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Going along together: drawing and curating in the work of Sally Taylor

When Sally Taylor approached me to write this essay I asked her for three things: a copy of the bid that secured her funding from Arts Council England, any documentation of the conversations she had had with her mentors over the duration of the project and, of course, images of her new work. This short essay addresses what to me seems to be the tangible relationship between all of these things. What I mean by this is that her ACE project has not been merely an impassive instrument to secure funding. Rather that the form the application took emerged from pressing questionings about how drawings come into being in and are encountered in the social world. Over the course of the next few pages I will argue that the production and curation of the new work is a performative index or a working through of the inherently social apparatus of Taylor's project, a dimension of the work that has had to confront the conventional modes of drawing display in the gallery.

Joining with one another in the studio

The first task of this essay is to describe the perceptible shift in Taylor's practice over the course of this ACE project. It is a movement through which questions latent in the works' production have come to the surface via its curation; that is the tension between the collective making and display of her drawings in the studio and their framing as individual works for exhibition. In 2011 Taylor's practice had been working through what she called the 'mouth motif' which formed the substance of her solo exhibition at the Ryedale Folk Museum. The essay for the exhibition catalogue, accompanied by an image from Taylor's studio, began by referring to the crowd-like combined effect of these drawings as an assault of silent yet raucous voices (Fig.1).ⁱ The drawings were at once mute and articulate, mobilising kitsch references, bad drawing and an aggressive, expressive vocabulary of child-like mark making, which set them up against the discourse of Conceptualism which had dominated contemporary art since the 1970s. The impetus to that intervention lay in Taylor's working-class background that made her acutely aware the privilege assigned to intellectualism over

materials in the arts and exclusion of audiences and participants not in possession of the right kind of vocabulary, necessary to the decoding of their experiences. What that essay did not tackle, however, was the different experience presented by the drawings when framed in isolation for exhibition (Fig.2).

As Taylor's young son grew into a toddler the disembodied mouths that filled her drawings gave way to a sustained engagement with heads. With that shift the human nature of her drawings became more marked and variations of colour, line, material and surface began to form communities that clustered amongst the crowds of drawings that populated Taylor's studio (Fig.3). It was this change in Taylor's practice that transformed the difference between the work's presence in the studio and its presentation for exhibition from a fact that is common to many artists' practices to a curatorial dilemma that the work that needed to address.

When tacked to the wall unframed, Taylor's works sat in conversation with one another; the viewer could wander through the visual jibber-jabber that simultaneously revealed the similarities and differences of the drawings' co-emergent personalities. Once mounted and framed, however, the uniform gaps and clean straight edges intercede in the dialogue between drawings. The frame does not silence the chatter of the drawings completely but it certainly ruptures their lateral focus, shifting their attention to the viewer who now stands before a set of images rather than a body of work that collectively exceeds the sum of its parts.

The work Taylor curated for the *Platform A* exhibition actively groups head drawings in large frames on a ground of found paper (Fig.). The absence of clean white edges opens up the lines of communication between Taylor's drawings but also, crucially, has enabled her to underpin the significance of the space between heads as a key dimension in the work. Rather than simply blanks between drawings they act also as spaces of possibility; room for what is yet to be made, known or encountered or gulfs that will simply remain.

The emergence of Taylor's head drawings as one with many and the working of the spaces between these subjects is more than an index of Taylor's aesthetic decision making. It is an impulse that registers the debt to and inextricable relationship with the other, not only present in all artistic production but by dint of being in the world. In effect what the curation of the work facilitates is what has been there all along, what social anthropologist Tim Ingold has named the process of 'interstitial differentiation';

'In which difference continually arises from within the midst of joining with in the ongoing sympathy of going along together'.ⁱⁱ

Ingold's vision of the social in which the lives of humans and non-humans are 'joined with one another' enables this essay to not only argue what is embodied in the emergence and display of Taylor's head drawings, but also how we might think differently about the operations of her ACE project as a 'networking' activity.

Mentoring beyond the network

The basic premise of Taylor's ACE application was a simple one; she had worked for a number of years and established a strong reputation for her practice through numerous appearances in the Jerwood Drawing Prize and solo exhibitions at prestigious venues such as the Rabley Drawing Centre. She came to know, support and be supported by artists engaged with drawing in the Yorkshire region and beyond through participation in group exhibitions such as *To Draw is to be Human, 20-21 Visual Arts Centre, 2016* and *Scarborough Prison Drawing Project (2016)*, such as Andy Black, Kate Black, Tracy Himsforth, Grieg Burgoyne and Lucy O'Donnell. On a day to day basis, however, Taylor works in isolation. In great part this was due to the location of her studio in rural North Yorkshire. Apart from students who would occasionally come over from York St John University twenty miles away, visitors were few and far between; unless that is you count the chickens that wander about outside or the swallows known to fly about the studio's rafters in summer. For many the picture I am painting is that of an artistic idyll but the lack of heating in winter, demands made by the motherhood of two small children and lack of peer support is a harsh reality that would test even

the most resilient practitioners. As Taylor therefore lacked a consistency exchange with an immediate community her ACE project endeavoured to create and bring such a community to her and, crucially take her to it.

