

Notes Towards a Prepositional Drawing

Joel Fisher (thoughts on habits, restrictions & potential)

Dedicated to Josef Albers, who is still teaching me

A short reassurance to my audience before I begin:

I don't want my title to frighten anyone off. You might think from that my talk will be full of grammar. For most of us, our contact with grammar was the first experience we had of theory assuming a role it was never intended to take. A descriptive process should simply describe what is happening. I particularly hated grammar because I felt that it was imposed. The way grammar was taught in my day, felt to me and most of my friends as if we were being fitted for shackles.

I am reminded of Andre's distinction that "Art is what we do and culture is what is done to us." Our experience was that we didn't do grammar; it was done to us. When something that is expected to help us to understand feels instead like a restriction, we might be justified if we develop an ambivalence toward 'understanding' and even 'knowledge.' What then is lost? We still meet artists who don't want to think about what they are doing because they fear that it will stifle their creativity. Where else could this sentiment come from?

I should say that after years of disliking the thought of grammar, I have recently begun to look at it in a different way. I no longer see grammar as rules so draconian that, in order to accommodate them, we have to deform ourselves,¹ but as descriptions of things happening in space, almost like sculpture. Perhaps the most important lesson that art teaches us (and this might be sculpture's contribution to a broader understanding) is that simply taking a different point of view can be liberating.²

Why might I be thinking of grammar at all in relation to drawing? Actually, in two ways. In the big way, meaning how the elements of drawing are put together in relation to each other. Things like ground, line, or point of view when combined in specific ways create something bigger than they can do individually. And also in a very specific way, by looking at drawing as we would look at the building blocks in any language, and assign roles like we do for individual parts of speech. These are like characters in a play, or a group of interlocking and cooperating professions. Each one plays a specific role.

Let's begin:

The full potential of drawing is squandered when a drawing is seen as primarily as a thing — as a noun. We seem to love the idea of something that can stand on its own; it implies solidity in a world otherwise in flux. The discrete object has an important place in art, and that includes individual drawings, but for drawing in general to aspire to this can freeze it into a rigid identity and deny layers of subtlety. We can't afford to be satisfied with drawing as a noun, we need to find another way to look at it.

We use the word drawing to mean either a thing or an action. We multiply possibilities when we choose to see drawing as action — when drawing

functions less as a noun and more as a verb. This expands what drawing can do, to include occupying time and establishing sequence³. This makes a dynamic difference, but it is still not enough. Drawing as movement and duration still can't deliver to us its full richness.

From early childhood, I have seen drawing as an activity in possession of a magical charm. Drawing makes things appear that weren't there a moment before. This conjuring up onto a blank page is undeniably miraculous, but drawing's real magic is found in all the other ways that it increases our sensitivity to the previously invisible. Bringing to sight the unseen is part of drawing's nature.

Our habits close off things for us. A full century ago, William James identified our habit of recognizing the existence of the substantive⁴ parts alone. He noted that this had become so extensive that a language that might have been flexible refuses to lend itself to any other use. He said that we ought to be able to say "a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by, quite as easily as we say a feeling of blue, or a feeling of cold."

When we tacitly accept a limited understanding of drawing we not only close off possibilities but also prevent the discovery of drawing embedded in other activities. A fresh way of looking actually changes what we see. A shifted point of view can bypass engrained habits. Achievements are not just in things. The truly outstanding also exists in relationships, in intervals, approaches, and context. Through drawing we exceed our habits and thus expand our possibilities. All we have to do is to expand what we believe drawing can be, and we effortlessly open up insights elsewhere.

Specific solid qualities emerge when we think of drawing as a thing (noun.) A kind of energy emerges when we think of drawing as an action (verb.) The possibilities and the nuances really begin to multiply when we become aware of relational aspects. When intervals are set up via relationships an extra dimension enters. Prepositions are the words that identify relative position. 'Prepositional Drawing' can imagine a drawing toward, or for, or because, or instead, or below, or after...

