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The art student as data capturer: Engaging multimedia technology in teaching drawing to Visual Arts students at a tertiary level

ABSTRACT

Over the last four years I have been drawing on aspects of my own visual art practice ('data capture' digital drawing performances, 2004–) in my drawing teaching at the University of Cape Town. For this article I would like to share these projects and discuss the relevance of incorporating multimedia engagement in the teaching of traditional drawing at a tertiary level. First, moving images, sound, digital devices such as smartphones, tablets and engagement in online platforms are primary mediators of experience for many urban citizens. I find it relevant for students to not only reflect critically on the use of digital tools and online social platforms, but to experience and explore engaging with them directly as an experience by making them physical through drawing. In my experience through my teaching practice I have observed how this embodiment of the technology can provide useful tools of

KEYWORDS

multimedia drawing
drawing teaching
portrait dialogue
digital collaboration
embodied technology
classroom networking

1. Skype text chat: Katherine Bull, Katherine Spindler, Trasi Henen, Nina Liebenberg, Toast Coetzer, Paris Brummer, Daniela Puccini and Jessica Holdengarde, 23 October 2014.

processing the volume of immaterial information that we engage with on a daily basis. A physical processing of multimedia material can also operate to provide an interesting engagement with perception, cognition and orientation. At another level, by bringing different media together in the physical studio of life drawing, there can be an interesting reflection and experience of different states of being in the world. These aspects are discussed through descriptions of a selection of my own creative practice and a second-year drawing project I teach at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town titled, 'Interface: Image and text, the portrait as Dialogue'.

Humans are the reproductive organs of technology. We multiply manufactured artifacts and spread ideas and memes.

(Kelly 2010)

Over the last four years I have been drawing on aspects of my own digital art practice in my drawing teaching at the University of Cape Town. In this article I will share these projects and discuss the relevance of incorporating multimedia engagement in the teaching of traditional drawing at a tertiary level. Interspersed in the main body of text are excerpts from a Skype text chat between a number of the participants and students from the project.¹

First, moving images, sound, digital devices such as smartphones and tablets and engagement in online platforms are primary mediators of experience for many urban citizens. I find it relevant for students to reflect critically on the use of digital tools and online social platforms, while also engaging with them directly as an experience by making them physical through drawing. In my teaching practice I have observed how this embodiment of the technology can provide useful ways of processing the volume of immaterial information that we engage with on a daily basis. Second, I am interested in how bringing multiple visual and audio media into play with live interaction in a drawing class fosters the importance of being fully present in drawing, engaging all senses and using the whole body as instrument. Lastly, the physical processing of multimedia material through drawing can provide an interesting space for reflection on how technology can operate as metaphor for multiple and mutable senses of self.

In an interview with Michael Craig-Martin, John Baldessari discusses the history of his relationship with teaching and making art. He remarks: 'If I'm not going to have to commit suicide, I'm going to have to make teaching like art' (Madoff 2009: 48). I have come to really appreciate the significance and power of integrating my creative practice with teaching over the last four years of my fourteen-year teaching career. Previously I was always reticent to bring my own creative practice into my teaching, preferring to encourage students to develop their own creative language without influence from my approach. At the time my practice was involved in digital drawing performances that did not have much to do with my teaching responsibilities at Stellenbosch University.

DIGITALLY DRAWING FROM LIFE TO DRAWING FROM THE DIGITAL

Since 2004 I have been creating digital drawing performances that involve observational drawing (mostly portraiture) using a digital interface. Starting from drawing low resolution, miniature digital portraits that in turn become

