

BILL PLATZ

Bill Platz is a lecturer at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, and convenor of Interdisciplinary Drawing. He completed his undergraduate and graduate studies in New York and his doctoral studies in Brisbane. He is convenor of Drawing International Griffith, co-convenor of Drawing International Brisbane and a member of the Griffith Centre for Creative Arts Research. His research, teaching and practice consider life drawing, portraiture and pedagogies of drawing, with an underlying focus on the studio transactions that occur between artists and models.

A MALFUNCTION OF LIFE DRAWING

This paper is an investigation of the productive role of malfunction in the life drawing studio. It draws upon three ongoing research projects: a practice-led studio drawing inquiry, a dialogue with a professional life model and an investigation of a 1979 performance at Brisbane's College of Art by artist Dragan Ilic. Malfunction is presented as an interrogative method that can be applied to the regulatory structure of life drawing.

A Malfunction of Life Drawing

The single human figure is a swell thing to draw.

- RB Kitaj, *The Human Clay*

It is a swell thing. A morbid swelling. A single and swollen and moribund thing that we persist in drawing. It is naked and vulnerable and girded by regimes of regulation and fear.

Mallfunction and Urizen's Beard

I spend a great deal of time considering the various ways in which life drawing may maintain a position within a critical pedagogical framework. I was reared in programs that are compliant with strategies intended to mitigate the inconvenient, transgressive and miasmatic nature of the life drawing theatre — strategies structured to protect the models, artists and lecturers from potential injury or iniquity. The regulatory constitution of the life drawing studio is actually laden with malfunction, and it is this very malfunction that may be unveiled and redeployed as a productive feature.

Function and malfunction cannot be directly apprehended. Behaviours and symptoms, however, can indicate malfunction, and in doing so, can also create alternative productive possibilities. Although I am inclined to use the modal terms *ought* and *oughtn't* in relation to malfunction, it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve too deeply into the intricacies of modals. Suffice to say that a perception of a behaviour that *oughtn't* be happening is indicative of a malfunction, and the presumption of *oughtn't* demands a theoretical structure in which things are occurring as they *ought*. In regards to modal statements and malfunction, philosopher Paul Bloomfield writes:

When something is functioning as it ought, then the possible world where it is properly functioning is the actual world... It may not be working in this way, however; it may actually be malfunctioning, and in this case the function of the item can be understood in terms of what it is doing in another possible world in which it is actually functioning properly (Bloomfield 2001, 144).

For example, perceiving a form of looking in the life drawing exchange as wrong presumes a malfunction of the type of looking that is prescribed by a theoretical life drawing. This theoretical life drawing creates a functional purpose for looking. Behaviours that are malfunctioning, then, are those that signal alternative possibilities to the behaviours associated with life drawing practice as it *ought* to be. Philosopher Beth Preston writes, “A malfunction is not something going wrong with the function itself, but with the structure that is supposed to subserve the function” (Preston 2013, 138). In the case of life drawing, there is an adequate conventionalized form to dictate the way a theoretical life drawing *ought* to function, and to account for its malfunctions when it behaves as it *oughtn't*.

After spending three decades in the life studio as student, model, artist and educator, patterns of malfunction become all too apparent. One of these patterns of malfunction is the intrusion of an unwelcome sexuality manifesting as a corrupted form of looking. This intrusive sexuality threatens to upset the structure that dictates acceptable behaviour. ‘Lusting’ is the word Peter Steinhart uses in book *The Undressed Art: Why We Draw* (Steinhart 2005), but Margaret Mayhew, in her 2010 PhD thesis on Australian life drawing, prefers the Australian colloquialism ‘perving’. She uses the term liberally to describe and interrogate a ‘sexual staring’ that diminishes the agency of the model or makes

the model uncomfortable (Mayhew 2010). Mayhew resists a reductive heterosexist framework for this phenomenon and relates anecdotes in which she, and other models, even perv on students from the dais. Lusting and perving demonstrate the structural defects implicit in a system in which looking is purported to be neutral, unidirectional and selectively blind.

