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On drawing: Gosia Wlodarczak's quest

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Cinderella II – The Dreamer
12 May - 10 June 2008
Cinderella II – The Dreamer

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Gosia Wlodarczak, Desire 2: Phantom, 2007, process of making – drawing panels
Gosia Włodarczak, Desire: Yohji (detail), 2007, pigment markers, acrylic on wallpapers on cardboard
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All artwork by Gosia Wlodarczak
Desire 3: Beo, stillframe from video installation, 2007
Introduction

*Cinderella II – The Dreamer* is an exhibition of work by Gosia Włodarczak that engages primarily with drawing, but also incorporate elements of sound and video into installation and performance. In her art practice Gosia equates the reality of ‘being’ with seeing. Engaging with time, space and place her drawings reflect what she sees existing in the immediate proximity of the space surrounding her. As she states: ‘I draw my environment as I see it in real time – tracing and re-tracing the visible…’ ¹

*Cinderella II – The Dreamer* is one of a series of research based exhibitions that engages external scholars to participate in the SASA Gallery’s exhibition and publication programs. The external scholar for this exhibition is Associate Professor Ian McLean, Fine Arts Honours Co-ordinator, School of Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts, University Western Australia. As well as writing an essay for the catalogue, McLean will participate in events associated with the exhibition.

The SASA Gallery supports a program of exhibitions focusing on innovation, experimentation and performance. With the support of the Division of Education, Art and Social Sciences, the Division Research Performance and Five Year Research Infrastructure funds, the SASA Gallery is being developed as a leading contemporary art space and as an active site of teaching and learning. Exhibiting and publishing high-quality research based work, the SASA Gallery showcases work by South Australian artists, designers, writers and curators associated with South Australian School of Art and Louis Laybourne-Smith School of Architecture and Design in a national and international context.

The SASA Gallery has received immense support towards the development and implementation of this exhibition and catalogue. The catalogue has been designed through the Visual Communication Consultancy and printed at Cruickshank Printers. The excellent wine served at the opening was supplied by Perrini Estate.

Mary Knights
Director, SASA Gallery

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¹ Gosia Włodarczak,
www.gosiawlodarczak.com, March 2008
Desire 1: Yohji (detail), 2007, pigment marker, acrylic on wallpaper on cardboard
Since arriving in Australia from Poland some twelve years ago, Gosia Włodarczak has established herself as an innovative and highly individual artist whose practice centres on the act of drawing. In the artist’s own words:

My practice is made manifest through heightened awareness of dwelling in the everyday areas of human thought, behaviour and experience. Drawings are processed via the biological phenomenon of ‘being’ as detected by my sense of sight and communicated through my body. I draw my environment as I see it in real time - tracing and re-tracing the visible - thereby finding elements often concealed by the primacy of sight. My work interrogates space, time and language. Over time I have adopted various visual processes and methods to address and communicate these issues. Drawing is the basis of all my work, extending towards installation, performance, interactive situations and video and sound installations.

In Cinderella II – The Dreamer, with the assistance of New Work grant from the Australia Council, Włodarczak continues her investigation of the perception of home and domestic space as a site of dreaming and habitation where the imaginary and real coexist.

The three objects that form the basis of this exhibition are presented as ‘stylised profiles of desire’: a haute couture outfit from Yohji Yamamoto’s 2007 Spring Collection, a Rolls Royce Phantom and a Bang & Olufsen sound system. Włodarczak is making the dreams of three of her friends come true through her drawing. When they are not on the wall the works can be packed away into gift boxes made by the artist. Portability is an important aspect of this new work – theoretically each recipient can carry the box home. The artist has created a special gift for each of three friends, which represents both the materialisation of a wish they have shared with her and a record of the time she has dedicated to making it come true – a portion of her own life.

