

## Drawing in Social Space: testing a model outside the gallery

Kelly Chorpening, in close dialogue with Renee Odjidja and Misty Ingham

### Background

The idea for *Drawing in Social Space* arose from the experience of co-editing *A Companion to Contemporary Drawing*, which was published by Wiley-Blackwell in early 2021.<sup>1</sup> In the book's survey of global practices, a category of drawing emerged that saw artists using the medium in more public and collaborative ways. This type of work typically exploited the characteristics of drawing as an accessible, affordable and portable means of expression. Through the creation of large-scale posters and murals and small print-run newspapers and zines, artists were making powerful statements that impacted a wide range of communities. The design of *Drawing in Social Space* was also informed by the flourishing of remote communication that was a by-product of the COVID-19 pandemic. It showed us meaningful connections could be made without the need to fly people or artworks around the globe, thus making it possible to develop a dynamic project that was both green and financially viable.

In its final form, *Drawing in Social Space* encompassed four, artist-led projects that placed emphasis on collective, iterative processes, leading to shared authorship. 'Drawing' was reimagined as a tool for thinking, discovery, storytelling and communication. 'Social Space' referred to the ways projects were held outside traditional exhibition spaces, and where participants included a broad range of disciplines, interests, ages, ethnicities and nationalities. From remote locations, artists offered inspiration by sharing their work and ideas, but handed the making over to project participants.

Drawing Room was the ideal collaborator for this project, not only for its long-held commitment to contemporary drawing, robust learning programming and network of community collaborators, but also because they were without premises while their new Bermondsey location was under construction. Our mutual aim was to sustain drawing activities outside the gallery, by testing a model that put engagement at the centre of how work was made and experienced.

### Project 1: Mujeres Creando

2 May–6 June 2022

Mujeres Creando is a Bolivian women's collective that uses satire to problematise ways in which women's bodies are sexualised within patriarchal, Catholic society in South America. Cartoons, slogans and installations help create a space for productive debate. How might Londoners relate to their approach, especially in light of an upsurge in violence against women in the United Kingdom since the pandemic?

A film presented by Danitza Luna, a member of Mujeres Creando, offered an overview of the collective's history, aims and struggles, with an unflinching account of conditions for women, girls and LGBTQ+ people in Bolivia. This became a powerful starting point for Camberwell College of Arts students to work with Young Girlz Matter, a self-formed collective of female school students aged between twelve and seventeen from South Bank University Academy. Over a period of six weeks, the groups spent time connecting and exploring what it means to be part of a collective, reflecting upon the processes of Mujeres Creando through a combination of drawing, visits to the university, walks, games and the sharing of food. Activities ultimately led to the display of large-scale drawings near the girls' school in South East London, and the creation of a zine.

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly Chorpening and Rebecca Fortnum, eds, *A Companion to Contemporary Drawing*, (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> In the news at the time were the cases of police officers sharing images of dead sisters Nicole Smallman and Bib Henry, and the rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a policeman.

## **Project 2: Gluklya (Natalia Pershina-Yakimanskaya)**

**1 November 2022–29 March 2023**

Gluklya is a Netherlands-based artist who uses her work to speak truth to power, whether in defiance of Vladimir Putin's rule in her native Russia, or concerning the plight of refugees throughout Europe. She sees an alignment between the artist's tool and the worker's tool. Under capitalism, 'unproductive time' – activities that involve exploring, listening and drawing – become small but important acts of resistance.

Camberwell College of Arts Fine Art students and the Southwark-based Citizens UK community-support project Parents and Communities Together (PACT) became enmeshed in a series of encounters and interactions, using mapping and storytelling to connect with each other. Students spent time in groups, working across disciplines to uncover stories and map South London, creating a series of layered and conversational works. They developed further ideas through workshop proposals, which were delivered at PACT sessions, in order to expand approaches to storytelling and collaboration. Gluklya, parents, children, students and staff created an immersive space of drawings, marking their presence and time through gestures, improvised actions and the creation of a zine.