I am in the midst of a drawing project that is engaged with the malfunctions of looking in the artist/model exchange. Titled *Big Yawn—Urizen's Beard* (figure 1), the work stems from a set of early experiments using grotesque artificial beards during life drawing performances to inject zombie mythology into the life drawing exchange. Symbolic of consumption, cannibalism, infection and oral trauma—typical zombie tropes—the beards malfunction as disguise and malignancy. In their current form, the beards distend the jaw in a pantomime of yawning while also concealing the lower face. In addition to the beards, absurdly monstrous merkins are deployed as belts that exaggerate or conceal the genitals (figure 2). This work directly confronts the conventional structure of life drawing in which looking and visibility are codified as objective and harmless. The title of the *Urizen's Beard* series of drawings is derived from William Blake's complex mythopoeic cosmology, and specifically from a small sketch in emblem 49 of his notebooks (figure 3). It depicts a shaggy beard without a face. In my drawings, the mutinous beard spills from the cheeks, mouth and groin and is reiterated in the ostrich feathers of the neo-burlesque fan dance. The beard of reason is unruly, unkempt—creating an unstable looking through exaggerated display, concealment, movement and a fugitive nudity. These malfunctions posit an alternative structure in which proximity, infection, horror and dysfunctional attention give purpose to looking and visibility.



Figure 1 *Big Yawn—Urizen's Beard*, 2015, ink and thread on rice paper.

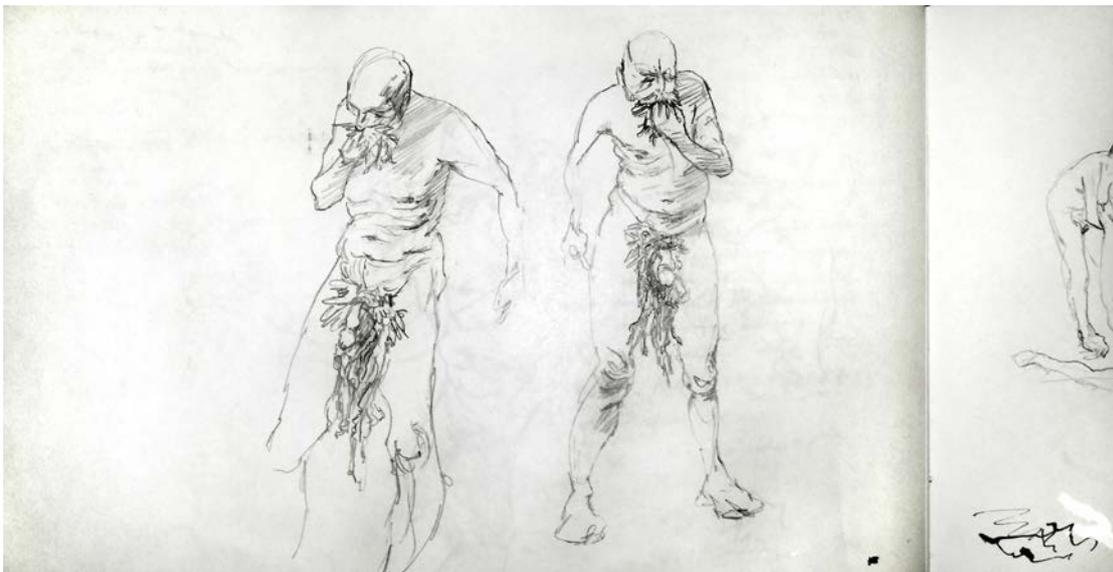


Figure 2 Merkin/Beard sketches.



Figure 3 Sketch of Urizen's Beard after Blake's Notebook, Emblem 49.

Central to this problem of looking in life drawing is the position of the model as a naked performer, and the tendency to reduce artist/model transactions to sexual negotiations. A framework is required that both acknowledges the implicit sexual dynamics of the life drawing exchange and allows for practices and discourses that aren't defined exclusively by heterosexist orthodoxy. Sarah Phillips, in her book *Modeling Life* (Phillips 2006), attempts to corral the problem by distinguishing between sex work and sexual work. Although Phillips strives to maintain a clear distinction between the two types of naked performance, she omits an alternative form necessitated by visual art. Rather than dismissing Phillips' thesis, as it is important to advocate for the skilled performance of the professional model, I would suggest that Phillips' binary framework of sex work and sexual work requires a more fluid category that can capture the phenomena of life drawing, naked performance and the visual arts more broadly. I will refer to this alternative form as 'sexish' work. Whereas sex work (stripping,

prostitution, pornography) and sexual work (modeling, acting, dancing) are in need, according to Phillips, of the erection of boundaries in order to maintain the integrity and professionalism of the life model, it may be more productive to consider the boundary zone itself—the sexish—as a productive space in which conventional heterosexual assumptions concerning looking, desire and power can be interrogated.

