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## Drawing as an Act of Research Rooted in Inquiry and Care

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### Abstract

Building upon reflections from *On Drawings and Drawers: An Exploration* (<https://doi.org/10.48619/bbds.v5i1.999>), this essay examines the practice of drawing as rooted in inquiry about nature, and as a form of care towards the drawer and the subject. By considering my own drawing practice, I examine how drawings made during the pandemic served as an act of preservation, documentation, and activism. They reveal how drawing fosters a deeper connection with the subjects (including nature and the environment), resulting in the choice of subject as a form of care, with the aim of its preservation. Arguably, drawing is a form of creative documentation as well as activism, elevating the selected subject matter out of care, which is how I see my pandemic illustration project: Paw Prints 4 - Living in the City. The self-published book was created during the Covid-19 pandemic as a part of a series of artistic responses to the grave environmental and health crises emerging from ecological degradation in cities. With the goal of embodying and spreading the notion of care as fundamental to population wellbeing, it also offered assorted forms of conducting research in one's urban environment.

### Keywords

Drawing; Research; Art; Design; Care; Subjects; Nature; Focus; Activism

### Introduction

There are so many drawers in the world with varied styles and often relatively unknown, practicing and preserving an art form on the brink of transformation due to the digital era we have entered. Drawing is often one facet of a creative individual whose works span many visual or creative disciplines. Writer Sylvia Plath, for instance, made many drawings, as did singer Joni Mitchell. Meanwhile, British artist David Hockney is, "a great exemplar of Leonardo's belief that drawing is about steadily seeing nature's truth."<sup>1</sup> But in this essay, I would like to argue that by focusing one's attention onto a subject (whether real or imagined), in addition to inquiry, allows drawing to become a form of care towards the subject, which further results in its preservation.

Care is a term that is being thrown around a lot as the limits of state responsibility become apparent as well as the need for people to forge their own networks increases (for survival and for resilience). By focusing or paying attention to whatever we are choosing to draw (object, person, idea) indicates a form of attention, a focus which is best described as care because it not just communicates an interest, but also invites others to be equally interested or curious. Drawing in many ways thus becomes an extension of the notion of care through expanded yet concerted attention. And while drawing is often a reflection of ourselves: our interests, and areas of inquiry, the subjects we choose to elevate into "art" by drawing or sketching are nodes of attention. It functions sort of like a magnifying glass that focuses the light: drawing, as an act of caring, invites further care. Andrew Graham once noted that: "Drawing is the single

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1 - Quoted in Jonathan Jones, 28 Oct 2023, 'No one can draw from life like David Hockney – but more than ever are trying,' The Guardian, URL <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/oct/28/life-drawing-boom-david-hockney-art>

most fruitful and vital artistic skill at work in the world today. Drawing lies behind almost everything around us in the modern world. Drawing is everywhere.”<sup>2</sup> It is so many things to different drawers, and to their subjects, but perhaps most personally crucial it is also both a simultaneous way of coping, and of caring. Simply because, we don't focus on things we don't care about or aren't interested in (i.e., the subject and the output of drawing are sites of care). And by drawing, in terms of a process, we are in some ways also caring for ourselves: mentally, emotionally and even cognitively.

Sketching nature is often connected to perceiving and understanding nature; botanical illustrations, bird portraits and even landscapes elevate their subjects through a practice of documentation. The side benefit is that it (usually) involves being immersed or in close proximity to natural surroundings, which in itself can have significant benefits: relaxing, fun, and resulting in documenting or creating scientific illustrations. I have been thinking about this a lot lately while considering my own practice: why I sketch, diagram and draw, and how I choose my subjects. I only choose things that hold my interest, or draw things that I admire, am intrigued by or care about (or want to care about / feel curious about).

The act of drawing is usually a solitary one; drawers very often live in their own fantasy worlds. Sketchers, doodlers, taggers all have an innate need to make marks, and often have many striking shared interests. Most of the drawers I know of have achieved a level of skill through rigour and dogged practice. They were already drawing a lot, and then chose related professions allowing them the time and profession of close proximity to the things that they enjoy. Perhaps, over time they have made visible what they care for?

