appearance so much as a demand to animate thought. Thus drawing is always beyond perception, the other side of perception [. . .] to become enfolded in the labyrinthine sensations of the visceral and the haptic.⁶⁹

The other side of perception is also visually conceptualised in Penone’s *Rovesciare i Propri Occhi (Reverse Your Eyes)* (1970), which was also included in the 2008 Biennale of Sydney. At the time, I was completely consumed by the images presented and now even more so. The work was significant when considering the phenomenon of perception and of the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible. It challenged how I saw and yet did not see. Penone reversed my conception of sight to expose a blindness that persists at the very heart of vision itself.

Reverse Your Eyes consisted of a series of seven slide projections in which Penone is seen at first glance in the distance standing in a tree-lined street. With each slide, Penone comes closer into view until he appears close-up, with eyes that are veiled and staring blindly. In this powerful and disconcerting image, we are made aware that Penone is wearing mirrored contact lenses and, in so doing, he has rendered himself metaphorically blind. Through a ‘non-seeing’, his perspective is reflected back to the viewer in a reversibility of seeing. Penone remarks “in reflecting what we see it allows others to see what this person would have seen, it’s like becoming part of the work before it’s created”.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Cixous, “Writing Blind,” 115.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Jean Fisher, “On Drawing,” in *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act, Selected from the Tate Collection* (New York: Tate Publishing, 2003), 218.

⁷⁰ *Giuseppe Penone Documentary Part 1*.

As indicated by the title, *Reverse Your Eyes* suggests a turning of the eyes inside out; to see inwardly evokes the idea that other forms of seeing are possible from behind closed eyes—veiled eyes, an inner perception that reveals more than what the external eye alone can perceive. Penone expresses,

When the eyes are open, the physical extension is as far as the eye can see. The space we see is reflected in our mind therefore the space we see is the extension of our body. Closing our eyes we define the body with the volume that it really has. And what we see, we transmit it through our actions, in what we do, in the conception of reality and life that we have.⁷¹

Penone reveals in the mirrored eyes, or in the reversing of one's perception, that blindness is not in opposition to vision, but that blindness and vision are co-dependent. They are entwined in a continuous interrelationship to inform each other through the bodily presence of the other. Merleau-Ponty expresses this idea, emphasising that "our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world".⁷² In reflecting on one's perspective, and the invisible boundaries between one and the other that separate, distance and dissolve, Penone's reversibility of seeing puts one back into touch with the perspective of another self.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2005), 413.

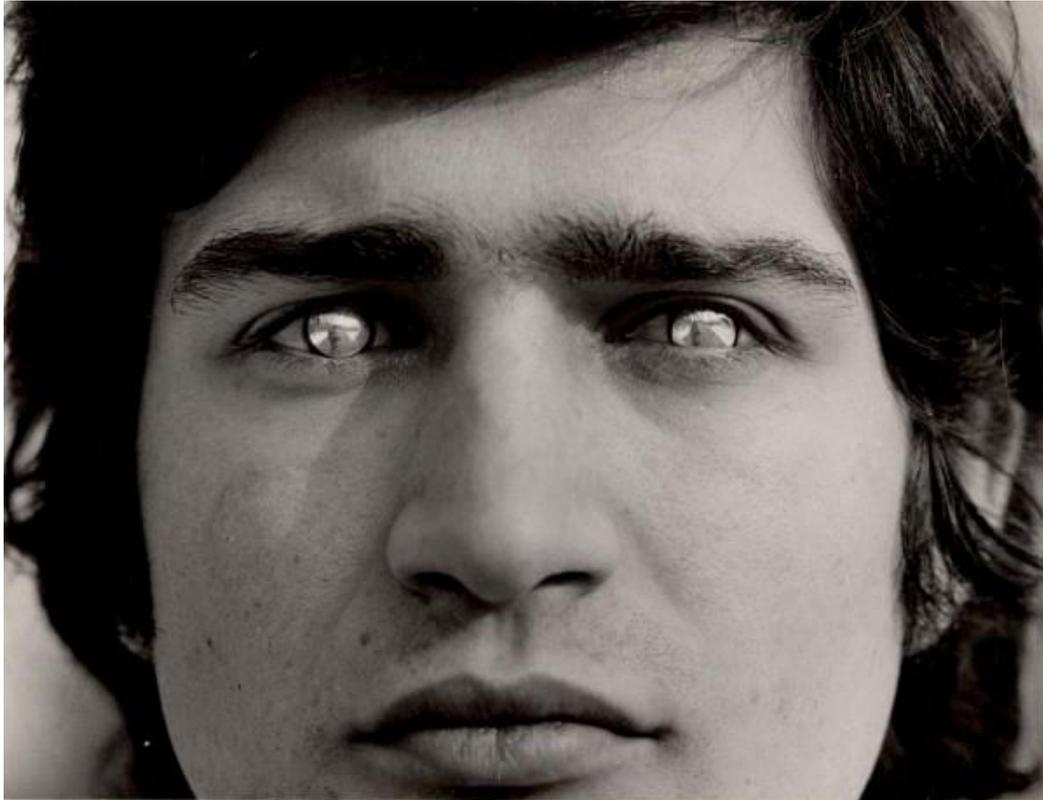


Figure 12 Giuseppe Penone, *Rovesciare i Propri Occhi (Reverse Your Eyes)* 1970, action by the artist, reflecting contact lenses Photo: Claudio Bas.



