Drawing Bodies: A Kinaesthetics of Attention

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What I would like to bring our attention to is the action of drawing bodies. Of bodies drawing bodies. And particularly of bodies in motion. What happens when we attend to the sensations of being in motion with other bodies?

But what if attending itself is a way of moving? A way even of drawing? When we attend to something, we don't do so in the abstract. To draw our attention to something is not in the least figurative. Or rather, it is the figure itself that we must begin to set in motion differently. What are we doing with ourselves as we gather to think through drawing, as this gathering is itself collected and redistributed? A symposium is, of course, traditionally organized around drinking and talking, for which the image and text traditionally serve as a kind of supplement. Plato's Symposium—to evoke, with this one example, a long history and context—is an account of a spoken "dialogue," a dramatic scene handed down to us on paper, which our eyes drink in by moving in a kind of collective repetition, taking their turn in an intoxicating rhythm, drawn out and shared across time.

This task of thinking through drawing, with all of the ways we can pass through, inflect, and read it, thus asks us to attend to what we're doing when we attempt to think through drawing. What do we do to pose and work with the question? What are the ways in which our histories of doing this both allow and disallow, suggest or dissuade movements? How would we go about learning? About thinking through drawing? I want to call our attention to both the multiplicity of modes that happen, often more or less together, but also to the specificity of them, the ways in which we take on certain gestures of learning. If only to see what new gestures we might learn.

Elusive gestures

Can we speak of a usual gesture of learning? This is even more difficult to think if we refuse to imagine gesture (like education) as a kind of supplement, an artifice, something sketchy to be looked past. But is that not how we begin?

Drawing is nowhere, after all. A thing for kids, and for those who would prefer to remain kids even if it means taking on a profession and mastering a formal tradition. Even then, drawing as a discipline, we often lament, falls between the cracks. The making of marks has a hard time leaving its mark. If drawing is the fundamental activity we turn ourselves to immediately upon our learning to stop eating the crayons, it is likewise a bare step from such fumblings.

But let us put this childish impression in a larger cultural context: As Jacques Derrida (1976) lays out in Of Grammatology, the spoken word, in its immediacy, has become the vision of a kind of pure presence, of unmediated thinking itself, of which writing is a poor, if necessary, supplement. Extending this, we could say that drawing falls even further behind, a kind of crude mark making, not even proper writing. And if we were to extend this line of thinking even further, gesture—rather than bringing us back closer to the ephemeral immediacy of speech—becomes a particularly cursory form of drawing.
We can agree, then, with the assessment Stephen Farthing shared with us—in tracing the limits of the elusive terrain of drawing, as a way of knowing something about it—that the slipping shadow a plane casts on the ground is not a drawing. Since Plato’s allegory of the cave, at least, the casting of shadows has been linked with illusory nothingness. It is thus a telling example: if drawing is not passing shadows, it is nevertheless what borders on and follows them all too closely.

But what if, rather than arguing the proximity, we simply re-draw it? As Derrida points out, contrary to our common sense narratives, writing, and mark-making as a whole, comes prior to—has priority in relation to—speaking. Speaking is, we might say, a particular form of leaving traces, of drawing. Seen from this perspective, the very suppression of the gestural mark is itself a particular form of gesturing: in this case, the gesture of outlining an acceptable terrain, creating the impression of it being distinct from some negative space. When we first learn to count, for example, we are quickly discouraged from using our hands. To learn is to learn the idea of numbers. But rather than escaping the movements of our bodies have we not simply displaced them to a gestural locus our culture prefers, the tongue? We learn our multiplication tables by the gestures of speaking them, until we can do so subtly that we hardly notice. Sublingual: learning is recognizable to us as the gesture of forgetting gesture.

But this is just to say, switching figure for ground, that it is only in the movements and gestures we make in the world, no matter how subtle, that our thoughts take shape. Indeed, we might say that is only through drawing—the thing that is nowhere—that a sense of where is expressed. It is not that we are first in a world in which we might then choose, for example, to dawdle by drawing. But rather it is only in the child drawing out uncertain movements, gestures, and traces in the world that the where of the world begins to shape up in the first place. We draw out, and are drawn out, by our worlds.
Figuring

What if drawing is understood, then, not as the fixing of traces, but of their expression? In other words, what happens if we understand drawing as primarily a form of moving? And what if moving were the mode proper to thought itself; the way we find our way? The pilot ignores his own shadow, to be sure, but navigates instead a critical, emergent line mediating the transition between density and buoyancy. This life and death tension, this livelihood, is drawn out as a gesture expressing the lived dimensions of space. In that sense, that last bastion of stuffy frivolity, figure or life drawing, is actually what we are doing all of the time. We are continually working with what is somewhat condescendingly, narrowly, and misleadingly called our “body image,” sorting out how we move in relationship to others and the world. And while we often feel like we know how that goes, on some level we are always making it up as we go along, figuring things out. Threading earth and sky.