The pandemic enabled a breadth of time, and a need for both self-care and other forms of care (directed at family, community, and even the city). Drawing was a therapeutic process many turned to during those difficult years. Drawers, unlike the furniture that they often allude

to, are usually not rigid or limited in their techniques, subjects, works, and process. Like their works, they often just flow. Drawing is in fact frequently just a starting point for their art or explorations; this is particularly true for graffiti writers. Drawing methods and output are fairly unlimited: they write things, but in writing they are actually memorialising or preserving themselves with a drawing.

For me, drawing often becomes a unique form of, interaction and inquiry which enables a combination of spreading care and developing research insights. When it comes to drawing nature, we are not just talking about the act and the process of drawing, but also the subject that is being depicted. Through drawn depictions, we are engaging our senses visually with the subject, often nature. In Delhi, for example, I have often tried en plain air sketching (a method I learned from my high school art teacher, Walt Bartman), only to find I am offended, my body almost assaulted by the pollution. This is important because only through the desire to go and draw the subject - flowers, birds, trees - am I suddenly placed in very close proximity with the fall out of urbanisation.

And yet, these subjects are intriguing and under-represented. One of my high school drawing assignments used to be to focus on lesser drawn things - we would be tasked to go look into the sink, stare into the toilet or even a trash can as unique subjects. By drawing trash, (which I have tried unsuccessfully to do), I somewhat immortalized onto paper an issue that I think more people ought to care about and do something about, even if it was not a natural instinct to care for it at all. The point being that we will not depict or represent things that do not capture our interest or imagination, even if we are yet to care about them.

Selecting models for portraits and sittings is also a gesture of care, akin to immortalising someone. People are often flattered, happy, and a little uncomfortable to become the subject of someone else's gaze.

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2 - Watch the video here: Andrew Graham, The Secret of Drawing Episode 1: Line of Enquiry, BBC, URL <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9H59cVnnF9Y>

Paw Prints 4 is a book drawn in 2021, which considers the ways in which nature and the city interact. It is composed of drawings made with a brush and Indian ink on assorted repurposed paper. It focuses on the ways in which humans

over time have affected their relationship with wildlife in the city, and uses drawings combined with humour to imagine often absurd scenarios. Below are some excerpts:

Urbanization  
has caused  
birds to sing  
**LOUDER**  
<sup>dey</sup>  
Urban ~~habitats~~  
is a major  
threat to  
biodiversity

Over 3/4 of the world's population now live in urban areas; but our habitats are increasingly incompatible -- "unfair, unfriendly, and often deadly" -- with those of the various species that lived there first.

More:  
<https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/news/how-our-planet-became-more-urbanised-ever>

Image 1: People are often ignorant to the challenges that urbanisation presents to animals; birds for instance have had to alter and adjust the pitch of their songs in order to communicate over the furor of machine and human-made noise, among other assorted forms of pollution and toxicity which effects environmental as well as human health. This will likely have evolutionary consequences.



### **Delhi's Animals: Life during COVID-19**

A side effect of the pandemic has been natural rewilding of spaces. Roaming in search of food, and given the decreased human activity --- animals and birds were found frolicking in unusual spaces. From dangling langurs in Shimla to roaming horses in Jammu & Kashmir, to dancing peahen in Delhi and sleepy stray dogs comfortably occupying crosswalks in the national capital region.

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Image 2: These drawings were all made on paper and cardboard collected during the pandemic. For a brief period of time in 2020, the skies were significantly clearer, cities were quieter, and animals came out to occupy spaces (or search for food since their usual sources were in lockdown!). Due to limited human activity, animals suddenly had to search for new options for food and water in order to survive. Some of these instances are documented in the book.



Window  
collisions  
cause 1 billion  
bird deaths  
in the USA/yr

Statistics are currently unavailable for Indian birds. But, small actions can help them: keeping lights off in tall buildings so as not to attract or confuse them is one. Or making bird boxes for them to safely shelter in. What are other considerate things you can do for the biome you occupy?

