

Swallowing Warragamba

Year: 1987
Level: First Year, Autumn Semester 1
Unit: 10221 Drawing 1
Dates: April 27, 29, May 1, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13.
Duration: 8 days

Origin

In 1987 we trialled for the first time a sequence of nominal 'Foundation Studies' projects, each of roughly equivalent duration. To satisfy neutrality of intent in relation to any perceived bias amongst the staff teaching into the unit, (favouring any one discipline above another), each project inclined toward a specific discipline, thus all disciplines were introduced in the early formative phase of each student's experience. I was given responsibility to devise a project that worked ostensibly through drawing.

Premise

The initial phase of the project required students to work directly from imaginary visualisations conjured by two brief Zen parables. I had used the first one previously in a drawing workshop at Sydney College of the Arts. The parables were sourced from a collection of Zen writings compiled by Paul Reps titled "Zen Flesh, Zen Bones" (1957). The heightened drama of the precariously suspended man about to fall to his death, yet able to relish in that moment of his imminent demise the delicious taste of a strawberry, offered an intensification of sensation indelibly recorded. Students were required to work rapidly and urgently from within the dilemma and generate many quick 'fleeting' sketches from the various viewpoints of the different protagonists each in their different ways intent on eating or being eaten. Working through a range of different perspectives, but deliberately avoiding the central focus of the familial human viewpoint (the imaginary predicament of the suspended man himself) a set of gestured evocations were encouraged which would then provide source material for further development. The second parable offered a potentially more difficult challenge, requiring investment in the imagined conscious considerations of inanimate things, generating a set of sentient responses or views, as for example, what would it feel like to be a teapot and experience an outpouring? And how could the sense of that experience be visualised? Underpinning the project was the intent to get students connected to the potential of haptic and kinaesthetic sensations in the drawing act, as an overtly *visceral* activity, particularly, as in this case, when the subject was presented additionally as a dramatic narrative of depiction.

Part 1 Parable (Gk: *parabole* – comparison)

Visualise the following two parables through a series of drawn images, initially as a rapid proliferation of sketches that in an exploratory way imaginatively depict each parable from a number of different viewpoints.

Parable 1

A man travelling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Two mice, one white, one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

Visualisations:

- 1 The viewpoint of the tiger (at the top of the precipice).
- 2 The viewpoint of the tiger (at the bottom of the precipice).
- 3 The viewpoint of either the black or white mouse.
- 4 The viewpoint of the vine.
- 5 The viewpoint of the luscious strawberry.

Parable 2

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868 -1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. 'It is overfull. No more will go in!' 'Like this cup,' Nan-in said, 'you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?'

Visualisations

- 1 From the point of view of the teapot.
- 2 From the point of view of the cup.
- 3 From the point of view of the overflowing tea.

For each viewpoint deploy your sketches (permutations) variously upon a single large sheet of paper – such that your 'train-of-thinking' is apparent (evident). Avoid captions, cartoon boxes, the notion of comic illustration, the notion of narrative. You should be primarily concerned with **incident**.

Having generated a sketched sheet for each of the eight viewpoints you should then proceed through the processes of selection and development to produce a number of drawings that attempt to combine a number of viewpoints within the context of a single image (always keeping the two parables separate). In so doing consider the occurrence of **co-incident**.

Your drawings should continually address the appropriateness of both scale, format (shape), medium and procedure to what you are attempting to encapsulate (capture) as image.

The second session involved a trip to Warragamba dam, (the dam that provides the major water supply for Sydney) presented a dramatic visual spectacle in the wilderness setting of Nepean gorge offering a number of striking allusions to the parables. The awesome scale of the dam wall with its sheer drop that one could peer down over from the top, bore comparison with the cliff face in the first parable. There was a precarious wire suspension bridge that straddled the gorge, (for pedestrian traffic), that offered extremely vertiginous sensations in its traversing. One could view the dam from above or below. There was a curious analogy between the damming of the water with its overflow, and the teapots 'reservoir' of water and 'overflowing' spout from the second parable. Students were encouraged to see the parallels and the *comparative* nature of parables themselves, with one thing being used to imply another. The affect of 'holding on' and 'letting go' as exemplified by the dams retention and release of water, of blocking and build up and pressure and release, again as something to 'inhabit' both physically and psychologically and provide experiences that could inform the emerging images. Working through metaphor, over against literal renderings of the parables, were explored through this encounter with the dam. Co-incidentally there was a lion safari park not far from Warragamba and students were encouraged to visit, to experience a direct encounter with these apparently fearsome creatures engendering some of the anxieties of being pursued by a tiger (as in the first parable). The play between imagined and real was constantly being tested out. Near the site of the dam there was a small museum that told the history of the dam exhibiting a working model of the dam. Having a cup of tea at the cafeteria nearby was encouraged as a link to the second parable. The students were asked to keep their eyes open for strawberries and small rodents.

Part 2 Dam (an obstruction: L. *ob*, against; *struere*: to build up)

Metaphor: A figure of speech which makes an implied comparison between things which are not literally alike (Gk. *Metapherein*: to transfer)

During your exploration of the dam you should be continually addressing the inter-relationship between the action of *holding back* and the action of *releasing*.

You should refer this reflex (stopping/flowing) as exemplified by the dam, to a number of incidences occurring within the two parables, for example: Holding onto the vine which is about to break, releasing the man, or the activity of pouring tea from a teapot. These are two of the more obvious connections. You should be able to establish numerous other subtly implicit connections between the dam and the parables.