## **Project 3: Al Hassan Issah**

**1–30 April 2023**

Al Hassan Issah is a Ghanaian artist who explores the prevalence of gates in his country to comment on societal divisions, material histories, theatricality and objecthood. His drawings explore this vernacular and pose questions about the legacy of colonialism in Africa. With an existing track record of working with young people, could children in London take inspiration and explore their personal identity through a gate design of their own?

Fine art students from Camberwell College of Arts and children from The Blue Youth Club in Bermondsey were engaged in an intense period of exploration. The youth centre became an active studio where children made sketches and rubbings alongside Al Hassan on Zoom, as he worked in his studio in Kumasi. He posed the question: 'Is it the materials that lead you to the city, or the city that leads you to the materials?' With this, they embarked on an exploration of Bermondsey, including Drawing Room's new site, using the entrance gate as a focus to draw, discuss, document and question.

Through drawings and collages, new gate designs were produced and displayed locally – on fences, doors and walls, and in shops, markets and bus stops. Simultaneously, Al Hassan placed printed copies of the young people's work on notice boards and walls in Kumasi, exploring the idea of public art, both locally and internationally. The group also produced a zine.

## **Project 4: AZ OOR (Noureddine Ezarraf)**

**3 April–31 July 2023**

The fourth project extended the partnership to the University of Nevada, Reno, working with the Moroccan artist AZ OOR (Noureddine Ezarraf), testing the design of *Drawing in Social Space* outside an urban context.

The arid climates of Marrakech and northern Nevada enabled participants to specifically explore the use of mapping to manage access to water. AZ OOR posed questions to the group, such as: 'what is a line?', 'what does it mean to draw from above?' He cited a concept developed by Moroccan sociologist Paul Pascon, which explored the difference between 'water from the sky vs. water from the state'. AZ OOR's aim was to raise awareness regarding maps as a means of controlling and organising the world.

Working together, a group of students and lecturers of art, graphic design and geography from the University of Nevada, Reno used a variety of methods to collect, record and measure information.

Activities revealed complexities connected to conservation and reparation when it comes to the consequences of mapping. As with the previous projects, the participants also created a zine.

## Reflection

To work collectively, one must first understand that each project comes with its own unique set of variables and challenges. Working across generations, disciplines, institutions and organisations means working with people from diverse backgrounds, who are coming into contact with each other often for the first time. A huge amount of care is required to address varying degrees of confidence, vulnerabilities and social hierarchies, in order to approach something together. Producing four *Drawing in Social Space* projects made this clear: there's no single roadmap or methodology that applies to all.

When we began work on the first project led by Mujeres Creando, the time spent establishing legal agreements and defining duty of care responsibilities far outweighed the time spent on the project itself. We were managing the criteria for the funding we had received alongside the art students' curricular demands and outside commitments, as well as the organisational priorities of Drawing Room and South Bank University Academy. We were also preparing to work with minors, in the context of a project that introduced challenging material and involved activities outside the school grounds and hours. We truly were forging new ways of working.

So, why go to such lengths? There's a lot to understand about the different ways collective engagement through drawing can function as a knowledge practice – a practice through which participants find a voice, process information and even evoke change. Contemporary theories help situate both the conditions and their transformative social value.

In 'Curatorial Research as the Practice of Commoning', Je Yun Moon explores emerging forms of curatorial research that instigate 'a particular network of relationships [...] formed and continuously run by providing the ground for meeting points'. This mode of work imagines the product of activities as something expansive and open-ended: 'the knowledge that contemporary artistic research produces is able to open up a new reality that can be actualized by a collective reimagining of the world.'<sup>3</sup>

In their 2016 book *Drawing Difference: Connections between Gender and Drawing*, authors Marsha Meskimmon and Phil Sawdon, proposed a feminist framework for contemporary drawing:

Moving beyond binary thinking towards the simultaneity of object and process, exploring concepts of becoming, emergence and materialisation, emphasising the embodied and experiential and formation of subjectivity in connection with others – these preoccupations are central to the critical explorations of contemporary fine art drawing and feminist theories and practices within and beyond art.<sup>4</sup>

In more general terms, artist Imani Jacqueline Brown examines a world in which statistics and satellite imagery present a tidy version of events, but seem to exacerbate indifference to human suffering. She argues for the value of 'sensory awareness of the position of one's human self' – a strong case for on-the-ground investment in individuals and their stories.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Je Yun Moon, 'Curatorial Research as the Practice of Commoning', in Carolina Rita and Bill Balaskas, eds, *Institution as Praxis: New Curatorial Directions for Collaborative Research* (London: Sternberg Press, 2020), pp.32–43, at p.41

<sup>4</sup> Marsha Meskimmon and Phil Sawdon, eds, *Drawing Difference: Connections between Gender and Drawing* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016), p.14.