Life models often explicitly discuss the erotic charge of posing and the complicated exchange of sensuality and desire. Unfortunately, these discussions are relegated to academic discourse and are typically unwelcome in the regulated environment of the life drawing studio. Silence reigns in the theatre of life drawing. This silence can be read in terms of Michel Foucault's constructed refutation of his own 'repressive hypothesis'. In Foucault's famous argument, the prohibition and censorship of sexuality have the effect of creating an intensely regulatory discursive production around sex. For Foucault, silence is part of this strategy of discursive regulation of sexual behavior, but it is also loaded with potential for transgression and its own alternative production. He writes, "silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance" (Foucault 1990, 101). The life studio should be reframed as one of these relatively obscure areas of tolerance, a zone of sexish work, which cannot utterly escape the regimes of power that circumscribe it, but in which strategies of difference can be deployed. Within this framework, transgression can be more closely examined without compromising the security and professionalism of the life model. In this regard, malfunction serves as an antidote to power, but also exposes itself to retribution.

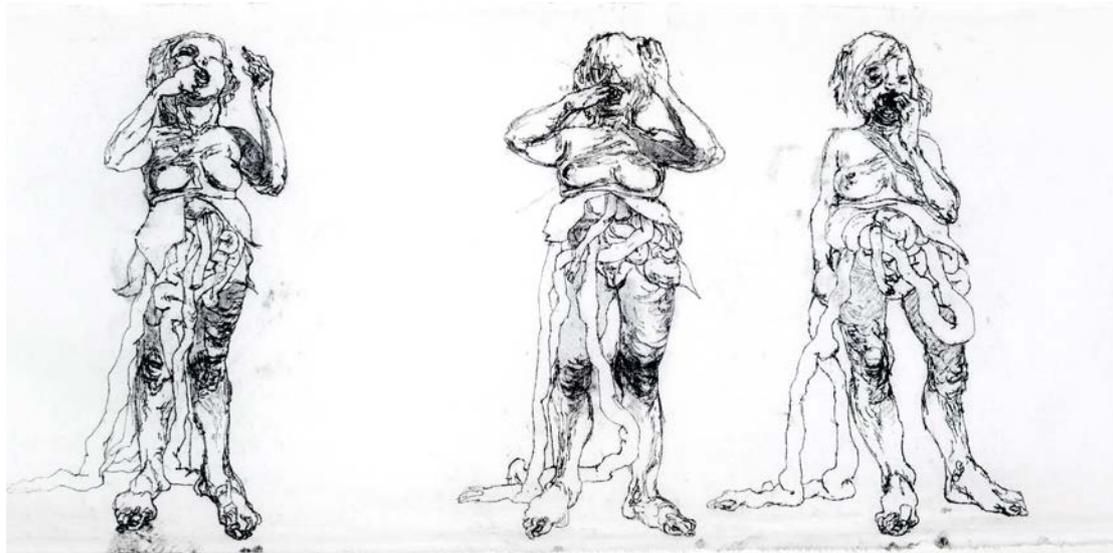


Figure 4 *Young Woman Yawning No. 4*, 2014, ink on linen.

A profound behaviour in the silent theatre of life drawing that can be regarded as an intensely subversive activity is yawning. The pantomime and portrayal of yawning is a method that has been employed in my recent drawing investigations of silence, transgression, mortality, infectiousness and the sexist (figure 4). I became curious about yawning after seeing an obscure and sinister late Degas drawing, formerly of the Hanley Collection, titled *Young Woman Yawning*. The drawing depicts a woman in full skirts seen slightly from below, with a relaxed and distant stare, inserting her right hand into her mouth. It seemed incongruous—the stoic disposition of the life pose incompatible with the spasmodic and reflexive gesture of the hand snapping into the yawning mouth.