These connections should be developed through a sequence of drawings whereby the dam progressively assumes *metaphoric connotations* in relation to the parables.

The third session, back in the studio involved a review of all drawings produced thus far, each student was asked to make selections from the abundant range of sketches, literally cutting out and 'extracting' the most interesting images and thinking through ways of reformatting or combining images. This was a process of reconstitution prompting an altered perspective on what was beginning to emerge. A single image was then selected and displayed. All participants were then required to make a 'copy' of each image displayed, generating around 60 copies each displayed of the original depiction.

Directive from notes:

'Select what you consider to be your most accomplished drawing, affix it to the wall. If the drawing exists on the same sheet of paper with other drawings, indicate the one you have nominated, by framing it with a line. The studio has now to be thought of as an art gallery – a display of drawings – you must think of it as an art gallery, you must put yourself in a position where you are visiting that gallery for the day to do some sketching. You are to make individual sketches of as many of the drawings on display as you can. Each sketch that you make should be no larger than an A4 sheet of paper and on completing each sketch you should leave it alongside the original, with your name on the back. Your copy should be as accurate as possible and where possible use the same drawing implements as used in the original. In making your copy you are trying to trace the manner in which it arrived on the page – the sequence of gestures (the order in which they accumulate) so you will have to closely scrutinise each one in order to decipher this. Having acquired some grasp of how the image was drawn through your own copy re-live or re-enact something of the original drawing process. Each original drawing will make a different set of demands. You should try and be as responsive as possible to these differences. In order to complete 60 drawings [there were 60 participants] – you should allow no more than 5 minutes on each. You may in effect spend 4 or 5 of those minutes studying the original and then rapidly sketch the image in the remaining time. At the end of the day each original should have been copied 60 times.'

The next session drew close attention to both haptic and kinaesthetic sensations generated by apparently simple actions. The example of drinking a glass of water was used for its obvious correlation with elements in the parables and the functioning of the dam. This exercise required participants to visualise actions that could not be seen, such as for example swallowing. How can the sensation of swallowing be depicted, how can a 'blind' sensation be visualised? The simple action was broken down into a linear sequence of movements, each discernibly discrete in some way. The imaging of each stage of the action was then gestured through drawing and after a number of 'rehearsals' of these discrete gestures an attempt was made to link them

as a continuum-in-flux, an overlay of gestures that registered the haptic/kinaesthetic interplay of the entire action.

Part 3 Drinking-A-Glass-Of-Water

Take 'Drinking-A-Glass-Of-Water' as a single continuous coordinated action that involves a number of physically synchronised gestures (flowing one into another), and through the activity of drawing re-enact these gestures.

Duration ---->----->----->----->----->----->

The Glass: Full (Heavy) → Emptying → Light (Empty)

1. Reaching out
2. Holding
3. Lifting up and towards
4. Tilting
5. Sipping
6. Swallowing
7. Lowering
8. Releasing

The Stomach: Empty (Light) → Filling → Full (Heavy)

Initially slow down the procedure of 'Drinking-A-Glass-Of-Water' so that each individual gesture becomes apparent (freeze frame).

Having familiarised yourself with all aspects of this physical mechanism, moment by moment (as a sequence of single instances), then begin to accelerate the process of 'Drinking-A-Glass-Of-Water' to the point at which it can be seen as a continuously completed movement, a repeatable gesture (fast forward).

During your drawing it is not so much what-you-are-drawing but *how-you-are-drawing-what-you-are-drawing* that is important.

Haptic: Pertaining to sense of touch.

Kinaesthetic: The sensation of movement or strain in muscles, tendons and joints, the perception of movement.

Eating-an-apple was also used as an example and demonstrated (mimed) during this session, the sequence being elaborated as follows:

- Preliminary – rubbing and shining.
- Locking the apple into pivoting position (axis: core) (hand grip / teeth grip).
- Excavation (gouging), the first bite, the skin difficult to grip pushed hard against the edge of the teeth – chiselling, chiselled chunk as the apple is 'torn' away.
- Chewing – back teeth grinding – pulping – mashing – juicing. The tongue as well as tasting directs the traffic, a muscle flexing, transferring pulp from one side of the mouth to the other.
- Swallowing.
- The apple held: the grasp released – the rotational shift – the original excavation offers a broken edge to grip on for subsequent excavations.
- A complete orbit, the axis tilts – a further orbit.
- The other hand comes in to turn the apple, a further orbit.
- Gnawing: a grazing all over, shaping to the core (nibbling).
- Ejection (disposal) the, often misplaced, throw: ricochet off the bin.

Other options were canvassed such as eating a biscuit, or sucking up cordial through a straw.

The final stage of the project was left deliberately open-ended:

From notes:

'Divergence of activity – In the absence of clearly defined directives (guidelines) looking for individual initiatives: a sense of development:

'Although this can be seen as the penultimate day of the project and you may feel, having achieved certain things, like easing off and coasting home – I would strongly advise against this. You should see that what you have done so far as being merely the construction of a platform. The foundation, if you like, of innumerable possibilities. The task now is to pursue some of these possibilities given the novel vantage point from which you are now in a position to view them from. In a sense you are asked to annex these earlier directives to a small number of selected images.'