Each of the objects has an associated sound component which was created in collaboration with the Canberra based composer, Alistair Noble. Initially Włodarczak and Noble toyed with the term ‘sound-image’ to describe the product of their collaboration, however on discovering it was already in use in the music and film industries, Włodarczak finally settled on the word ‘Similitude’. These sound installations, Similitudes, represent ‘an aural equivalent of the visual experiences’ the artist has created for us. The idea is based on her belief that ‘everything in the world is built with/constructed of the same energy which manifests/appears itself in different forms to be experienced by human senses’ so that that in her work she is ‘developing processes and codes to make translations between senses’.

This sense of interconnectedness, of inner cohesion, is central to Włodarczak’s practice and the inclusion of a sound component is an extension of a very logical approach to art making. Włodarczak has a quite singular approach to drawing. She speaks about what she does with passion. One gets the impression that it is something she has to do: a life-affirming activity. In a monograph on the artist published in 2004, David Bromfield concludes that to ask what she is drawing, is to ask the wrong question, since ‘for Gosia the verb is intransitive like the verb to be’.

Drawing is looking rather than looking at, the object of drawing is not the representation of a particular environment, rather it is the documentation of being in the environment. The former suggests an automatic activity, like breathing, while the latter is a more considered, self-conscious activity.

When one is confronted with Włodarczak’s drawing installations one sees a complex tracery of lines of varying density. In certain areas where the ground cover is sparser one can make out a hand, a cup, a part of a cornice, the side of a chair: domestic objects documented with lines of practised economy and an enviable confidence, the result of rigorous academic training. In most cases, the bulk of the drawing is executed within the artist’s home and then the final stages can be completed within the gallery space, with or without audience participation.

Rather than relegate the activity of drawing to the realm of ‘making art’, Włodarczak seeks to integrate it as seamlessly as possible into her day-to-day domestic existence. The presence of other people, the distractions of conversation or television or meals are welcomed, as they enrich the immediate and present environment that the artist is recording and also ensure that the simple activities of looking and recording remain just that, unencumbered by any self-conscious attempt at self-expression or art-making.

Włodarczak shares this compulsive recording of the present with Conceptual artists On Kawara and Hanne Darboven. Japanese Kawara has been based in New York for over 40 years, and since 1966 he has made over 2,000 ‘date paintings’ whereby he paints the current date according to strict, self-imposed rules which determine the choice of typeface, size, format and colour. Self-imposed rules, in this case based on numerical systems, also underpin the daily ‘writings’ - rhythmic marks on paper that reference
in cursive script or numeric tables – that have occupied German artist Hanne Darboven since the 1970s. Similarly, each of Wlodarczak’s works is constructed according to a quite detailed plan which outlines the number and dimensions of panels that constitute each of her drawing installations and the time to be allocated to the drawing of each panel. Paradoxically, it is the very specificity of the constraints she establishes prior to embarking upon the drawing phase that ultimately liberates the artist to concentrate solely on the act of drawing.

In Cinderella II – The Dreamer the ‘objects of desire’ are presented as stylised profiles, slightly larger than life size. They have been constructed, piece by piece, from 890 small to medium sized cardboard panels, which were first covered in wallpaper and then with a network of fine pigment pen lines. The process is quite straightforward: Wlodarczak finds an image on the Internet of the object desired by one of her friends. The image is gridded and the panels prepared, which can take several months to complete. The artist then works her way through the grid, each panel a record of her ‘looking’ at a particular time in a particular domestic space. The use of wallpaper in this series suggests domesticity. On another level it reflects the artist’s reticence to use the medium of drawing as a vehicle for self-expression; the function of wallpaper is to fill an empty wall, without shouting ‘Look at me!’ In a formal sense, it provides a textural backdrop which complements the drawn lines and is also an alternative means of achieving tonal contrast, aside from line density.

Musical notation is a sophisticated system of signs that allows a particular sequence of man-made sounds to be conceptualised as a written form so that it can be accurately reproduced when required. A musical score is a piece of music rendered in visual code, which some people have developed the skill of ‘reading’ and thus are able to ‘hear’ the music in their heads.