Figure 13 Giuseppe Penone, *Rovesciare i Propri Occhi (To Reverse One's Eyes)*, 1970, slide projection, 7 colour slides. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris. Photograph: Jenni Carter.

2.2 The Punctum Caecum of Vision

In *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*, Peter Schwenger writes that seeing is conditioned by our culture, which “has taught us how to see, what to select out of the field of vision, and in the process how to achieve a selective blindness”.⁷³ However, at the heart of vision exists a physiological blindness—commonly referred to as the blind spot, the punctum caecum is a hole on the retina where the optic nerve is formed.⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty refers to the eye’s punctum caecum “as a blindness of the ‘consciousness’”.⁷⁵ And, as he suggests, because consciousness has a punctum caecum, it both sees and does not see, and because it cannot see itself seeing, it can never “completely have a positive vision of reality as full presence”.⁷⁶ In effect, one cannot see what one does not see; at the outset, seeing is conditioned by blindness.

In the previously mentioned exhibition *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, Derrida called into question the ocularcentric paradigm. As a memoir, the catalogue presents an account of Derrida’s attempt of writing without seeing, “not with eyes closed but open and disoriented in the night; or else during the day, my eyes fixed on *something else*, while looking elsewhere”.⁷⁷ From the onset and through his own experience of writing without seeing, Derrida defines the “abocular hypothesis”⁷⁸ as being “without the eyes”,⁷⁹ and equates drawing to blindness.

Derrida’s hypothesis is twofold. First, Derrida asserts that while drawing presumes a dependency on sight, sight is much more than what the eyes alone can perceive. In citing the drawings of the blind, Derrida discerns that it is the hand, or touch, that becomes the seeing-eye, posing the question,

⁷³ Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 38.

⁷⁴ Daniel C. Dennett, “The Definition of the Punctum Caecum, Blind Spot,” *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Hachet Book Group, 1991), 323.

⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 248.

⁷⁶ Martin, *Downcast Eyes*, 320.

⁷⁷ Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 3. Original emphasis.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

What happens when one writes without seeing? A hand of the blind ventures forth alone or disconnected, in a poorly delimited space; it feels its way, it gropes, it caresses as much as it inscribes, trusting in the memory of signs and supplementing sight.⁸⁰

This brings the hypothesis to its second part: drawing also assumes memory as its prerequisite, suggesting that drawing is entrusted to memory rather than perception. Expanding the idea, Derrida refers to Charles Baudelaire, emphasising, “it is the *order of memory* that precipitates beyond present perception”.⁸¹ He writes that the blink—the Augenblick, the batting of an eyelid, the instant when the gaze is subverted—is the moment when memory prevails.⁸²

Derrida relays the story of attempting to draw himself and recognising the moment when the eye must turn away from the subject of the drawing, and to the drawing itself. This is the moment when memory precedes and in the space between seeing and not seeing, that blindness also ensues. Derrida asks,

how can one claim to look at both a model and the lines [*traits*] that one jealously dedicates with one’s own hand to the thing itself? Doesn’t one have to be blind to one or the other? Doesn’t one always have to be content with the memory of the other?⁸³

2.3 Drawing Blind

Artist Robert Morris writes, “Vision is always mediated. We always believe before we look. We always assume (theorize) a wholeness of the visual. We believe to such an extent that we do not ‘see’ the absences”.⁸⁴ Memory, blindness, and touch are prevalent in his *Blind Time Drawings* (1973–2009), which challenges drawing’s assumed dependency on sight. These drawings are the result of Morris’s

⁸⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁸¹ Ibid., 48. Original emphasis.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 36–37. *Traits* is in the original and means ‘lines’. See translator’s note, p.2.

⁸⁴ Robert Morris, *Robert Morris, Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993–2007*, ed. Nena Tsouti-Schillinger (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 45.

unprecedented decision to draw without the use of his eyes, either closing them or wearing a blindfold. Morris's multi-faceted work challenges the ocularcentric paradigm and, in a deliberate decision to exclude sight from the drawing process, parallels Derrida's abocular hypothesis.

