

## Lifedrawing as a model for the art of self-observation and discovery

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I want to draw some comparisons between the dialogue between two minds that goes on in the psychoanalytic consulting room, and the dialogue between hands and the moving figure that takes place in the lifedrawing studio.

One is an art of listening, yet the communication is often described in spatial terms; the other is an art of looking yet is dependent for its vitality on an undertow of music and movement. And like all art forms, they are concerned with the evocation and interpretation of dreams.

Psychoanalytic thinkers such as Bion and Meltzer, who regard psychoanalysis as both an art form and a descriptive science, stress the overriding importance of keen observation. To begin with, says Bion 'we have to look... (and most people don't) – and while looking, recognize the meaning which lies beyond' (2005, p. 64-5). I shall be saying more about the meaning which lies beyond, or perhaps underneath – the underlying musicality of the pa encounter and of lifedrawing, in poetry known as the 'deep grammar', the truth which is trapped in the words yet is greater than the ordinary grammatical meaning. For the mind that lies beyond can be known only through sensuous manifestations, yet exists beyond them.

'What is it we are observing?' asks Bion, and again, 'I wonder what I do when attempting to draw an analysand's attention to a pattern' (1991, p. 227). He often

speaks of the emotional turbulence that reveals patterns in an otherwise smooth surface. For the nature of mind, as Byron said, is to be ‘in perpetual activity’ and this is especially manifest in dreams where it is ‘much more mind than when we are awake’. This turbulent activity is the ground for symbol formation. In any journey of self-exploration or discovery, we are looking for patterns that will capture some aspect of experience so that it can be thought about and eventually its meaning will become apparent.

The key, Meltzer says, is the ‘quality of observation’: this is the ‘foundation of truthfulness’. But, he adds, ‘which comes first, the knowing or the describing?’ (1994 [1981], p. 504). The kind of truth that is being looked for or listened to is something that emerges in a live practical situation, a setting in which mind or spirit is given a local habitation and a name, such as the transference - countertransference. Meltzer has described the analyst’s countertransference in terms of waiting in the dark for a pattern to emerge:

The state of observation is essentially a resting state. I compare it with waiting in the dark for the deer grazing at night, seen by their flashing white tails. This nocturnal vigilance is on the alert for movement of the quarry, part-object minimal movements that with patience can be sent to form a pattern of incipient meaning “cast before”. This catching of the incipient meaning cast before is a function of receptive imagination – open to the possible, unconcerned with probability’ (Meltzer, quoted in Williams 2005, p. 182).

He calls this the ‘countertransference dream’ and it is equivalent to the type of observation that is employed in drawing the moving model, a sort of mental hunt for an emerging pattern of marks that gradually evolve into the meaning of the pose. It is knowing and describing at the same time – as distinct from knowing *beforehand* what the body looks like or should look like. The lifedrawer must be open to the possible, not bound by the probable – the shapes produced by the body in space are often astonishing, if we can forget that we ‘know’ the shapes of the body-parts.

As with any live experience, knowing begins with not-knowing.

It was Freud who originally suggested that consciousness is really an organ of attention, rather than an interesting or higher state in itself. It directs our observation to the extraordinary things that are going on in the unconscious. Others have suggested that there are two contrasting or perhaps complementary types of looking. Meltzer, for example, speaks of penetrating versus passive attention. Marion Milner has written of narrow and wide attention: one like a searchlight, the other waiting for things to float into focus. She said she was struck by the effect of writing things down:

It was as if I were trying to catch something and the written word provided a net which for a moment entangled a shadowy form which was other than the meaning of the words... this effort to describe made me more observant of the small movements of the mind. (1986 [1934], p. 107)

Looking and describing go together - in psychoanalysis and, even more evidently, in lifedrawing with its own mode of ‘writing things down’: capturing part-object

minimal movements on paper in the hope that these shadowy forms will form a pattern of humanity.

The Kleinian art critic Adrian Stokes wrote that 'all art is of the body', above all the body of the internal mother or object, representing the World itself and all the humanity or internal babies that it encompasses and houses. 'Whatever the form of transcript, the original conservation or restoration is of the mother's body' (1967, p. 37). Indeed, he goes to far as to say, 'The human body thus conceived is a promise of sanity' (p. 40). It needs continual care and rejuvenation to maintain its fertility. Drawing the nude, as an activity, has a particular poignancy in the context of this worldview, with the anxiety of spoiling the image and the requirement of trust in the image to right itself.

