

## **“An Original Creative Principle”**

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The following imaginary ‘self interview’ is linked to an hour-long drawing workshop carried out during the 2002 NSEAD Annual National Conference ‘Creativity in Art & Design Education’.

“Sometimes I see it and then paint it. Other times I paint it and then see it. Both are impure situations, and I prefer neither” Jasper Johns (Rose, 1968, pp. 165-166)

The American Artist, Robert Motherwell maintained an interest in psychic automatism throughout his life. Although he remained suspicious of its mystical connotations fundamental principles appeared to inform his working methods. Motherwell identified a number of key issues which serve to define its potential in the origination and development of paintings and drawings. He saw the process as:

“Automatism ...is actually very little a question of the unconscious. It is much more a plastic weapon with which to invent new forms” (Motherwell cited in Terenzio, 1944, p.34).

Motherwell’s analysis and, to some extent defence, of the process is as follows:

1. It cuts through any a priori influences - it is not a style.
2. It is entirely personal
3. It is, by definition, original
4. It can be modified stylistically and in subject matter at any point during the process

The proposed drawing workshop seeks to explore Motherwell’s approach and by definition, exposes a related and learning and teaching strategy. The process serves as a catalyst for creative thinking, exploiting analogy, simile and metaphor in the generation of artistic and personally defined contexts or narratives.

Motherwell eventually declared that “artful scribbles” might be a more appropriate term, “Artful Scribbles” is the title of a book about children’s drawings by Howard Gardener. (Danto cited in Rosand, 1997, p.51.) Motherwell also considered that “psychic automatism” was “the most powerful creative principle ... consciously developed in the twentieth century” (Motherwell cited in Rosand, 1997, p.50).

The notion of automatic drawing had a clear impact on the work of Jackson Pollock. "Automatic drawing released the images in his imagination to his hand and enabled his hand to free him from dependence on those images. It is in the transference of the freedom of automatic drawing to automatic painting that Pollock's style is created." (Rose, 1980, p13.)

### **Q. What is the aim of the workshop?**

It is primarily concerned with visual experience and the process of making drawings - initially, the physical manipulation and handling of materials (graphite/pencil etc.) and the marking of a surface.

'... as far as I can see, an artistic medium is the only thing in human existence that has precisely the same range of sensed feeling as people themselves do...'  
(Motherwell cited in Terenzio 1992, p139)

It is important that all participants should be engaged in practical activity, not feel threatened and retain ownership of the work produced. At this point, it is often useful to keep the use of words to a minimum - but this of course, depends on the previous experience of those taking part - how much confidence exists within the group at the outset.

" Verbal description stops visual mediation in its tracks - and the more brilliant and profound that description is the more deadly in its effect in freezing or arresting the instinctive flow of the purely visual thinking which, in the painter, first produces the painting, and, in the spectator, lies at the heart of his experience of the painting " (Heron cited in Smith 1974 p. 157).

### **Q. Can you elaborate on this?**

For some people, drawing might be perceived as a means of representing visual experience in a perceptually accurate way. It can, therefore, be assumed that skills are required - skills linked to the traditions of drawing initiated during the Renaissance. In some instances seeking to make a drawing that looks like a photograph may compound this notion. Because the workshop begins with an approach close to doodling, such skills are not, in this instance, being tested. The simple pleasure of marking a surface and engaging visually (and perhaps, emotionally) with the result can be experienced without any need to classify the outcome as right or wrong. Building confidence remains an important issue and in this situation, it is important for everyone to succeed.

" ...You must help to uninhibit and unintimidate people before they can get involved in the creative act. I think that is one of the important things in teaching

– to unintimidate. Freedom should be first before judgement and self criticism” (Smith cited in McCoy, 1973, p. 152).

**Q. What’s the point in making marks just for pleasure? It sounds like playing!**

At the outset, that’s probably close to the truth. No constraints, no targets. Play is certainly recognised as a significant element in the creative process (Winnicot, 1971).

**Q. How do you begin?**

We start with pencils or graphite and lots of small sheets of paper. Participants are invited to make marks on the surface but not ‘images’.