Yawning is a common occurrence in the life studio and on the dais, yet seldom does it manifest in drawings from life. Yawning (gaping) distends the mouth (the site of infection) as well as being physically infectious. In the literature, this infectious phenomenon is termed contagious yawning or *echokinetic* yawning. In my studio work on yawning, I am indebted to Olivier Walusinski's *The Mystery of Yawning in Physiology and Disease*—a highly specific and curious anthology of

contemporary *chasmology* (the study of yawning). Yawning inspires behaviours of concealment and veiling and also produces a host of other involuntary physical responses, such as shuddering, twitching, muscle contraction, moaning and sighing, which indicate the sexish. As a wholly involuntary, reflexive and socially immodest behaviour, yawning is a motif loaded with productive potential for both literal and metaphorical probing of the life drawing encounter (figure 5). The disconcerting physical abandon that accompanies yawning ruptures the artifice of the life studio. It is an evanescent gesture. The chasmological pose entangles desire and distortion and demonstrates the potential simplicity of strategies of malfunction.

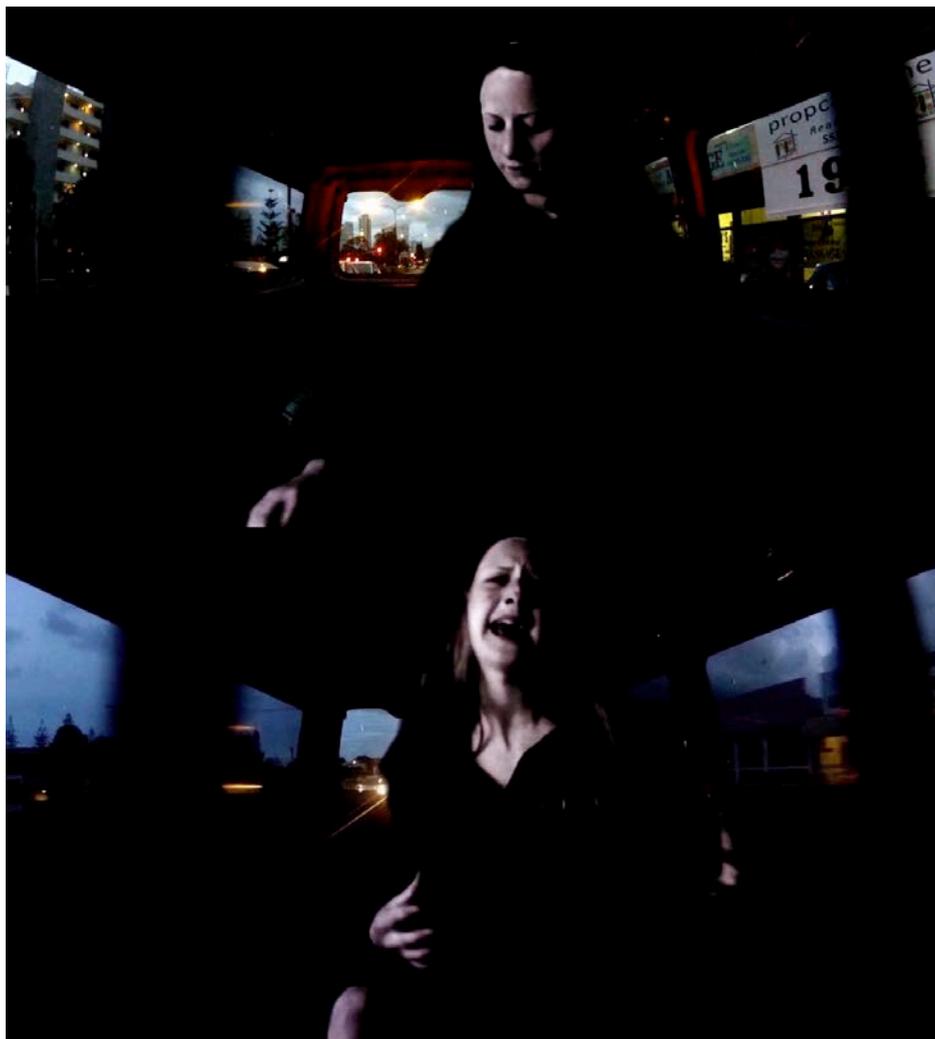


Figure 5 *Some Candy Barbra*, 2015, single channel digital video.

The Dragan Ilic Affair



Figure 6 Institute of Modern Art programs, 1979. Courtesy of the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.