The conversion from stone to decorated bas-relief sculpture, first achieved by the cavemen, entails a complex exploration of the world-mother: as Stokes has put it, in one of his earliest (preKleinian) works, *Smooth and Rough*:

Much crude rock stands rearranged: now in the form of apertures, of suffusion at the sides of apertures, the bites, the tears, the pinches are miraculously identified with the recipient passages of the body, with sense organs, with features ... (Stokes 1951, p. 56).

Yet before divinity became incarnate in the human body, and before man saw himself as ruling the world, he perhaps saw the divine as incarnate in the animal body with its power and beauty and food-providing qualities.

We could say that lifedrawing began a long time ago in the caves of Lascaux; indeed Picasso said nobody would ever be able to draw as well as these cavemen. By comparison with the magnificent deer, horses, cows and bison that come into three-dimensional being from the pre-existing contours of the limestone rock, man saw himself as a tiny sticklike creature. Man is a mere sign, an indicator, two-dimensional, a part-object; the bison is a symbol of God on earth - and is one with the world itself, the rock from which it emerges.

Life-drawing, then, has a very ancient history, which probably continues to influence our mental and emotional attitudes whenever we engage in this hunt for an image or representation of what Milton calls 'the human form divine' (*Paradise Lost* III, 44).

Kenneth Clark, in his classic study *The Nude* (1956), traced the history of the representation of the nude in the Platonic terms of humanity's search for the ideal, for an abstraction from the world of ideal forms, that becomes embodied in sensuous existence. Clark saw this as being most fully realised in the art of ancient Greece which combined the celestial and the sensuous (the Apollonian-static or timeless and the Dionysiac-ecstatic or moving). He describes the function of loosely hanging drapery in the nudes of ancient Greece, particularly the female nude:

Clinging drapery, following a plane or a contour, emphasises the stretch or twist of the body; floating drapery makes visible the line of movement through which it has just passed. Thus the aesthetic limitation of the nude body in action, that it is enclosed within an immediate present, is overcome. Drapery, by suggesting lines of force, indicates for each action a past and a possible future. (1956, pp. 169-71)

The Dionysiac or dancing nudes exist, he says, in “a pool of movement in which their bodies seem to swim” – their swirling garments assist their effort to merge with a spiritual world. The lines of force that lead onwards and outwards speak eloquently from their position trapped within the stone drapery. This eternal dance complements the inviolate balanced stillness of the Apollonian nude. They represent two different ways of looking at the aesthetic object – the body of the mother-that-is-the-world.

These ways correspond to some extent to the two types of attention already mentioned – narrow and wide, penetrating and passive, objective and subjective. One is an active, directed focus that aims to be faithful to the precise proportions of the figure, and the other is a passive, floating form of looking that allows for openness of interpretation. These modes also correspond to Stokes’s famous distinction between ‘carving’ and ‘modelling’. The modelling approach taken by some artists, or by all artists some of the time, is to do with questioning, turbulence, seeing things uncertainly in parts and shades of meaning, and an urge to be somehow swept up or incorporated in the object. It indicates the melting of boundaries, the merging of the body with the spirit world. It is associated with what Stokes terms the ‘greedy, prehensile, and controlling act of vision’ and in its extreme form, it has affinities with the in-sane, and tendencies towards infantile omnipotence or tyrannical control of the object. The carving approach is to do with respecting the otherness and distance of the object - its self-contained inviolability and unquestionability: like Michelangelo’s description of releasing a pre-existing form from within the block of stone. It has affinities with the Kleinian depressive position of accepting dependency on the qualities of the object.

In terms of drawing the nude, the narrow or active mode of looking is concerned with accurate representation of the outside of the object, the moving mode with capturing the spirit or essence of a pose. Stokes in his early writings was suspicious of the modelling approach owing to its association with the Kleinian paranoid-schizoid position, which is similar to the Dionysiac style of representation described by Clark; however in his later writings, Stokes came to see modelling as essential to maintaining the vitality and communicativeness of the link between internal infant and internal mother. And this balance is to some extent the history of lifedrawing itself, and in a somewhat corresponding way, illuminates the history of psychoanalysis in its attempts to be both art and science, subjective in its responses yet objective in its formulations.

It was the combination of the Apollonian and the Dionysiac approaches that, according to Clark, evolved the Grecian ideal which - he says – constituted a “finality of form” that would “control the observations of artists for centuries to come”.

But there was something problematic about this finality and perfection of form.