‘Eye music’ is not a new phenomenon. Medieval composers of songs sometimes used black and white notes for grief and joy, darkness and light, and the notation for courtly love songs could be presented in a heart shape. These were exceptions rather than the rule though, and the same Western notational system remained the norm for four hundred years until the mid 20th century, when, for some composers, the score became less a prescriptive tool and more a set of rules for a new type of musical game, together with the necessary material for playing.²

But in creating her Similitudes, Wlodarczak has inverted the usual sound/image relationship, wherein musical concerns influence the notation of a musical composition. She uses elements of musical notation as simply another set of drawing marks to add to her existing inventory.

It is important to note that for me these are simply visual artefacts, I do not prepare them with specific sounds in mind. I am not a musician but a visual artist, and I do not ‘hear’ notes.⁶

The process of translating a visual image to a musical score – and of transforming it into an artwork in its own right – is beautifully realised in the video soundtrack, Desire 1: Yohji, 2007.

Curiously, her method of ‘scoring’ Yohji, Phantom and Beo is far more closely related to traditional drawing methods of rendering a likeness than to her own more experimental approach to drawing. The shape of the object is created using musical notes, with dense groupings of quavers and semi quavers creating the darker tonal values to be found in the original photographs of the Objects of Desire. More complex or detailed parts of the objects are similarly accorded a busier score while less ornate areas are represented by ‘white’ notes of longer duration: minims and semibreves. As a process of image generation it is not dissimilar to typewriter art, an art form popularised by the Concrete poets in the 1950s and with which Wlodarczak has experimented in the past.

For Wlodarczak the musical notations are both a means to an end (a video soundtrack) and an end in themselves (editioned digital prints), and in this exhibition she is presenting them alongside the large drawing installations. In fact each Object of Desire has several components: a large multi-panelled drawing plus the plan for it, a musical notation and a video soundtrack. This non-hierarchical approach to process and product again links the artist to certain Conceptual artists who began working in the mid 1960s and who used time as the organising element in their work – Kawara and Darboven being notable examples. For such artists ‘the notational systems for recording time and processes were intended…to constitute the real and complete art object.’⁷

Creating the Similitudes required collaboration with a composer. Wlodarczak and Noble first worked together in 2006 to create what was then called a ‘sound image’ for the drawing installation, Skin of the Wall, shown at the Helen Maxwell Gallery in Canberra. The Similitudes in this exhibition are richer and more complex, ‘multi-dimensional and cyclic rather than two-dimensional and linear.’⁸

While initially the musical notations were simply visual artefacts, prepared with no specific sounds in mind, the artist was involved in making all the crucial decisions during the process of transforming image to digital sound. The instrumentation of each of the three Similitudes is different, as is its texture and mood, and the person willing to spend time with the work in this exhibition, moving between the different components, will be richly rewarded.

Each of the three video soundtracks provides a different insight into Wlodarczak’s creative process. Where the focus in Desire 1: Yohji was on the process of transformation, from an image of the actual object to the multi-panelled drawing, to the sound ‘score’, Desire 2: Phantom shows the artist at work – drawing and piecing together the panels. Desire 3: Beo is the most abstract and also the most playful. Fragments of images and musical notes on staves weave in and out on the screen: sound has become image once again.

It seems so logical that sound would become a significant component of Wlodarczak’s practice. Her approach to drawing is itself much like jazz improvisation. While the latter assumes an understanding of classical harmony, Wlodarczak’s ability to effortlessly and spontaneously record on paper the minutiae of her immediate surrounds is based on a rigorous academic background in drawing techniques. Those fortunate to have seen her perform live ‘on stage’ in a gallery, depart with the knowledge that they have witnessed a virtuoso performer.
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Desire 1: Yohji, 2007, wallpaper mounted on cardboard and box, 12 x 22.5 x 16.5 cm
Desire 1: Yohji, Layout, 2007, archival digital print, edition 3, 100 x 50 cm

