

# CLOSURE

Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung

## **Autor**

Darren C. Fisher (Melbourne/Victoria)

## **Aufsatztitel**

Graphic Storytelling. Teaching Experience and Utility

## **Journal**

Closure. Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung #8 (2021) – [www.closure.uni-kiel.de](http://www.closure.uni-kiel.de)

## **Empfohlene Zitierweise**

Darren C. Fisher: Graphic Storytelling. Teaching Experience and Utility. In: Closure. Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung #8 (2021), S. 129–142. <<http://www.closure.uni-kiel.de/closure8/fisher>>. 20.12.2021.

## **Herausgeber\_innen**

Victoria Allen, Cord-Christian Casper, Constanze Groth, Kerstin Howaldt, Julia Ingold, Gerrit Lungershausen, Dorothee Marx, Garret Scally, Susanne Schwertfeger, Simone Vrckovski, Dennis Wegner, Rosa Wohlers

## **Redaktion & Layout**

Victoria Allen, Cord-Christian Casper, Sandro Esquivel, Constanze Groth, Kerstin Howaldt, Julia Ingold, Arne Lüthje, Gerrit Lungershausen, Dorothee Marx, Garret Scally, Alina Schoppe, Susanne Schwertfeger, Simone Vrckovski, Dennis Wegner, Rosa Wohlers

## **Technische Gestaltung**

Sandro Esquivel, Marie-Luise Meier

## **Kontakt**

Homepage: <http://www.closure.uni-kiel.de> – Email: [closure@email.uni-kiel.de](mailto:closure@email.uni-kiel.de)

# Graphic Storytelling

## Teaching Experience and Utility

Darren C. Fisher (Melbourne/Victoria)

### Introduction

Waves of rolling economic shutdowns throughout the world in 2020 and into 2021 have, among other things, led to reappraising art's value concerning ›essential work‹ that sustains modern human life. A renewed appreciation of art's impact on our mental, physical, and emotional health has arisen because our routines and liberties face such profound disruption and ongoing uncertainty. This article will discuss the arts' renewed functional social utility in this pandemic context, identifying drawing as 1) a foundational art that plays a crucial role in driving and developing myriad art forms and 2) an accessible practice with benefits in mental health resilience and slow-living skills. A key focus of this article is Neil Cohn's 2012 paper »Explaining ›I Can't Draw‹: Parallels between the Structure and Development of Language and Drawing«, which provides a template from which to integrate supporting ideas and research.

While neither the most authoritative nor informed, mainstream media conversations register some level of community opinion. Within this context, a British mainstream press readership poll (Tracy) conducted in June 2020 ranked being an artist as the number one non-essential job. At the top of the list of essential jobs were doctor, nurse, cleaner, and garbage collector, many of which also spearheaded the list of ›jobs that I don't want to do‹. At the other end of the scale, a May 2020 piece in *The London Evening Standard* (Thompson) claimed the arts have never been more critical to our mental health and wellbeing. To this flawed debate, a 2021 report commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts added a survey of 260 people who identified as graphic storytellers, which returned promising results. The report found that demand for graphic storytellers is growing across various fields, including Health, Education, and Product Design, with new opportunities emerging in visual language for internal communications, mapping, strategic thinking and problem solving (Patrick Grant et al.).

The growth of graphic storytelling and increasing awareness of its utility may be vital in changing perceptions of the arts as viable career opportunities to progress traditionally glacial shifts of cultural values. A misstep would be to reframe graphic storytelling and drawing as production tools alone; they are languages of conceptualization and communication, vehicles of experience, and binders of ideas. The article will close with a consideration of how these viewpoints informed the design of an online comic workshop as part of CLOSURE's 2020 International Autumn Online School. This remotely delivered 90-minute session led participants through a suite of activities to impart foundational skills in graphic storytelling to adults and non-practitioners, building upon teaching experience with young adults in the Higher Education sector. In summation, this article seeks to add a voice of support to highlight the utility, benefit, and experience of drawing from a practical perspective.

