

“From Atrocities Of War To A Skateboarding Cockatoo”

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Abstract:

Reportage: from Atrocities of War to a Skateboarding Cockatoo.

Drawings throughout history have reflected the idiosyncrasies of human life. Our conflicts, social injustices, struggles against disease, and our searches for medical and scientific knowledge are archived by artists in museums all over the world.

Artists as diverse as Goya, Otto Dix, Daumier, and Hogarth, through to current practising artists Sue Coe, Joe Sacco and Marion Satrapi, all offer social commentary. Their drawn stories highlight injustice and upheaval, cruelty and humour.

Following the realization that photographs no longer necessarily speak the truth thanks to Photoshop, the live action drawing maintains and increases its reputation for integrity in the 21st century. The drawn line, our simple accessible window to history - is the artist's strength, weapon and communicator. The documentary artist or graphic journalist writes with drawings. This work needs no translation; it travels freely across language barriers.

My own drawings tell of personal journeys. I have drawn a kidney transplant from mother to son; witnessed the excavation of mutilated sacrificial skeletons at Stonehenge; been surrounded by Vikings; and confronted by a skateboarding Cockatoo. The rich tapestry of life recorded through drawing is a sort of visual time capsule, a source of knowledge and a social commentary. This paper aims to demonstrate that Reportage or Documentary drawing continues to play an important role and is a viable 21st Century genre contributing towards an historical archive. To conclude I echo the sentiment of the Victorian Royal Academician Lord Leighton, R.A. who declared as a child "I'm alright - I've got my pencil" .

Keywords: Drawing, Archive, Reportage, Documentary, Graphic journalism

1. Introduction

My intention in this paper is to demonstrate that Documentary Drawing or Reportage, is alive and well and proving itself to be a viable 21st Century genre.

For many the idea of commissioning an artist to document proceedings is a curious one.

What is the purpose of making these drawings - what are they for?

Why should we, when budgets are tight, pay for someone to make drawings?

In response I say that drawing is not in competition with photography, it offers an alternative view or perspective. Unencumbered by the photographer's cumbersome equipment the artist can access intimate or moving events, such as surgery for example. Drawings, unlike documentary film or photography, attempt to capture minutes and hours as opposed to fractions of seconds in a single image. Thus the pressure of *“instant photographic results is tempered by the somewhat more considered discipline of creating artworks”* (O. Neil, 2001). Thanks to the minimally invasive nature of a pencil working on paper the presence of an artist is readily tolerated particularly in arenas of sensitivity such as conflict or disaster. An artist edits away extraneous detail allowing the viewer to focus on the core of activity. In turn the work is enabled to eloquently convey whatever tensions and passions are witnessed on location. (fig. 1).

[“Emergency Study” Julia Midgley]

It could be argued that the genre has emerged from a tradition, particularly in England, of appointing Official War Artists. Now however it is a global trend as documentary artists, illustrators, and cartoonists increasingly produce graphic reports of world events. Witness the work of artists Joe Sacco, author of “Footnotes in Gaza” (Sacco 2009) and “Palestine” (Sacco 2009), and Marjane Satrapi whose poignant stories of an Iranian childhood and adolescence “Persepolis 1” (Satrapi 2008) succinctly and sensitively portray 21st Century stories of cultural and social challenge.

2. A Brief History

During the First World War artists were sent directly from England to combat zones, often the front line. Many worked alongside surgeons as they operated.

Sir Henry Tonks entered service as a medical orderly, before being appointed as Artist to a unit set up by surgeon Harold Gillies dealing specifically with facial injuries. Gillies recognised the value of combining disciplines to provide a more rounded record of his patients. The resulting series of pastel drawings by Sir Henry Tonks illustrates both the collaboration between artist and surgeon, and, one of the earliest examples of reconstructive surgery. He drew from direct observation.

Paul Nash, Sir Hugh Casson, Christopher Nevinson, Barbara Hepworth, and countless more were appointed as Official War Artists. Women artists were not in the front line but recorded the war effort at home. They worked in hospitals, in the munitions factories, and on the land. Dame Laura Knight was engaged to document events post war at the Nuremberg trials. (fig. 2.)

[Sketch for “the Nuremberg Trial” (LD5798) by Dame Laura Knight ©Imperial War Museum,]

Prisoners of war and internees also made drawings of their suffering (Sujo 2001). Memorably Kathe Kollwitz’s (Hartley 1981) heart rending images of mothers protecting their children could be said to communicate desperation more poignantly than any other medium.

