

Drawing Done with Intellectual Care: David Sylvester's Drawing Exhibitions and the Shaping of the Creative Individual

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Critic and curator David Sylvester played a pivotal role shaping the intellectual as well as the actual consumption of avant-garde art in the post-Second World War period and yet a key series of exhibitions he curated, focusing on the practice of drawing in the 1950s and early 1960s, has been all but ignored. *Drawing for Pictures* (Arts Council, 1953), *Recent British Drawings* (ICA 1954) and *Drawing Towards Painting* (Arts Council, 1962) all steered public engagement with the eclectic and often private practices of drawing at a volatile moment for art institutional structures in Britain. Sylvester's exhibitions place him among the international vanguard for his use of drawing theory as a tool to explore the role of the artistic individual within her practice, a perspective that points toward the role drawing took in process art and conceptualism in the ensuing decades. Many years before Lawrence Alloway's celebrated essay on Sol LeWitt (*Artforum*, 1975) inspired an international audience to reappraise drawing in light of conceptualism, Sylvester harnessed drawing to speak to the limitations of modernism and individualism. Sylvester's analysis arose from the particular socio-cultural sensitivities of 1940s and 1950s Britain about the role and obligations of creativity. This paper re-examines these significant exhibitions in order to consider Sylvester's, and by extension Britain's, place at the forefront of the subsequent rise in international exhibitions devoted to drawing practice.

Introduction

Today I will discuss three exhibitions of drawings principally organised by the art critic and theorist David Sylvester - *Drawing for Pictures* held with the Arts Council in 1953; *Recent British Drawings*, held with the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1954; and *Drawing Towards Painting*, also held with the Arts Council, in 1961-2. Within Sylvester's oeuvre the three exhibitions form a discrete sub-category for their explicit engagement with the medium of drawing as a set of practices. They were later joined by a fourth exhibition, *Drawing Towards Painting 2* in 1967, which not only falls outside the scope of this conference but also lacks the theoretical innovation of its predecessors.

This paper re-examines these significant exhibitions in order to consider Britain's place at the forefront of the subsequent rise in international exhibitions devoted to drawing practice. I will first touch upon the dominant historical narrative for drawing before discussing the exhibitions, their context and implications.

Historical Narrative

In recent decades there has been a push, first from the museum and gallery sphere and then from the academic ones, to consolidate and concretise the importance of drawing. In other words, a history of drawing, as a category in itself, is being written, and thus there is also a wider revisionist history occurring. A danger inherent in this type of project is that our current preoccupations may distort the past as we reclaim it. As it is, a dominant narrative has emerged that links the advent and legacy of drawing with that of Conceptual art¹, for it was the intellectual

¹ Examples of this framing include: Philip Rawson, *Drawing: the Appreciation of the Arts 3* (London: Oxford U.P, 1969); Laura Hoptman (MOMA), *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions*, exh. cat. (New York: MOMA, 2002); Anna Lovatt (Marguerite Hoffman Scholar in Residence, Meadows School of the Arts), 'Wavelength: On Drawing and Sound in the Work of Trisha Donnelly', *Tate Papers*, no.18, Autumn 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/18/wavelength-on-drawing-and-sound-in-the-work-of-trisha-donnelly> and 'Ideas in Transmission: LeWitt's Wall Drawings and the Question of Medium', *Tate Papers*, no.14 Autumn 2010, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/14/ideas-in-transmission-lewitt-wall-drawings-and-the-question-of-medium>; Katherine Stout (Head of Programme at the ICA), *Contemporary Drawing: from the 1960s to Now* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014); and, to a lesser extent: Ed Krcma (University College Cork) 'Drawing Time: Trace Materiality and the body in Drawing After 1940', PhD diss. University College London, 2007.