### **Organic Knowing**

Howard Gardner argues for at least ten forms of intelligence: visual/spatial, bodily/kinaesthetic, musical/rhythmic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, naturalistic, moral, and existential (2011). Drawing engages a number of these intelligences across the physical, emotional, spatial, and cerebral. Within a Practice Led Creative Research context, »making is conceived to be the driving force behind the research, and in certain modes of practice also the creator of ideas« (Mäkelä, 79). Chris Gavalier recognizes that drawing plays an integral part in the evolution of ideas and stories as he states that »a drawing is not simply the execution of an idea, « because »things happen in the drawing process itself« (14). Ivan Brunetti agrees with Gavalier as he points out that »structure cannot be imposed from without; it must develop, grow, evolve from within« (6). Citing Chris Ware, Brunetti stresses that »allowing one's drawings to suggest the direction of a story is comics' single greatest formal advantage« (66). This perspective considers visual language's complex relationship with text, setting up a paradigm where stories are ›constructed‹ through writing and organically ›grown‹ through drawing.

Part of how images suggest previously unconsidered story development in their growth process is through the interactions of media, individual biomechanics, and practiced habits. The constraints and influences of materials, medium, and motor skills create what Australian cartoonist Pat Grant refers to as an uncontrollable or inevitable nature of the visual outcomes, stating that

to cartoon is to make marks that are locked within a nest of cages. Some of these cages are created by the author. Some are created by the conventions and idioms of the visual language. Some are created by the practical restraints of the workflow. Either way, the friction between the cartooning body and the walls of these cages is an essential component of style (172).

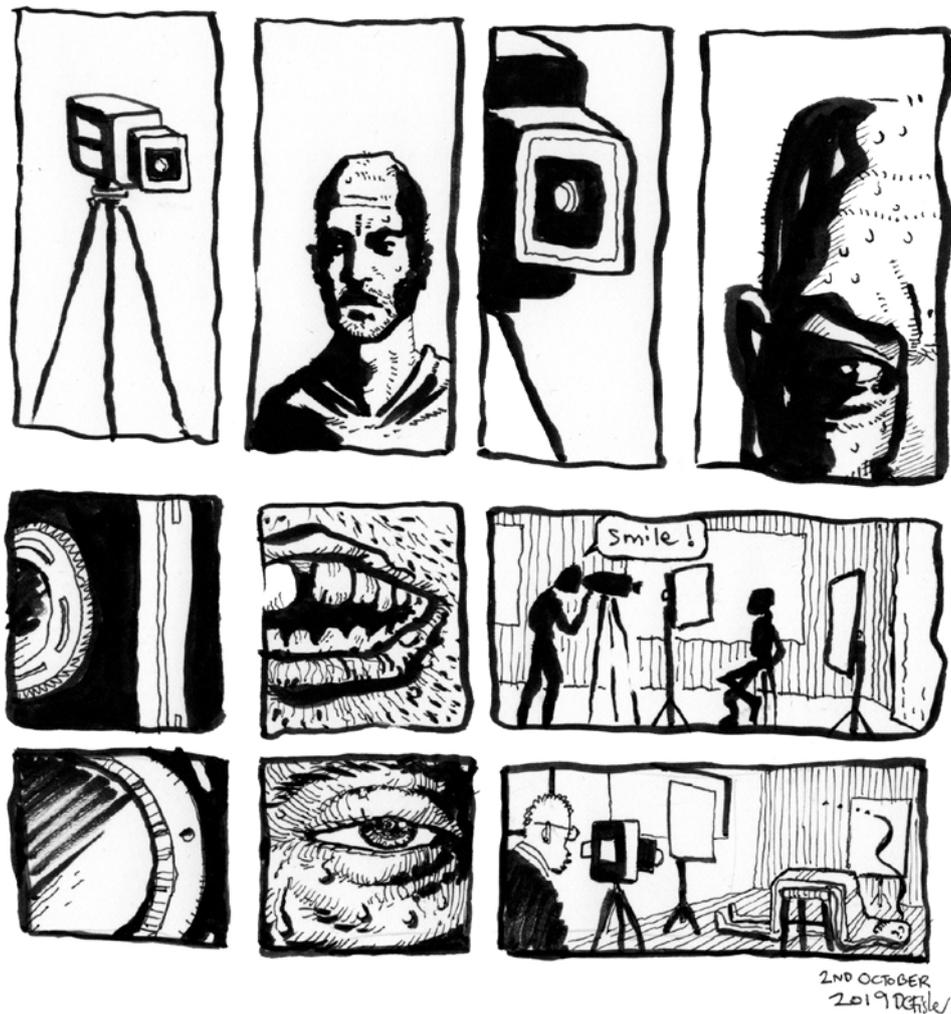


Fig. 1: Diary Comics 1 – ›Straight ahead‹ image-based story development.