Since the second World War artists have continued to record conflict for example Linda Kitson, the Falklands War, and Peter Howson in Bosnia. Their connection with medicine continued too. Susan Macfarlane, a nurse turned professional artist, produced in 1995 the wonderful body of drawings “A Picture of Health”, (fig.3) documenting breast-cancer care, originally launched at the Barbican Centre, London, and a subsequent portfolio “Living with Leukeamia - Paintings and Drawings of Childhood Leukeamia” in 1998.

[“A Picture of Health” by Susan Macfarlane, (© Angus and Euan Mackay)]

Sir Roy Calne, the eminent transplant surgeon, makes paintings and drawings of his own patients. These occasionally appear as illustrations in his books and lectures. Calne received advice on colour and painting from his Royal Academician patient John Bellany who was at the time recovering from a liver transplant. Through his skills as an artist Calne illustrates the humanity and suffering of patients and promotes international understanding of transplant surgery. (fig 4.)

[“Diagram” by Sir Roy Calne]

Here the surgeon’s knowledge combined with his artistic skill communicates the patients’ and his own experience with intimate immediacy, simplicity of line, and compassion. It has been said that patients benefit remarkably when confronted by their condition in such a visual and engaging manner. Thus the poignancy and exceptional power of drawings to engage and captivate an audience is clearly demonstrated.

Further away from the fields of conflict and surgery artists produce work on the factory floor, at conferences, and, world events. Josh Neufeld’s book “A.D. New Orleans After the Deluge” (2009) describes the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the local population. Whilst making use of the graphic novel format drawing remains his currency of choice. Sue Coe the English illustrator and social commentator (who works in America), has confronted difficult issues from social injustice, particularly in South Africa, to Aids. Latterly her focus has shifted to uncompromising visual treatises in defence of the plight of animals. The abuse of research and farm animals led to a ten year project exposing animal exploitation by the meat industry eventually published under the title

“Dead Meat” (1996). More recently Elephants have provided a source for her protest.

There are some parallels here with South African artist William Kentridge whose observations on corruption and abuse of human rights take the form of short animations made from large reworked charcoal and pastel drawings. “*History of the Main Complaint*” (1996) was exhibited at Tate Modern, London in 2000.

Another explanation for the continuing use of Reportage is referred to in a student essay on the subject at Liverpool School of Art & Design by William Daw (2011).

He points to Reutersgate and recent questions of the reliability of photographs in the media. For example in 2007 Reuters news agency published a photograph in which use of Photoshop’s clone stamp was clearly visible, whilst BP in 2010 ‘Photoshopped’ a press release of its Deepwater Horizon command centre reputedly adding extra consoles to the image. Daw (2010) transcribed photographs of these examples with his own drawings, going on to hand write and illustrate with drawings the entire essay. (fig 5)

[“Transcription Drawing” William Daw 2011]

3. A Personal Observation

My own practice as a documentary artist began on the factory floor leading me on to further projects within industry, theatres, sports arenas and cultural events. In 1997 I was appointed as Artist in Residence to The Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen University Hospital. The aim was to produce a panoramic view of the art and science of medicine in Liverpool at the end of a century. (The Residency culminated in 1999, the 50th Anniversary of the National Health Service). The working lives of others always prove engrossing; to date mutual respect reliably develops between artist and subjects despite on occasion some initial uncertainty. The artist whilst on location sees and absorbs new thought processes and procedures which in turn inform his or her own practice. Thus, ideas are conceived which would not have been born without the access afforded by such collaborations. For (in this case) the medical staff, the experience provides opportunities to witness an artist’s eye at work. The artist to them is part lay person, part professional observer, who presents objective and novel interpretations of their work.

In Liverpool’s international community patients occasionally struggle to communicate. A young woman seated by her unconscious partner was isolated by poor English. Disengaged, she absently acknowledged the artist’s presence but on seeing the end result grew animated using parts of the drawing as a communication tool. The image had initiated a dialogue. The power of drawings to elicit an emotional response from a viewer was similarly demonstrated when an exhibition visitor wept in front of the drawing ‘Tender Farewell’ (fig. 6.). It described a nurse tenderly preparing a cadaver for removal from the ward. Moved not so much by death, more by the nurse’s tenderness towards an unknown individual, the drawing had provoked in that visitor some personal memory and experience.

[“Tender Farewell” Julia Midgley]

The Residency “Drawn from Experience” culminated in a touring exhibition, (University of Liverpool; The Royal College of Surgeons of England; and New Academy Gallery, London) lectures, and a fully illustrated publication. Drawings were acquired for National public collections - The Wellcome Foundation; National Museum of Science and Industry; and The Royal College of Surgeons of England. After touring England some of the works travelled to The Liverpool Hospital in Sydney. The tour disseminated and broadcast documentary drawing to new audiences, mostly medical and scientific. As large Museums and collections hosted the tour members of the general public were also introduced to the portfolio.

