



Article

## Drawing in Search of Truth and the power of digital contagion.

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### Abstract:

In this paper we consider the role of observation and reportage art in visualising representations of reality and exploring the concept of truth - we consider the role of digital networks as a means to co-create a more universal definition of truth. One that is not merely based on words but that is further illustrated through the senses.

**Methodologies used;** We use Hermeneutic/dialectic methodologies to interpret the information acquired through primary and secondary research methods - Our primary information is gained through Observational research of the Practice of drawing or designing how this process is experienced by each contributing artist. The secondary research methods uses literature and media reviews (Hanington & Martin 2012).

This research was cleared by HREG ethics at the University of Newcastle 2017

### Introduction:

Observational research has historically been used in the field of science, humanities (ethnography), population behaviour surveying, by artists, writers, mathematicians and philosophers. It is also used in medical practice where controlled observations can be conducted as part of randomised testing in order to study the effects of treatments.

These studies are the observation of nature taking its course and recording the findings over time. This can be seen as the academic equivalent of close critical reading of text as a body of knowledge to provide new insights. This is an iterative process of close observation, looking as an artist is trained to see.

'What an artist is trying to do for people is bring them closer to something, because of course art is about sharing. You wouldn't be an artist unless you wanted to share an experience, a thought'.

(David Hockney)

One of the most comprehensive uses of observational research was the social research project, 'Mass-Observation of the United Kingdom' which took place from 1937 in the mid-1960s, and briefly revived in 1981. This appeared to use a 'relativist' ontology (Annells 1996, p.386) in that there was no one point of view reality consists of many localised realities based on the context of the individual - in that there was no 'singular truth' instead a 'prevailing consensus' (Annells 1996, p.386) derived from multiple opinions. This combined 'modified objectivist' and 'subjectivist' epistemology (Gray & Malins 2016, p.20) in which the research as completely separate from the researcher (modified objectivist), but in the case of the reportage artist the researchers experience, input, and interpretation is of value to the research (Annells 1996, p.387).

The resulting 'Mass-Observation Archive is housed at the University of Sussex, however some of the war art is archived at the Imperial War Museum UK. This project recorded everyday life in Britain through the use of around 500 untrained volunteer observers who either maintained diaries, sketchbooks of reportage drawing

and photographs, as well as open-ended questionnaires. Known as 'directives' they anonymously recorded people at work, on the street and at various public occasions including public meetings and other events. Over a long period of time this enabled the researchers to better understand the individual realities of people's lives. After the war this process also helped to unite a country divided by both class and location.

Many drawings were made, particularly during the war by British artists, giving the quality of the observational work greater depths by extending the period of intensive 'looking' helping to form a deeper connection to an individual lived reality and surface the truthfulness of the findings. While the camera can provide a 'snapshot' a 'slice of time' the drawing process allows us to move away from this 'hit and run approach'.

'A photograph is not necessarily a lie, but it isn't the truth either. It's more like a fleeting, subjective impression.'

— John Berger, Understanding a Photograph

Social constructivist agree with the complexity of the individual experience; Participatory, puts great value on the role of individuals in their settings, in this way the researchers are the truth for the user's experience. (Abrams et al 2004, p.1)

The process of drawing is one of immersive connection with what we see, the layering, a portion of observed time. Through an intensive period of looking and drawing, it is more akin to writing than to photography.

"We who draw do so not only to make something visible to others, but also to accompany something invisible to its incalculable destination."

— John Berger, Bento's Sketchbook

### Drawing on Reality, Truth and Trust

After the second world war populations had been exposed to a great deal of propaganda designed to help them to survive. They learnt to trust things like public information films, posters and the communication that came from a government of national unity- as a result people trusted

government sources. 'Trust is crucial whenever risk, uncertainty, or interdependence exist' (McKnight 2000, p.382). We are now at a time when the use of social media uses a range of visual language - fake news has seen manipulation on an unprecedented scale. People find it hard to trust much of the information they see.