There is of course something end-stopping about the very notion of artists having their observations “controlled”. Observations cannot be limited by preconceptions, in art any more than in psychoanalysis. In fact Clark then notes the process of decadence which followed the classical Greek period, from Roman grandiosity through to medieval coyness, until the Grecian ideal was rediscovered during the Renaissance. But then again, the pattern was repeated and the Renaissance celebration of the body subsided into the dullness of the Victorian over-smooth finish which acquired a pornographic tinge. For ultimately, the prescription to draw along classical Greek lines - however proportionally ‘perfect’ - inhibited observation of the living figure.

It is as though the Dionysiac, moving element had become fixed in stone and its original inspiration forgotten. Indeed, drawing the body in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century often consisted of students drawing classical statues or copies of these ideal forms – a model of perfection in the most literal sense. We could see this as the dominance of the Apollonian over the Dionysiac – the worship of finality rather than of process and evolution: placing scientific objectivity over subjective response. In other words, no literal ‘ideal’, in the sense of physical proportionality, can continue to have life, if it is merely copied. Beauty has always to be to some extent in the eyes of the beholder, otherwise the life seeps out. Any fixed ideal provokes a reaction against it.

In Clark’s history of drawing the nude, he says that the goal of smooth imitation was attacked and broken up by Cubism and then deconstructed by constructivism, dividing and rearranging parts of the body. Stokes, writing in the same period – the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century - saw the reduction of the body to cubes and cylinders as being an abstracting or essentialising process. This was indeed Cubism’s manifesto. We may not agree that this is what lay behind that art movements (myself I suspect it illustrates the era’s craving for scientific respectability), but the point is that there was felt a need to somehow break down the impervious surface of the already-known, the ossified beauty that has lost its life, and is no longer conducive to contemplation.

It is a familiar scenario in any field, including psychoanalysis, when what was once a good idea turns into an orthodoxy and loses its resonance, hidebound by moralisms of theory and technique. In such a straitjacket, we look, but cannot see anything new – only what our preconceptions have already put in place. We do not get *involved*, in the literal sense of entwining and merging of boundaries. Many art schools by the end of the last century had come to the conclusion that lifedrawing was not worth teaching at all.

This cultural history mirrors the problem faced by each individual artist in any life-drawing session. Lifedrawing originally meant drawing from life, rather than copying from statues. But that is not enough. There is also the need to make contact with what Bion calls the ‘meaning that lies beyond’ – how to make contact with the ‘divinity’ or spirit that is housed in the human form: in other words, how to achieve a drawing that is not merely accurate but that *has life*. It is the same as the modern goal of psychoanalysis. Jung thought that ‘many aspects of life which should also have been experienced lie in the lumber-room among dusty memories...glowing

coals under grey ashes' (1965), and Bion writes of the spark of wisdom' amidst the ashes waiting to be 'blown into a flame'. The goal of psychoanalysis, he says, is not unearthing memories, but 'remembering' (1970, pp. 69-70) – a more vital process altogether. The problem is how to unearth the principle of mental growth that has become frozen or fossilized, the spark of life that may be hidden under grey ashes of depression. Another of Bion's metaphors is the Sleeping Beauty that is buried underneath the brambles and thickets of psychoanalytic theories and jargon. However inspired a theory may have been when first formulated, if it does not progressively adapt to the new evidence of one's psychoanalytic eyes, then it just adds to the lumber that suffocates experience.

It is the same in lifedrawing – how to fan the flame of life without inventing new orthodoxies such as Cubism and Constructivism that just become straitjackets in their turn.

This is the miracle of the type of lifedrawing to which I was introduced by Meriel Gold with her extraordinary classes in Lower Froyle, a small village in the philistine heart of rural Hampshire. The method was established by Cecil Collins, who was Meriel's teacher, and has achieved a special status in the world of art education, without – so far – becoming an orthodoxy of its own.



I had been a fan of lifedrawing since my student days, but many years of accurate representation had left my appetite for it somewhat jaded. I shall quote here from Meriel's own poetic description of the ethos or philosophy that underpins the method:

Using hands, water, clay and ink, bamboo reeds, goose quills, brush and chalk, we begin by exploring the nature of the materials; for instance the exquisite lightness of a quill, the robust strength of a reed and the many qualities of water; translucence, fluidity, carrying. And as we explore these qualities, they reflect back to us the myriad ways they are played out in the theatre of our own lives. We work from live models who move to music, responding to its infinitely changing forms and nuances and hold poses that palpably magnify Presence. In this way the form carries the fragrance of the formless, which in turn reflects the formlessness of Being, at the heart of our self. Exploring the nature of experience without relying on rationalising tendencies or fixed ideas, we create a space in which it is possible to discover the natural wisdom of the body and use the medium of drawing to unfold the simple perception of 'what is' into our daily lives. Having relaxed the struggle to conform to pre-conceived beliefs, we learn to rest, with awareness, in an abiding sense of Being. (*DrawnHome* website)