The lynch pin of that community would be Professor Anita Taylor, also an essayist in this collection, Executive Dean of Bath Spa School of Art & Design and Director of the Jerwood Drawing Prize. The artist has known Anita Taylor for the past 18 years and together with Kate Brindley, now Director of Collections and Exhibitions at Chatsworth, Taylor they worked to set goals and create opportunities through introductions that would enable Taylor's practice to flourish. While the ACE bid articulated those activities under the banner of networking, I hesitate to describe it in those terms. That reluctance stems in great part from Lawrence Alloway's influential essay 'Network: The Artworld Described as a System' first published in *Artforum* in 1973 (1984). In that text Alloway describes the 'artworld' as a 'communication network' which packaged art from the studio for distribution to the public in galleries and museums and critique by art historians or critics.ⁱⁱⁱ Success in this scenario depended on the artist's participation within the network, which in turn relied upon the ability to participate in the exchange of 'information.' For Alloway art was made up of two types of information, 'special characteristics' which are 'unique' and bespoke the style and thus name of the artist and those that are 'repeatable', that is which are 'transmissible to other artists'.^{iv} Participation in the network is therefore due the ability to strategically assimilate what is 'of the moment' and while nevertheless make something different of it produce an outcome which, for want of a better way of putting it, can be readily identified by the market. Within this economy our relationship with art and others is instrumentalised, driven by self-interest.

This set of operations, however were far from the impetus to Taylor's project. Its rationale can be approached via Herbert Read's reminiscences of his close association with Unit 1 in the 1930s. This artist's group included John Armstrong, John Bigge, Barabara Hepworth, Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore and Edward Wadsworth. In the essay 'A Nest of Gentle Artists', published in *Apollo* in

1962 *Read* described their coming together as ‘a spontaneous association of men and women drawn together by common sympathies, shared seriousness and some kind of group criticism. There were no polemics and no programme.’^v Of particular note is *Read*’s recollection of *Nash*’s letter to the *Times* which stated “‘the peculiar distinction of Unit 1 is that it is not composed of, let us say, three individuals and eight imitators, but of eleven individuals. And yet there is still a quality of mind, of spirit perhaps, which unites the work of these artists, a relevance apparent enough to any intelligent perception.’”^{vi} As *Read* concluded; ‘there was a prevailing good temper [in Unit 1], an atmosphere in which art could grow’.^{vii}

The generous spirit with which *Read* describes 1 leads me back to the writings of *Tim Ingold*, for one of his chief contributions to the discourses on art of the last ten years has been to argue for the way it comes into being or ‘grows’ by ‘joining with’ lives and materials.^{viii} In other words ‘concrete form does not issue from ideas’ or information. This position was set out in his *Huxley Memorial Lecture, On Human Correspondence*, given to the Royal Anthropological Institute in 2014.^{ix} In the early phases of that presentation *Ingold* outlines *Herbert Spencer*’s vision of social life. For *Spencer* the social world had been comprised of discrete individuals, or ‘blobs’ as *Ingold* terms them, whose relationships were governed by self-interest and modelled on the operations of the market. ‘In the market’, *Ingold* tells the audience ‘it is what changes hands that matters not the hands themselves. The handshake seals the contract but is the contract not a binding of lives in itself?’ As he points out the etymological root of the term ‘contract’ unites ‘con’ meaning together and ‘trahere’ meaning ‘to draw or pull.’^x

If we accept *Ingold*’s proposition that life is lived as multitude of lines, which unfurl and knot, braiding our becoming and potentialities with the lives of others and feeling grief when we become parted from them ...

Vanessa Corby, September 2017.

ⁱ Vanessa Corby, 'Say What You See: The Drawings of Sally Taylor', in *Sally Taylor Drawings*, (Ryedale Folk Museum, 2011), p.5.

ⁱⁱ Tim Ingold, 'On human correspondence,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2016, 23, 13.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alloway, L., *Network: Art and the complex present*, (Michigan,1984), p.3.

^{iv} Alloway, L., *Network: Art and the complex present*, (Michigan,1984), pp.8-9.

^v Read, H., 'A Nest of Gentle Artists' (1962) in Benedict Read and David Thistlewood Eds., *Herbert Read: A British Vision of World Art*, Leeds, 1993, p.61.

^{vi} Read., p.61.

^{vii} Read., p.61.

^{viii} Ingold, T., *Making: Athropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, (London, 2013), pp.20-22.

^{ix} Ingold, T., 'On human correspondence,' Huxley Memorial Lecture, Royal Anthropological Institute, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vlg5s04wBU> (Accessed 01/02/2016).

^x Tim Ingold, 'On human correspondence,' Huxley Memorial Lecture.