For Morris, drawing blind is a self-reflexive meditative state, since he draws from thoughts and memories while actively using his body as the extension to his thinking process. He describes,

While working, I was thinking about the future of my then 9-year-old daughter Laura, the phases of her life and how these might get lived out, and I was trying for some bodily movement of pressure, direction, motion, etc., to stand in for these meditations.⁸⁵

The primacy of touch, and the action and reaction of the body to its own physical capabilities to the thoughts and to the surface of the paper are all embedded in the work. Jean-Pierre Criqui describes Morris's process as an embodied experience, expressing:

In these works in which the artist goes bare-handed at the paper, his groping redolent of the sculptor (modeling clay, among other activities), but also the artist's corporeal involvement as he stands, body tensed over the sheet, as if in front of a mirror that is constantly being whisked away, attempting to make it tangible with his own hands, and also the sounds that are a part of his action (rubbing, scraping, tapping, sighing, throat noises).⁸⁶

Morris's series *Blind Time V, Melancholia* (1999) and *Moral Blinds* (2000) became, as Criqui suggests, more autobiographical, remembering past events; in particular, a childhood experience of almost drowning and the fear and uncertainty of not finding

⁸⁵ Jean-Pierre Criqui, ed. Jean-Pierre Criqui "Drawing from the Heart of Darkness: Robert Morris's Blind Time," in *Robert Morris: Blind Time Drawings, 1973–2000* (Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, 2005), 22.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

his way to the surface again. The memory of this experience became the impetus for *Melancholia*. In a description written in the margin of the work, Morris writes,

Working blindfolded with ink on the hands, estimating the lapsed time, and holding my breath, I concentrate on the memory of nearly drowning at age eight in the deep end of a swimming pool. Then as now my eyes were tightly shut, then as now I groped for some imaginable thing that would save me, feeling the rescue pole just as my air ran out. Time estimation error: - 10 seconds.⁸⁷



Figure 14 Robert Morris, *Blind Time V (Melancholia)*, 1999. Photo: Lawrence Beck.

Drawing blind is also a facet in artist William Anastasi's work, although his work process differs to that of Morris. In an act of disconnection, Anastasi would disengage from the thought process and allow the body, without conscious thought or predetermination, to draw solely through the body's action and reaction to the environment it was in. In *Subway Drawings* (1993–2006), executed while travelling the subway, with a board and paper placed on his knees and with eyes closed or looking away and a pencil in either hand, Anastasi would allow the motion of the train to create the marks made.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

There is no mark that does not bear the trace of its maker, of the past made present, as Bergson states, “it is part of my present, exactly like my habit of walking or writing; it is lived and acted rather than represented”.⁸⁸ Similarly, *Untitled (Pocket Drawings)* (2008) were created while walking with paper folded and in his pocket walking. The movement of Anastasi’s body would allow the action and create the drawings. Significantly, Anastasi’s lines/marks accrue across the surface of the paper and are not bound by limits.

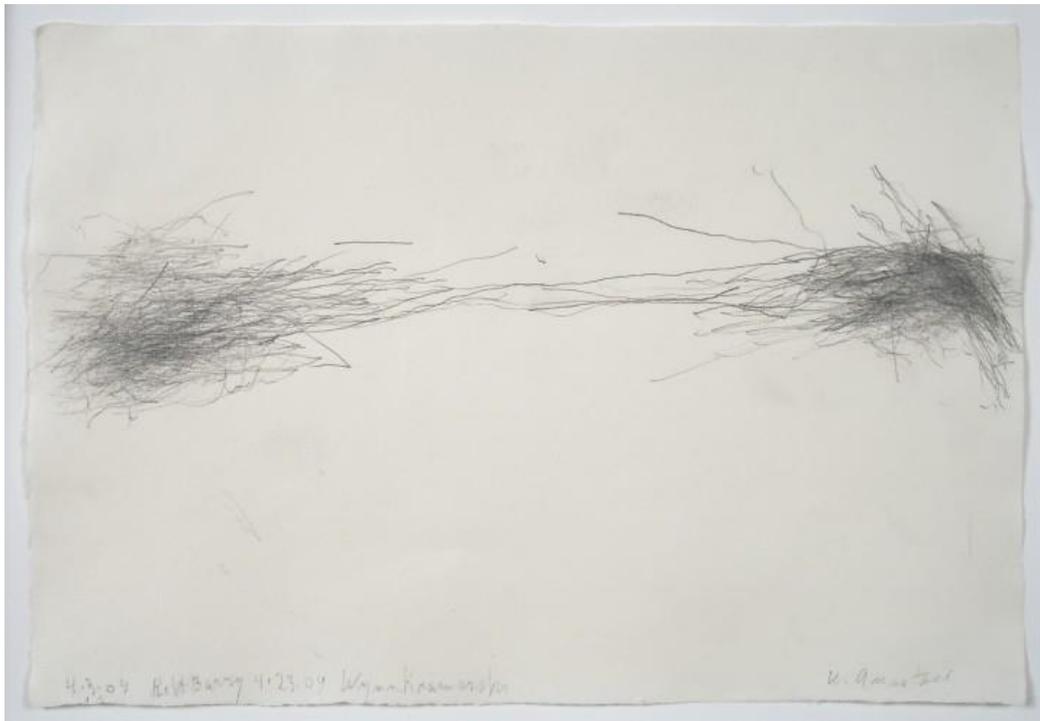


Figure 15 William Anastasi, *Untitled (Subway Drawing)*, 2009 Graphite on paper, 20.3 x 29.2 cm
© 2012 William Anastasi.