intervention in the late 1950s and 1960s of figures such as Robert Rauschenberg and Mel Bochner as well as Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin among others,² critically engaged in the tangible reality of drawing activities and objects, which facilitated drawing-qua-drawing becoming a conceptual rather than a material activity in its own right. This shift was consolidated in the 1970s with the establishment of MOMA's Drawings Department and its curator, Bernice Rose's landmark *Drawing Now* exhibition. The justice in coupling drawing with conceptualism is that, even at its simplest level, drawing is both a verb and a noun and thus it seems to unavoidably embody the philosophical problems inherent in evaluating the role of 'medium' in art. As theorists seek inclusions for the quickly growing history of drawing, they are plagued by the probity of not only drawing as a category but also the nature of medium – to create a category, after all, at some level necessitates a tacit boundary between inclusions and exclusions. The current compromise is to link drawing with conceptualism and reclaim those artists and curators who critically and explicitly engaged in debates along these lines. Something less straightforward occurs when we look at those operating outside Conceptualism with a big 'C'. The early and mid twentieth century, with the slow wane of medium-purity, is fertile terrain for understanding those who were struggling to understand the potentialities of drawing. This period demonstrates that the questions posed by conceptual artists have long roots in Britain, going back at least as far as Roger Fry. He openly debated the problem of drawing in a 1919 series of articles, when he set himself the task of deciding whether drawings, as objects, could ever be self-consciously modernist ends in themselves. He recognised the paradox inherent to drawings succeeding within a modernism premised on emphasising material possibilities, for when all but the inherent material characteristics of a then-traditional drawing are isolated to their most dominant characteristics, i.e. the mark and the line, any formal immediacy is undercut by an awareness of the process involved in making both mark and line.³ In other words: conceptualism and process are fore-fronted, a trait recently described by Michael Newman as being simultaneously 'event'

² Other artists working along similar lines include: Ed Ruscha, Piero Manzoni, Henry Flynt (Fluxus), Eva Hesse, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, John Baldessari, and Robert Morris, among others.

³ (1) Fry, 'Drawings at the Burlington Fine Arts Club'. *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 32:179 (Feb 1918): 51-53, 56-57, 60-63, 81; (2) 'Line as a Means of Expression in Modern Art'. *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 33:189 (Dec, 1919): 201-3, 205-8; and (3) 'Line as a Means of Expression in Modern Art (Continued)'. *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 34:191 (Feb 1919): 62-3, 66-7, 69.

and 'thing'.⁴ Noting this, Fry resigned himself to the incompatibility of art and drawing – he found drawing lacking. When Rauschenberg and Bochner, pondered similar questions nearly five decades later, they found art lacking. It is between these two coordinates that Sylvester's exhibitions occurred. Rather than dismiss him as a relic of an old order, as scholars, such as Lucy Steeds did in her recent and impressive analysis of drawing exhibitions, it is important to look to how Sylvester's intellectual framing bridged the gap between Fry and Bochner and thus to encourage further scholarship into how the concerns posed in these exhibitions shaped the parameters of later debate.⁵

The Exhibitions

All three exhibitions were concerned with exhibiting then contemporary practitioners, both established and students between the ages of sixty and twenty years old.⁶ Between the forty-two artists involved in the series, only four were exhibited in two of the three exhibitions and only Victor Pasmore and William Coldstream's work appeared in all three.⁷ Sadly the lack of photographic documentation means that I do not have any photographs to show of the installation, but from the records here at Tate and of the Arts Council, in addition to the surviving catalogues, it is possible to build a picture of their framing.

The three exhibitions grew from each other, refined according to reception and demand, but their concept was the vision of one man, Sylvester. He termed them anthologies, a deliberate positioning of the drawings not as art objects but as something between art and text, invoking

⁴ Michael Newman, 'The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing' in *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act, London and New York* ed., Catherine de Zegher, (2003), 104-5.

⁵ Lucy Steeds, 'Exhibitions [of Drawings] in Britain, 1964-80', in *Towards Visibility: Exhibiting Contemporary Drawing 1964-80*, ed. Julie Enckell Juliard (Paris: Roven Éditions, 2015), 74.

⁶ Complete list (alphabetized): Robert Adams (1917–1984) Michael Andrews (1928–1995) Kenneth Armitage (1916–2002) Frank Auerbach (b.1931) Elinor Bellingham-Smith (1906–1988) Francis Bacon (1909-1992) Robert Buhler (1916–1989) William Coldstream (1908–1987) Prunella Clough (1919–1999) Robert Colquhoun (1914–1962) Diana Cumming (b.1929) Andrew Forge (1923–2002) Lucian Freud (1922–2011) Martin Froy (b.1926) Michael Fussell (1927–1974) Adrian Heath (1920–1992) Josef Herman (1911–2000) Patrick Hughes (b.1939) Peter Kinley (1926–1988) L.S. Lowry (1887–1976) Robert Medley (1905–1994) Rodrigo Moynihan 1910–1990 Henry Moore (1898-1986) Henry Mundy (b.1919) Sidney Nolan (1917–1992) Victor Pasmore (1908–1998) Ceri Richards (1903–1971) Claude Rogers (1907–1979) William Scott (1913–1989) Jack Smith (1928–2011) Matthew Smith (1879–1959) Ruskin Spear (1911-1990) Stanley Spencer (1891–1959) Graham Sutherland (1903–1980) Euan Uglow (1932–2000) Keith Vaughan (1912–1977).