Contrast that to our usual notion of figure drawing as a specialized and tradition-laden domain demarcated by collections of techniques and pedagogies held loosely together by the special peculiarity of the object being visualized. Treated as a visual-tactile exercise, figure drawing lends us to thinking of the body as a kind of empty pose, mere gesture. And yet, if we would prefer to think of the figure as a kind of elaborate and specialized aesthetic object, what is it that draws us to it or pushes us away? One possibility is that we somehow recognize there the modern challenge of embodiment itself: the need for, or resistance to, figuring something else about our figure. Buried under our desire for the skill of rendering dynamism and life in the drawing itself, we find a deeper challenge pulling on us: that we have yet to truly understand the figure as a moving process.

We tend to stand the figure on its head, even priding ourselves on the optic/pedagogic trick of such a move. At best, we might suggest that if we could feel a pose for ourselves that might lend itself to an improvement in rendering it. And yet, in this time that is witness to the demise of the centrality of the figure in drawing, which is itself beleaguered, there is perhaps room for another gesture. Engaging with the sensations of figuring, of being either drawer or drawn, can allow us to access a more accurate and functional facility with the movements and structures that underlie our experiences in general. What happens when we take the time to feel the sensations of movement that are often dismissed in our visually dominated and oddly disembodied culture? What if we treat the body not as a visual object but as a locus of kinaesthetic experience? Figuring, as a process of working out the felt relationships between things in motion, is a kind of fundamental inter-disciplinary learning.

If we think of figure drawing in this more robust way, as the thing we are doing all of the time, (even when we pretend not to be doing it), then figure drawing starts to be defined less by a subject, by a history of technique, or by a medium, and more by the feedback that it provides us about our continued “figurings.” In the process of discovering the movements that allow us, for example, to follow lines around the surface of ourselves or another, we are not just doing contour drawing, but finding new ways to draw out, organize, and move ourselves than we might otherwise be used to. In this light, the question is not whether we are doing figure drawing or not, but how is it going?

A kinaesthetics of planes

Take the problem of planes, for example. We don’t get far in drawing without having to wrestle with planes, not the least of which is the plane of the paper. Unfortunately, how we are asked to think about our embodied relationship to planes leaves much to be desired. As a glance at any anatomy textbook will demonstrate, our Cartesian sense of space does something rather violent to the body, leaving it both bisected by planes, and hanging, oddly nowhere. It is as if we are saying: Planes determine space, and space in turn is the framework in which movement happens. In the process, space becomes interchangeable, the body ungrounded, movement an abstract equation. In fact, our language and references for human anatomy and movement have their roots in the study of the cadaver, the dead body spread out and still on the surface of the table, or moved by an observer studying the movement of joints isolated along “planes of action,” rather than a felt, organizing intention.

But what about living bodies? The very fact that the anatomist can construct a reference for thinking about the movements of the body should highlight another dimension of planes: that planes—even the most abstract of them—are something that we must draw out. Anatomy books are invariably illustrated, and any child can rudimentarily follow suit, literally
drawing out a plane on a flat piece of paper. But we also do so in countless implicit ways all of the time, drawing out subtle or forceful planes into our world. We construct our sense of space.

Even the notion of a stable, enduring space is something that we must work to draw together. Anyone who has tried to memorize the movements of classic anatomy, described as they are in relationship to abstract planes, will recall the remarkable effort it takes to first locate a sense of those reference planes. You wind up having to hold yourself in odd configurations and perspectives, playing at being dead and then moving yourself, in order to make sense of the terminology. So even in this limit case—this game of imagining space to be fixed, immutable, and indifferent to the movements expressed within it—we find ourselves constantly making and unmaking planes. We establish and re-establish variations on them with subtle or overt movements of our bodies, our balance, our eyes, our hands. A plane, in short, is something we draw out.