'Human language is unique in its ability to transmit information about things that do not exist at all. Large numbers of strangers can cooperate successfully by believing in common myths' (Harari 2015) (Harari, Y,N., Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, HarperCollins Publishers)

Observation is transferred through an artists particular visual language - in this way we are able to understand the phenomena of the everyday, using the real world as a primary source of truth for their work. They employ the senses, visual cognition and an individual visual language. But there is a new eye on life, an unblinking digital eye, no emotion, that has machine logic at its core. UON PhD student RALPH KENKE (supervised by Minichiello and Roxburgh) AND ELMAR TREFZ WON DIGITAL PORTRAITURE AWARD WITH SELFIE FACTORY in December 2017- *the Selfie used the same codes as Cambridge Analytica to develop a digital image from the online activities of users, by scraping their data to form these profiles and images. How can we trust?*



However, 'Trust is human, it's about human interactions' Sinek (2013, sec.16.15).

Whereas the human eye connects to the human mind, to the emotion centre of empathy and human memory and intelligence. Machine observation does not involve aspects of humane perception. Agents such as *Cambridge Analytica* and countless other online harvester's, data miners, data brokers, and data analysis paint a picture of the world and then seek to manipulate it. This is a kind of new 'Mass-Observation of humanity, a 'project driven by machine thinking. The images the system selects and the positioning and juxtaposition through machine logic is being allied to our natural cognitive sense making processes, and appears to be significantly changing the way we are thinking about the world. We seem to have used our natural inclination to adapt to allow us to think in a more machine-like way, a way of thinking and seeing that is alien to our species.

There is a real feeling that we have been misled, that our emotions have been manipulated. Emotion is an attitudinal response or reaction, and is an integral component of trust (Aksoy et al, 2013; Singh et al, 2012; Fiske & Malone, 2013). In fact, Barblet (cited in Singh et al, 2012) states that trust is a 'social emotion', developed through a sense of community and 'shared moral values' (Ward 2017) a means to increase in trust through the expectation of regular and honest behaviour. Sinek (2013) . These human qualities emerge in the mind from sensory material – once in the mind it is real. Reality is formed by an individual's mind- we as researchers need to accept the idea of **multiple realities** instead of a single **reality** (Cresswell, 2009). **Reality** is subjective and **multiple** as seen by the participants in the study (Cresswell, J. W. (Ed.). (2009

'The next stage of history will include not only technological and organisational transformations, but also fundamental transformations in human consciousness and identity.' (Harari 2018) (*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*)

In our post truth age, drawing and in particular documentary and reportage drawing exists as a remarkable human document with an ability to make visible the invisible, engaging with its subject and audience in a more humane

and empathetic manner.

Wolfgang Grunwald a neuroanatomist in Bremen makes sense of his very specific world seen through the lens of the microscope by drawing in pencil the connectivity and networks of brain neurons he observes every day. Working as a biologist and in effect as a draughtsman, he says of drawing that it's 'The most classical unsurpassed and quickest way to illustrate a structure, always with the possibility of rapid correction .... It allows one intuitively to develop techniques to depict an object as accurately as possible' He goes on to add 'any conceivable technique of automated photo analysis used for a program of reconstruction would here be doomed to failure' (Roob, p112)

This was in 2003 and digital scanning and lens technology has undoubtedly moved on, but he makes a valid point relating to drawings' ability to enhance greater clarity, to create an area of focus, and to 'eliminate alien artefacts.' Drawing as 'first sight' as Bonnard remarked can express an idea quickly, conceptualise, be used as a critical tool, help to think laterally, record observations, and, as a graphic witness form a political statement or generate stories in the form of visual narratives in order to communicate more effectively and empathetically a story as a sequence.

In its own right as an autonomous visual language, not medium specific, drawing has become increasingly important as a graphic language for visual journalism, not only as a means to capture on the spot visual commentary but also in a supportive role, as visual thinking; making ideas visible, making the invisible visible. Reportage drawing has been traditionally seen in a passive role as a practice secondary to the mighty word and photography in terms of journalistic inquiry. New technology is now beginning to shape and redefine the role of traditional journalism. Drawn visual journalism is separate to that of purely observational drawing, and a discipline in its own right, more aligned to photojournalism and part of the new developing area of documentary drawing, and multiple immersive and mixed reality journalism.