Image 3: Through small actions, like planting wildflowers, re-wilding spaces, and even turning off the lights in tall buildings to prevent bird injuries — our awareness can become a basis for environmental activism. Due to light pollution at night and reflections in glass, birds are often injured by flying into these structures. This drawing was to raise awareness of this fact and to protect birds. The sparrow population in Delhi, for instance, has been dwindling for years.

## Climate Change

The Holocene extinction is known as the sixth mass extinction or Anthropocene extinction. It is the ongoing extinction event of species during the present Holocene epoch (with the more recent time sometimes called Anthropocene) — as a result of human activity.

Many families of plants and animals—including mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish and invertebrates—are going extinct. With widespread degradation of highly biodiverse habitats such as coral reefs and rainforests, as well as other areas, the majority of these extinctions are thought to be undocumented.



### Causes of Extinction

- Climate Change
- Asteroid Strikes
- Invasive Species
- Loss of Habitat
- Lack of Genetic Diversity
- Better-Adapted Competition
- Disease
- Human Predation
- Pollution

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Image 4: The drawings in this book demonstrate the power of art as drawings to communicate issues such as our climate crisis. In particular, the use of visuals to communicate science is creative and compelling; for the artist making them, the act of drawing and creating a book of facts, musings and questions was also powerfully meditative and therapeutic. Here is a drawing of birds sitting on power lines and phone wires seemingly discussing human behavior. Much of the imagery in the book stems from the city and from imagined ways of being.