In 1968 I spent a memorable day with the painter Josef Albers. As we were looking at one of my paintings, he mentioned that he didn't understand why frames have to be on all four sides of a painting. Is it possible, he wondered, to have a frame that held a painting on only its opposite sides, or even only one side, or perhaps just a corner? Frames signal the beginning of context, but perhaps this can be done without creating a barrier. Simple awareness of a relationship is all that it takes to distinguish context in a radically different way.

Every preposition names a context that begins as a vector in the very heart of our subject instead of circumscribing and isolating that area of concern from its surroundings. There are ways to think of context other than that of a

conventional frame. Inside space and outside space can mix without being a threat.

We might consider *Prepositional Drawing* as a form of generative (rather than descriptive) theory. Look at the potential within each preposition as a generator of imagination and experience. You have each been given a paper with a list of prepositions.⁵ When you have a quiet moment, read through the list slowly and allow your imagination to link each word to a potential drawing.

Drawing often *inclines toward* something else. This has traditionally been a depiction, or a structure or a visualization. There is energy in inclination. Drawings embody energy because they take a position in relation to something else. “*Every force evolves a form,*” said Mother Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers.

Drawings *incline toward* but they also *lead to*. That’s why we can choose the title ‘**Thinking Through Drawing**’ as the theme for our conference. The word *through* is (I am obliged to point out) a preposition. Drawing is clearly a pathway to thought. It is worth asking, as we begin today’s program, if drawing could in fact be a form of thinking.

We might start by trying to figure out what we mean when we use the word thinking. How can we clarify meaning except by use? Is thinking something that we do alone? Is it active or passive? The philosopher Robert Sokolowsky says that thinking is not something we do entirely on our own because we are only allowed to think by what our thoughts are about.

The old expression ‘A penny for your thoughts!’ suggests that an exchange is possible. When that phrase was formulated, a penny was certainly more valuable than it would be today; today a penny is the smallest useful unit, a financial atom. A bagatelle for your thoughts, we might say today. Not quite nothing but almost.

We value thinking even if within the functioning values of our culture, we might let the thinker starve. We don’t get paid for our thinking, only for our products, whether real or implied. You sell your book, or your patent, or your sheet of paper. We might be paid for a drawing that is thoughtful, but thought itself, whatever it is, is hard to commodify.

No matter how clear thought is it is not substantive. We could say there is no ‘there’ there. But also that drawing could take us to that there.

In order to think about ‘Thinking through Drawing’ let’s begin by reviewing some of the ways we use the word. I have discovered at least seven common uses of the word ‘thinking,’ Let’s look at some of the uses and see which ones have something to do with drawing.

1. We might be sitting at the edge of the sea and just thinking. By thinking we might mean daydreaming, a vague flitting from one notion to another, a gentle flowing reverie. We use the word thinking to describe a kind of automatic

ebbing and flowing of brain processes.

There are certainly modes or types of drawing that come into existence in exactly this way, doodles are the most common, but also the many meandering drawings that seem to grow out of the page as they appear, or spread across the surface like they are flowing. Some approaches to drawing seem to make visible all the little twitches of our nervous system, or allow for unconscious ideas to surface.

2. Imaginative thinking can include creating a story in our mind and living in that story as it develops, a process that sometimes carries us along with no choice. Imagination is more than this, of course, and it appears when we invent alternatives. Playing chess may be logical, but it is essentially imaginative. From imagined possibilities we build inventions.

Drawing can use imagination in all these ways also. A drawing can grow as a story might grow. A drawing can help us to explore alternatives, and to visualize the paths and consequences they imply. Most of us, I believe, think in images. We don't think initially in words and then 'illustrate' those thoughts. Thinking through images is a kind of imagination. When Copernicus proposed that the earth circled the sun rather than the other way around, he could have only achieved that through imagination. Copernicus could be the patron saint for a certain kind of drawing.

3. Most of us remember when we were young, the anxiety of some adult shouting at us to '**Think what you are doing!**' Is this thinking? Yes, in a way; but the command as it was given is really a plea for awareness. We are being urged to adopt a frame of mind or a fixed attitude.