This personalized approach to drawing creates a unique space for creativity with many benefits, including »promoting personal change, development of identity and self-awareness« (Blomdahl et al., 322), even superseding pharmacology regarding specific prolonged symptoms and activity limitations (see Thyme et al., Körlin et al.). These correlations suggest a causal link between our mental health and drawing as a largely forgotten yet vitally important form of human expression.

### The Language of Cultural Misapprehensions

Although the comparison between drawing and language is not new (Arnheim; Willats), Cohn further articulates a link between the two as expressions of our basic need to communicate, proposing that drawing is »fundamental [...] to humans as a species« (167). The foun-

der of ›Literary Darwinism‹, Joseph Carroll, echoes Cohn’s assertion from an evolutionary perspective, stating that we »have evolved dispositions for [...] participating in shared forms of imagination through stories, songs, dance, and visual images« (90). This evolutionary and fundamental nature of drawing is evident at an early age. Children instinctively lay the foundations for image production by scribbling meaningless marks, similarly to how they begin speaking by first producing inarticulate noises. The ability to draw and communicate through image production is widely accessible physically. Still, a shift in cultural attitudes and misinformation is required before more adults assume their rightful role as visual storytellers.

A child’s engagement and progression in drawing often abruptly ceases around the age of puberty, commonly attributed to a lack of interest or motivation (Davis). Popular misconceptions include that those who continue to draw past their teenage years have an innate gift for artistry, or otherwise have worked hard to overcome a ›normal‹ post-puberty inertia. Naturally, such cessation of use does not occur with language, making the link between language and drawing appear tenuous. However, when viewing trends in drawing progression across cultures, the association gathers credibility. Japanese children, for example, do not stagnate similarly to their equivalents in the West. To understand why, we must consider cultural influences, primarily, the saturation of Japanese comics, or manga, an essential medium that