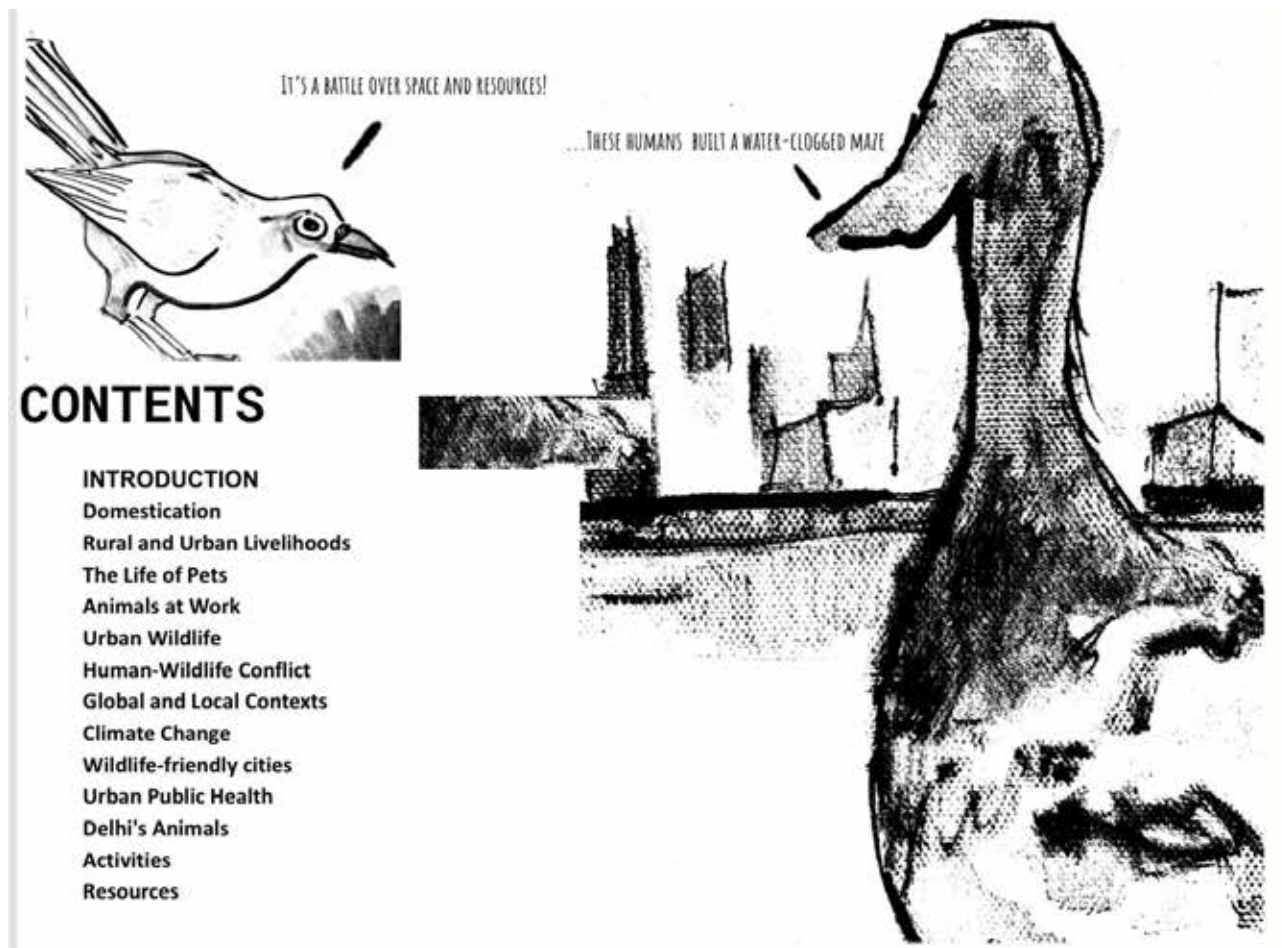


Image 5: The table of contents sets up the use of drawing as a tool for observation, imagination, and visual communication of the many complex issues which exist in nature as a result of human activity. This book responds to and explains them: chronologically, artistically and scientifically.

Drawings are frequently observation-based, genuinely thoughtful, and almost always incorporate a form of activism as commentary. In this instance, activism emerges as directly commenting upon nature and on conservation, in a myriad of ways.

Speaking with assorted artists has confirmed a general observation that: “Drawings, as a result, are also important socio-political and cultural relics: as artefacts

and as modes of communication that remain in flux (in terms of form and material), subject to influence and transformations over time” (Malhotra 2023: 14).

Certainly it isn't easy to generalise about how the drawer feels about the subject and this is often complex. Albrecht Durer's pillow studies for instance, are akin to scientific illustration, but as artworks are open to interpretation. Was he longing for sleep? For comfort? Was he anxious

about changing his pillow cover? What it does reveal is that the drawings elevate a subject that is often mundane, and forces a degree of observation and inquiry that is both insightful, archival and often rooted in a form of care. Is it more of longing and desire, than care? Perhaps, when we consider the drawing gaze of a western man onto what he considered exotic, or held power over. I hope that my work might challenge that assumption.

As a general condition, in addition to a focus or inquiry it isn't far-fetched to assume that when we select our own subjects - people, nature (including plants), the abstract / unknown - the selection emerges from a place where inquiry seems to be rooted in care. It may be something we might want to explore, have an affinity to, something we feel very kindred, concerned, or even lovingly towards.

## Conclusion

Drawing as a process is therapeutic and a form of self care. As an action it is activist, choosing or selecting subjects critically as sites of inquiry or care. It can also direct focus as a form of care through inquiry (Graham; Evans and Van Dyk 2019). Many people find that spending time on artistic activities, such as drawing and painting, can be soothing: the dynamic of using a brush and or pencils and crayons in particular, the role of colour, and simply the act of sitting in focus and of being.

Jean Hunleth uses drawing as a technique for anthropological inquiry: "You asked how anthropologists might take up drawing as both representational and non-representational. My answer is that anthropologists are already doing this, even if they aren't thinking about it in such terms or using drawing as a method. I work in a medical school, which means that I think a lot about my relevance and what anthropology has to offer. There is a push in the medical and public health sciences toward participatory research (as well as co-design and community engagement), which means that researchers are taking up many (new to them) visual, observational, and interview methods."

Drawing is therefore not just an open-ended tool for creative inquiry, but it also sometimes (arguably) reflects the impulses, interests and perhaps an attitude of care towards the subject that is being drawn. It is perhaps, everything.

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