

A Carrier Bag Theory of Drawing

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In her 1986 essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' author Ursula Le Guin took another look at the stories we tell ourselves about technology to ask, what was the first tool? Judging by what had survived it had usually been assumed to be a weapon or tool of domination: a flint or an axe, perhaps. Following the anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher, Le Guin posited instead that the first cultural device was 'probably a recipient... some kind of sling or net carrier'¹. It made sense to Le Guin, that 'with or before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home.'² Looking at the way this narrative has informed our understanding and expectation of other cultural devices (such as books) Le Guin went on to propose that 'the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag.' This idea was quietly radical for a number of reasons. For a start, Le Guin did away with many of the elements often deemed essential to a story: a hero, conflict, resolution. Rather than producing a narrative arc, the job of this new kind of story was to hold things. In Le Guin's words, a novel might be 'a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us.'³

Drawing, like the carrier bag, is another ancient technology. And while it has often been theorised in the service of the heroic narrative of art history (drawing as relic of the 'Old Master', its lines the signature of his genius) it has also existed in ways that quietly defied this interpretation, that suggested a nature more akin to the carrier bag than the axe. While it's true many caves have been covered with depictions of animal hunts some of the oldest drawings were created when clouds of pigment were blown around anonymous hands, their negative space marking the presence of people there around 40,000 years ago. Building on Stephanie Straine's imagining of the drawing support as 'a membrane between above and below, inside and outside'⁴, this essay imagines the ways that drawing can be used to gather things together, as a receptacle for experience, to 'hold things in a particular and powerful relation to one another and to us.'

Capacious hold-all

Kara Walker's drawing for the Biennial was made in March 2020, at a moment when many of us were struggling to come to terms with the ways our lives were about to change. Drawing's sparseness and lightness of means allows for a response in real time, as Walker describes: 'The stay at home order had just come down and I sat down at the kitchen table with the first piece of paper I could find, and did this.'⁵ On a hot pink field a face is coaxed into being with energetic pen lines, surrounded by expansive clouds of inflected squiggles; a thick shadow, applied with brush and ink, obliterates part of the face in a stark chiaroscuro which threatens to engulf the figure. For Walker, drawing provided a handy receptacle for a moment as yet not fully defined. Perhaps it could not yet be put into words, but it could be drawn.

An earlier proponent of the carrier bag, prefiguring Le Guin by some seventy years, Virginia Woolf described her ideal diary as 'some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through.'⁶ To allow this its structure must be 'loose-knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful, that comes into my mind'⁷. For the artists in the *Drawing Biennial 2021* the almost infinitely flexible nature of drawing, its ability to hold both the micro and the macro, the cosmic and the everyday side by side, has allowed it to act as willing receptacle for the near endless variety of things they have thought to put in it. Flinging in a mass of odds and ends to be looked over later drawing's open-endedness is key, for in Woolf's words, 'I was curious to find how I went for things put in haphazardly, and found the significance to lie where I never saw it at the time.'⁸

1 Elizabeth Fisher, *Women's Creation* (McGraw-Hill, 1975), cited Ursula Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (Ignota, 2019; originally published in *Women of Vision*, 1988), p. 29.

2 Le Guin, p. 30.

3 Le Guin, p. 34.

4 Stephanie Straine, 'Collective Fantasy', commissioned by Drawing Room for the occasion of *Drawing Biennial 2019*, and published in the accompanying exhibition catalogue.

5 All quotations from this year's Biennial artists, unless otherwise stated, are taken from the contexts provided by them for the *Drawing Biennial 2021*.

6 Virginia Woolf, Easter Sunday April 20th 1919, published in *A Writer's Diary: Being extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Leonard Woolf (Harcourt, 2003; originally published 1953), p. 13.

7 Woolf, p. 13.

8 Woolf, p. 13.

The sheet's all-embracing capacity to hold disparate currents of thought, Woolf's 'mass of odds and ends', allowed Hardeep Pandhal the space to combine his observations of a central Glasgow Caffè Nero, a loaded comment at a Zoom meeting, and curiosity about online clothing retailer BooHoo's acquisition of Debenhams (*Shading is Half of the Context*, 2021). In the space of the drawing each experience (the presence of Victorian buildings as visible reminders of Glasgow's colonial legacy, Pandhal's self-identified role at the meeting as providing 'urgent colouring and shading') is able to resonate with the other, underpinned by the drawing's spectrum of shading from gothic shadow to ghostly outline.