Meriel speaks of the 'simple perception of what is – of Being'. Yet in some ways this perception of Being is far from simple. It is in Kleinian terms the depressive state of accepting dependence on the internal object with its capacity to house mental qualities and offer them as food for the mind. (In post-Kleinian terms, it is specifically an aesthetic object, as in the Platonic equation of the good and the beautiful.) Virginia Woolf, writing a memoir called 'Moments of Being', defined Being in terms of exceptional moments in which dawned a new understanding of life as a whole, whereas 'non-being' comprised the daily routine of conversation, meals, travel, work, waiting etc. Wordsworth calls them 'spots of time' (*The Prelude*), and Bion points of catastrophic change: such that the process of resting-in-Being is in fact always a state of Becoming. Emotional Knowing, rather than intellectual Knowing About.

In drawing the moving figure, as represented by poses which are spots of time temporarily halted, we are also following the ebb and flow of our dream life, in the way that Meltzer described psychoanalysis as sampling through particular dreams the continuous, underlying existence of phantasy or dream-life – just the tip of the unconscious iceberg, emerging for momentary observation. Drawing, said Matisse, is 'putting a line round an idea' – it is capturing something ineffable, non-translatable, and holding it for observation, realising that there is far more meaning behind and beyond the small element you have managed to express. (Bion calls it making boxes for beta-elements – 'should such a thing exist, and should it swim into my ken' [1997, p. 29].)

Meriel and Morag Donnelly - her main helper, artist and model who now runs classes of her own (*LifelineArts* website) - both always emphasize how important it is not to draw while the model is moving in between poses, but only to watch, since watching is also drawing, but not with hands. This preparatory watching is part of the final pose even though the body shapes and directions may have changed.

In relation to this, it is well known how an artist's 'mistakes' enliven a drawing; this does not apply to all wrong lines, only to those which are part of the initial exploration of space and tensions surrounding the model. There are many techniques designed to help deflect the natural omnipotence of the modelling medium (and let the inner life take over). You can draw without looking at the paper, or in a masking-out medium such as wax which can be revealed afterwards by a wash. The Chinese categorise five positions for holding the brush, graded from tight to loose. Long-handled instruments may be used, or delicate ones such as goose-quills, which also relax the hand's control, its long-established muscular dominance. Particularly effective is the use of both hands simultaneously, employing contrasting types of markmaking instruments – the fluid and the emphatic, shadowy and definitive, light and dark. Preferably the stronger implement should be attached to the weaker hand and vice versa.

Similarly Marion Milner in her wellknown autobiographical narrative *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950) expressed her desire to relax the tyranny of 'deliberate opinions', in order to leave her line of thought 'free to follow its own laws of growth,

my function being to observe its activities' – something she called (after Montessori) achieving the 'play attitude'. The purpose is not simply the negative one of undermining acquired skill, but the positive one of releasing muscular potential that has been restricted by habit.

The interplay of hands allows the two types of attention or observation to contribute to the dance, without one dominating the other. Two hands echo the dialogue of minds, or the weaving together of inner and outer space. The already-known rests in abeyance whilst the hands follow the movement of the lines of force around the moving body.

Adrian Stokes (1965) uses the word 'incantation' to describe the peculiar pull which seems to be exerted by an aesthetic object once the viewer really engages with it. He is talking about our appreciation of works of art. A special type of looking appears to draw the viewer inside the boundaries of the object into a dynamic relation with the mind of its creator. The object's independent existence is recognised yet invites not just contemplation but also exploration - a modelling approach. Bion speaks of the anxiety when the external Vision does not match, does not 'fit' the internal one. The anxiety of observation is an important feature – it may be playful but it is also serious. As Meltzer puts it, in his description of psychoanalytic observation, it is 'fraught with anxiety – but a poetry generator' (in Williams 2005, p. 182).

Any mark on pristine white paper is experienced initially as a scar, hence arouses anxieties about omnipotence and aggression; it is necessary to carry on long enough to give the image a chance to form of itself, emerging rather than being imposed. A network of scars begins to create the illusion of 3D space. Wax scumbles washed over with a light tone imitate the texture of a limestone wall like that of the cave-men. (Rembrandt's nudes have this feeling of emergence from the cave.) A common technique is to draw in series, either the same pose from slightly different angles or a slightly different pose, each on top of the previous one. Another is to draw a multiplicity of possible lines. The artist's phantasy is not of imposing form and order, but rather of discovering a congruence, following the lines, matching the image to his own inner voice. As John Berger has put it:

Each confirmation or denial brings you closer to the object, until finally you are as it were, inside it: the contours you have drawn no longer marking the edge of what you have seen, but the edge of what you have become. (HantsArts webpage <http://hantsarts.com/wordpress/?p=1190>)

The drawing is a response to not only 'an independent and completed object' (writes Stokes), but to 'the ego's integration' – carving and modelling at the same time. It is a Dionysiac response to the Apollonian. Stokes calls this 'beneficence in space' (1963, p. 69).