brushes that are used to draw a 'catalogue' (2004) self-portrait (Joao Ferreira Gallery, Cape Town, 2004), to inviting male artists to pose naked for a series of live digital drawing performances ('data capture_a muse', Blank Projects, Cape Town, 2008), I have explored the nature of technology as an extension of our perception and orientation in a contemporary ever-changing media landscape. I have travelled with my 'data project' performances to conferences in Poland, New York and Egypt responding to the different cities and conference contexts as a means to further generate subjects for my databank. As part of an exhibition at the On Gallery in Poznan Poland ('data capture: in the field I', 2005) I invited conference delegates to take part in a lucky draw to become my portrait subject. My eventual subject, Timo Lehtonen, commented that he became hyper-aware and could literally feel where I was looking at his face from watching the disembodied mouse cursor as it moved across the digital drawing surface of the live projection. At the New York Tisch School of Art as an extension of a presentation I made on my work, I played on the artist buskers that you find in the parks in Manhattan, and busked digital portraits of delegates passing by. My 'data capture: in the field III' (2008) involved a series of 33x33 pixel portraits drawn from life of the 24 woman artists on the International Dwyer Residency in Alexandria, Egypt. I faced each of the artists in the geographical direction of their home country when they sat for a 30-minute pose. The portraits were then animated into a single head that appeared to turn around as the orientation of each portrait changed. The most recent iteration of my digital drawing performances is 'data_captive audience' in which I drew quick sketches on a tablet of audience members from the stage while they watched a performance, *Believe You Me*, by artist Christian Nerf (LIVE ARTS Festival, Cape Town City Hall, 2012). These performances draw attention to the process of perception in watching being watched and the effect this has on how we engage with portraiture, mediated by technology, as an intimate dialogue of connection and exchange.

One of the drawing projects I was asked to teach when I started part-time lecturing at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in 2011 was a two-week second-year portrait project. At the time the project consisted of one week of traditional observational figure drawing from the naked model and then one week of developing a self-portrait in which students were encouraged to explore beyond traditional mirror observation. Over time a fellow artist and part-time lecturer, Katherine Spindler and I expanded the project to include working from multimedia sources in order to stimulate an exploration of the portrait as a relational exercise. 'Interface: Image and text, the portrait as dialogue' is a two-week project. Each day in the first week we present the students with a different artists working process as drawing source. For the first exercise I draw on a branch of my own creative process, which involves drawing and painting from the moving image. We select audio and video clips that range from video artworks, documentation of performances, artist interviews, music videos and audio artworks. The drawing takes place in the lecture theatre, dimly lit by the projection as the sound issues from the speakers.

The aim is for students to engage and embody, through drawing, the fluid space between the virtual and the actual that informs our everyday engagement with the Internet and social media platforms. Drawing from the moving image calls for an active and physical engagement with processing audio-visual material. The body is activated as a data-capturing device and performs alongside the digital space of the projection. This visual note taking from a moving-image source results in an exploration of mark-making and

a compression of the time-based media. It draws attention to and influences how we see, perceive, process and ultimately retrieve information.

KB: Can I bring the conversation back to the digital (conference paper motivates). Paris how did you find the exercises on the first day when you were asked to draw from video and sound?

PB: Intimidating at first because it was a new method of teaching. I remember a lot of us asking 'Is this right?', 'What are we supposed to do?' because we are so used to following rules and set procedures. I guess it exposed some of the issues with being taught in black and white / right and wrong. So at first intimidating, but once I got into it, very exciting and stimulating. Though I was mentally exhausted to an extent – at the end of the session – I simultaneously didn't really want to stop.

In 2009 I began to invert my digital drawing process by drawing in physical media from digital sources in order to reflect on how we process our environments mediated by television series, online searches, social platforms such as Skype and webcams. For example in my solo exhibition 'data capture_LOST & FOUND' (Blank Projects, Cape Town 2011) I approached the moving image as an object of ethnographic study and contemplation. For this exhibition I watched all six seasons of the ABC television series *LOST* (2004) and created a watercolour during each of the 120 episodes. The last season's episodes were completed as performances in the gallery during the exhibition. I was not interested in creating a recognizable picture from watching the television as much as I wanted to explore, through the process of the analogue, the threshold of the visible and invisible in perception. So in the 'data capture_LOST' watercolour process I attempted to make a mark to capture something only if it was visible on the screen. I started each watercolour as the episode began and put down my brush as it ended. Through this process the paintings evolved as colour fields of marks that, although chaotic, retain the traces of structure and narrative while taking on movement and changing depth as they are viewed over time. Through the medium of watercolour I attempted to orientate and navigate the television as a contemporary cultural landscape into which we escape for recreation. In the accompanying drawing action 'data capture_FOUND' I explored an