Drawing can bring awareness to the surface. If we adopt a fixed attitude and follow it through we inevitably make discoveries. Whenever we begin a drawing we assume a specific frame of mind and at that moment place ourselves within a lineage. Sometimes we do this consciously, sometimes intuitively. Even if we seem to be on the outside, we are always functioning from within something. We always adopt a frame of mind. All art is attitude.

4. We might be at a party and we meet someone who wants to tell us '**what he thinks.**' Usually this information seems to have little to do with thinking, and might even be described as its opposite. Thinking, in this sense, is really belief, and has more to do with habit than thinking, probably because beliefs are formed like habits. We all have beliefs but sometimes we don't know what they are until they are challenged. Usually someone who wants to tell us what he thinks feels as if he has been challenged. What is clear is that 'thinking' as it is being used here is somewhat autobiographical. It has the stamp of personal history.

Thinking as belief or tacit assumption can clearly exist in drawing. It is there when we are appreciating an effort by someone else, and it is there when we are making our own drawing and we inadvertently trace out a form we know very well. Belief and habit are rich areas waiting to be explored. They open

some doors and close others.

It is interesting to remember that anything that ends in graph must have something to do with writing or drawing. A lithograph. A photograph. An autograph. Or an auto-bio-graph.

5. **‘Think where you put the keys!’** What you are actually asking me to do is to remember.

Drawing touches on memory in many different ways. We build on drawings others have done in the past. Sometimes these are forgotten drawings. We occasionally unearth, through drawing, what was lost.

6. Thinking can mean recognition — discovering a pattern, or recognizing resemblance. Thinking connects things with each other and us to them. Sometimes the discovery is methodical, sometimes immediate. Because thinking is implicated in discovery, it becomes a kind of empirical enquiry.

Discovery is embedded in the act of drawing — repeated, sequential discovery. We know things at the completion of a drawing that we didn’t know at the beginning. In that sense drawing is both a form of empirical enquiry and a vehicle for revelation. Each time it leads to recognition it creates a kind of echo. Any exhibition or collection of drawings is full of echoes.

7. Thinking very often means reasoning and reflecting. These are not the same but can be in service to the same need. Reasoning can include formulating a cogent argument against apparent facts that we are being officially fed. It can mean going over and assessing the risks involved in a new venture. Reflecting makes an image of a situation in order to see it in a different light.

Thinking, like drawing, can be seen as performative, although it is easier to describe someone who is drawing than a thinker who is at work thinking. Both activities seek to persuade, perhaps ourselves, perhaps others, and both do this by deciding what is necessary to exclude, what is necessary to include, and where we put what we keep. In considering placement we select what is helpful.

That is seven ways but there are certainly more. I discovered two others in this text while proof reading it: once I used thinking to mean ‘assume’ and another time to mean ‘consider.’

Reviewing these various uses shows us how drawing and thinking run on parallel paths. Drawing is like thinking, but not what we might call a ‘mode of thought.’ It is too multifaceted to be proposed as a single system or lens able to give us a specific understanding of the world.

Drawing is not a clear approach in the same way that the scientific method is. The scientific method is a specific empirical system for thinking about, understanding, and acting in the world. Other candidates for ‘modes of

thought' might be cutting the flat patterns for clothing in a way that creates volume when sewn together, making moulds so that undercuts do not get in the way, or the creation of meaning by taking away, like we find in carving. These are activities that guide thinking into a direction and attention. Drawing doesn't really do that. It is too polymorphous and dynamic to be called a form of thinking, but it is clearly related to thinking. Everything drawing does, thinking seems to do too, but the most important thing that drawing does is to place thinking into a relationship.

The world is a buzzing, humming, turbulent jumble of sensations. We have too much information. This is not a new situation but in the past 200 years the number of sensations has multiplied, and the speed of nearly everything has increased. So far we can handle it. Human beings are both physically and mentally designed to filter information. We do this whether it is busy or quiet. Sometimes we do it consciously.

In university, the lectures are spoken, and talk is almost always faster than we can write. As far as I know nobody, except perhaps a court stenographer, or sometimes a journalist, is taught how to take notes. We are just thrown into it and in the midst of everything we try to simplify our process of recording what is essential. Each of us evolves a personal style and system. We discover inherent principles in the process. We find some forms of abbreviation can be smoothly reconstructed and others that cannot.