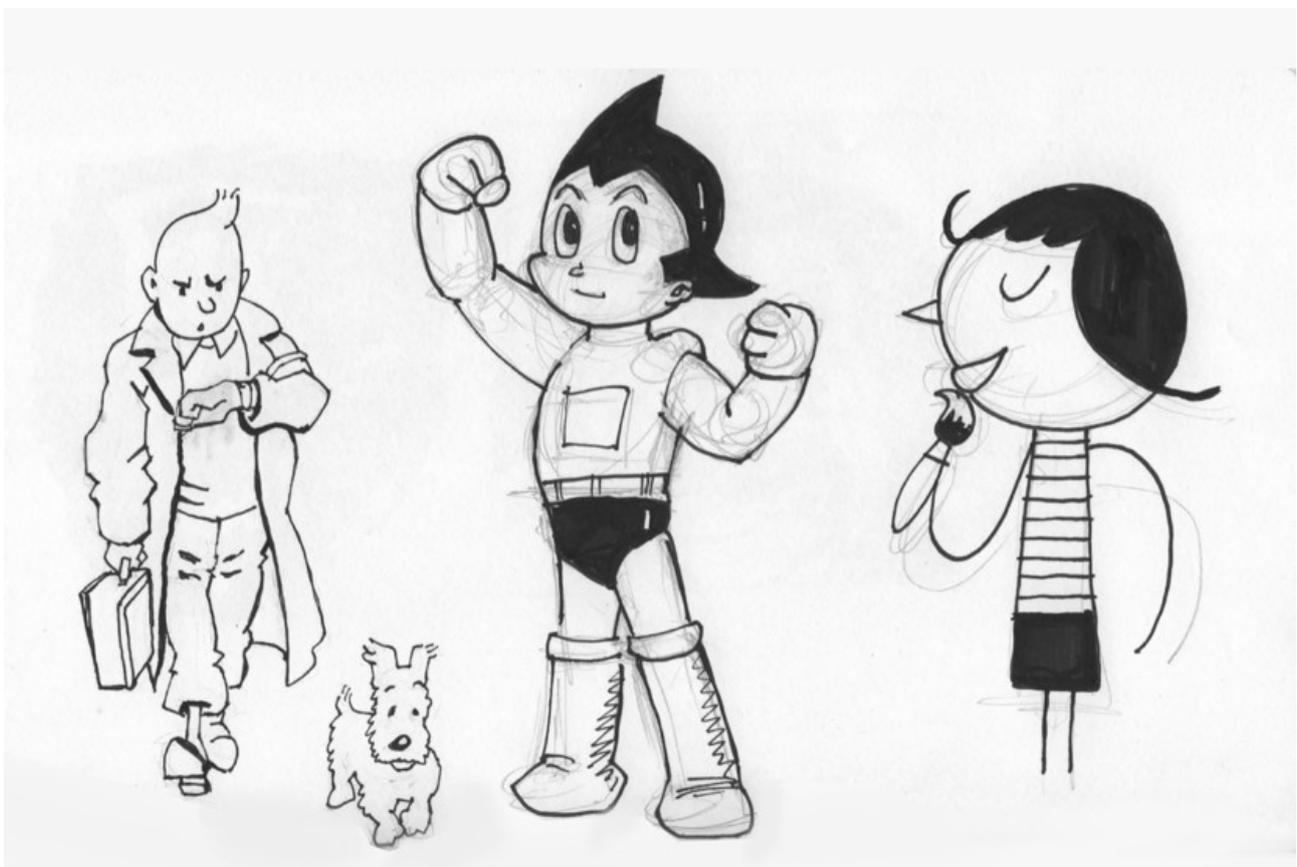


Fig. 2: Observational drawing 1 – Mimicking iconic styles.

transcends genre and unifies demographics through its largely uniform language of symbols, marks, and design. Cohn refers to this visual language as a graphic lexicon, a mental library of graphics the user chooses from in the process of drawing and engaging in other forms of visual communication, including comics.

Challenges facing Western children in building a useable graphic lexicon include the general devaluation of the arts as previously outlined. Additional blocks of progress are the many visual styles and lack of differentiation regarding their cultural significance. This idea of cultural significance is critical, as the consistency of graphic schemas provides essential building blocks in the development of drawing proficiency (see Wilson). Despite our globalized economies, we exist in culturally constrained silos that shape the success of a sustained drawing habit. As with language, ongoing development is aided by encouragement and immersion, considering that we do not learn purely in pursuit of utility in business or as a means to a skillfully modulated end. The verbal-linguistic mode allows us to