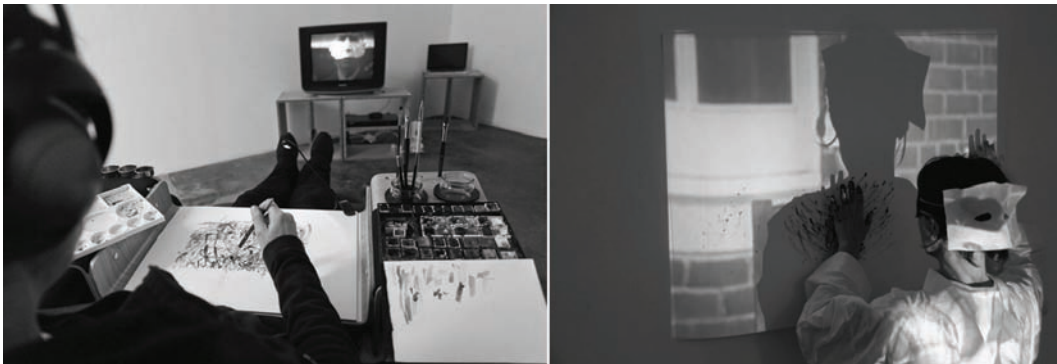


Figure 1: Katherine Bull, 'data capture_LOST & FOUND' (2011). Blank Projects, Cape Town. Copyright Niklas Zimmer (left) and Christine Cronjé (right).

internal journey towards understanding the self by focusing on drawing from a feeling space. Using archival film footage of a female mental patient observed performing repetitive and compulsive hand movements, I positioned myself inside the projection drawing while blindfolded. I mirrored her position and actions becoming part of the projection. In contrast to the 'LOST' watercolours, I drew with my hand in grease and ink and delved inwards, challenging the margins of what defines the seen and unseen in imaging the self.

DRAWING FROM THE DIGITAL AS A WAY OF BEING PRESENT

PB: When your email invitation came through it was immediate that I wanted to participate in this. As said before, the project really unlocked some difficulties I had with the idea of drawing in the past. I became scared of it. It became this classical art production that terrified me because I've always felt 'I cannot draw properly', only doodle. So it was enriching to take part in an experience that changed my perceptions on the tropes of drawing. To becoming just about mark making ... And then to just being pure experience.

KB: Thanks, Paris. Fixed perceptions can really restrict the flow. For me one of the challenges of a large class drawing space is to facilitate an experience where there is structure, but open enough with possibility that each of the 60-odd students can find a space to develop their own language of mark-making or drawing without being prescriptive.

PB: Yeah, I agree with Katherine Spindler, it takes one bad experience at being taught something to completely ruin that something for you forever. In short I fell in love with drawing again. And the experience I took from it has informed my darkroom work. It isn't just about printing a picture, but instead the entire process has become atmospheric for me. The project also taught me a great deal about patience. Sometimes *regurgitated* (original emphasis) or *forced teaching* (original emphasis) rushes you and the pressure demands an end result as opposed to the nature of the process.