Desire 1: Yohji, 2007, 199 panels drawing installation, pigment marker, acrylic on wallpaper on cardboard, 200 x 81 cm
‘Gosia’s ambition’, wrote David Bromfield, is ‘to achieve this absolute identity with the universe’. At the other extreme, and what might seem more on par with Andy Warhol’s small-minded desire to be a machine, Bromfield also thought ‘she would like to be nothing but drawing, to exist solely as an endless act of drawing, a constant immediate looking’. We might, then, well wonder about the sanity of Gosia’s obsessive drawing project, which seems to exist somewhere between science fiction (‘identity with the universe’) and theatre of the absurd (‘she would like to be nothing but drawing’), and which has a similar disciplined riotousness to the Outsider art that Dubuffet collected from lunatic asylums. Yet, as Bromfield demonstrates in his study and I also hope to show here, there is method in Gosia’s madness and more, much more.

While drawing and the universe are much the same thing for Gosia—certainly her drawings can look like the endless banks of stars in the night sky—it is better to see her drawings as the way of achieving what Bromfield calls ‘this absolute identity with the universe’. She doesn’t want to be a drawing; rather she draws in the sense that a bird flies. She draws not from desire but because that is the way she is in the world.

For Gosia drawing is not a way of representing things but more an index of the quotidian processes by which we know them. Quite literally, drawing is a prosthesis for her sensations—not a prosthesis that replaces some missing or damaged sense, but one which, like a microscope or telescope, extends her existing senses or embodied experience of the world. Thus she draws not at the easel, like a painter looking onto the world in order to objectify it, but draws as she lives in the world, in a variety of positions from lying to standing but always drawing out from the posture of her body and simultaneously in from the surrounding space—as if constructing a vestibule of habitation. And this world that she draws into and out of is invariably not a studio but her lived space, her home. Likewise, the light she draws by is never something designed, as in an art gallery or studio, to illuminate a scene or the drawing, but is the varied light of the everyday world—from the deep shadows of night to the flickering fluorescence of a television screen.

If Gosia is not drawing the things of the world as if she is a subject objectifying them before her, what then is she drawing? Her drawings voice (and I will shortly comment on the sound of her drawings) the reciprocal movements of her sensations, which, as Merleau-Ponty observed, simultaneously touch the world as it touches them. In other words, they are the means by which the world moves into her and her into the world. These movements are also reciprocal in that they extend inside as well as outside. That is, the spatiality of her drawing refers not just to the outside space she inhabits—her habitat—but also to the inside space of herself—her habitus—which, because of this reciprocal movement, this simultaneous touching and being touched, is not herself as a differentiated subject or consciousness, but herself as an undifferentiated mind/body. Thus these movements, or processes, which together are the very act of drawing, literally draw herself and the habitat she occupies into a co-joined contact zone, and at the same time entangle—rather than separate—her consciousness and the various biological and psychological systems that comprise her body and its necessary relations with the world.

This short account of Gosia’s project has probably only confirmed your suspicion about both the artist’s and her project’s madness, but her ambition cannot be in doubt. The project is in the realm of philosophy rather than science fiction; with Kant, Gosia sees in art a means of circumventing the object/subject dualism that bedevils Western philosophy—which is perhaps why it also seems mad or absurd, if by madness we mean the inability to distinguish between subject and object, self and other. However it would be too limiting to categorise the ambition of Gosia’s drawing as philosophy. It is more cosmological in scale. Like a theoretical physicist she seeks to trace the most fundamental forces of aesthetic experience, as if in this way its very fabric can be unpacked, or should I say unpicked, undone, so that art can be shown for what it does.

Does is the operative world: Gosia’s drawing is essentially performative: it does rather than is. Her drawings are not formal objects in themselves, as the critic Clement Greenberg famously insisted Jackson Pollock’s paintings were, but index the events and processes of embodied experiences. In being a doing thing, Gosia’s drawings are temporal entities—she means them to register
the temporality of embodied experiences, and she does this by embedding her drawing in the biological, rather than the symbolic or conceptual. Those beautiful marks and colours don’t just adorn the skin of paper or canvas or wall, either as immutable signs or decoration; rather they are lived extensions of her skin, most obviously her fingers but most importantly herself: her living undifferentiated mind/body.