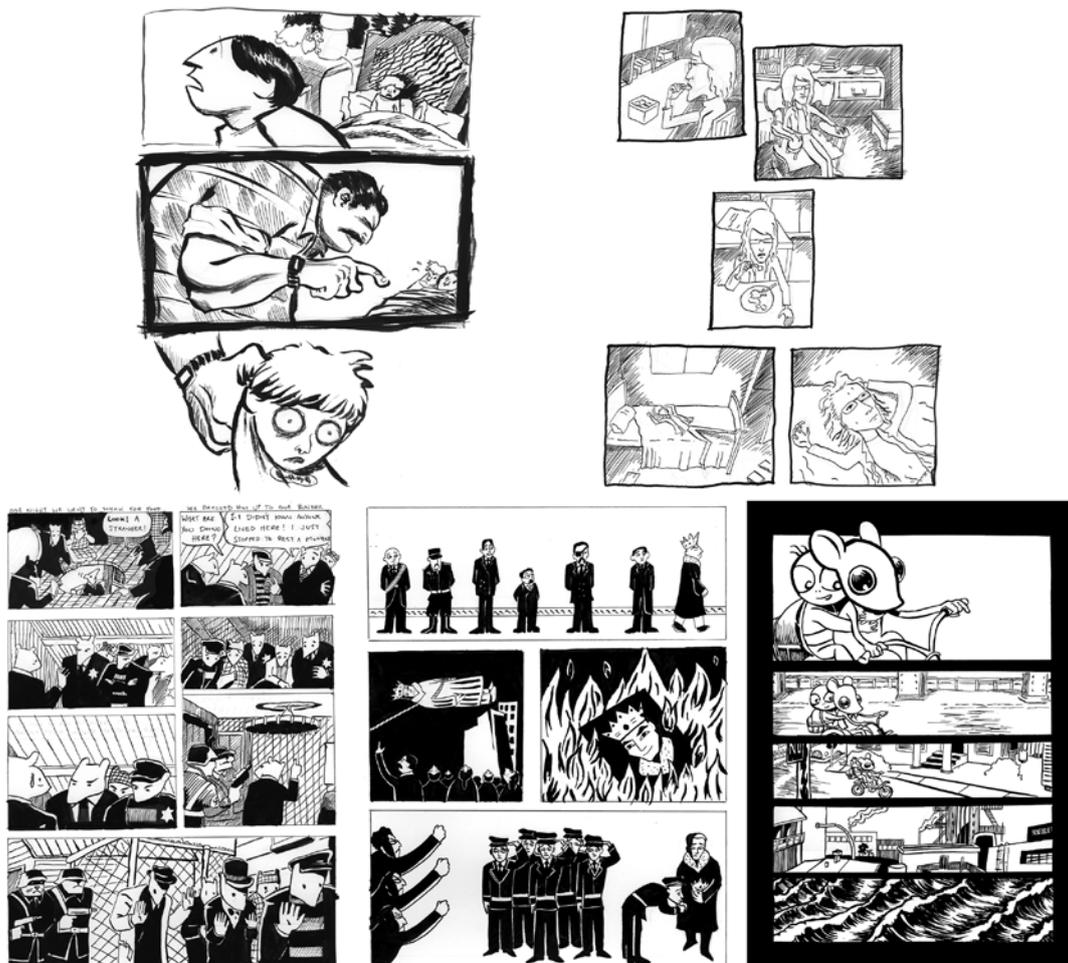


Fig. 3: Observational drawing 2 – Mimicking comic styles.



Fig. 4: Memory Drawing 1 – Colour and composition on social experience.

exchange ideas and to understand ourselves via conversation and internal self-narration. Language also facilitates the experience and expression of emotion through cultural, religious and personal acts, including singing, praying and chanting. Such analogies to the nature of language may help us navigate drawing's reconceptualization as a tool of deep personal benefit as it spreads into the realm of commerce. In the context of negotiating essential work and waves of rolling pandemic lockdowns, this is a pivotal moment to reappraise existing misapprehensions of art and rediscover drawing as a necessary contribution to our lives.

### **Merging Binary Oppositions**

There are broadly two dominant fields of thought and approach to drawing. These are Observational Drawing (also referred to as life-drawing, visual realism, and view-based depiction); and Memory Drawing (also called intellectual-realism and object-based depiction). Traditionally, observational drawing is encouraged to develop drawing competency, which we can apply for communicative or conceptual purposes in conjunction with the imagination. Advice commonly given to developing artists is to learn to draw through the observation and graphical representation of life. This advice manifests in various ways, from life drawing and plein air painting to furtively sketching people in public settings. Modern research adds to the arguments for observation while adding a nuanced understanding of its application. While art institutions have long criticized

the imitation of other people's drawings (see Lowenfeld), in fact, imitating other artists has been shown to fuel overall creativity (Ishibashi and Okada). From my perspective, drawing requires more complexity than simple either/or binary oppositions. It is common for students with highly developed observational drawing skills to find memory drawing a challenge, and conversely, those who rely on memory alone tend to be underdeveloped in observational drawing proficiencies.

According to Cohn, observational drawing articulates a 2.5-dimensional representation of perception, while memory drawing requires a mental 3D model. That is to say, a three-dimensional understanding of graphic elements is necessary to allow for the complete flexibility of their two-dimensional inscription with freedom

of axis and rotation. In practice, a mix of approaches is optimal. Memory drawing benefits from the reality check of observation and the application of foundational heuristics. When studying an environment, it is helpful to recreate a perspective set up to find the horizon, vanishing points, and lines of convergence, and adding elements from imagination to an observed scene can bring new worlds to life. Similarly, drawing from memory is aided by composition studies, separations of tonality, and depth elements of foreground, midground and background. Applying all available tools across observation and memory drawing facilitates a more comprehensive and flexible repertoire of image-making than an either/or mindset.

### Flowing to Proficiency

Drawing depends on procedures and ingrained habits, baked into a visual/spatial, bodily/kinaesthetic creative inquiry. It incorporates the observed and interoceptive world, cultural