The diaristic drawing must be elastic enough to hold both the weight of the historic (or, as we got so used to hearing, the 'unprecedented') and the minutiae of the everyday. In this pandemic year, one was often folded into the other as the 'new normal'. From Kelly Chorpening's scrutiny of road markings (*Walking Man (no. 2)*, 2020) to Mia Enell's consideration of a lost umbrella (2020) the quotidian is lavished with attention through loving inscription. In *Plant Life* (2020) Kathy Prendergast turns her attention on the house plants 'I have lived with for many years but never really looked at', her focus on the texture of the everyday echoing the shift in perspective and priorities experienced by so many. In *Rendezvous* (2020) Nicky Hirst's column of chairs ('especially abject when they aren't really designed to stack') stands in for all the missed coffees and conversations with friends, the businesses floundering, the people out of a job. Phoebe Boswell's self-portrait *Tired (The Zoom Meeting)* (2021) reminds us that likely in no other year of our lives have we been so often confronted with the digital image of our own face, forced constantly to see ourselves as others see us.

At the other end of the scale, Anna Lovatt has noted drawing's unique ability 'to distil unimaginable suffering into the curve of a graph,'⁹ and in 2020 data visualisation entered the national discourse as 'flattening the curve' became a political and personal imperative. Judith Goddard's *Dangerous curves – contagion 1* (2020), the lines pruned free from their context, eerily summon the hours spent looking at graphs of cases, infection rates, deaths, trying to parse scattered and imperfect data like druids auguring from the entrails of birds, comparing different national strategies and disasters. Meanwhile, Mandy El-Sayeh's *Boundary Work*, taken from her journals of 2020, uses the principles of virology as a model to think through 'ideas of attachment, boundaries and care', appropriating the now-familiar imagery of a virus entering a host cell. Opposite, an involuted Venn diagram folds together different psychological states with love and death (the latter encircled by a 'false veil of fear' decorated with sticky spike proteins). The lines which seem to divide these states are implied as more porous boundaries, capable of absorbing that which seems to be its opposite.

Yet in addition to its elasticity, one of the chief strengths of the diary is its sense of structure. During lockdown drawing became a daily or serial exercise for many artists, who spoke of it as a grounding or meditative practice, for example Vanessa Jackson's *Marking Time* (2020) and Aideen Barry's *Monachopsis drawings*, which he described as a 'metaphysical anti-depressant'. Donald Winnicott used the word 'holding' to describe a supportive developmental and therapeutic environment. To 'hold space' for someone is to be present, to listen, and for many artists drawing became this space of presence, this space of quiet listening. For many it was colour that offered this supportive space, as in Harminder Judge's *Connecting Bodies 5* (2021) created 'as an aid to daily meditation', in which pools of ultramarine and violet commingle, or Eddie Ruscha's alternating fields of softly modulating airbrushed colour (2020) which seek to create a 'psychedelic experience... free from judgement.'

For many artists drawing took on a new significance while they were unable to access their usual mediums and materials. Isobel Finlay's weaving with watercolour *Untitled (Soft Series)* (2020) is a meditation on interruption: 'This series began in the studio but has now been continued in my home on my kitchen table, like love letters to the sculptures I can't see anymore, hidden in a room I can't access.' She notes that 'a lot of my sculptures in my studio are unfinished, living just as hanging pieces of fabric lounging on the wall ready to become something else. Sometimes I feel like wrapping myself up in the knitted fabric, feeling supported and hopeful in their potential'. As Finlay wishes to be held by the embryonic sculptures, so the drawing holds space for her longing, offering her a space of possibility in which to dwell.

Strange reality

While Woolf and Le Guin's projects might at first seem diverse (engaged with diary-writing and science fiction respectively) their ends were perhaps not so far apart. Both saw their carrier bags as a kind of tool for 'catching life'. In her attempt to articulate a modern novel that did not yet exist, Woolf exclaimed that a

9 Anna Lovatt, 'Introduction', *Vitamin D3: Today's best in contemporary drawing* (Phaidon, 2021), p. 14.

contemporary author had 'come down with his magnificent apparatus for catching life just an inch or two on the wrong side' (reminding us that Woolf was a keen wielder of butterfly nets), while Le Guin saw science fiction as 'a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe'.¹⁰ In this sense Le Guin hoped that science fiction might be 'less a mythological genre than a realistic one. It is a strange realism, but it is a strange reality.' This year we have certainly been made to feel the strangeness of reality, to re-examine the things we took for granted, and drawing provides ample space for this reflection.