⁸⁸ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 91.



Figure 16 William Anastasi, *Untitled (Pocket Drawing)*, 2008, graphite on paper towel from The Modern Restaurant, 42.9 x 42.9 cm © 2012 William Anastasi.

2.4 Drawing Blind/Drawing Memory

To interrogate the subject of perception, and to actively comprehend the body's position in the act of drawing, drawing blind became a significant focus of my studio research. I have explored drawing as an embodied experience, and a mode of haptic perception unencumbered by visual stimulation. This method was partly initiated by Derrida's abocular hypothesis, and I draw a comparison between my blind drawings and Morris's *Time Blind Drawings*, although the comparison lies in the act itself—drawing without the use of eyes.

The images that are embedded in my memory—what Bergson describes as memory-images, or mental pictures—are important to my work process. However, Bergson does not regard memory-images as representations of the past: “to recall the past is not a representation of the past; rather it is the lived experience of the past that is

perceived in the present”.⁸⁹ Importantly, Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle, authors of *Deciphering the Senses: The Expanding World of Human Perception*, state: “the ability to visualize something internally is also closely linked with the ability to describe it verbally. Verbal and written descriptions create highly specific mental images”.⁹⁰ These words are actualised when I am drawing blind.

In a process of recall, the memory-image begins with a verbal description that would set the tone and the starting point to each drawing. The self-reflective act of drawing blind, and a dialogue with the past brings into play remembering and memory-images, and centres for me on the potential of drawing as an intertwining the past and the present. Memory and remembering and the interchange/exchange of the narrative and the image are all in the foreground of the image and my body.

My blind drawings began as intimate works in my journal, and I filled numerous books with them. Later, this extended onto small blackboards. Drawing on the blackboard was significant; metaphorically, it operates as the prime support to the transient nature of memory, of remembering and forgetting. As a surface structure, lines can be traced, retraced, and erased on it, with the original mark present. Each drawing becomes a marked record of a memory—the material trace of what was—and although I can continually recall the same memory to mind, it cannot be drawn the same. I share my use of the blackboard with other artists—as well as Beuys, Twombly and Tacita Dean. Emma Dexter has argued that for these artists, “both inscription and erasure are conceptually central”⁹¹ to notions of memory and remembering. For me, it was the idea that memories are a trace of what is remembered and are as easily forgotten.

The blackboard format I worked with was large enough to sit comfortably on my lap. In this way, I was able to negotiate my way between the edges of the board to find my starting point in relation to the board’s edges.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁹⁰ Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle in Martin, *Downcast Eyes*, 8.

⁹¹ Emma Dexter, *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2005), 76.

Working in complete darkness and in a contained space was integral to the drawings, as all sound was muffled. This aroused a sense of being invisible, hidden from the activities of the day. My seclusion enhanced a bodily awareness, an embodied experience of being in the moment and simultaneously transposed to somewhere else.

The term “lines of flight”⁹² that Deleuze and Guattari speak of enters my mind when thinking of a stowaway escaping, as flight incites a sense of fleeing of escape, of always moving, never being static. The line in drawing is a line that marks the material presence of the body, of moving through space. As “living lines, flesh lines”,⁹³ they are the life lines that connect, disconnect, intersect, and diverge. To draw blind also incites a line in flight; it moves not by seeing not by plotting. It escapes the gaze without the eyes to determine where it will go where it will end; it moves with the body, an extension of the body, from the body.

I questioned whether the work could be developed further by increasing the size and if this would have an impact on the drawings and on the intimacy of being in close contact with the boards. While I had become accustomed to drawing in a contained space, I would now have to work in a larger space with the boards hanging on the wall. This also altered my position to the drawings; instead of sitting I now had to circumnavigate the length of the boards, standing, walking. Touch became primary as I would walk and draw, feeling my way across and over the surface of the boards, always staying in contact.

⁹² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 203.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 286.