Lifedrawing is thus a process of 'becoming', of honing self-observation at the same time as observing the moving figure. (A wonderful example of this counterpoint is Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in which the poet disturbs the silent surface of the

Urn with his insistent questioning, then withdraws from his Dionysiac identification but with a new knowledge: that silence can play its own music, but not to the 'sensual ear', but rather, 'pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone' [see Williams 2010, pp. 99-106]. The observer sees both the solid form – with his Apollonian objective eye - and the spaces where it is not, with his Dionysiac imagining eye, and both contribute to the meaning beyond. As Coleridge said, 'During the act of knowledge itself, the objective and subjective are so instantly united, that we cannot determine to which of the two the priority belongs'. (*Biographia Literaria*, chapter 12). In the verbal medium of psychoanalysis, the meaning may slip through in the gap between the words, and for this Bion often uses the illustration of how a sculpture traps light.

But what, we might say, brings these two modes of looking together? The answer, according to Stokes, is finding 'a pulse in common'. The pulse is something beyond both of them yet created between them. The philosopher of aesthetics Susanne Langer has described how an abstract or mental pattern is created through the sensuous movements of music and dance. 'What is the dance?' she asks:

...an apparition. It springs from what the dancers do, yet it is something else. In watching a dance, you do not see what is physically before you – people running around or twisting their bodies; what you see is a display of interacting forces ... single in its motion. (Langer 1957, p. 10).

In the same way the lines traced by the model in space are a type of abstract dance, which the drawer strives to match with lines on paper – themselves an abstraction, since lines do not exist in nature. All the conflicts relating to boundaries (the dance between inside and outside, between body and space) congregate along the line; it pulls together and it separates simultaneously. Lifedrawing is not a choreographed dance, and can indeed be very still and quiet, almost non-moving. The model's curve, and the drawer's line, both express what Langer (1953, p. 121) calls the 'underlying idea', the aesthetic essence of the scene, the process of Becoming.

And in a sense the incantation, the invitation to participate, is always unheard and unhearable as in the Grecian Urn: even when as in the case of lifedrawing, the scene is set by music and this is what governs the flow and succession of poses.

What we are trying to observe, whether in psychoanalysis or in lifedrawing, is something ineffable and nonsensuous, the inner essence or principle of development. Psychoanalysis often seeks spatial terms to describe what is going on in the consulting room, such as transitional space or container-contained. Lifedrawing, which takes place in space, grounds itself in a musical matrix in order to facilitate the incantation that leads into a symbolic congruence with the object. Without the listening element it becomes static and lifeless. The type of interpretation that is expected to succeed through content alone, forgetting these musical aspects of communication, is liable not to 'take', and it is the same with the kind of correct figuredrawing whose proportions cannot be faulted but which still looks unaesthetic.

Like the Grecian Urn, the Sleeping Beauty has an inner voice; and as Bion asks,

'Is that voice in any way audible?' (1977, p. 37). It is the point at which looking and listening intertwine. In the psychoanalytic process, which Meltzer says is the aesthetic object, both analysand and analyst have the opportunity to develop; indeed, they *must* both develop if the process is to have life. Otherwise it is doomed to wash off like a thin coat of paint. The process is the underlying idea that is 'beyond' both analyst and analysand, the principle of evolution. Similarly the lifedrawing that *has life* is a creation of both model and drawer or drawers, both guided by the same underlying idea and responding to its music; indeed such is the essential nature of any work group – it becomes 'symbiotic' (Bion, 1970) for all its members. Then, as Yeats put it, 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' ('Among School Children').



Morag and Meg, lifedrawing day at Hyde Parish Hall, May 2011  
Photos: Kina Meurle-Hallberg

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### *The countertransference dream*

I heard grass and air;  
 My love lay looking  
 Where June drifted by;  
 A cloud harboured there  
 Windlessly, and I  
 Watched over my love.  
 Faraway she seemed,  
 Cloud faraway I,  
 Yet were we nearer  
 Than dream and dreamer.  
 Watching perfection  
 She, in the harbouring  
 Stream; and in her, I.

*Roland Harris, "Sonnetina"*