It is important to emphasise the biological actuality of Gosia’s drawings and not, as I did in a previous essay, simply defer her aims into the realm of philosophy—as when I quoted Derrida, who insisted that the artist draws like a blindman, with his fingers not his eyes, as ‘if a lidless eye had opened at the tip of the fingers’… ‘the hand ventures forth… in place of the head, as if to precede, prepare, and protect it.’ This entirely misses the profundity of Gosia’s ambition. She draws as much with her eyes as her hands, and indeed her whole body. For her there is no conceptual opposition, so beloved by philosophers, between the eye and the hand or the head and the body. Hence there is no deconstructive intent in which, in Derrida’s words, this ‘seeing itself see… cannot be thought… and thus is blinded… at the very point where it sees itself looking.’ Gosia is not seeking some intangible invisibility, some theological space that has been othered by reason. Her notion of drawing is more pragmatic and positivist, earthed in her biological body and the gravity that holds it in a particular environment and shapes the ecology of her habitation. Gosia’s hands, like her eyes and head, are equal interconnected parts of that integrated meta-system of the body’s skeletal, muscular, respiratory, nervous, sensory, cardiovascular, lymphatic, hormonal, endocrine, reproductive and urinary sub-systems. It is this whole anatomical package that, in her drawings, moves through the world.

Because Gosia’s art literally maps an unfolding of the body in space in time, it is best characterised as phenomenological. Thus it disavows, not in a critical fashion but just as a matter of course, everything brought to the consciousness by ideology and language, as if the shaping of consciousness by culture and the environment has in some way been averted. This is why I have not sought to interpret the meaning of Gosia’s drawings—they are not open to interpretation—but simply explain how she draws and what this might mean. If I had to interpret them in the usual way, to articulate their content, all I could point to would be a type of nothingness, the nothingness from which being comes into existence.

Like a Yogi, Gosia understands her task as being to orchestrate the constituents of her body’s phenomenological performance in the world, so that her consciousness is not some artistic ego jack-booting across the canvas, but a barely perceptible hum tuned into the movements of her anatomical systems moving through the world. Like a Yogi, this level of consciousness requires a highly disciplined approach, something closer to ritual and ceremony than the promiscuous arena of post-romantic art. It also involves a highly reductive regimen so that focus can be brought to only the most elemental features of this embodied epistemology, by which the body making marks is a means of knowing or revealing. This embodied making of marks is a way of knowing, not in the limited scientific sense of measuring the physical dimensions of the body in the world, though Gosia’s mark making does involve this, but also plotting shifting moods, emotional dimensions as well as meta-physical aspects of things, spaces, systems (bodily, meteorological etc.) and feelings as they register in her sensations. Recently this mark making, already musical in its rhythms, already generating a distinctive hum—you can surely at least hear the peripatetic beat of free-form jazz—has widened to encompass what she calls ‘sound drawings.’

Likening them to aural ‘sylitudes’ of the underlying energies in her corner of the universe, she aims to translate between their different phenomenological manifestations, in this case, as felt between the vestibular and optic nerves.

It is tempting to see Gosia’s art in terms of that now familiar modernist and postmodernist trajectory of taking art into ever-new realms that move beyond its traditional aesthetic boundaries—into what has sometimes been called the anti-aesthetic. In her case something as simple as drawing has become a seismograph of complex bodily processes and spatial arrangements, rather than the object of silent aesthetic contemplation. However, Gosia’s drawing turns not away from and beyond the aesthetic dimension but back into it, reminding us of its original revelatory function as a way of knowing things that are normally considered unknowable or overly complex and unpredictable. She thus rejects the ideological turn of late twentieth-century art and its fetishisation of the image and allegory—as if the image can so easily reveal meaning; as if art is some cultural studies project.