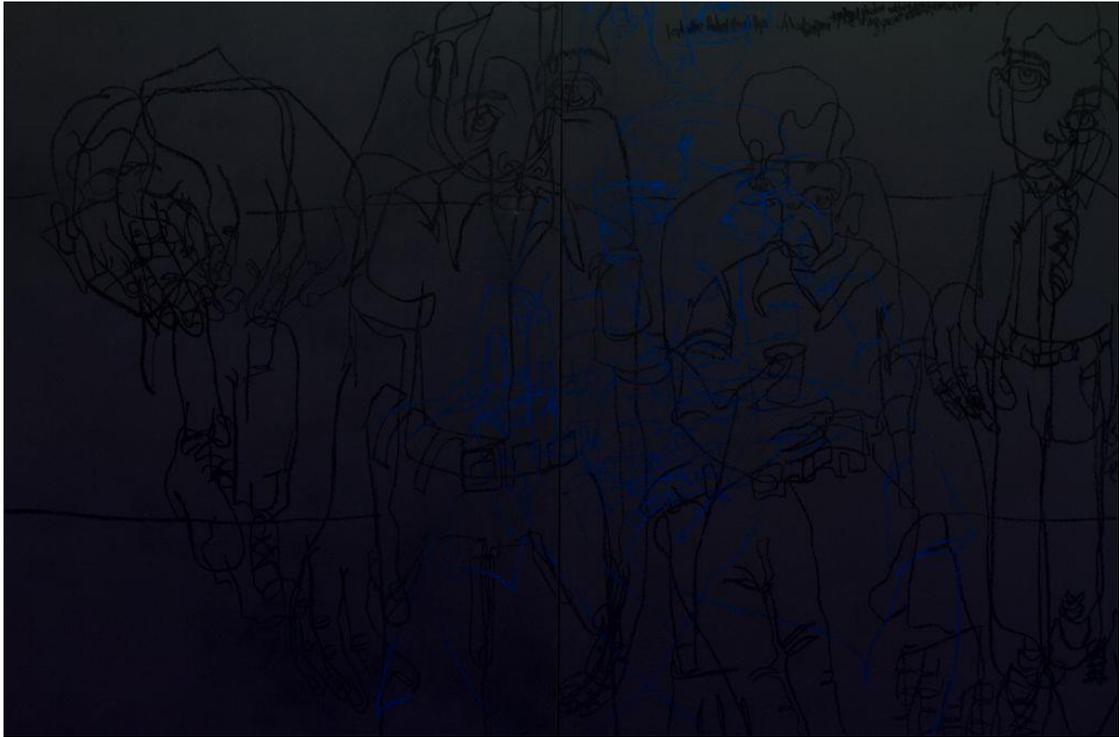


Figure 17 Sonya G. Peters, *In Dialogue with My Father II...* 2014, Installation view, chalk on blackboard, 200 x 1800 cm. Photo courtesy of Steven Roberts.



Figure 18 Sonya G. Peters, *In Dialogue with My Father II...* 2014, Installation view, chalk on blackboard, 200 x 180cm. Photo courtesy of Steven Roberts.

2.5 Drawing/Writing

My process of drawing blind evolved into text-based drawings in which drawing and writing formulate in response to memories activated by the found object. I would write and rewrite (blind) in response to an audio recording of the newspaper clipping. With the recording playing, I would begin writing, but I found that it was impossible to keep pace with the audio. The words and sentences lost sequence while I attempted to remember what I heard and write what I remembered. In the end, the sentences and words were unreadable. Engaged in the process of making through sensory perception, I was aware of the recording, the surface of the paper, the pressure of my hand on the pencil and on the paper, and the space I was in. The act of writing became automatic, unconscious, with the hand trying to keep up.

Experimentation with various surfaces, from the blackboards to writing on carbon paper, became the difference between being bound by the edge or frame (writing on the boards) and a sense of not being contained by the edge when working on paper. It informed my decision to make the work, *Unsaid* (2014).

A text-based drawing, *Unsaid* is presented on fifteen metres of baking paper and writes out what is heard from an audio recording of the first chapter of the novel *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass. Significantly, the novel reveals the untold stories of a family history.

To work on baking paper was a conscious decision, made specifically for its translucent wax-like quality, which contrasted strongly with the material qualities of the cement that I had been working with. Important to the work was setting out a format for the scroll to represent the pages of a book, the writing set between margins. Here the writing took on a metaphoric blindness; I was seeing through non-seeing. While concentrating on the audio and aware of writing, I was working with a pen and quill, trying to keep up with the audio recording. The words and sentences merged, one running into another. My body acted and reacted to the audio; the past and present, the invisible and the visible merged and converged in the calligraphic