Matt Booker: 2019. 'A place for everyone' Project and exhibition.

Matt Booker: 2019. 'A place for everyone' Project and exhibition. Reportage drawings and audio interviews with the people of Bristol into the unique role the Bristol Beacon, formally Colston Hall, has played in people's lives.

These new forms of documentary, journalism and visual journalism are being explored and exploited due to what Katharine Viner, editor in chief of the Guardian referred to as, 'the rise of the reader.' (Viner 2013) In her essay for the Guardian 'How technology disrupted the truth', she wrote, 'Technology has induced a fundamental redrawing of journalists' relationship with their audiences', adding, "The circumstances in which we report, produce, distribute and obtain the news have changed so dramatically that this moment requires nothing less than a serious con-

sideration of what we do and why we do it". (Viner 2016)

Facebook has become the most powerful publisher in history by replacing editors with algorithms, dividing public debate and challenging democracy. (Viner 2017) This can be attributed in part to social media, citizen journalism, smartphone technology and interactive technologies, including virtual and augmented reality. Further to this, Viner in her article 'The rise of the reader' references Thomas Pettitt's theory 'The Gutenberg Parenthesis'. Pettitt suggests, "It's a new world order ...but that new world is in some ways an old world from before print and the identifiable newspapers, the way we think now .. is based on gossip rumour and conversation". (Viner 2013)



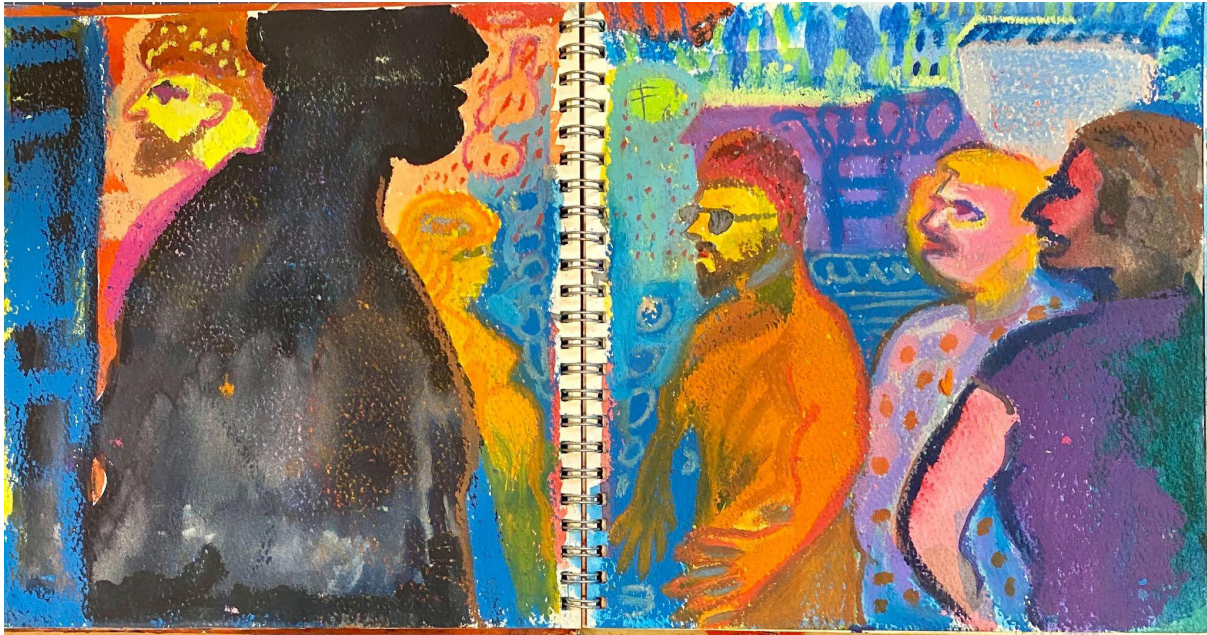
Topolski Chronicle Residency Programme: Election special chronicle.