In the sciences like chemistry, or even in psychology or history, most adjectives can be dropped, because from the context we can reconstruct them. E.B.White, an expert on clear writing, believes that the elimination of adjectives creates dynamic writing. One reason for this is that while trying to understand what has happened readers tacitly reinsert the sense of the adjectives if not the actual words. Consequently they are more involved. If we say, "*The city was destroyed by fire,*" we already know a lot that doesn't need to be said. Destruction by fire is a specific kind of destruction.

How else do we abbreviate? A general title does a lot. In much note taking we find that quite a few of the verbs can be dropped. Nouns and pronouns can be simplified or eliminated completely. Prepositions, on the other hand seem to be absolutely essential. We either keep them or we draw a picture.

I have often thought of note taking as a kind of drawing. We can't remember everything, and we cannot write down every word. How do we select what we record? Preferable forms of notation at the same time record facts and also function as aids to help us to remember things too numerous to write down. The question of how we abbreviate is as interesting as it is basic. It happens whenever we remember anything. In abbreviation we find a principle of drawing that reappears in many other places.

For several centuries Cicero has been used to teach Latin because he is known to have spoken fluently and persuasively. There is a comparison between Cicero and Demosthenes that apparently comes to us from Plutarch, but is retold by William Jennings Bryan. The difference, as Bryan says is that

“When Cicero spoke people said: ‘How well Cicero speaks!’ but when Demosthenes spoke they said, ‘Let us go against Philip.’” Cicero, like many skilled orators impressed himself upon his audience, demonstrating his mastery, maybe showing off. The audience noticed, and appreciated his ability. When Demosthenes spoke, in contrast, what the audience heard was his arguments. Demosthenes was invisible, but the abuses of Philip of Macedonia were not. Hawthorn, in a similar mode, was known to say that “easy reading is damned hard writing.”

In what is called ‘the art that disguises art’, we don’t try to impress. This is a very broad issue and extends well beyond drawing. It is just as true in serious spiritual practice. Charity is best when it is unseen. A Bodhisattva can help more when he hides his nature. A need to impress never really honors the audience. If a guru fascinates his devotees that in itself may be a sign of disrespect. The *art that disguises art* determines quality in art making, and also in every installation in which art is presented. In an important sense, it is also what good teaching is about.

In Prepositional Drawing we don’t want to dazzle with fancy flourishes or showy skill. We want our ultimate skill to be almost invisible. Think of the famous duck-rabbit drawing discussed by Wittgenstein. In order for this to work, it has to be exceptionally well drawn. The figure/ground relationship has to be in balance. The effect is ambiguous because the drawing is so invisibly unseen.

I spent a month carving stone in Edinburgh as part of the STONE project®, a huge international research project exploring stone and stone working techniques. After I had the main shape in the stone roughed out, I kept coaxing the form into existence. Every passage of the chisel was like drawing a line. Each additional removal enabled me to see something else. The effect — perhaps the purpose — of each change is to provide increased vantage. As I change something it helps me to see what I haven’t seen before. The process of carving could be described as progressive seeing.

While I was thinking of this I remembered the story of Agassiz and his student.⁵ Agassiz believed that drawing was an aid to observation. The story demonstrates both the difficulty of observation and the process through which each action helps us to see things that we hadn’t seen before.

This is the story:

A student is eager to study with Agassiz and has traveled hundreds of miles in order to meet the man and asks if he might be taken on as a student. When he arrives he is not certain where to go, and wanders around looking for someone to direct him. He eventually finds his way to Agassiz’s laboratory, but just as he arrives, he finds that Agassiz is leaving for some meetings.

The professor was cordial but regretted that it would be sometime before he could get back, perhaps more than two hours because he was not just going to one meeting but two, one after the other. He would be happy to talk with

the young man on his return, if he wouldn't mind waiting. Certainly not, the student replied, after all he had come so far already. Agassiz pointed to a fish on a platter in the laboratory. While I am gone, he said, spend your time drawing the fish.