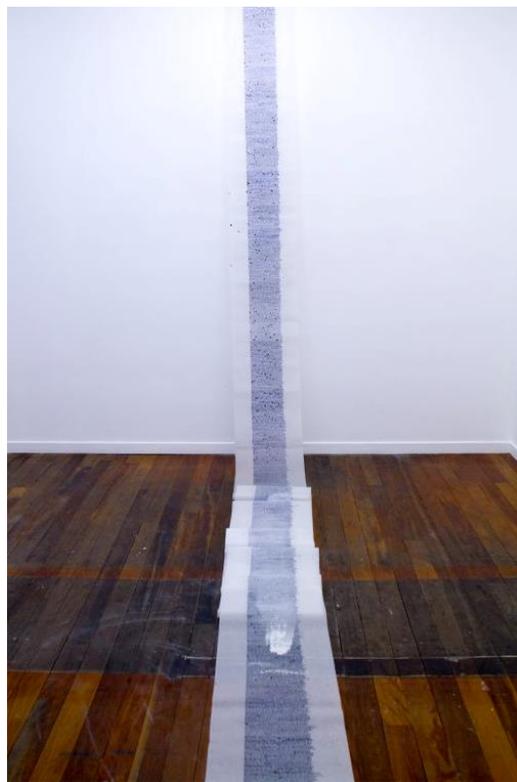
marks. Derrida describes this as a “distant kind of synergy”, that simultaneously “coordinates the possibilities of seeing, touching, and moving. And of hearing and understanding, for these are already words of the blind.”⁹⁴

This chapter has specifically focused on seeing and not seeing, a metaphorical blindness, expressed through the autobiographical accounts of philosophers Cixous and Derrida. It has examined the works of specific artists who forego sight in order to explore the potential of the body as the site of perception. In relation to my drawing, I have considered blindness as a central metaphor to explore memory and remembering through a self-reflective study.



Figure 19 Sonya G. Peters *Unsaid ...* 2014, installation view, ink, cement-dust, baking paper, table, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of Steven Roberts.

⁹⁴ Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 4.



Figures 20 and 21 Sonya G. Peters, *Unsaid ...* 2014, installation view, ink, cement-dust, baking paper, table, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of Steven Roberts.

CHAPTER 3

Seeing Through Memory

3.1 Memory Remembered

The studio research carried out during this doctoral candidature moved through a range of experiments that investigated the way in which memories of the past reside in the present, and are activated by the found object. Merleau-Ponty comments, “Our perception ends in objects, and the object once constituted, appears as the reason for all the experiences of it which we have had or could have.”⁹⁵ An object perceived is also an object that is remembered, and, through memory, the same object acquires new meaning, or as Robert Sokolowski expresses, “a new noematic layer: as remembered, as past”.⁹⁶ Just as perception contains both an absence and a presence, memory contains “a new blend of presences and absences”.⁹⁷ Sokolowski describes the importance of the object to memory, saying “In memory we reactivate not just an object but an object as presenting itself there and then, and yet presenting itself again here and now, but only as past”.⁹⁸ To call up the past is to call it up in the present; the there and then becomes the here and now. Sokolowski refers to this as “the noematic form that remembered objects take on, a form different from that of perceived objects”.⁹⁹ The perceived object is now also embedded with memory, of a past, a present and a future, and the body, for Sokolowski, “is established in the interplay that occurs between perception and memory”.¹⁰⁰ The ability to position oneself in both the past and the present through memory, as Sokolowski continues, “introduces a whole new dimension into my mental or inner life. I am not confined to the here and now; I can not only refer to the past (and to the future), but I can also live in it through memory”.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2005), 77.

⁹⁶ Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

The inspiration for British artist Rachel Whiteread's work *EMBANKMENT* (2005) was an old cardboard box embedded with the memories of the past. Whiteread relates the story of re-discovering the box, which at one time had been filled with the objects and memorabilia of her family. The box was discovered after Whiteread's mother's sudden death. The box as Whiteread recalls,

had many lives: it used to reside in her [Whiteread's] toy cupboard next to piles of board games, and at one point was filled with Christmas decorations. Over the years its sides started to collapse, the painted logo on the outside faded, and the lid came to shine with the traces of all the Sellotape used to bind it up over the years.¹⁰²

The sudden passing of Whiteread's mother prompted the clearing up of personal items, and going through boxes filled with the memories of her childhood. She became reacquainted with personal items that held meaning, connections to the past. As Whiteread refers, "every single thing had a significance, connections and associations that you couldn't stop".¹⁰³ The connections, associations and memories that were aroused in Whiteread when she rediscovered these boxes are similar to what I have been inspired by in the current research project.

¹⁰² *The Unilever Series, Rachel Whiteread, Embankment*, www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-rachel-whiteread-embankment/rachel-whiteread.

¹⁰³ Catherine Wood and Gordon Burn, *Rachel Whiteread: Embankment, The Unilever Series* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 74.



Figure 22 Rachel Whiteread, *EMBANKMENT*, 2005 © Tate Photo: Marcus Leith.