This could be described as a form of unintentional, co-designed journalism by proxy, often referred to as ‘churnalism’. These non-fiction stories are often recycled online, uncorroborated, appealing to the emotions rather than based on thorough research, reason, or empirical knowledge. Thomas Pettitt in an article on the parallels between the pre-print era and our own internet age commented that we now live in a world of overlapping forms of communication. (Garber, 2010) The public no longer believe that print is a guarantee of truth, leaving a void to be filled by other forms of journalism such as drawn visual journalism, multiple journalism, and immersive forms of non-fiction documentary narratives. ‘Facts don’t work” and voters don’t trust the media, everyone believes in their own truth’ (Viner 2016)

The photographic image as truth teller has been under attack for a number of years, increasing with the speed and advent of digital media due to its ability to seamlessly manipulate the photographic image. With the advent of algorithms, artificial intelligence, deep fakes, ‘morph porn’ and the rise in social photography (Jurgenson 2019) we are increasingly being fed what we think we want. We are gorging on an unhealthy diet of disinformation and fake news and we don’t always know who the referees are anymore. Subsequently this has created fertile ground for disinformation. Fake news could be described as a symptom of our society rather than a cause, and as emotions take over verifications people fail to be critical. Much of this technology is often seen as benign, but its ubiquity is increas-



Topolski Chronicle Residency Programme. Chronicle 2013



Mario Minichiello, Woolgoolga, Australia NSW. Unusual North Coast town noted for its large Sikh population, beautiful High street. 2018

ingly dangerous and disruptive (Invisible Networks 2018) The suspicion we are now living in a post truth age full of charlatans and fakery has been given rocket boosters.

Ron Burnett in 'How Images Think' wrote about 'the appearance of photography in the 19th century, resulting in the criticism that mechanically produced images would lead to the destruction of truth, therefore undermining human memory. Burnett references Francis Yates book, *The Art of Memory* where Yates discusses active images and thinking, contrasting images of human suffering to those that require more lengthy contemplation to be understood. (Burnett, p.16) An image which purely illustrates and serves in a secondary passive role to a text can only really ever be a page filler or decoration. An image which is created as a visual equivalent to the text, as primary research or one that draws the reader in for greater scrutiny facilitating a relay between the two will have greater resonance and ultimately be more effective and empathetic at communicating a powerful message. The role of the reportage artist working directly from life on the spot, from primary research can only strengthen the disciplines' reach in terms of the public's belief in this medium.

Maria Gough in her essay 'drawing between reportage and memory' (Gough, 2013) makes reference to Diego Rivera's Moscow sketchbooks as 'complex graphic objects located on the continuum between reportage and memory'. These 45 watercolour drawings bear graphic witness to the power of political demonstration and are part of a tradition of reportage drawing which gained popularity throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century most notably in the form of Topolski's *Chronicles*, and *Memoir of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*, and continues unabated into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as reportage and documentary drawing.

There are very good examples of contemporary collaborative drawn visual journalism, for instance The Topolski Studio Residency, and *Firsthand* in the UK and 'Artists for democracy in New York'. This loose collaborative group formed on January 21, 2017 when a group of reportage artists united to experience and document the Women's March in Washington DC. Before the group had a collective name, those in the group had individually drawn political events ranging from campaign speeches and rallies, to Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter protests. 'We recognized that vulnerable groups – people we loved – would come under attack from this new administration.



Mario Minichiello: Driving through the bush fires with Colin Rhodes, in Sydney Australia, overtaken by truck driver smoking at the wheel, reporting APEC 2007

We feared the erosion of democratic values, institutions, and norms. After almost a year, we think we were right to fear it. When the truth is under attack, we believe that the immediacy and authenticity of reportage art is our most powerful response' (Reportager, 2017)

Mario Minichiello's drawings for the 'social tensions' series documents the social difficulties that arose during the Brexit process. Mario states that : 'Many newspapers and some political figures made inflammatory statements that often had no basis or evidence. This resulted in new tensions on the streets of many British cities. The tensions continue to this day' (MM)



Mario Minichiello: Series of social Tensions, Brexit 2019.

New technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality are only just beginning to be embraced by reportage artists who are challenging, subverting and experimenting with these new tools. These 'disruptive' emerging digital platforms can suggest new ways to co-create, distribute, and engage with audiences including immersive and interactive technologies. (Bridle, 2018) The next generation of artists will undoubtedly exploit this technology developing new forms of journalism, documentary, and visual journalism. In our post truth age, new innovative ways to co-create, distribute, and engage with audiences are introducing further challenges and debates, increasing demand for innovative dynamic media rich ways to tell non-fiction stories.

Jill Gibbon at the House of illustration discussing the impact of digital media said 'there is something very particular and very powerful about drawing which digital technology is enabling us to disseminate more easily... We are so inundated by the digital, and by the photographic image, that it draws attention even more to what is particular about drawing, which is a very powerful way of engaging with the world.

"I think the process of drawing itself, whatever the end product, gives us a way of grounding ourselves in the world where we can increasingly feel alienated' (Reportager 2018)



Topolski Studio Residents draw live. A collective response to the Notting Hill carnival celebrations. London 2015



Gary Embury: Drawing with virtual tools within virtual reality at University of the West of England.



Jill Gibbon: Sketchbook drawings from the Eurosatory Arms Fair Paris 2016



Jill gibbon: DSEi Arms Fair London 2015 sketch book drawing.

Jill is an artist and activist using drawing as an interdisciplinary method to research war and the arms trade.

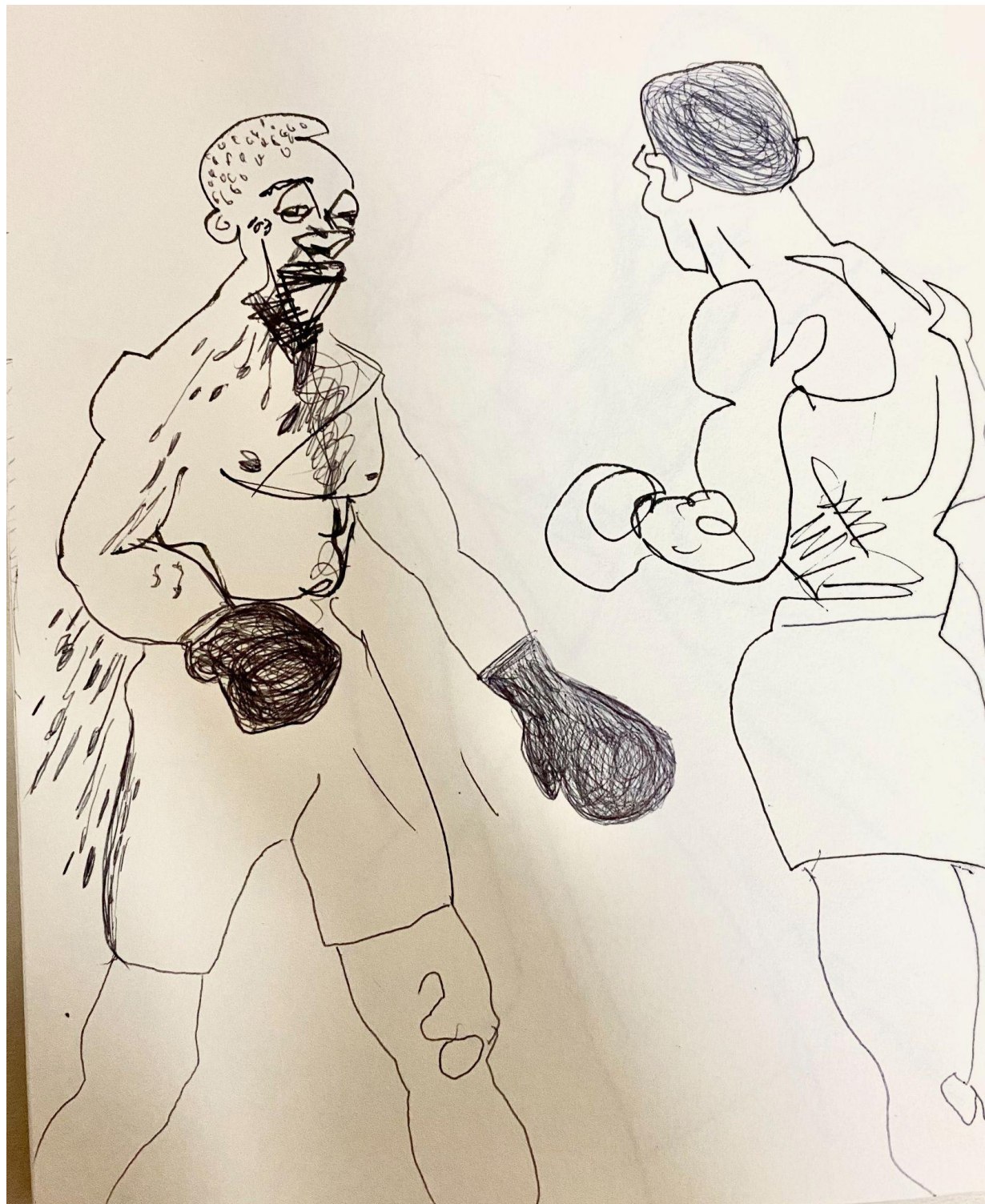
Drawing as a fundamental mode of production within reportage and documentary illustrative practice is still relevant within immersive and interactive technologies. due to Drawings' ability to serve as an analytical tool to reveal the real history of spaces. (Allan and Pearson 2016) Drawings subjectivity is why you would choose it over lens-based media. Its inherent subjectivity offers a different means of inquiry to photography or text-based journalism, especially when other means of documentation become impossible due to the physical space, security requirements, political situation or technical restrictions.