One of the areas of revaluation was our bodily autonomy, and in this strange reality there is a profusion of bodies – reaching into each other's slinky ribcages as in Emma Cousin's *Shakuhachi* (2020) or vulnerable and contorted, as in Ursula Burke's *Lockdown 2* (2020) – summoning the uncanny sense of bodily dislocation experienced by many. The mirroring of body and page as containers for emotion and sensation are powerfully evoked in Florence Peake's *Lockdown Lumps* (2020), 'extracting lumps of emotion content from the body and layering paint and drawn responses over an initial lump', and Tania Kovats' *orgasm no. 23* (2020) in which the page stands in for the body as recipient of touch. Meanwhile Rebecca Jagoe's extremely stylish column of dimpled flesh *Cheap & Chic* (2020) exploits the drawn body's ability to synthesise monstrosity and glamour in 'an attempt to reclaim the monstrous as a potential site for joy/sex/times/aspiration/beauty.'

Similarly there is a plethora of parties, taking advantage of drawing's imaginative space for wish-fulfilment and bad behaviour, such as Kate Lyddon's free-flowing *Milk and Wine* (2021) (and perhaps other bodily fluids) and Jessie Makinson's animalistic figures engaged in Georgian parlour games (*Silky Trap*, 2020), while the materials for Richard Deacon's *I left the cake out in the rain...* (2020) including wine, coffee, ash, and a nod to Donna Summer, seems spiritually married to France-Lise McGurn's dregs of a party, stained with paint marker like smudged lipstick (*The Last of the Tonic Wine*, 2020).

Rooms, echoing the handful that we have now grown overly-familiar with, also took on a special prominence. Some drawings use the edges of the page to model confinement, like Ansel Krut's *Expand-o* (2020), the jointed figure pushing at the boundaries of the sheet like a coiled spring, or Peter Peri's *Nine Hands* (2020), the soft forms 'fitting tightly within the frame' ever so slightly deformed by the sheet's edges, as if they exerted a gentle yet constant pressure. Vanessa Baird (2021) depicts monstrous girls grown too large for their rooms like Alice who has just eaten the cake marked 'eat me'. Naked but for her socks and Mary Janes, she screams with face wrinkled like an infant, her body claustrophobically cramped, head touching the ceiling. In another she is clothed, hands raised as if to bat away the little fleshy starbursts now filling the room, as if the room were eating, or assimilating, Alice.

Man Reading Messages (Pawel) (2020) is from David Haines's ongoing series of portraits of online sex workers. Features caught in a half-yawn in the moments while waiting for a client to appear, the image captures the immediately relatable vacancy of someone totally absorbed in a device, mentally elsewhere. Recognition is tempered by a sense of voyeurism as we realise the extent to which the subject is oblivious to our presence. Haines describes the 'maps and cityscapes which seek to counter the claustrophobia of the staged interiors', not so dissimilar from the 17th century Dutch paintings which Haines associates with the works, such as Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (c. 1663–64). Here we intrude in another room containing someone so absorbed they are, for the moment, unaware of our presence, a map gesturing to a world beyond the enclosed interior. In Haines's soft grisaille we get a glimpse of someone taking a break from the imaginative work of producing fantasy, whose own desires are only to be guessed at, veiled by the surface of the screen.

Mary Griffiths's *Enough for immortality* (2020) examines the potential of rooms to hold their history within their boundaries, and also to transcend them. 'The house where I was born and loved ones have died – a place of first and last breaths' is abstracted through the inscription of delicate, reflective graphite lines on a dark ground, to the scale of the cosmic. The title is from a poem by Rebecca Elson, the astrophysicist whose recipe for an 'Antidote to the Fear of Death' included an imaginative eating of stars 'Til they are all, all inside me/ Pepper hot and sharp', atoms redistributed by 'stir[ring] myself / Into a universe still young / Still warm as blood'. Alice Anderson's *Sun Tracking* (2018) offers another meditation on our relationship to the cosmos, the red pencil lines, recalling the copper threads of her sculptures, tracing the path of the sun through her studio window. Light requires an encounter with an object to be visible; Anderson cites Nobel astrophysicist Trinh Xuan Thuan: 'In empty space, even if he is bathed in sunlight, an astronaut will only see black ink,' (turning

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', *Selected Essays* (Oxford University Publishing, 2008), p. 8; Le Guin, p. 37.

the entire cosmos into drawing ground). In Anderson's words, 'by intercepting the waves' path, the studio windows, the floor, and the paper sheets are therefore developers'. In this way Anderson's work draws attention to itself as an image of (depicting, made by) light.