⁷ The doubles were: Vaughan, Pasmore and Freud.

the auratic status of the manuscript. The Arts Council's Arts Director Philip James even included a disclaimer in the foreword to the 1953 catalogue, writing: 'Many of these drawings were not intended for exhibition – they are ideas rather than finished drawings.'⁸ Sylvester was subtler in his thinking. 'Drawings beyond number' he opened the introduction, 'are made by most painters in the course of their careers, but for all that we see of them we might suppose they were of interest only to their makers.'⁹ Sylvester thus distinguishes between the private artist and the public artist in order to collapse the distinction between the private and the public drawing. Superficially this endorses the prevalent consumption of drawings as fetishized objects – as conduits or witnesses to a private life of a dead icon – but Sylvester cannot rely on the ensured significance drawings are promised as the last traces of an extinct mind. So it is not the drawing's insight to the artist-as-man but to the fluid creation process. This first exhibition celebrated the privacy of process, but by the third exhibition, the medium as process would emerge as central.

1953, Drawing for Pictures

The first exhibition endorsed drawing's credibility through a careful taxonomy. Each display was organised around a photograph of a painting and a caption detailing the working method of the artist in question – from Lowry and his elaborate working drawings, whether executed from memory or on the spot, to Ceri Richards's practice of drawing as a means of exploring an idea but not as a reference while painting. Sylvester was careful to include an index that distinguished between 'working drawings', referred to while making the later painting, and 'preliminary studies', whether created from the imagination or from life. Letters beside the listed drawings carefully branded each drawing with its function and Sylvester emphasised counter-intuitive correlations between drawing methods and painted results – an emphasis that was picked up on in a positive *Burlington Magazine* review, which concluded: 'Who would have thought that Pasmore's *Hanging Gardens of Hammersmith* of 1946-7 was based on a composition carefully worked out in harmonic proportions' – and though I was not able to find the two studies displayed with it, *Scheme for*

⁸ Phillip James, 'Foreword', *Drawings for Pictures*, exh. cat. (London: Arts Council, 1953), TGA 200816/4/1/5/2, page 2.

⁹ David Sylvester, 'Introduction', *Drawings for Pictures*, exh. cat. (London: Arts Council, 1953), TGA 200816/4/1/5/2, page 3.

Composition and *Trees* of 1946, here are three that were displayed alongside each other, though not as studies but as conceptually formative.¹⁰

1954, Recent British Drawings

Taxonomy according to utility was expanded in the second, ICA exhibition of 1954, which opened just twelve months after the first. A smaller exhibition and a self-avowed sequel to the first, Sylvester nonetheless celebrated the freedom he had in its curation to uncouple the link between drawings and paintings. He included sculptors among the painters, but the organisation was fundamentally different: drawings were included as ends in themselves without reference to greater objects. This is celebrated in the title alone: *Recent British Drawings*. In an accompanying article published in *Britain To-day* Sylvester distinguished drawing types not by function, but by intent: 'drawing done with care, intellectual'; 'drawing done with care, manual and optical'; and 'direct and spontaneous notation'.¹¹ The latter category is self-evident and included the work of Elinor Bellingham-Smith, Matthew Smith, Stanley Spencer, and Graham Sutherland, where 'the artist tries to trap the sensation of something seen in all its transience'.¹² 'Drawing done with manual and optical care' referred to works by Diana Cumming and Lucian Freud, and was characterised by distortions to the figure brought about by drawing what is felt about form rather than seen.¹³ In contrast, 'drawing done with intellectual care' replaced emotional compulsion with rational meticulousness. It was a label assigned to Coldstream and Pasmore.¹⁴

1961-2, Drawing towards Painting

¹⁰ Anonymous, 'Current and Forthcoming Exhibitions, *The Burlington Magazine*, 95:600 (March 1953), 116.