Indeed, we can only really experience a plane in relationship to other possible planes. To bring a plane into being one has to move off of it, draw it out. Planes are always partial, turning into view, “a good start.” The idea of drawing out an entire plane is in some quite tangible sense inconceivable. Which is to say, the idea is itself a kind of shorthand gesture: “take this to go on forever...” It’s a move we make. Oddly, it is a mathematician, Henri Poincaré (1905), who articulates the active, kinaesthetic generation of geometric space most forcefully:

...Sight and touch could not have given us the idea of space without the help of the “muscular sense.” Not only could this concept not be derived from a single sensation, or even from a series of sensations; but a motionless being could never have acquired it, because, not being able to correct by his movements the effects of the change of position of external objects, he would have had no reason to distinguish them from changes of state. Nor would he have been able to acquire it if his movements had not been voluntary, or if they were unaccompanied by any sensations whatever. (p. 59)

Far from simply being gridded up by the Cartesian planes of universal space, we are constantly moving and sketching out new planes, making layers of space.

Line quality

What would be gained by having an experiential taxonomy of the line? (What conversely, would a taxonomy be without its lines?) Much seems to be at stake in doing this well. On the one hand, the drawing of lines is a way of crossing disciplines, of establishing connections across divisions. Drawing, in this sense, is naturally exploratory and inter-disciplinary. We navigate the corridors of the disciplined space of the school by wending a particular and idiosyncratic line through it all. We draw out the trajectory of our education. On the other hand, it is the drawing out of lines in the sand, separating out this area from another, that allows for the disciplinary structure in the first place. What keeps the lines we weave across disciplines from simply establishing new fixed structure for us to rail against? Can we imagine a dynamic and interdisciplinary taxonomy of the line?

Perhaps we would have to find a new way of thinking about the relationship between lines and planes—one that didn't establish domains within an abstract space, but instead expressed the essentially dynamic and moving quality of space itself. Deleuze and Guattari, in their book, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (1987) talk about a “plane of immanence,” which, unlike a traditional plane, cannot be moved in relation to or “transcended.” But this doesn’t mean that movement is precluded. Rather movement becomes an expression of the plane itself. We move not from one plane to another, but instead find ourselves in constant relationship to a mobile, immanent field of coherence.

One could say that just as Derrida challenged the classic hierarchy of speech and mark-making, Deleuze and Guattari have flipped the usual assumption that movement is expressed within, and defined by the coordinates of a prior stable space. Rather, space itself is an expression of movement. The plane of immanence adjusts to maintain consistency with the varied movements of life.

Perhaps one way of imagining this plane of immanence is to evoke the notion of hyperbolic space, organized around a non-Euclidean geometry that, unlike uniform Cartesian space, actually increases in relationship to itself. A kind of excess of space, long thought a mere abstraction, a theory
impossible to model. But it turns out that crochet—the craft formed by the continued articulations of a line in relationship to itself—is an elegant way to express hyperbolic space. (Wertheim 2007) A hyperbolic plane begins to take up more room as it is drawn out, until it begins to fold back on itself. A line, expressed on this plane is not simply a line in space, but becomes a line of coherence around which the whole plane can flexibly reorganize itself.

The plane of immanence, in contrast to the Cartesian grid, creates multiplicity by moving in relationship to itself, rather than holding and replicating movement. The sea slug ripples its baroque topology to express a line of movement within the eddying sea.

Might we be able to imagine a dynamic and organic mode of moving and making lines that doesn’t simply demarcate new fixed structures, but suggests a way of moving from one dynamic organization to another? Taxonomy of line wouldn’t just involve a curiosity cabinet of line types, but might be conceived as hyperbolic: a growing and always partial articulating of the myriad ways in which we can move and express lines.

**Drawing motion**

Following this line of thought, the movements of the world in relationship to itself express a kind of ongoing figuring. The movements of the world express a kind of interdisciplinary attention, and always leave a trace. (Which is in turn a movement.) The distinctions that we usually draw between a thing and its representation, an abstract idea and its concrete model, or between things that endure and things that are ephemeral, begin to break down. It is not that there is movement and then a charcoal trace of the movement. But instead, movements are always traces of other movements. A gesture leads to a mark, which can only be understood and transformed by another gesture. The action of looking at a drawing is not a kind of abstract empathy or decoding but is itself a way of moving, of drawing.

We move in relation to other movements. If we dare to think that drawing might be a kind of fundamental gesture or movement through which we figure our world, what could we gain from this? What would we have to learn? And how would drawing move differently?

References