I recently had a peculiar experience at an exhibition opening. Several colleagues mentioned the same character in relation to my work — “Dragan *Ill-ish*, or *Eel-ick* — I can’t remember...” Each time, his name was spoken with a slightly different pronunciation and slightly different intonation. It was said in confidence, cannily and with an edge of regret — “I’m sorry to be bringing this up, but...” I was exhibiting over a hundred zombie life drawings, and it seems that some quality of menace in the work inspired those delicate comparisons. I will conclude with a brief discussion of the Dragan Ilic affair as a case study in malfunction and retribution.



Figure 7 Sketch of Dragan Ilic's *Human Canvas*.

In July of 1979, Serbian-Australian artist Dragan Ilic, who was exhibiting at the Institute of Modern Art with Jill Orr (figure 6), installed and performed a work titled *Human Canvas* at the Brisbane College of Art (now known as the Queensland College of Art). *Human Canvas* (figure 7) ultimately resulted in complaints, criminal investigations and resignations, and profoundly affected a number of prominent Brisbane artists and scholars. There has never been a definitive history of the event compiled and it still resonates through the Brisbane art community and provokes intense reactions. Out of respect for those that were deeply and directly impacted by the fallout of the Dragan Ilic affair, I will leave it to others to tell the story that accounts for the voices and experiences of

those who were caught up in the turmoil. Although this essay will sketch an introduction to the event and the aftermath, it will do so in the service of considering the Dragan Ilic affair as a case study by which to further enrich this inquiry into a malfunctioning life drawing.

Artist Barbara Campbell was present at the performance as a student and recounts the experience as particularly formative:

Ilic had been invited onto campus by some of the painting staff who were themselves artists. It seemed just an amusing distraction during our lunchtime. Ilic and later a couple of students stripped off and became canvases for audience members to draw on their bodies using coloured pens fitted into electric drills. The event had been videoed... Overnight Bjelke-Petersen's Vice Squad raided the homes of some of the lecturers who'd been present, looking for the video recordings of the 'nude' performance (Campbell 2015).

Campbell's account squares with other accounts of the performance. In broad strokes, Ilic set up paper in a large studio space containing approximately two hundred staff and students. He rigged five electric drills in which he inserted charcoal, chalk and fibre-tipped pens. After demonstrating methods of drawing with the electric drills he declared that he would strip off his clothes and invite the audience to draw on his body. After several minutes, Ilic invited the spectators to strip and join him in the performance. Two students—one man and one woman—disrobed, and the three of them marked one another's bodies with the drills. The whole performance lasted less than an hour.

Within a week, the first reports of serious trouble began circulating around the campus, and the crime reporter for a Brisbane newspaper, the *Sunday Sun*, filed the first of three stories on the performance (Jacks 1979). Published less than a week after the event, the first headline read "Naked Teacher Told Pupils

to Bare It All” (Bolton 1979a). It also reported, rather ominously, that Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen was being briefed on the ‘investigation’ and that the federal Criminal Investigation Branch(CIB) was involved. The second report published a week later used the bold subheads ‘Filmed’ and ‘Depravity’ in close proximity (figure 8) and quoted a parent’s description of the event as ‘live classroom pornography’ (Bolton 1979b).



Figure 8 Bolton, Brian, "Nude Art Teacher Row a Real Poser." *Sunday Sun*, August 12, 1979.

In some cases, police raided the homes of lecturers, and all documentation of the event was confiscated. The videotape and photographs were seized, either by the CIB or the Queensland Police Service, and their whereabouts are unknown. A police summons for Ilic stated that he had ‘wilfully and without lawful excuse’ invited the audience ‘to draw upon his exposed penis in a place to which the public were permitted to have access’ (Wynhausen 1983). The police ultimately failed to ‘extract admissions of lewdness’. On Ilic’s website, which contains four grainy photos of *Human Canvas*, the short description of the piece concludes with the statements, “Performance resulted in court

appearance and a charge of obscenity. The dean of the art school and five professors were forced to resign. Artist was exonerated” (Ilic 2015).

For the purposes of this paper, I will shift focus from the terrible effects that an overreaching and vicious politics had on a group of important artists, teachers and students, and towards a consideration of the performance’s content in relation to naked performance, drawing, life drawing and malfunction. In the context of this consideration of the productive potential of a malfunctioning life drawing, *Human Canvas* synthesizes several aspects of this investigation including a perceived corruption of looking, a perceived transgression of the sex work/sexual work boundary, destabilization of the privacy cushion that prohibits physical touching, and the taboo of photographic documentation. The extraordinary draconian response to an otherwise benign event signals the potential consequences of transgressive malfunction, and the perils of engaging with methods that oughtn’t be. *Oughtn’t* is a modal laden with productive potential and also burdened with the disorderly ethics and exchanges that seem so apparent in life drawing and yet are so hard to comprehensively articulate.