4. Unexpected Surroundings

Documentary Artists are found in unexpected surroundings. From my own practice commissions have sent me to a major Hospital, an Amusement Park, a World Heritage site, CCTV control rooms in Huyton, Merseyside, and the pressurised atmosphere of TV production. The examples of work referred to in this paper describing war zones and social injustice further demonstrate the encapsulation in visual terms of contemporary life. Seated with pen or pencil the documentary artist fulfils a special role as a professional observer.

4.1 Archaeology

Artists+Archaeology is a network of artists brought together by archaeologist Dr Helen Wickstead who formed the group with the purpose of looking at drawing process as practised by Archaeologist and Artist. A driving interest for her, she enlisted Professor Leo Duff of Kingston University to help create a group of drawing specialists. This group, including myself, was embedded within the Stonehenge Riverside Project from 2007 - 2009. Here drawing would take on a cross disciplinary role embracing reportage. Wickstead explains the archaeologists' approach:-

“Field drawings are static. There is no ‘movement’, no attempt to include the perception of time passing or the personal experiences of the individual doing the drawing. Field drawings work towards the definite, fixing what we know. The strict conventions of field drawing and the importance of the collective in decisions made through drawing make this no place for ‘self-expression’. Nonetheless some archaeologists produce drawings in an unmistakable individual style, and field drawings can be a source of personal pride.

The permatrace is taped over lightweight board covered in millimetre-ruled graph paper. A semi-transparent drawing surface comes into its own when finished drawings are removed from the planning board. Because the permatrace is see through and plans are marked with grid points of known co-ordinates drawings can be precisely layered” (Wickstead, 2010)

Drawings are a source of personal self esteem to archaeologists. However, the noticeable difference here to the practice of visual artists and the ownership of their drawings is clear. For example, Professor Thomas's name is applied to the section drawing of the Cursus yet it is the product of his team (fig. 7.).

[“Section Drawing” Prof. Julian Thomas]

The draughtsman is anonymous. Whereas my drawing of Professor Thomas beside the same Cursus trench (Fig. 8.), describes the movements of individuals over a six or seven hour period and bears my name.

[“Cursus Trench” Julia Midgley]

Here hard pencils drew on graph paper but were used by the artist in a freehand gestural manner. As a group we tried to emulate the archaeologists' process but unlike the archaeologists we were free to apply personal interpretation.

“Mud splatters and scuffed lines are more compelling than ‘official’ digitally enhanced illustrations. We annotate our drawings with thoughts that occur in the process of drawing and digging. Removing these annotations - while it makes a ‘cleaner’ more professional image - makes drawings less, rather than more, informative.” (Wickstead, 2010)

An infant skeleton buried with a dog's skull was found beneath the Cuckoo Stone, a sacrificial burial probably Roman. Nails had been driven into some of its bones. Forensic archaeologists worked clinically to annotate this moving find. Later, off duty, their reaction to my drawing revealed a more emotive response recalling the potency of drawing as witnessed in the Liverpool Hospital project in the late 1990's. Both the artist and viewer were affected. An artist, when given intimate and private access to moving events will produce works of emotional strength reflecting the experience. Meanwhile the viewer is free to invest the drawing with his or her own feelings. Thus, a cross fertilisation of sensitivities is achieved.

In 2009, laboratories and offices around the UK were visited in order to record the Post Excavation Analysis of finds from Stonehenge.

The Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, Bournemouth and Sheffield all provided access. The finds which I had witnessed being excavated from the Salisbury Plain were now examined in, for example, a huge Accelerator Mass Spectrometer for Radio Carbon Dating (University of Oxford), or through a laboratory microscope (University of Cambridge), or, subjected to the intense scrutiny of an archaeological illustrator working in her own home. Recorded by a pencil, modern and traditional technologies rubbed shoulders together.

4.2 Construction

Construction sites are an unlikely arena for the documentary artist. Given the rigid health and safety regulations it is perhaps surprising that Construction companies choose to record their activities with drawings. However in 2010 Scottish artist *Patricia Cain* produced drawings depicting the construction of Zaha Hadid's Riverside Museum of Transport in Glasgow. This body of work was awarded the Aspect Prize in Scotland. A further example of a large scale construction drawing from the same portfolio went on to win the 2010 Threadneedle Prize in London.

In America artist *Margaret Hurst* a Professor at Pratt Institute and Parsons School of Design, New York, produces drawings of construction sites to commission. Her lively rapid animated line graphically describes the activity and clamour of a building site. Individual workers are portrayed in such a way that they must be recognisable.