<sup>5</sup> Imani Jacqueline Brown, 'Ecological Witnessing', in Bridget Crone, Sam Nightingale and Polly Stanton, eds, *Fieldwork for Future Ecologies: Radical Practice for Art and Art-based Research* (Eindhoven: Onomatopoe, 2022), pp.21–48 at p.37

All these theories recognise the value that collective enquiry has in productively activating communities. This was also the aim of *Drawing in Social Space*: to develop an artist-led approach that resisted the usual hierarchies, to see what new skills and connections could be gained.

The skills required to work on this project are difficult to teach to art students in an education system that centres on individual statements and has a population that is relatively homogenous when it comes to age and socio-economic background. The students have benefited tremendously from interactions with the artists, curators, parents, children and each other. We have also observed the ways that participants – sometimes very young and often new to contemporary art – have engaged with the artists' work in sophisticated ways. On this, it's important to note how the design of each project allowed for the direction of activities to shift according to how processes of making, walking and talking influenced how ideas progressed. Projects have evolved through reciprocal exchange and this is why, in the exhibition, the artists' work is intertwined with work made by participants. This demonstrates how the collective ethos of the project has yielded new discoveries and insights for everyone.

In theory, the value of these sorts of projects might be recognised, but the reality is that the stakes for the different constituents, such as galleries, educational institutions, community groups and artists, ends up being very different. This becomes especially evident when it comes to sharing the outcomes. The results challenge how the project is valued overall as an artistic endeavour.

## Display

At the conclusion of *Drawing in Social Space*, we must contend with the fact that many outcomes have been ephemeral and some work has even been lost. It might be tempting to put a sign on the door saying 'you had to be there'. The truth is: there's an inverse relationship between the inclusive nature and sheer energy of these projects, and the experience of viewing what remains. The audience is left with documentary film, photography, a few drawings and descriptive text: small clues that allude to the activities that have enlivened each project. It's impossible to fully capture the experiences of spontaneous, quality exchange between the artists, students, parents and children. Like the four projects, we see it as a springboard for further dialogue and exchange.

Work made throughout *Drawing in Social Space* aligns with broader characteristics of socially engaged art, in that it hasn't been created with an exhibition in mind. Here it's interesting to note that Kayan, a young person from The Blue Youth Club deliberately used the word 'display' instead of the unfamiliar word 'exhibition'. This distinction can also be applied to projects that consider formal qualities secondary to processes that yield new understandings and connections across a diverse range of collaborators. That's not to say that outcomes aren't worthy of display. Seeing how collaborators have responded to these artists' ideas is, by varying degrees joyful, beautiful, moving and humbling, but the work tends to be less about 'finish' and more about 'being in the moment.' In other words, the work can't be measured by aesthetics alone.

That said, there are some wonderful similarities between *Drawing in Social Space*, and the concurrent show at Drawing Room, *UNBUILD: a site of possibility*, particularly in the way both exhibitions linger on ideas of proposal. In *UNBUILD* we encounter a vast, light space with ample room to situate work created by five artists. The outdoor displays of *Drawing in Social Space* are beautifully altered by the changing light of day and viewers passing by and interacting with the work. However, the main presentation of *Drawing in Social Space* creates a stark contrast with *Unbuild*; within a far more restricted space that encompasses the work of four artist-led projects and dozens of collaborators. This surely impacts the perceived value of the two shows. Upon reflection, we might have worked with the aim of an exhibition all along, and created work for the area surrounding Drawing Room, but that would have utterly altered the purpose and open-ended nature of each project. This is one of the biggest enduring dilemmas of socially engaged art.