As these different research projects continue to evolve and intersect, I expect that the ways in which these conclusions can be implemented into active curricula, projects and learning matrices will become more evident. The strange anachronisms that plague life drawing coursework are indisputable, and with study and trial, it is possible to reform curricula and methods in order to reframe the life drawing studio as an intensely valuable laboratory — one in which humanity, intersubjectivity, friction, frisson, and failure can be confronted as productive and progressive features of a malfunctioning life drawing.

References

- Bloomfield, Paul. 2001. *Moral reality*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bolton, Brian. 1979a. "Naked Teacher Told Pupils to Bare It All." *Sunday Sun*, August 5, 1979.
- — — . 1979b. "Nude Art Teacher Row a Real Poser." *Sunday Sun*, August 12, 1979.
- — — . 1979c. "Students got Sex Lecture Says Report." *Sunday Sun*, September 16, 1979.
- Brekelmans, Alana & Platz, William. 2015. Malfunctions. In *Model exchanges in the Theatre of Life Drawing*, edited by Alana Brekelmans. Brisbane.
- Briggs, Madeline. 2015. On the taboo of nude drawing. *The Oxford Student*, <http://oxfordstudent.com/2015/04/23/on-the-taboo-of-nude-drawing/>.
- Campbell, Barbara. 2015. *Interview with Barbara Campbell* 2015 [cited June 12 2015]. Available from <http://www.remix.org.au/interview-barbara-campbell/>.
- Foucault, Michel. 1990. *The history of sexuality: an introduction, volume 1*. London: Penguin.
- Garner, Steve, and ebrary Inc. 2008. "Writing on drawing essays on drawing practice and research." In *Readings in art and design education*,. Bristol, UK ; Chicago: Intellect. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/yale/Doc?id=10251425>.
- Ilic, Dragan. 2015. *Projects: 1979* 2015 [cited June 10 2015]. Available from <http://www.draganilic.org/projects/1979/1979.html>.
- Jacks, Annie. 1979. "Naked artist causes Brisbane outrage." *Art Network* no.1 (1).
- Mayhew, Margaret. 2008. "The Naked and the Blind; Exploring the Badness of Life Drawing." *TRACEY* (What is bad (good) drawing?):1-17.

- — — . 2010. *Modelling Subjectivities: Life Drawing, Popular Culture and Contemporary Art Education*, Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, The University of Sydney, Sydney.
- Phillips, Sarah R. 2006. *Modeling life : art models speak about nudity, sexuality, and the creative process*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Platz, William. 2015. "Posing zombies: life drawing, performance and technology." *Studio Research* (3):10.
- Preston, Beth. 2013. *A philosophy of material culture : action, function, and mind*. 1st ed, *Routledge studies in contemporary philosophy*. New York: Routledge.
- Rooney, Kathleen. 2008. *Live nude girl : my life as an object*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press.
- Steinhart, Peter. 2005. *The undressed art : why we draw*. 1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books.
- Waller, Susan. 2006. *The invention of the model : artists and models in Paris, 1830-1870*. Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Wynhausen, Elisabeth. 1983. "Dragan Ilic and the art show at the end of the universe." *The National Times*, December 30, 1983.

Image List

Figure 1 *Big Yawn—Urizen's Beard*, 2015, ink and thread on rice paper.

Figure 2 Merkin/Beard sketches.

Figure 3 Sketch of Urizen's Beard after Blake's Notebook, Emblem 49.

Figure 4 *Young Woman Yawning No. 4*, 2014, ink on linen.

Figure 5 *Some Candy Barbra*, 2015, single channel digital video.

Figure 6 Institute of Modern Art programs, 1979. Courtesy of the Institute of
Modern Art, Brisbane.

Figure 7 Sketch of Dragan Ilic's *Human Canvas*.

Figure 8 Bolton, Brian, "Nude Art Teacher Row a Real Poser." *Sunday Sun*,
August 12, 1979.