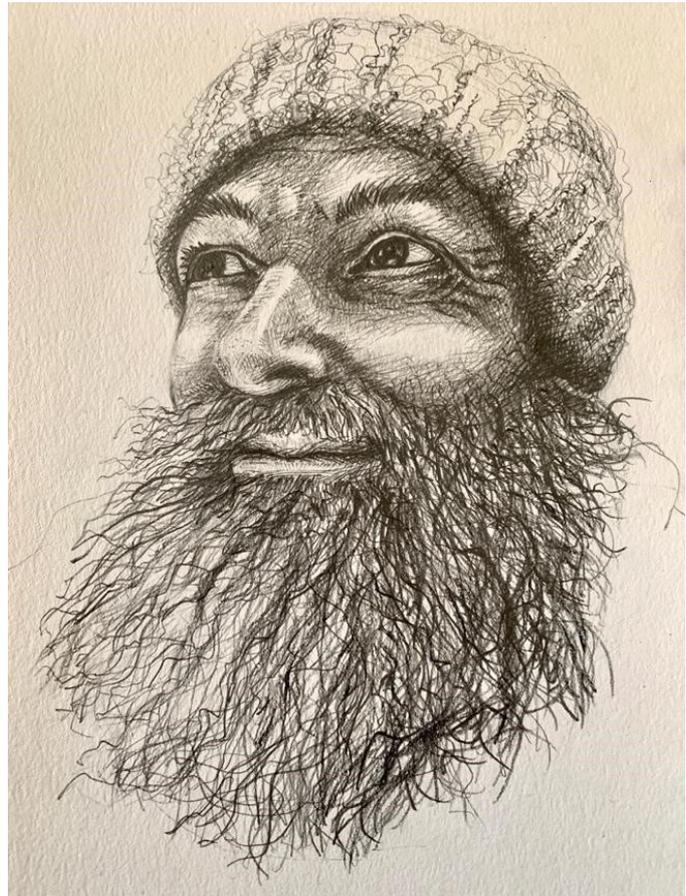


Fig. 5: Observational drawing 3 – Mimicking external graphic syntax (Sketchy School online, portrait class).

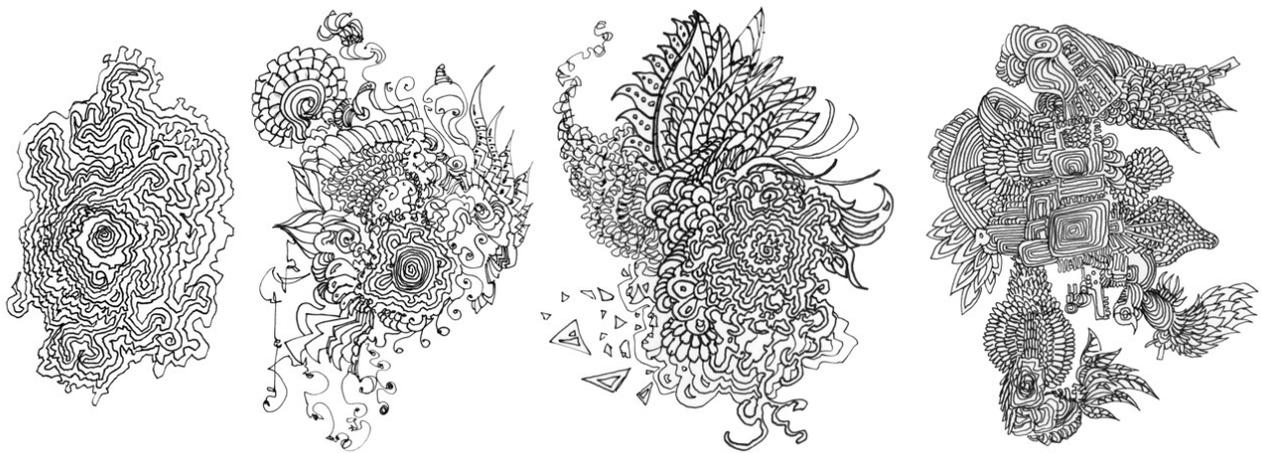


Fig. 6: Automatic drawing 1 – beginning with spiral pattern.

schemas, fine motor skills, the interactions of media, and cognitive choices of design and composition. These elements become merged as material outputs through perseverance, and the ability to sink into deep states of immersive flow.

As both a teacher of Animation in the Higher Education sector and a creative practitioner, I consider it crucial that academic theory also be practical. We need to apply emergent and divergent views on drawing and graphic production to better students and their practice. Advice commonly found in textbooks on drawing and given within art institutions is to draw frequently. However, this advice does not help if the primary will to draw is lacking, and strangely, this importance is not always made explicit, despite research showing that enhanced learning and motivation is driven by foregrounding experience (see Pemberton and Nelson) over expectations of outcome.

In »The Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction«, Brian Boyd states that

We can define art as cognitive play with pattern [...]. Just as play refines behavioral options over time by being self-rewarding, so art increases cognitive skills, repertoires, and sensitivities [...]. Like play, art succeeds by engaging and rewarding attention, since the more frequent and intense our response, the more powerful the neural consequences (Boyd, 15).