For the following sessions in the first week of the drawing project we invite artists, musicians and poets to come and use the drawing studio space as a temporary studio for the afternoon. The idea is for them to use the space as a kind of field studio to extend or test out what they are currently working on. The students then witness and record this through a series of drawings. Artists we have worked with include musicians Jeremy de Tolly (Dirty Skirts), Lance Herman and the spoken word band, The Buckfever Underground. Jeremy de Tolly used the space to experiment with generating ambient soundscapes, recording from the space and then playing the sound back to the students with his experimental band I was an Exorcist (now The Original Swimming Party). He also made use of the grand piano in the space to do a solo improvisation. Lance Herman explored the space as a field studio and moved between playing guitar, singing, recording a monologue and having a direct dialogue with the students. We also set up a camera and projected live footage of Herman onto a screen in the studio space. The Buckfever Underground did an improvisational session with DJ and musician

Jon Savage on guitar and piano, while poet Toast Coetzer read from his *Albatross* cycle and his album *Walk Fast Whistle*.

TC: We really loved it. When playing live you draw from the room, you feel the people there. Usually you feel them through applause or whistles and shouts (or lack of ...), but to feel and hear the audience draw, scribble and scratch was incredible. I suddenly felt part of a much bigger creative process. Normally people – the audience at live shows – are left with their own thoughts as you play, and they go home with their feedback. In the drawing gig, feedback was immediate, real and physical.

We gave the students exercises that moved between observational drawing of the subject and working purely from sound and then a combination of observed and listening mark-making. Our intention is for the students to become aware of drawing with their whole body and start to become conscious of developing their own language of mark-making and of how marks can function beyond mere description. Providing a combination of live, digital sound and a moving subject as input for drawing also assists in generating a sensitivity of mark-making as a gestural trace of movement and forces a concentration and complete presence in the act of drawing. If you escape into thought the moment passes and you become aware that you are disconnected from experiencing what is in front of you.

KS: Dani how did it feel to produce/explore in the presence of invited guests?

Did it bother you at all or not?

DP: It didn't bother me at all. I found it very comforting in a way. It felt like a collaboration and in a way though each of us, art students and musicians exploring their practice there was a silent sense of appreciation for each other

TC: I loved walking around afterwards to see how people *saw* (original emphasis) or *heard* (original emphasis) us. Minds and imaginations are awesome, and as a performer you never know (despite intentions you might have) what you'll trigger with an audience. In class I got a glimpse of that, and the scope of reactions was amazing.



Figure 2: Henen, Trasi and Ginsburg, Josh, 'Portrait Machine' (2013) and Herman, Lance (2014), Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town. Copyright Katherine Bull.

THE DIGITAL SELF AS MULTIPLE ITERATIONS

Visual artist Trasi Henen is an ongoing guest for the course with her 'Portrait Machine' project.² I was invited to take part in an iteration of this project at Whatiftheworld gallery in Cape Town in 2012. In the 'Portrait Machine', which has precedent in works by Maurizio Cattalan and John Baldessari, artists who do not know each other are invited to the gallery space and are seated back-to-back in the gallery space. Henen cites an earlier experience of doing a police identikit as an influence. Acting as a mediator, Henen then describes one artist to the other and they draw a portrait of each other from her descriptions. We both wondered what it would be like if many people drew from one description, so I invited her to run the 'Portrait Machine' with the students as part of the drawing project. In the first year (2012) I invited artist Christian Nerf to be the subject of her description. In 2013 Henen was in London studying at Goldsmiths, so we linked up with her via Skype video chat and I invited artist Josh Ginsburg to be the subject. We placed Ginsburg in the lecture theatre hidden from view while the Skype interface of Henen from London was projected onto a screen in the lecture theatre. Due to the nature of his own practice, Ginsburg decided to respond to the experience of being hidden and kept silent by describing his own response with text on his laptop, which we also projected in the space.