'That is one of the powerful things about drawing, it's so visceral and its clearly subjective, we are storytellers, and I think the camera can give an impression of objectivity,

but it isn't, any account is constructed, the photograph is constructed, .... but with a drawing its more obvious, the process of construction'. (Jill Gibbon Reportager 2018)

'We see the breaking and reframing of history through drawing as a critical act – going back in time to redraw the future'. (Allan and Pearson, 2016)

These ubiquitous new dark technologies can lead to a loss of humanity. (Bridle 2018) However there is nothing more humane than drawing and maintaining a connection to drawing is maintaining a connection to our own humanity. (Netter, 2018) Drawing and specifically reportage drawing exists as a remarkable human document, Drawing is now seen as a more humane and empathetic way to engage with a subject, a meditation, a time-based medium of minutes and hours rather than a split second which presents a moment taken from a continuum. The reportage artist Louis Netter stated, 'Reportage drawing is as much





Mario Minichiello Boxing series(1) Blood loss and(2) Sound of the crowd . These are both attempts to use drawing in ways that photography cannot do 2009.

about selection, de-selection, augmentation, speculation and pure invention as it is about the accurate depiction of space.' (Netter, 2014)

In contrast to drawing which could be seen as much more of a time based medium, an interesting perspective from a photojournalist's point of view is, 'Tragedy and violence certainly make powerful images. It is what we get paid for. But there is a price extracted with every such frame: some of the emotion, the vulnerability, the empathy that makes us human, is lost every time the shutter is released.' (Marnovich, G. Silva, J. p.194).