We can enable play patterns in a pedagogical setting by sequentially building activities logically, balancing risk and reward through an individually scalable challenge, and facilitating immersive creativity states. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory provides a framework to understand the deep engagement which can consume an individual to the extent that they lose focus on the outside world, even ignoring biological urges such as hunger (2014). A summarized list of the structures towards creating flow, and characteristics typical of the flow state, include:

- Clear goals every step of the way
- Immediate feedback to one's actions
- Balance between challenge and skill
- Action and awareness are merged
- Distractions are excluded from consciousness
- There is no worry of failure
- Self-consciousness disappears
- The sense of time becomes distorted
- The activity becomes autotelic

There are many barriers to achieving flow. From an institutional perspective, subjective marking processes that overly rely on tacit assessment rubrics can ingrain worry of failure and inhibit a sense of free experimentation. Additionally, some of the flow stages viewed independently are ideologically at odds with modern values and norms. For example, engaging in an activity where time becomes distorted seems counterintuitive in our productivity-focused world. Multi-tasking across countless digital platforms is the norm; excluding distractions from consciousness seems impossible, even undesirable. Given the generative effect of slow living and mindfulness practices, we need to reevaluate these norms. Drawing requires close and ongoing observation creating a feedback loop of creation and correction, which is the second stage of flow, it requires perseverance and patience, with some people sure to find difficulty in being entirely in the moment while drawing. There are also issues of media and familiarity with processes. As discussed, the nested cages of fine motor control, ergonomics, and physical materials play an integral part in the direct experience of drawing.



Fig. 7: Automatic drawing 2 – Watercolour and ink.

There are challenging barriers to overcome, particularly in teaching adults to draw. How do we create an entry point for adults reengaging with drawing practices after years of inactivity and burdened by an internal self-narrative of ›I can't draw‹? Keeping the flow stages in mind, I designed activities so that participants would not get too bored or worried, with clear demonstration and sufficient time to engage with activities. The online teaching space poses an extra layer of difficulty in gauging individual comprehension and engagement, requiring sensitivity to track participant progress without causing needless distraction. In designing a workshop structure where drawing is analogous to language, fostering parallel structures in small group discussions proved helpful. Chris Waters' concept of ›telescoping‹ begins with generalized questions before drilling down to more specificity and then telescoping back out to a general overview of covered content. This framework was implemented by starting with an overview of personal art practice, definitions of cartooning, then focusing on concepts of representation and specific exercises before pulling back to general applications.