Anderson's drawing was prompted by a particularly hot summer, 'a probable result of climate change', and many drawings in the Biennial focus on our relationship to our environment, and the entanglement of the stories of our species with others. Fiona Long's *Shaggy Ink Caps* presents a portrait of the fungi made using an ink partly composed of its own spores, while Jonathan Allen's *Actor #2* (2020) attempts to visualise the cognition of non-human subjects. Francesca Gabbiani's silhouette of palm trees scorched by fires in Southern California (2021) and Patricia Domínguez's haunting evocation of animals blinded by fires in the Bolivian Amazon (2021) impress how our fates are bound up with those already suffering the effects of climate catastrophe and environmental devastation.

Medicine bundle

Ursula Le Guin believed in the reparative potential of stories as medicine bundles, but as Donna Haraway notes in her introduction to a new edition of the essay,

'none of these bags is a utopia outside the killing fields; quite the opposite. They each situate those who make and those who carry [them] in worlds that are at stake now. [They] strengthen the people who make and use them. These carrier bags make their people more worldly, more able to discern and tell what is really happening and how it can still be different.'¹¹

Only in recognising the story that is unfolding around us can we seek to change it, or offer a new one in its stead.

Lindsay Seers's *Care(less) Worms 2* (2020) is a particularly bitter medicine, a personal reckoning with grief and death, but also a wider reckoning for a system of care not worthy of the name. 'When I was making *Care(less)* my father was trapped in the debacle of the UK care system and died before I could get a hoist for him to sit up. This drawing is dedicated to him.' The process of observational drawing is one of reckoning, a constant struggle to tally a thing with its image. In Seers's words, 'The presence is intensely felt as one looks again and again to try to see the thing in question with clarity.' But this emphasis on presence also shows how drawing is equally a reckoning with loss: the thing in question changes or decays, the drawing remains, a substitute for this lack, itself a kind of transitional object (in Donald Winnicott's words, 'not so much the object used, as the use of the object'¹²). As Sarah Casey notes, citing the Ancient Greek myth of the origins of drawing as romance between a shepherdess and her lost love, 'in drawing one is mitigating loss'.¹³ But it is the effort to see clearly which opens up the potential for healing, in Haraway's words to 'tell what is really happening and how it can be different'.

In offering a place for 'holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us' the drawing as carrier bag also offers a place for resting, for dwelling. For Anne-Marie James, drawing offered the opportunity to inhabit cherry blossom, as seen by Hokusai, as a space for healing. *Sakura 25* (2020), was one of 30 drawings made while recovering from Covid, thinking about how trees 'generate the air we breathe, how they symbolise temporality, and how this all connects to COVID (as a respiratory illness)'. In this framing the repeating branches become bronchioles and alveoli, the liquid watercolour around them the alchemical exchange of gases with every breath.

Sonia Boyce's drawing *And breathe...* (2021) can also be read as a request, and instruction, for healing. As she notes, 'I thought about the recurring and heart-rending sense of breathlessness across the world – whether as a consequence of Covid-19, or the last dying words of George Floyd. This drawing was made on 1 January 2021, in the hope that we can find a gentler way forward.' In this context the words are sensed as both an exhalation: a pause, an emptying, a taking stock; and an inhalation: a gathering of strength and energy, a means to carry on, to persist. The drawing acts as a caesura, witnessing the moment between these two actions.

¹¹ Donna Haraway, 'Introduction. Receiving Three Mochilas in Colombia: Carrier Bags for Staying with the Trouble Together', in *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (Ignota, 2019), p. 11.

¹² Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Routledge, 1991; originally published 1971), p. xii.

¹³ Sarah Casey, 'A Delicate Presence: The Queer Intimacy of Drawing', *TRACEY*, July 2016, p. 4.

Devlin Shea's *Pause* (2020) speaks to a similar taking stock at a moment of transition. Resolutely unresolved, the watercolour forms seem to combine a sprouting seed with a more mature new growth,

As I take a walk with my 1 year old, we pause to pick up leaves, she touches the textures and begins to form simple words. One month after putting my mother into a carehome, we have put my daughter into nursery; they both screamed and tried to escape while 'settling in'.

Again, the drawing becomes if not a statement of intent, then a quiet space for intention: 'Things will calm, smaller things will grow bigger, things will fade and there will be more space to see what has germinated in this unusual period.' In the words of Le Guin, 'and still the story isn't over. Still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars.'¹⁴

14 Le Guin, p. 37.