The students drew one head-and-shoulders portrait drawing from Henen's description and then we switched to a Skype text chat between the two artists wherein Ginsburg asked Henen to describe the room she was sitting in London. The students then had to create a drawing in response to scrolling text as drawing input. In this drawing session the students are being asked to respond to multiple media inputs, which draws attention to how engagement with our environment brings all senses into play. Drawing can be utilized as a translation of visual perception through mimicry, association, equivalence or abstraction. All these functions start to operate alternately and randomly bringing the drawing process closer to the experience of being with and in an environment rather than merely recording as a separate static subject. In a crude way digital technology becomes a reflection of how we can be in more than one place at any given time; a quantum consciousness of the body as energy made up of subatomic particles that can exist in multiple dimensions. Roy Ascott describes this in his definition of moist media as:

The Moist environment, located at the convergence of the digital, biological and spiritual, is essentially a dynamic environment, involving artificial and human intelligence in non-linear processes of emergence, construction and transformation ... [and in redefining our relationship to nature can] enable us to return to the archaic relationship with the invisible processes and patterns of living systems.

(2000: 4)

KB: So then did the text chat with Josh feel more like an exchange then?

TH: Well it wasn't the portrait machine exactly – it was something else
It was a perversion!

KB: Yes exactly. In adding the medium of Skype it opened up other possibilities.

TH: Yeah, and Josh brought in his own ideas.

2. <http://portraitmachine.blogspot.com/2012/02/coro-littlewort-lizza-littlewort-and.html>.

NL: I sat in on a wee bit of your session Trasi.

I think it was the Josh session.

And loved how you took them down a *wrong* avenue ... cannot remember the details.

TH: Yeah, I said that there was an enormous rock in my room. Thanks.

KB: Oh yes, the phantom rock was wonderful ... and how it appeared in different guises in the drawings!

The task of creating a visual image from the scrolling text also brings the imagined space into play. In my experience, imagination has not been an encouraged mode of representation in the teaching of drawing as traditionally in drawing pedagogy we encourage practicing observational and conceptual skills. This exercise allows for an imagined additional space that is directed yet open for individual iteration. I find that providing multiple sources of input both physical and virtual (text, video and sound) is a way to offer a project that has structure, but open enough for students to have choice as to what they respond to. Therefore I am not teaching so much a technique of how to draw, but providing potential information processing methods. The students then become part of a conversation between artistic modes. The interaction of the invited artists and the technology provides a complex space of human-computer interaction out of which potential new adaptations can occur. In Josh Ginsburg's own creative practice he is interested in the working of Complex Adaptive Systems and a creative space of processing the world through the hypermedia digital space that is ever evolving new possible meanings. In his thesis titled 'Walkabout' Ginsburg explains that

Complex Adaptive Systems comprise strategies that look to harness the haphazard inherent in complex systems rather than try to filter it out as an uncontrollable or destructive force. They are premised on the emergence of solutions from within a process as opposed to the imposition of a solution derived from rigorous analysis alone. (2011: 20)

KB: Yes, what I was excited about with the Portrait Machine is it was for me an analogy of the computational as a reflection of the biological. From Trasi's descriptions (single set of data) multiple visualizations occur?

TH: So Katherine, you want to keep this discussion tied with the digital?

YES! Variations.

Yeah – repetition and difference (as per Deleuze).

JH: The virtual space is also one of identity, how we perform and interact in that space, which links back to the initial identity profiling of the Portrait Machine.

TH: We have different aspects that emerge in different instances.

Yeah. Like yesterday this camp guy got in the way of me cycling, and I heard him screaming excitedly into the phone OMG.

O.M.G so the language of the virtual realm comes back into the real and then goes back again.

KB: Yes. The selfie, update status phenomenon.

TH: Post Internet!
 Internet.
 Yeah – feedback loops

KB: I like Internet. Should be more nesting less posting?