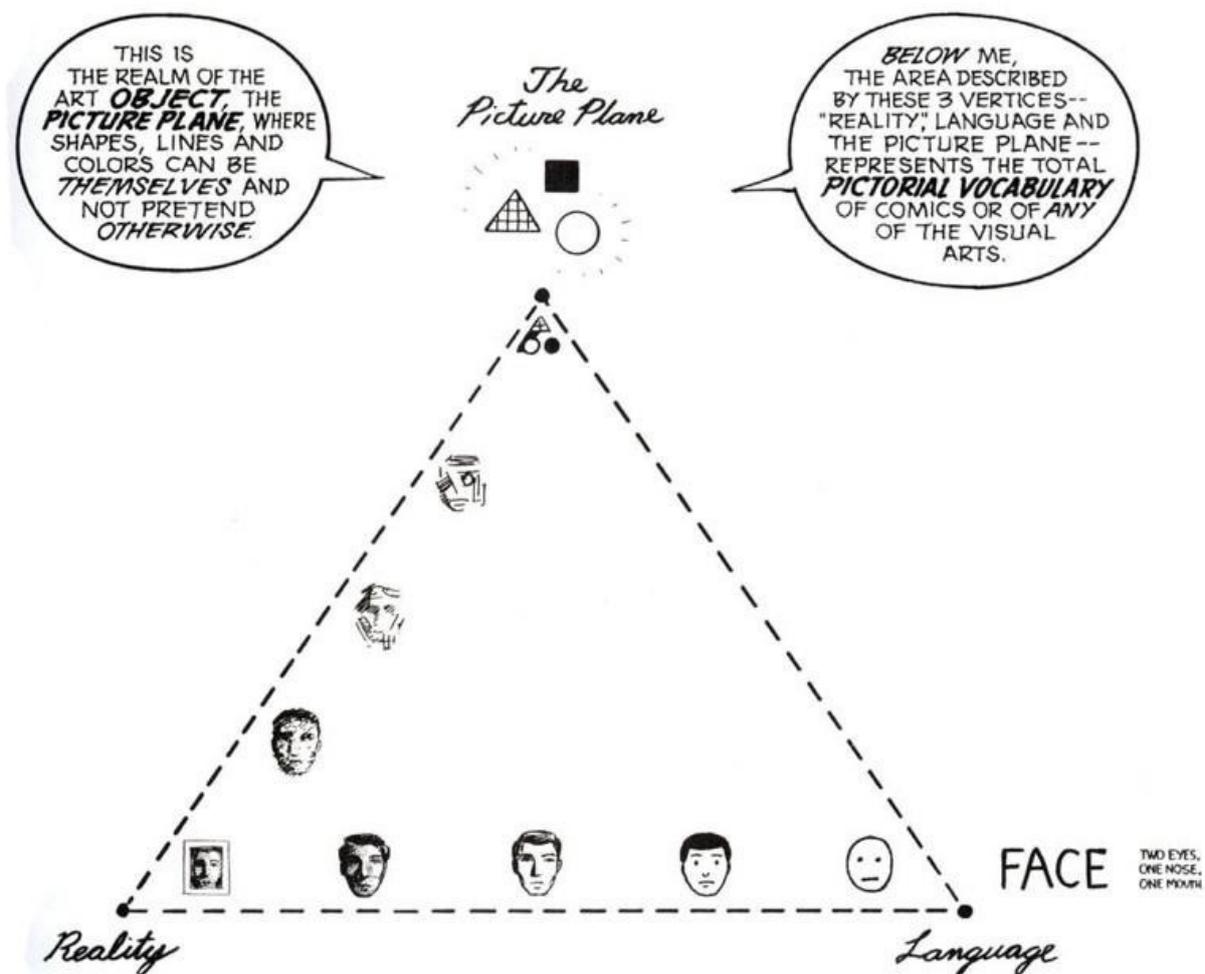


Fig. 8: Scott McCloud's *Triangle of Representation*.

My workshop within the Closure Interdisciplinary Online Autumn School began with a short presentation of practitioners and styles to set the tone of autobiographical cartooning before introducing Scott McCloud's *Triangle of Representation* and the natural crossovers between the text, image and meaning. Warmup exercises including two-handed drawing, calling attention to the physical experience of drawing in a new way. A secondary aim of these exercises is to ›loosen the tap‹ of creativity towards a renegotiation of ingrained, limiting beliefs around drawing. The main workshop activity asked participants to visualize a generated list of prompts and then redraw or extend someone else's, mixing graphic lexicons while building confidence in sequential storytelling. This exercise resulted in defamiliarized personal stories, a low-stake form of autobiography. A closing phase of discussion allowed people to reflect on the session, based on Blomdahl et al.'s definition of art therapy as a two-phase procedure of ›art creation and the verbalizing of this experience [...] [creating] space for the client's own narrative« (322). Based on Brent Wilson's 2003 findings on the importance of graphic schemas as building blocks of drawing proficiency I included graphics to mimic and springboard from in the workshop design, and emphasized simple drawing tools to encourage ongoing, everyday practice. Multiple activities with frequent check-ins helped to assess people's engagement and try to ensure that the goals were clear enough to be met.

This workshop demonstrated the importance of providing clear goals every step of the way – the first step of creating flow – as some outputs showed a level of uncertainty with what was being asked. This is admittedly not always a straightforward proposition given the many distractions offered by our screens, the disruptions of internet connections, and many participants engaging outside of their first language. However, the primary goal of having people engage with a creative practice was a great success, with the variety of responses to prompts, the interactions, and sharing of outcomes, demonstrating an overcoming of critical self-judgment. Frequent sessions, in a face to face setting, would have a greater chance of setting up sustainable practices, fulfilling Boyd's concept of cognitive play with pattern to facilitate more frequent responses, and more powerful neural consequences.

## Conclusion

This article has identified misconceptions of drawing as a niche talent nestled within a reduction of the arts as a dying cultural field maintained through fits of nostalgia and goodwill. Frequent economic shutdowns brought about by the pandemic have driven a cultural conversation that repositions the arts as vital for our individual and collective communal resilience. By identifying its various properties and outcomes, this article has highlighted areas in which drawing can be considered a powerful tool for cognition, communication, and self-therapy. A broad reconsideration of drawing's value is likely to be led by a growing apprecia-



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