Berger suggests that the contexts photography are used for, such as scientific, systems for social and political control and as a means of public communication in the media are all different but it's generally assumed that 'the truthfulness of the photograph - or the way that this

truth functions - is the same in all three'.(Berger p.71) Ironically photography's ability to fix time to a fraction of a second originally gave credibility to the idea of its truthfulness, a record of what happened, at that moment. In that sense, a drawings' inherent subjectivity is why you would choose drawing over photography. In this context perhaps 'Transparency is more important than objectivity, said the citizen journalist Carlos Miller in 2006 (Miller C) mirroring Katherine Viner's more recent comment in an article for the guardian 'A mission for journalism in a time of crisis' where she speculated, 'You're more accountable if you're transparent.' (Viner, 2017)



Gary Embury: Trump Demo London 2018

Increasingly we live in an image saturated world accelerated by digital contagion and the 'social photo' (Jurgen-son, 2019) Subsequently the uniqueness of the photo has disappeared.

Wim Wenders the film maker, as part of his exhibition at the Photographers gallery in London also regards photography as a thing of the past, he stated,

'It's not just the meaning of the image that has changed – the act of looking does not have the same meaning. Now, it's about showing, sending and maybe remembering. It is no longer essentially about the image. The image for me was always linked to the idea of uniqueness, to a frame and to composition. You produced something that was, in itself, a singular moment. As such, it had a certain sacredness. That whole notion is gone'. (O'Hagan, 2017)

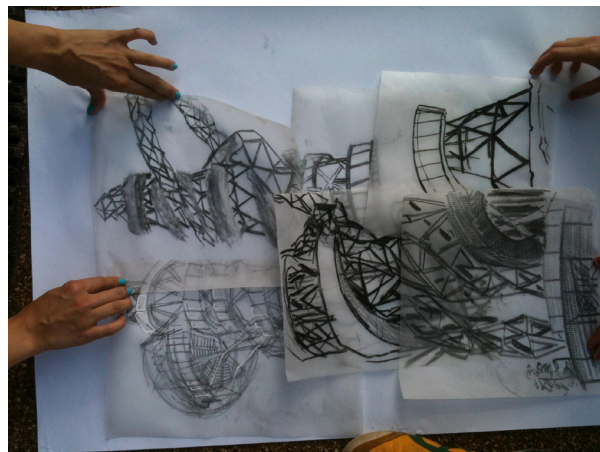




Gary Embury 2021 Drawings from a residency at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital during Covid.

The reportage artist Jill Gibbon believes there's something much more radical about drawing and provides an alternative way of understanding a location to the dominant one which is photographic. During a panel discussion on reportage drawing at the House of Illustration she stated,

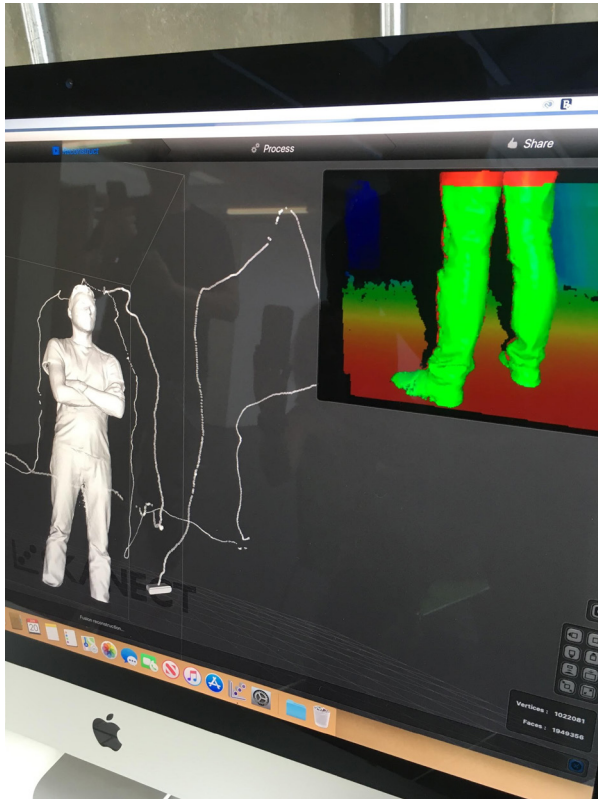
'It's much more visceral, it's much more contemplative, it's much more grounded' she added, 'John Berger wrote about drawing and the politics of drawing. He wrote about drawing in Palestine. Drawing ...created a shared vocabulary (amongst) people whose houses had been bulldozed in the occupied Palestinian territories and who used drawing to assert their memories of the houses that had gone. I'd suggest you can't do that with a camera, you can't do that with a photograph. (Reportager 2018 Reportage Illustration: Visual Journalism)