Agassiz left and the young man began his drawing. He wanted to do a good job in order to impress the great man. After an hour his drawing was finished and it looked pretty good. He sat back to admire his own work. As he sat there, he looked at the drawing, and then at the fish, and then back at the drawing. He began seeing things that weren't quite right. Quickly he began to correct his drawing. He wanted it to be finished when Agassiz returned, and it was nearly two hours since he left. When the corrections were done he sat down to wait and to again admire his work. Now it was much better. He looked at the drawing, and then at the fish, and back to the drawing. Again he noticed a few more things that weren't the same. He began to erase again and redraw.

Now he really had it! He had revised it twice, and it was obvious that the second revision had made a difference. He sat down again to admire his work, thankful that Agassiz had not yet returned. He looked at his drawing, quite proud of his work. He compared the fish again to the drawing. He congratulated himself because now it really was good. But as he kept looking he began again to see still more things that he missed. He erased and redrew again. Again he sat down to wait, but every time that he thought that the drawing was finished, the same thing happened.

Many hours later Agassiz finally returned. He had been delayed, and he had forgotten about the student. He apologized for keeping him so long. The student told him how he had spent his time. Agassiz understood from this story that the young man had the ability to revise his first impressions. The student had learned that the act of drawing had helped him to see, and that each seeing helped him to see further. On the strength of that story the young man was accepted by Agassiz and worked with him for many years.

The changes I was making on my sculpture were working exactly the same way. After removing one little bit I was able to see things that I hadn't seen before. Drawing moves us toward seeing.

My comparison brings other things into focus as well, specifically how the unique characteristics of our materials can determine the nature and path of what we learn. A mark made by a pencil (which can be erased) is not the same as a mark made by a chisel (which cannot.) In carving each line establishes itself as the new ground. It is the foundation that is being renewed. If we draw with a pencil, as happens in the Agassiz story, the ground is unaltered, but the drawing is malleable.

In Propositional Drawing the search is pulled into the drawing as it comes into existence. This begins to happen even before the first mark is made, as attitude or approach become the first ingredient of the activity. More and more resonances appear while the drawing floats into existence, but the completed

drawing is never finished in any relational sense. After the last mark has been made it continues to explore the space of intention, it finds sympathetic vibrations elsewhere in the world, and aligns itself to them.

When artists really understand how this relational aspect functions they begin to accept that the work is bigger than they are. They see that both they, and their drawing, is in service to something else. We can adapt the words from Robert Browning's poem where he declares that "the reach must exceed the grasp." The reach of the work must be longer than any individual grasp. In drawing, it often is.

I tell my students that one of their most urgent tasks is to find a work that is big enough for them. This is not a minor consideration. Sometimes our world can start shrinking without us noticing. There are plenty of situations that begin as a pathway to freedom or adventure but later become a trap. We know that certain lifestyles do this, and if we live long enough we can cite examples from our acquaintances.

We can find traps in certain activities, in personal relationships or in specific working situations. Even success can be a kind of prison. What begins as an urgency, or a relief, becomes a burden. Artists sometimes end up doing variations and parodies of their earlier work, each new action undermining and diluting their own achievement. We want our work to do for us and for others what we cannot do for ourselves.

There is a drawing technique that most Cathedral restoration teams are now using as a tool. The restoration team works from a linear drawing that has been created with computer assistance from photographic input. It looks like a pen and ink drawing that depicts the entire façade of the building. The essential thing is that every stone is seen straight on.

Normally the space we see is curved. As our eyes look out from a fixed position near the top of our head, the world at our feet is further away. The world over our head is even further away. If we accurately draw what we see, the space is curved.

The restoration drawing is clearer than a photograph because it offers sharp edges indicating the boundary of each stone. These edges relate to work that has to be done, and the task needs to be seen and understood by the masons without the possibility of misunderstanding. In the same way, a botanical drawing or an anatomical drawing is also clearer than any photograph can be. We think of a photograph as objective but in some cases it can actually obscure information. A drawing has focus. A drawing sets up purpose.