**Q. Why don’t you want to make images?**

A. I don’t want to start with a result. At this stage, I consider that the image would become a trap and would represent ‘closure’. The intention is to keep the process moving, to sustain the action and also to limit any sense of competition. Neither is the session designed to promote mere demonstration of skill. This issue must be dealt with later.

John Christopher Jones acknowledged Heidegger’s philosophical method which reflected a shift ‘ from progress to process. “What he, (Heidegger) does is to refuse to be drawn into making any fixed conclusions, concepts or theories, which are the accepted aims of Western philosophy. Instead he writes and teaches a mode of what he calls ‘meditative thinking’ that is not intended to reach conclusions but to keep the process of thinking alive. While this kind of philosophy is happening, while the thinker is thinking, then it’s happening. As soon as he reaches a conclusion - it’s over, dead. The aim does not disappear-but it changes its nature. For what Heidegger calls ‘calculative thinking,’ thinking-as-a-means-to-an-end, the aim is external to the process .The use of thinking to establish truth, certainty, to control something. But for ‘meditative thinking’ or what I am calling process - philosophy, the aim is internal: to maintain the process. Because, says Heidegger, only while we are giving our minds to whatever it is that provokes our thoughts are we being truly human” (Jones, 1991, p. 160).

**Q. Is there any discussion concerning a ‘ context’ for the action?**

The declared aims are simply to engage with the process of mark making at its most fundamental. The workshop seeks to explore a personal strategy for making drawings. Dealing with the uncertainty that this approach invokes would only be problematic if we were considering the process as an opportunity to

demonstrate previously acquired skills. As all participants are not required to engage with this issue, there is no threat, no competition - and all are equal.

It is interesting to witness how participants demonstrate the capacity for sustained action in spite of uncertain outcomes (Csikszentmihaly M. Csikszentmihalyi S.,1988.).

“It should be emphasised, because of the amateurish connotations of the word doodling, that doodling can be, in the proper hands, as high a mode of drawing as any. By nature doodling is one of the generic artistic modes of drawing and, when elaborated, of painting in general” (Motherwell cited in Terenzio, 1992, p.143).

**Q. What happens next?**

The first drawing (I actually prefer the term “visual statement” - I’m not sure that what’s going on is “art” at this point) is underway, and mark making continues until it is felt that no further marks can be added.

**Q. How do they decide when the first drawing is finished?**

The decision to stop making marks is simply rooted in personal feelings - it appears to be a largely subjective and intuitive decision. It may be about a sense of personal satisfaction - i.e. the marks give off a sense of being ‘right’, or dissatisfaction - i.e. the marks give off a sense of being ‘wrong’. The decision is founded on the visual evidence, personal feelings and preferences. I think it’s about making choices.

“Chance has an awful lot to do with it. The chance thing was probably developed from the surrealists. I use chance because I said I didn’t want to invent. I wanted to find other ways to compose. I wanted to find things out there to use, rather than sitting down and saying. ‘Oh. this is what I’m going to paint. I’m inventing this...I draw a lot, just doodles, while doing something else, talking or something. Very often I catch something that I wouldn’t have if I hadn’t started thinking. I like to do things almost automatically. Freedom. My decision-making is different somehow the shape and colour reveals itself to me - I don’t try to dominate it” (Kelly cited in Morley, 1997, pp 22 – 29).

**Q. So when the first set of marks is complete, what next ?**

At this point a new “drawing” begins - the first one serving as a catalyst or providing a clue for the generation of the second. Pace also appears to be important. It seems that drawing a little faster than one can think may be useful. It also tends to highlight the fact that marks must exist before decisions are made about their significance.

**Q. The process doesn't seem to accommodate 'correction'. Are marks subtracted as well as added?**

In this context, not physically – there isn't any 'rubbing out'. If there were lots of time available, (an hour isn't a very long time!), then making a 'drawing' through a process of addition and subtraction might be initiated. However, the advantage of not 'rubbing out' is that evidence is preserved and one can reflect on the process. Modifications can be made in subsequent drawings with each drawing being, to an extent, a criticism of the preceding one. A process of evaluation or assessment takes place - albeit rapidly and intuitively.