Gary Embury: Collaborative drawing with the Topolski residents at the Invictus Games London 2014

Reportage drawing and documentary visual journalism is and will be increasingly relevant in a post truth age with its ubiquity of so called 'benign' yet disruptive technologies at the disposal of the reader formally known as the audience. (Viner, 2016) This dark mirror will indeed reflect both a utopian and dystopian future but one where drawing in all its guises will still be valued as a highly subjective, empathetic and humane mode of communicating with an audience, one which can be used to reveal, immerse, illuminate and ultimately inform. (Jurgenson, 2019) especially when one considers we now live 'in an age where hatred or fear of the other is increasingly weaponised by pundits and politicians' (Dunne, 2018)

“It’s so vital and important for one human to be studying, looking, and perceiving another human because it eventually creates empathy. You’ll start to understand your own vulnerabilities” (Sabin, 2018)



Gary Embury: Experimenting and drawing with the new technology. 3D scanning with Structure, Sense. Infrared with Photogrammetry.

In the age of 5G and the digitally mediated image, fakery and 24-hour rolling news reporting, multiple journalism and the new emerging technologies of AR and VR, there is a growing sense of a distinct lack of empathy.

Reportage artists can continue to contribute to our perceptions of social, political issues, war and conflict. (IWMN, 2013) Saturation media coverage accelerated and disseminated by social media as digital contagion can liberate artists from the pressure of producing an official record of an event by freeing them to respond in a more personal, empathetic and subjective way, therefore possibly uncovering and reflecting wider social and political viewpoints. The technology is increasingly accessible and the use of drawing as part of this technology could add a

humanity and empathy currently lacking with much of the current uses of these technologies.

It’s up to artists to work with the technologists to really get this off the ground. Drawing could be seen as part of a series of developments and changes including economic, engendering a “culture of encounter” (Alexander, 2017) which human beings need in order to flourish. The advantage of these kinds of collaborations could lead to a re-thinking of how technology can be applied in order to break new ground especially within what could now be called post new visual journalism.



Gary Embury: Drawing at the Trump Demo in London 2018

Perhaps there is more at stake here? in the past species of humans vanished because of competition with each other, they outbred, or killed off the others, this called the ‘Replacement Theory’. It came about as competition for resources grew and turned into violence and genocide. Resources are an increasing issue as is intolerance as we observe and understand ourselves though the each other made through another form of intolerance. The process of making a drawing and looking at the world through human eyes instead of those of an alien technology that uses machine thinking and algorithms to train us to respond to its version of reality seems too simple to be affective. However, we seem to find ourselves increasingly living

in echo chambers and thought bubbles with increasingly angry people. The images produced by codes and immersive screen technology has produced an ever-dysmorphic view of ourselves and adds to our inability to act and increases our personal tensions.

‘ Every man-made order is packed with internal contradictions. Discord in our thoughts, ideas and values compel us to think, re-evaluate and criticise.’ (Harari 2018) (Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind)

We know that people are influenced by what they see, the internet offers endless examples of photographs, drawing, films and paintings that change the world because they changed our cognitive ability to process new, often shocking information and changed our reality. Our immersive media now draws our sight to a different means of forming our understanding of what is real. The systems rinse and repeat the kinds of images and visual consent we last looked at where in the past confrontational and disturbing events would be balanced with our physical socialising with kinder, more positive ones, now we get more of the same. This then is amplifying our anxiety and stress. The figures for anxiety and stress and the rise in self-harming and early deaths are concerning as the so-called ‘snowflake’ generation are the first set of humans to be blinkered by these new systems of seeing. Before we are all replaced by machines Perhaps, we need to return to our primary intelligence.

“Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.”

— John Berger

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