Important to my investigative methods was to continually centre my work on seeing through memory, giving form to thought. The key concerns centred on imagination, the imperceptible and the perceptible, and visualising the immaterial as the material.

Using cement for the castings was significant to the project, and referenced the Leica camera box, an object that had concealed the secrets and the memories of the past. In working with castings to create three-dimensional objects, and drawing from seeing to trace a non-seeing, the drawing blind experimentations led from one work into another. The focal idea was the trace, the residual marking encased within the box and my memories.

In collecting and working from boxes that had been discarded, I began casting what symbolised the empty space. What became interesting to the work once the cement had set and the outer skin was removed were the remaining fragments of the box embedded in the cement. The empty/negative space now revealed traces of what was unseen, imperceptible; the interior and exterior became simultaneously visible.

After casting almost twenty boxes, the question arose, how could the work progress further through the cement and casting?

3.2 Making Concrete, Making Material

My work *Making Concrete (Embedded)* (2015) began in response to the traces left behind that marked the presence of something that once was in my past. While walking on a freshly laid concrete footpath, I observed the embedded traces of the leaves that had fallen. This observation inadvertently prompted a rethinking of the concrete boxes and the important presence of the imprint of that which is left behind after something or someone passes. I returned to the cardboard boxes and I began to draw on the inside, on the sides, and the flaps and folds of the boxes. I poured cement into the boxes, excited at not being able to predict an outcome as the work was left to chance. Once the cement had set and the outer casing removed, the drawing was embedded, leaving a trace as an altered resemblance of the original. By drawing on the inside of the box itself, various aspects of the drawing were also mysteriously revealed. A fold lay over another fold, and part of the image was revealed, distorted, and disjointed. The one image was now formed and reformed into several facets.



Figure 23 Sonya G. Peters, *Making Concrete (Embedded)* 2015, concrete boxes, and graphite, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of Aidan Ryan.



Figure 24 Sonya G. Peters, *Making Concrete (Embedded)*, 2015, concrete boxes, and graphite, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of Aidan Ryan.

3.3 Seeing Memory

Blind Drawing/Drawing Blind (2015) developed from my investigation of perception as the method to interrogate blindness—actual and metaphorical. The act of drawing combined with not seeing prompted me to utilise my body as the active and reactive agent, resulting in the sensory actions of memory, touch, movement and time all being integral to the studio project.

In *On Drawing*, John Berger describes, “A drawing is more than a memento – a device for bringing back memories of time past.”¹⁰⁴ Berger suggests that, “A drawing slowly questions an event’s appearance and in doing so reminds us that appearances are always a construction with history”.¹⁰⁵ Thus, line acts as the material trace of memory; it is always in the process of becoming, tracing the movements of the body, merging the past with the present.

The *Blind Drawing* series was initiated from what I imagined in response to the mementoes discovered in the Leica camera box. The text descriptions were from specific memories of my thought. As a working methodology, I set myself a twenty-minute time limit that I worked towards, and was blindfolded. The time limit operated as a gauge to what could be accomplished within those parameters. What became apparent in the process was a ‘slowing down’ of time (time became irrelevant), which allowed me to focus on the present with less regard to the idea of what was to come. Navigating my way along the surface of the walls and drawing from envisioning memories of the past, with only my thoughts and imagination, in the confined space of the gallery, was a concentrated and physical effort. Here my sensory perception was heightened through haptic perception.

The works *Blind Drawing/Drawing Blind, Unsaid* and *Making Concrete (Embedded)*, exhibited at the Whitebox Gallery, Griffith University, Gold Coast, in 2015, interconnect the ideas and methodology derived from my inquiry into the subject of perception to focus on seeing and non-seeing. These works coalesce the multiple concerns of the research: memory, the trace, and the physical.

¹⁰⁴ John Berger, *Berger on Drawing*, ed. Jim Savage (Aghabullogue: Occasional Press, 2008), 70.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