Students are asked to draw from one or more of the first week's exercises for the second week of the project, in which they develop a series of self-portrait drawings as a dialogue. They are encouraged to resolve the self-portrait within the traditional limits of drawing on paper, but they can deviate into mixed media territory if relevant for the trajectory their project takes on. There have been some interesting results where students present the viewer again with a multimedia experience of self. In one example, by Roné-Mari Botha, traces in charcoal of a backwards and forwards movement appear spread over pages on the floor and walls. A video and soundtrack show Rone-Mari dressed in black, blindfolded, listening to earphones with charcoal held in her toes and fingers. Her body lurches back and forwards, halts and jolts and sways again. This self-portrait shows her as she tries to recreate the experience of her journey on the campus bus to and from the main campus in the suburbs to the art school in the city. As she listens to the recorded sounds of the journey her body responds to the vibrations as she records the movement with all four limbs. In another self-portrait Mosinyiemang Othusitse presents a video and soundtrack of him DJ-drawing. Simulating the motion of a disc jockey on the drawing surface using charcoal and ink, the drawing emerges as a trace of his movement to music as an imagined persona. Evan Wigdorowitz attempts to find himself through watching a multitude of movies and television series to find his name spoken aloud. He splices these snippets of video and audio together into a media collage displayed on a television that calls his name. Jess Holdengarde's reflected on her past eating disorder by carefully drawing on her skin in ink all the food she eats for a week and presented it as a video loop, with a small notebook listing the foods in a diary format. I have noted that one of the results of using multimedia inputs for drawing as a more holistic body and mind, feeling and thought exercise has created a space in which students do feel and share intimate and difficult experiences in the project. This raises for me an interesting challenge of how to negotiate showing students the difference between

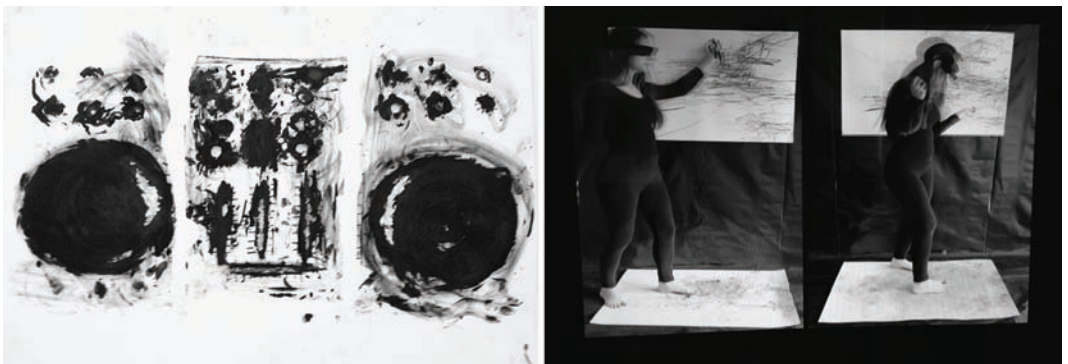


Figure 3: Mosinyiemang Othusitse (left) and Botha, Roné-Marie (right) (2014). Documentation of work submitted for mid-year evaluation in Core Drawing, Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town. Copyright Katherine Bull.

using drawing as therapeutic space of clearing internal baggage (process) and drawing as an act of sharing in which a viewer can empathize with the feeling without it being tied to a specific person or incident.

WHAT NEXT

Another trajectory of my practice has been a series of ambidextrous works and performances. Using my left and right hand to create two images simultaneously, stems from my interest in bringing the digital and physical space into a closer dialogue. Ambidextrous work can be seen as a metaphor for working with data input that becomes expressed in two different iterations simultaneously. Our innate stereovision then composes a singular perception from multiple inputs. This ambidextrous process was brought into conversation with my Skype portrait work in 'data capture_DOUBLE TROUBLED'. The work was part of an exhibition that was curated to accompany an international neuropsychanalytic conference hosted at the University of Cape Town ('Suspicious Minds: Artists's Exploration of Mind and Matter', Michaelis Gallery, Cape Town, 2013). I invited the international speakers and delegates from the conference to connect via Skype video chat for a one-hour portrait appointment. While they worked on their computer, I kept them company and painted their double portraits in oils. I am interested in how the online platform enables an intimate live connection with another, but with a temporal-spatial distance. In using the Skype interface as a medium of silent communion, I draw attention to how we communicate on other levels – not solely engaging through speech and gesture. I am interested in using the online video chat platform formally due to the *painterly* quality of the varying digital resolution of the connection and the *doubling* that occurs within this interface. By doubling I mean that you are able to watch the person you are connecting with in a larger screen window and yourself mirrored in a smaller window. Through creating an ambidextrous portrait I generate a further doubling and hope to explore the differences between my left and right brain perceptions.