¹¹ Sylvester, David, 'Contemporary Drawing', *Britain To-day*, 216 (April 1954): 24-27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹³ The approach was largely developed under Cedric Morris's (1889-1982) anti-academicism teaching at the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing (run by Morris and Arthur Lett-Haines), where drawing led by feeling rather than appearances was key. Spalding, Frances, *British Art Since 1900* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 149, 151.

¹⁴ (1) Sylvester, 'Contemporary Drawing', 25. (2) Of conjoining Pasmore and Coldstream: 'The visual music of Pasmore's drawings is more sonorous than that of Coldstream's practice. Nevertheless, if Coldstream's "untrammelled observation" does not hinder his creation of abstract forms, neither – in the Cornwall drawings – does Pasmore's deliberate designing cut off his contact from the object.' Sylvester, 'Contemporary Drawing', 26.

A few weeks after the ICA exhibition closed, the Arts Panel¹⁵ invited Sylvester to expand the first exhibition, *Drawings for Pictures*, with a 'larger group of drawings on an international scale' and Sylvester proposed two additional exhibitions.¹⁶ It would be seven years later, in 1961, that Sylvester finally did expand the first exhibition, which was intellectually mature in ways the first two were not. It contained many of the hallmarks of the 1953 exhibition in that each artist was allocated a number of screens, which were more like framed, hanging display cases within which drawings were organised around a photograph of a painting and an expanded description of the drawing processes involved (and here are some of Sylvester's sketches for the installation of two screens, as well as a recreation of part of a Coldstream screen). In the catalogue Sylvester directly critiques modernism for compelling artists to hide their methods, work directly on canvas or claim that they are doing so: 'For the last hundred years' he wrote, painters 'have tended to lay emphasis on the creative role of the actual process of painting, to believe that a picture ought to be worked out on canvas itself, and this has diminished the usefulness of drawing as a direct aid to painting. In the last two years this principle of making it up as you go along has become something of a moral imperative [...] Yet the situation is not, in practice, quite as simple as that.'¹⁷

Historical Context

In order to understand the full implications of this for drawing as a medium, it is necessary to step back a moment and examine the context for exhibiting drawings in the preceding years in Britain. In the beginning of the century, exhibitions reflected drawing's importance as an artefact or as a pedagogic practice – it had been associated with the demonstration of professional

¹⁵Art panel members present at meeting: Coldstream (chairman), Howard Bliss, Oliver Brown, S.D. Cleveland, Brinsley Ford, Lawrence Gowing, Lynton Lamb, Rodrigo Moynihan, Herbert Read, Robert Sainsbury, Mrs Sommerville, Ellis Waterhouse, Carel Weight, Charles Wheeler, E.M.O'R. Dickey (ministry of education), Philip James (director of art), Gabriel White (assistant art director). Art Panel Minutes, 17 April 1953, Archive of Art & Design, Victoria and Albert Museum, ACGB/32VAA, 2 (g).

¹⁶ The two Sylvester proposals considered in the course of that same meeting were: one of sculptor's drawings, which was denied, and one of Stanley Spencer's drawings, which was accepted and became the 1954 touring exhibition. Sylvester was refused support for the sculptor's drawings because 'sculptor's drawings were better shown as a background to the Council's exhibitions of Sculpture in the Home.' Art Panel Minutes, 17 April 1953, Archive of Art & Design, Victoria and Albert Museum, ACGB/32VAA, 2 (g).4 (e-g); see also a photocopy of the catalogue for the Spencer exhibition, TGA 200816/4/7/109/2.

¹⁷ David Sylvester, 'Introduction', *Drawing Towards Painting* (London: Arts Council, 1962), 3.

legitimacy, so much so that Fry complained that Ingres's saying (that drawing proves the integrity of art) had become so influential that it had become 'an excuse for indulgence in a great deal of gratuitous and misplaced moral feeling.'¹⁸ Exhibitions at this time were largely connoisseurial in nature – promising insight into those gymnastics of dead icons.¹⁹ During the Second World War, however, drawings gained new visibility through exhibitions of war artists and sketch-correspondents. Despite the popularity of exhibitions of drawn documents, however, they remained documents, yet this tempered the ground for a shift: they were after all being treated as objects worthy of exhibition in a thematic category of their own. But they remained segregated as 'other' from more traditional fine art forms, something exploited for its anti-elitism in exhibitions of amateur and workers' drawings organised by the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Artists International Association in the early post-war years.²⁰ Sylvester's rival John Berger built upon this precedent in his *Looking Forward* exhibition, held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1952.²¹ These uses of drawing's otherness in exhibiting it occurred alongside the ascendancy of, first, Fry and Clive Bell's formalism, and then, the American variant expounded by Clement Greenberg, which advocated the isolation of a particular medium's characteristics as a fundamental concern of fine art. It is Greenberg, Fry and before them the English impressionists, who Sylvester references in speaking of the moral need to work directly onto the canvas. In his three drawing exhibitions, Sylvester denies the trend for reading drawings as witnesses or documents and instead reincorporates them into high art.