British artist *Jeanette Barnes* also focusses on buildings, most recently the construction of London's Olympic stadium. She is a past prizewinner of the Jerwood Drawing Prize in the UK.

Before joining Artists+Archaeology and The Stonehenge Riverside Project I found myself following a similar path - a commission to draw the construction of Liverpool John Moores University's new Art & Design Academy. There were some interesting visual parallels to the observations made of archaeological practice. Surveyors' poles formed T shapes on excavated Stone Age ground and again on brand new concrete slabs. (fig.9.)

["A.D.A.no.31" Julia Midgley]

5. Recent Developments

Varoom Magazine (2011) recently published an article "*Thinking with Pictures*" which looks at how organisations are commissioning drawing specialists / illustrators to bring lectures, especially Powerpoint presentations, to life. Andrew Park of visual communicators *Cognitive Media* based in Folkestone UK makes drawings and animations for online lectures which have been edited to a ten minute timespan.

After planning the approach Andrew draws directly onto white boards - making changes as he draws

"..... and animate the drawings as we go. A lot of people get confused, they think its computerised or done on screen, but its just good old - fashioned drawing" (Park 2010)

These lectures for the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce) have attracted millions of viewers especially on You Tube.

Conferences or conference delegates can also come under the artist's scrutiny. In February I was not alone in drawing proceedings (fig.10.)

["The Drawing Semantic" Julia Midgley]

at the Recto Verso - Redefining the Sketchbook Conference 2011 hosted by The University of Lincoln. (examples can be seen here:-

http://web.me.com/barbara.griffin/sketchlincoln/julia_midgley.html

6. Conclusion

From the trenches of World War 1 to the archaeological trenches on Salisbury Plain reportage continues to fulfil an important role. It speaks a common visual language communicating across cultures, and subject matter. The artist plays and has played an important role by providing a fresh perspective, an alternative viewpoint for our appreciation. By the exclusion of superfluous information only the core action is presented. The resulting records form archives of momentous events and intimately engage the viewer. A cross fertilisation of ideas is generated between disciplines, lively debate instigated, but, most importantly diverse professions develop mutual respect.

The constant theme running through the history of reportage is our continuing fascination with the human condition. At its most simple the human face does not change, nor does its reflection of extreme circumstances. We respond daily to facial expression; separated from contemporary costume it is that which communicates with us. Artists as diverse as Marjan Satrapi whose graphic novel *Persepolis*, (2008), describes her childhood in Iran arguably more forcefully than words ever would and Tim Vyner who travels the world recording sporting events contribute to the tradition. Vyner records sporting events as he sees them from The Olympic Games, to street soccer in Ghana. As a reportage artist his images present a unique view of the passion and atmosphere of live sport. A discipline, which arguably began on the field of conflict, now embraces the full compass of human activity, for example:- Mario Minichiello's vital and powerful subjects covered during the late 1980's included the Birmingham Six hearing, Beirut hostage releases, and Spy Catcher trials. He produces living images of life on the edge. Arabella Dorman lived and travelled with the British army in Basra and Southern Iraq. Her work explores day-to-day life and the psychological experiences of soldiers during conflict, and, its aftermath. *Xavier Pick* (2011) returned from Basra where his inspirational sketchbooks graphically recorded life as experienced by the armed forces. The Basra portfolio seeks to portray the positive side of conflict. Pick has maintained a practice of producing daily visual diaries for 15 years, which he describes as a living portfolio, reportage for him is a way of life. (fig.11.)

[“Freedoms” Xavier Pick]

Once, when travelling in Majorca I watched as a street entertainer presented his audience with an array of exotic birds. He produced Sydney, a white cockatoo, the star turn. On each foot Sydney sported, bizarrely, a mini skateboard. He performed for us with complete aplomb, as if his footwear was the most natural thing, proving that life is stranger than fiction. There he was, a subject to be recorded by a reportage artist who just happened to be passing through.

The examples I have used here are a small representation of reportage or documentary drawing as currently practised. The genre reflects capsules of time, archives, and collaborations, not just with medical, and archaeological sciences but contemporary society in general, humour, lives in conflict and at peace. It does not simply record but with personal interpretation it engages with and contributes to a cross fertilisation of knowledge, perspectives, and skills. (fig.12.)

[“Archaeological Illustrator” Julia Midgley]

There is the anecdotal story which tells how the U.S.A. invested millions of dollars in pursuit of a writing instrument which would work in space, as opposed to the Russians who simply employed a pencil. If at some future date technology fails us there will always be someone making his mark with graphite or charcoal. Lord Leighton was on message - he was alright he had his pencil.

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