**Q Do the participants know what they are doing?**

Everyone is, of course, working within a context [Fine Art/Design/Craft/Art Education etc.] which suggests its something to do with a creative process - starting with nothing. They are not always sure what they are doing – but appear to know what they are dealing with.

**Q. How long does this process continue and how many 'drawings' are made?**

Work expands to fill the time available. Some people work slowly, others more quickly - that's the way it is. As I have already said, the important thing is to sustain the process - to keep 'making', allowing each drawing to inform the next. However, we do need a collection of visual evidence - 10 drawings might be enough

**Q. If they are 'reading' previous drawings in order to make subsequent ones - is there a danger that the marks become repetitive?**

Good question. The answer is yes... this is often the case. Drawings evolve and some are 'visually consistent in their appearance - others don't fit. It is human for concentration to lapse! However, sometimes the 'odd ones out' provoke some further analysis. Making comparisons emphasises similarities or differences.

**Q. Once a collection of drawings has been established, what is the next stage?**

Each person lays out the drawings - usually in the order in which they were completed – and is then invited to reflect on the visual evidence and seek to identify any recurring visual characteristics.

**Q. What sort of things are they looking for?**

It may be a consistency in the placement of a particular shape, the use of tone or a particular configuration of lines. The intention is to find some emerging visual structure in the marks.

**Q. What constitutes visual structure?**

Everyone seems to 'manage' marks in a distinctly personal way. In order to explore this phenomena, drawings might be rearranged in 'sets' - or 'paired' in order to confirm connections.

"...when you paint you don't choose to paint the way you paint, how you make a shape or a form. You are compelled to make it that way because it reflects your nature and you are therefore able to recognise it as being true, and then you leave it that way" (Scully in interview with Dr. Hans Michael Herzog, 1999, see exhibition catalogue: Timothy Taylor Gallery, no pagination).

"I think you're born with a particular sense of structure and you can't really change it. My sense of how things go together, of what constitutes equilibrium, stays the same' (Frank Stella cited in Rubin, 1970, p.79).

"...When you've done something a lot, it gets built into your arm, and wrist and just comes out - in the way you might use a certain phrase habitually, though in wholly different contexts" (Motherwell cited in Terenzio, p. 288).

**Q. This prompts people to review the drawings and compare one drawing with another. Do they discuss their findings?**

Yes, at this stage - conversations often ensue. Initially the language used may be quite descriptive, and employed to describe the drawings in terms of visual facts - testing the function of language in relation to visual experience. Written lists or sentences may also be constructed, finding words that help to trap essential characteristics. It's interesting that the marks they have made produce drawings that they haven't seen before!

W. H Auden & Elizabeth Meyer in their introduction to "Goethe's, Italian Journey, remarked that, "... No verbal description, however careful, can describe a unique object; at best, it describes objects of a certain class. The only media for showing an object in its concrete uniqueness are the visual arts and photography. Goethe, of course, knew this and said so. " We ought to talk less and draw more. I, personally, should like to renounce speech altogether and like organic nature, communicate everything I have to say in sketches "He also knew that this was an exaggeration. There are certain characteristics of things which are every bit as 'objective' as their visual appearance and with which only language can deal. A drawing can show what something is at a moment, but it cannot show us how it

came to be that way, or what will happen to it next. This only language can do" (Goethe, 1987, p. 9.).

**Q. This application of language sounds interesting. Is it developed?**

Yes - in seeking to describe something unfamiliar, one may resort to comparing it to something that is. The use of analogy, metaphor, simile - can be significant here. As Tim Rollins put it:

"...when you read through the many volumes of Thoreau's Journals, what is so impressive is that he simply records what he observed and thought about during a usually aimless walk he took on any particular day. He doesn't take a walk - the walk takes him. This is his pedagogy. He will more wonder than walk. He'll observe the forms of the ice and these cracks refer him to ideas about the worlds that have nothing to do with cracks, and these ideas lead to the study of something else apparently unrelated. The universe of what his walk leads him to learn is ever expanding, generous, free. This is learning as poetry - the idea of sauntering through history, through knowledge, through possibility - finding yourself by carefully getting lost" (Rollins cited in Paley, 1995, p. 46).