¹⁸ Fry bemoaned this attitude: "Ingres has long been accepted in the schools as par excellence the great modern master of drawing. His great saying '*Le dessin c'est la probité de l'art*' [drawing is the probity of art], has indeed become a watchword of the schools and an excuse for indulgence in a great deal of gratuitous and misplaced moral feeling. It has led to the display of all kinds of pedagogic folly. Art is a passion or it is nothing. It is certainly a very bad moral gymnasium. It is useless to try to make a kind of moral parallel bars out of the art of drawing. You will certainly spoil the drawing, and it is doubtful if you will get the morals. Drawing is a passion to the draughtsman just as much as colour is to the colourist, and the draughtsman has no reason to feel moral superiority because of the nature of his passion. He is fortunate to have it, and there is an end of the matter." Roger Fry, 'Drawings at the Burlington Fine Arts Club', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 32:179 (Feb 1918), 61.

¹⁹ Bemoaned by E.G. Robert Morris: 'Scratches made while on the train, in a plane, a hangover from the High Renaissance where every telephone number and coffee stain (by the right person) revealed the inner or under or deeper or less disguised and more naked creative nerve – so many little exposed nerves; see them trembling beneath the neuritis and neuralgia of the cross-hatching.' Robert Morris, 'On Drawing,' in Suzi Gablik and John Russell (eds.), *Pop Art Redefined* (London, 1969), 94–5.

²⁰ *Coalminers: An Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Coalminers and Professional Artists* (AIA, 1950); *Two Lancashire Painters: L.S. Lowry and Theodore Major* (Arts Council, 1951); *Realism in Contemporary Art: Painting on the Life and Struggles of the Working Class Produced by Northern Artists* (CPGB, 1951).

²¹ John Berger, *Looking Forward: an Exhibition of Realist Paintings and Drawings by Contemporary British Artists*, exh. cat. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1953).

Coda

In doing so he establishes a curious logic for the simultaneous autonomy and contingency of drawing. It emerges from the 1961 exhibition as a parallel activity, one whose material demands are distinct, and yet, it is because of this untranslatability to painting that drawing becomes conceptual rather than technical preparatory work. This is not the same as drawing being subsidiary to a painting practice – though Sylvester's texts are not entirely free of this – but it is drawing justified as a means of thought precisely because of its relationship to painting. Its conceptualism emerges from its contingency. And this absolutising of the artist's state of mind (to borrow Meyer Schapiro's words) becomes more important than the produced object.²² A version of this sentiment was expressed by Lawrence Alloway in his article of 1975 where he compared Sol LeWitt to Federico Zuccaro and the distinction between 'disegno interno' and 'disegno esterno', thus establishing a transhistorical and conceptual identity for drawing. This positioning directed the intellectual framework for Bernice Rose in curating *Drawing Now*, which in turn has become a point of departure for the narratives of exhibiting contemporary drawings as their own practice. Sylvester, however, like Bochner in 1966, gathers traces of conceptual activity in order to demonstrate beyond doubt the rigour and fullness of the creative process.²³ For this and for the subtlety of the framing of drawing practices, Sylvester's exhibitions are a little acknowledged but important landmark in the twentieth century renaissance of drawings.

²² Meyer Schapiro, 'Nature of Abstract Art', *Marxist Quarterly* (Jan-Mar 1937), 82; quoted in Bernice Rose, *Drawing Now*, exh. cat. (New York: MOMA, 1976), 11; quoting: Meyer Schapiro, 'Nature and Abstract Art', *Marxist Quarterly* (Jan-May, 1937), 11.

²³ Mel Bochner, *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant To Be Seen as Art*, exhibition held at School of Visual Arts Gallery, New York, 1966.