In 2013 a Swedish student, Carolina Ljungström interviewed me about my work as part of her postgraduate research project titled 'Video Trail' (Ljungström 2013). For her research she initiated and facilitated a video exchange between a group of school children in Stockholm and a group in Kayamandi, Stellenbosch, South Africa. Through her own interest in using the film medium as a tool of self-representation and conversation between a culturally and geographically distinct community of learners and places, she asked if she could use my Skype portrait project as an exercise in her teaching research. After using the process with a group of students she reported very positive feedback. Ljungström placed the students back-to-back in pairs and asked them to connect via Skype to paint a self-portrait and a portrait of their partner from the Skype interface on the screen. The students responded by suggesting that it be the first exercise in the art class for the year as it gave them the opportunity to look carefully at someone who is present without feeling self-conscious. It is interesting to me how young students are more comfortable with a personal interaction mediated by a screen. Another formal advantage is that the image is framed by the digital device, thereby making it easier to compose an image and translate it onto a flat surface, while retaining the sense of live presence. This kind of project is less easy to implement in South Africa where not every student has a tablet to work with, but it could be adapted to work with camera phones.

I would like this project to continue to function as an evolving Complex Adaptive System that becomes more self-regulating and expansive through the dialogue between artists, teachers, students and technology. I see potential for it to grow and adapt to different applications and environments and evolve as a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). The sky seems to be the limit in the digital drawing domain as we can see in Ai Wei-Wei and Olafur Eliasson's 'Moonmoonmoonmoon' collaboration, which features the creation of a virtual moon surface as an open drawing field for cyberspace travellers. The home page invites you to:

Turn nothing into something – make a drawing, make a mark. Connect with others through this space of imagination. Look at other people's drawings and share them with the world. Be part of the growing community to celebrate how creative expression transcends external borders and internal constraints. We are in this world together. Ideas, wind, and air no one can stop.

(Eliasson and Wei Wei 2013)

As cyberspace becomes a more complex space of human projection of feeling, thought and connectivity with others and our environment, I think it is important to engage in that space with more awareness and physicality. In my own experience with digital media, bringing it into conversation with a physical engagement through my performative drawing exhibitions and teaching, digital media can be used as a way to come closer to understanding the connectivity of thought and feeling in expression, not merely as a distraction and escape. An embodied processing of media through drawing can help to integrate an understanding of digital media as an extension of the body and of our consciousness that connects us to each other and our environment.

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Katherine Bull (b. 1974) is currently a practicing artist, part-time lecturer in Visual Art at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town and a creative coach. In 1998 she was awarded a Master of Fine Art degree from the University of Cape Town with distinction. Since then Bull has produced five solo exhibitions, been awarded the Ampersand Fellowship to New York and most recently the AIR Laureate award to travel to a residency in Italy in 2015. Her solo exhibition, 'data new print works by Katherine Bull' in 2004 (Joao Ferreira Gallery, Cape Town), started a ten-year trajectory of digital drawing performances that has taken her to Poland, New York and Egypt. Since her last solo exhibition 'data capture-LOST & FOUND' (Blank Projects, Cape Town, 2011) Bull has been working on a number of painting projects drawn from digital sources (films, Skype, animated Google Image searches and webcams).

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