For example, a certain configuration of shapes in the drawing might raise comparisons with a shell, or scaffolding, or a brick wall. The search for comparable visual phenomena in the real world is thus prompted by the marks, and these initially aimless marks help to endorse a connection with related visual experiences. The marks help their maker to claim an aspect of visual experience as their own. A connection or correspondence not made on the basis of what things are, but through how they appear or how they look.

Gombrich mentions George Braque's "thrill and awe with which he discovers the fluidity of our categories, the ease with which a file can become a shoe-horn, a bucket a brazier" and acknowledges that "this faculty for finding and making underlies the child's discoveries no less than the artists" (Gombrich, 1986, p. 264).

"To create, to respond to and understand Drawing, we depend upon one great fundamental faculty of the human mind, seldom discussed as it deserves: Analogy...It seems that as we live our lives a continuous activity of scanning and matching what we have seen goes on in our minds. When we encounter one phenomenon, our mind scans and matches it rhythmically with others we remember and know. It then connects that phenomenon with yet others - also with graphic forms already stocked in our memory from looking at pictorial images. By it we recognise the phenomenon- so each experience can be accompanied by a kind of memory resonance in our minds, which consists of a collection of near and more remote matches" (Rawson, 1979, p. 20).

The previous statement is loaded with potential and such issues can be taken on board alongside the traditional activity of drawing from direct observation. Common 'visual structures are identified and the process continues:

**Q. So the content or subject matter arises at the end of the process not at the beginning?**

Exactly - the process of drawing without purpose eventually provides a means of locking into related visual phenomena. It is one way of deciding not only how to make a drawing, but what to make drawings about.

David Thistlewoods' observations about Tom Hudson's' teaching, appear to acknowledge the significance of doodling as a catalyst to creative thinking. He refers to Hudson's work with children, and the implications of helping them to explore a 'natural creative process' (Thistlewood, 1981, p.24).

'Hudson applied teaching philosophies developed with children at all levels with some success. Thistlewood observes: "... instinctual 'scribble', led to the recognition of images, to material exploitation and the evolution of visual structure. The images and symbols children used in their creative inventions afforded limitless comparisons with their surroundings (when the image was real), as opposed to the only possible comparison (when the image was that of a particular subject)"(Thistlewood 1981 p.26).

**Q. Do the connections made always refer to ' things that one can see ' ?**

Mostly - this is a key function of the workshop. However, some may connect the marks with a more deeply felt experience. The focus is clearly on the potential of visual evidence to promote a dialogue in the search for meaning.

In discussing automatism, Motherwell observed that it is "actually very little a question of the unconscious. It is much more a plastic weapon to invent new forms. As such it is one of the twentieth centuries greatest formal inventions" (Motherwell cited in Terenzio (ed.) 1992, p. 34).

**Q. Where does ' Art' come into it?**

The legacies of Modernism and particularly an engagement with visual experience are clearly apparent. Paintings and drawings are objects in the world that rely upon their visuality. How the drawings look or appear can provide criteria for making connections

**Q. But in the context of contemporary Fine Art practice, words like intuition, subjectivity and notions connected to a personal visual aesthetic or form of expression are, for some, vulnerable terms. How do you feel about this?**



A. You may have a point – and I am well aware that those for whom the focus of much contemporary art is on social contexts for example, would very probably side-line or displace this approach. The postmodern critic would question the capacity of essentially abstract marks to carry significant meaning. However, making drawings and paintings can be a private as well as public activity and it remains a unique means of engaging with the visible world, personal feelings and a range of contemporary contexts. I am not a camera and particularly value my visual experiences. Drawing may help us in the search for who we are. It can help us not only to look– but to see.

Referring to the ideas of Maurice Merleau Ponty, Kearney makes reference to the notion of primordial expression. “... this primordial structuring of the environment by an organism constitutes a certain style. Style is like a fingerprint – it is possessed by all, but each in a unique way. Human existence may be considered a style which each person ‘embodies’ in the struggle to achieve an individual equilibrium within a global environment” (Kearney, 1998, pp. 131-132).

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud almost in the shape of a camel?

Polonius: By the mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.....

Hamlet: Or like a whale.

Polonius: Very like a whale.....

(Shakespeare cited in Smith 1975, p.35).

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### **Exhibition Catalogue:**

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