When I began my career as an artist my impression was that drawing was the private part of art making, the most intimate activity in a public practice. Often drawings were kept in small sketchbooks. Looking at someone's painting was granted without the need for permission. Looking at drawings was different. Drawings were so personal that they were only suitable for private research or solitary study. Before you looked at someone's drawings you asked

permission. Painting, even unfinished, was for public presentation. Not drawing. Drawing was somewhere else.

In my lifetime drawing went from private to public. I believe this shift was partially aided by conceptual art's rigid modes of presentation: painting was unacceptable but photographs and drawing (as diagrams, visualizations, or plans) were accepted. In tandem with writing it became the standard way to record an intellectual statement or express ideas in art. Drawings, even clumsy drawings were now out in the open.

Today, thanks to the concerted efforts of many of you here today, drawing has a new respect. It is even possible now to earn a MFA in drawing. This, as an achievement, is not to be underestimated. It is not just the addition to an academic program of a new media, like film or video. It moves a previously supportive process into a central position.

Creating the option to specialize in drawing means that a previously peripheral or introductory practice has been moved into the pantheon of valued arts. This has not happened easily. There are still those who believe that the apotheosis of drawing goes against the natural order.

Although not often mentioned, art education has functioned under a kind of class system. Part of this is having two 'houses' at the top and then all the rest. There is Painting and Sculpture. Think also of the Royal College and the Slade, Oxford and Cambridge, There are actually quite a few of these "summit twins."

The revolutions of Copernicus and Darwin restructured the order of understanding. As we start thinking of drawing seriously we also start to restructure an established order, but to move drawing into a central position does not necessarily have to dethrone anyone. It is not really like turning the manor over to the servants, but *that* case could still be made. It is more like sending Cinderella to the ball. She still remembers how to distinguish lentils from ash.

At the moment drawing may be the most flexible art form. It slips around corners and lights up dark passages. Far more ancient than painting or sculpture it feels fresher. Drawing reminds us that art can be comfortable in those places in the world that still remain unnamed.

There is another story that amuses me.

A young child was busy drawing a picture. After a while, an adult notices the intensity of his actions, gets particularly interested, and comes over.

"What are you drawing?" the child was asked.

"God." the boy answered.

"But nobody knows what God looks like," the adult replied.

"They soon will." replied the child

They soon will.

Notes:

¹. Speaking of the coercion of rules, think of Winston Churchill's witty comment that not ending sentences with prepositions was nonsense up with which he would not put.

². James Joyce said that he wanted to fly by means of the nets thrown over him in order to keep him from flying. *“The soul ...has a slow and dark birth, more mysterious than the birth of the body. When the soul of a man is born ... there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. ... I shall try to fly by those nets.”*

³. Think of the ubiquitous drawing marathons. These are drawing as duration, and much can be discovered in this kind of emersion.

⁴. A substantive is a noun

⁵. aboard, about, above, absent, according to, across, after, again, against, ahead of, along, along with, alongside, amidst, among, amongst, apart from, around, as, as far as, as for, as regards, aside, aside from, astride, as well as, at, atop, baring, because of, before, behind, below, beneath, beside, besides, between, beyond, but, by, by means of, close to, circa, concerning, despite, down, downward, due to, during, except, except for, excepting, excluding, failing, far from, following, for, from, in, in addition to, in accordance with, in back of, in case of, including, in front of, in lieu of, in place of, inside, inside of, in spite of, instead of, into, like, minus, near, near to, next, next to, notwithstanding, of, off, on, on account of, on top of, onto, opposite, out, out of, outside, outside of, over, owing to, past, plus, prior to, regarding, regardless of, round, save, since, subsequent to, than, that of, through, throughout, till, time, to, toward, towards, under, underneath, unlike, until, up, upon, versus, via, with, ,with regard to, with respect to, within, without.

A drawing however might have more than one preposition, or several in a row; here are 3 prepositional phrases in a row: “meet me under the magnolia, at twilight, without your wig.”

⁶. Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz was an exceptional scientist and among other achievements is the person credited with the discovery of the ice age. Over the years I have realized that there are several versions of this story. Instead of being variations evolved from a single incident, I think that these stories may stem from different experiences of someone drawing a fish, a teaching technique that Agassiz used for many of his students.