This isn't a criticism of the curatorial vision of Drawing Room. After all, it has been a leader in community engagement and learning programs. This is more to propose a new model for the art world at large. As the Helicon Collaborative noted in their 2017 report 'Mapping the Landscape of Socially Engaged Practice', 'critics and funders alike often use fine art criteria and language to assess the quality and value

of socially engaged work, even though it has different aesthetic origins, values and intentions.<sup>6</sup> Although the intention with *Drawing in Social Space* was to bring engagement activities to the centre, the fear is that, within the gallery, the perception of the project – given the assigned differences in quantity and quality of space – is that it remains at the periphery.

What alternatives should we be exploring? How can we be more effective in creating sustainable and collaborative artistic communities, where funding and infrastructure is more supportive and agile? There must be better ways of enabling artists, educational institutions, galleries, museums and their surrounding communities to work together with more ease. What else can we learn from projects such as *Drawing in Social Space*, in terms of their critical importance, and how we create and experience art in the future?

Here it might help to bring in the voice of a *Drawing in Social Space* artist. In recent conversations with Al Hassan Issah, including a public event at Drawing Room<sup>7</sup>, we discussed the value of collaborative working. He described how he works within a network that encompasses many other networks – an environment that derives in part from his communal upbringing, as well as from the fact that artists in Ghana operate without any government-funded infrastructure. He has united with other artists in a commitment to elevate an entire community, through the exchange of skills and processes needed to make work and by regularly interacting with young people. In this system, art is transformed from a commodity to something closer to a gift. It's a reciprocal and rhizomatic approach, in which artists are actively rooted in their communities, collectively engage in their struggles, invent generative ways of working and contribute to the building of communal success. It would be refreshing to see more exhibitions – or displays – that show how the individual artist learns and grows alongside collaborators, through collective, creative processes.

On the opening night of the exhibition, banners greet visitors to Drawing Room's new premises. They are rubbings made in Bermondsey by The Blue Youth Club, having taken inspiration from Al Hassan's work. In a nearby window a large drawing is shown. Although vertical, it's clear that it has been made horizontally, with elements drawn from all sides. It evokes a social, creative moment, when fine art students discussed Gluklya's ideas, and reflected upon their explorations of Peckham. Alongside the work are crowds of art students and children from The Blue Youth Club, pointing with astonishment and pride as they discover their contributions have been included in the public display. This work and these experiences become a kind of ecosystem, showing the reciprocal dynamics that *Drawing in Social Space* has created.

*Drawing in Social Space* was conceived by Kelly Chorpene, previously Programme Director, Fine Art at Camberwell College of Arts, UAL, and now Professor and Chair of Art at University of Nevada, Reno. It was developed with Renee Odjidja, Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Camberwell College of Arts, UAL, and Misty Ingham, Projects and Partnerships Curator at Drawing Room.

Thank you to all our partners: Drawing Room; Mujeres Creando, Gluklya, Al Hassan Issah and AZ OOR; PACT: Parents and Communities Together; The Blue Youth Club, Bermondsey; Young Girlz Matter, South Bank University Academy; Yamuna Ravindran, Drawing Room Librarian; the fine art students at Camberwell College of Art; the art, graphic design and geography programmes at University of Nevada, Reno; and Knowledge Exchange, University of the Arts London.

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<sup>6</sup> Helicon Collaborative (Alexis Fradz and Holly Sidford), 'Mapping the Landscape of Socially Engaged Practice' (2017), available at [static1.squarespace.com/static/5a8dfd48d74cffac3017261c/t/5d3ef580eddc910001c256c3/1564407180003/Mapping the Landscape of Socially Engaged Artistic Practice Sept2017.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a8dfd48d74cffac3017261c/t/5d3ef580eddc910001c256c3/1564407180003/Mapping+the+Landscape+of+Socially+Engaged+Artistic+Practice+Sept2017.pdf), accessed 1 August 2023.

<sup>7</sup> 'Drawing: Both Noun and Verb' was a presentation by Kelly Chorpene and Al Hassan Issah at Drawing Room on 25 September 2023.