Stripping away what is sometimes called the content or meaning of art, Gosia concentrates her energy on the medium itself, on what it means to make or perform marks on a particular sheet of paper or wall. I am reminded of the anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner’s claim that the development of Aboriginal thought takes an ‘aesthetic rather than an intellectual course.’ While there is not a lack of empirical and intellectual thought in traditional Aboriginal life, the cosmos is too vast and unpredictable to be known only in this way. It is not comprised of fixed determinate things but is a fluid and changing field. In the absence of enough direct empirical and intellectual knowledge, the mysteries of the cosmos are tracked through an intuitive feel for its symmetries and patterns. This aesthetic sensibility is what alerts Aborigines to the force and action of Dreaming in the world.

While this aesthetic knowledge is, in Aboriginal ceremony, remembered in the form of allegories and stories, their aesthetic content—the geometry or structure of the songs and mark making—is the key to interpreting the ever-shifting contemporary meanings of what these stories re-present. The circles and lines are not an alphabet by which a story is quickly and efficiently decoded, but poetic arrangements that must be felt and continually re-interpreted. Stanner called them ‘a kind of “furniture of the mind”’, as opposed to a fixed semiotic regime. So too the recurring forms of Gosia’s marks are a kind of “furniture of the mind” through which she makes a home in the world she occupies. Her art is, then, a cosmology; but unlike Aboriginal art, one in which any allegorical crust has not been allowed to accumulate.
Like Adam before he tasted the apple, she refuses any allegorical clothing.

If Gosia’s nakedness lays bare the origins and depths of the aesthetic process itself, and so seeks to articulate the common ground of all art, her reductive methodology is decidedly uncommon. Most art takes its aesthetic function for granted: the aesthetic is merely a means to some higher end. For example, in animals the aesthetic function is largely an intuitive means of sexual selection: the prize goes to the prettiest. Humans, being animals, are not exempt from this rule of desire in their art. However for tens of thousands of years human sexual selection and art have been subordinated to moral—i.e. ideological—precepts. A little over 200 years ago a new role was dreamed up for art: it would be an autonomous disinterested self-conscious aesthetic activity and a vehicle for individual freedom; and in the power games of the Cold War, art became a political marker for precisely this.

Gosia, who grew up and was educated in Poland—a frontier or contact zone of the Cold War—inherits the legacy of this relatively recent turn in the function of art; except, in this post-Cold War era, she feels no ideological need to demonstrate her freedom or individualism. The knowledge elicited by her drawing may be a type of freedom but it is not power—or at least not political power because it is reciprocal: the knowledge is drawn from a dynamic ecology of self and other, inside and outside, in which each shares (learns) something about the other.

* * *

How are we to judge Gosia’s project? I will make two quick points in conclusion. First, we should understand it in terms of the unfinished project of the Enlightenment. Thus Gosia is not alone in her ambition. Her art is in the spirit of the Enlightenment project at its most purest: the modernist struggle to evacuate the inner logic of not just human cognition but also the very animating forces of the universe: what theoretical physicists call TOE—the Theory of Everything. Like Monet, for example, or Matisse, Gosia pushes back into the very processes of art to uncover a holistic epistemology, rather than, like other more dominant strands of modernism and postmodernism, makes art into a vehicle for some inner vision or borrowed ideology. Second, there are no doubt personal reasons for Gosia’s apparent obsessive activity, but her demeanour and methodology is, appropriately, that of a scientist. Like a scientist, Gosia developed disciplined procedures that began in a limited terrain—literally her body and the space she lived in—and moved out into the world from there. The aim is not, like a conquistador, to draw the whole world, but to map the universe of her habitation. At first this universe was imagined mainly in spatial and visual terms. Gradually they became more determinedly phenomenological and have recently ventured into the aural dimension. Also, recently, Gosia is attempting to occupy—I should say draw—domains that have always resisted phenomenology, such as desire and the subjectivities of others. Her success in achieving this, in this most recent project, will now be judged; but for Gosia success is not measured by what is achieved, but by the integrity of the process, the truth of the drawing.

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