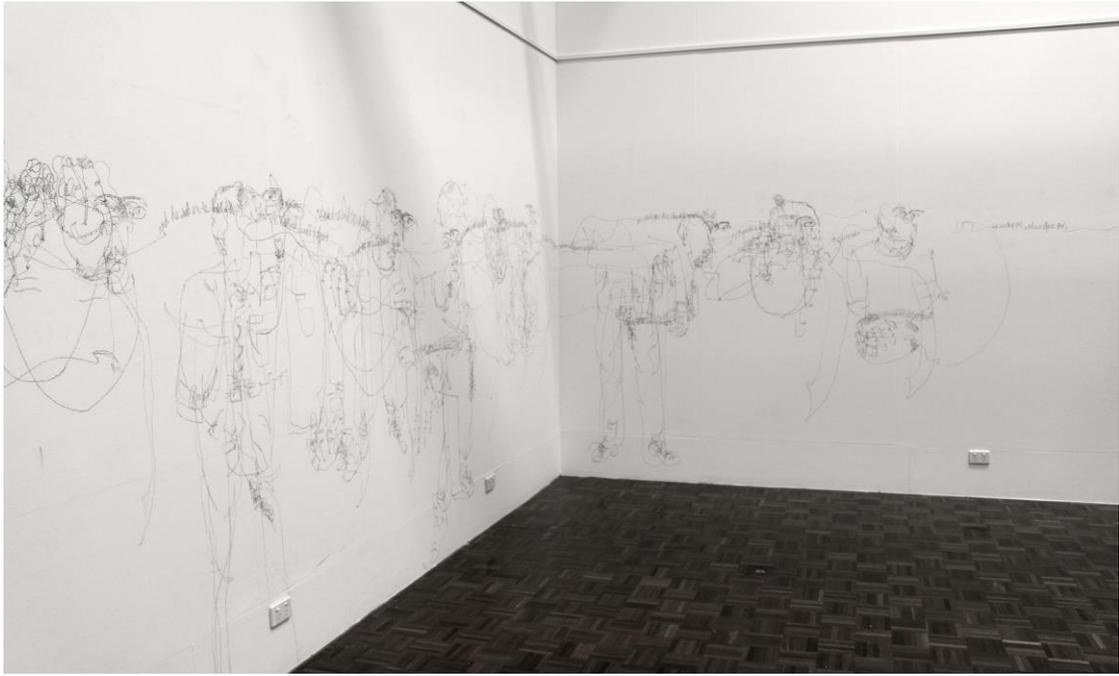


Figure 25 Sonya G. Peters, *Drawing Blind/Blind Drawing*, 2015, Installation view, graphite on walls, dimensions variable



Figure 26 Sonya G. Peters, *Drawing Blind/Blind Drawing*, 2015, Installation view, graphite on walls, dimensions variable



Figures 27 and 28 Sonya G. Peters, *Drawing Blind/Blind Drawing*, 2015, Installation view.

Conclusion

The research and studio outcomes of this Doctor of Visual Arts candidature have provided the platform to articulate issues relating to perception, memory, and remembering that are core to my drawing practice. Through experiential experimentation, the project provided me with the means to consider drawing as an embodied strategy. This in turn formulated key findings that exposed drawing's presumed dependency on sight.

The discovery of the Leica camera box as a mnemonic device provided the link between the correlations of blindness, vision, and memory. These concepts along with the influence of Jacques Derrida and his writings on drawing and vision played an integral part in my studio practice, which prompted this investigative research, resulting in extensive experimentation.

The studio research and concepts were further articulated through the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose ontology of the body as reversible flesh provided insight into my studio research. The premise that sight was the primary source of knowledge also inspired me to examine the notion of drawing and its direct correlation with embodied human experience. The use of my memory was key to the methodology of drawing blind. This methodology incorporated Henri Bergson's understanding of memory and perception as two interdependent and mutually informing processes. These ideas were pursued through the studio research project and were pivotal in exploring the act of drawing blind as the agency of investigation into memory and remembering. Here the inclusion of contemporary artists Robert Morris and William Anastasi further substantiated my methodology for the blind drawing series.

The question ‘How can drawing, as an embodied strategy with an assumed dependency on sight, elicit a response to extend across all the senses?’ has prompted the use of various techniques. This included blind drawing, blind writing and making concrete objects, which allowed for the development and experimentation between two- and three-dimensional formats. The research also challenged the belief that drawing is reliant on sight.

Through the studio project, I discovered that perception and memory operate in a continuum, that one informs the other. The importance of the ‘box’ and its relationship with my studio practice gave me insight into understanding the connection between memory and remembering, and the way it is expressed through different materials. Line, as a significant aspect in the blind drawing series, became the material trace of memory; as the body moves through thoughts and ideas, lines make the invisible and the imperceptible traceable. The studio work also established the link between seeing and non-seeing, in which touch encompassed drawing an embodied experience.

Significant to the studio and research project was a new developed body of work *Blind Drawing/Drawing Blind* (2015). Supporting this work was the discovery of the ‘box’, which acted as the catalyst behind these investigations, acting as the interconnection between the ideas of perception and personal memory. The research project challenged my notions of perception, of drawing, and of what it is that we do and do not see. The following words by Cixous resonate with this inquiry:

Then I raise the visor from my eyes, I turn my naked eyes toward the world. And I see. I see! with the naked eye, and it is exaltation itself. I pass from non-seeing to seeing-the world. The features of the world’s face rise, emerge, pass from the unperceived into presence. It is a sudden, dazzling, engendering passage. I feel myself see. Eyes are the most delicate most powerful hands, imponderably touching the over-there. From over there I feel a self return to me.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Cixous, “Writing Blind,” 116.

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