



Back to the drawing board! Can drawing practice help our digitally depleted attention?

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This paper presents some of the key concepts and the practice-based, process-led stage of the research project focusing on exhibition related practices as sites of attention care, which focuses on conceptualising and conducting experimental formats of drawing event-workshops. This stage of the project envisages constructing and assembling multimodal sequences as ways to activate beyond-ocular and non-explicit modes of attention, through processes of interpretation of non-visual input by non-verbal processes of mark making. This research project interrogates expanded drawing workshop formats as sites of attention care, in the context of extractivist techno-capitalist agendas of attention economies of online media platforms.

I posit exploratory formats of drawing workshops as research and artistic practice, and as events with a potential to disrupt perception habits, to retune attention and to restore sensory nuance. Assembling the situation of 'sensory attention' and deepened sensory focus within a group can be set against what Sherry Turkle refers to as continuous, sustained partial attention of interacting with online platforms. Sociable group aspect and intersubjectivity of a workshop setting can mitigate the visual media's alienating effects, de-selfing the online self, and work against individualism towards seeing oneself as part of human and non-human world.

I look into discursive potential of sites of presence and co-presence, generating sociable togetherness and situation-sharing through liveness and embodiment. I also aim to reclaim expanded workshop formats within outreach and education roles and posit them as research and artistic practice.



Introduction

My current process-driven, practice-based research project posits attention care as a potential role of exhibition-related artistic practices. My concept of 'attention care' is understood within the framework of this project as a set of considerations focusing on the harm caused by attention economy models to human attention processes, and on envisaging ways to counteract, offset, reduce or mitigate this harm. As extractivist techno-capitalist agendas of attention economies of online media platforms increasingly claim our attention, employing predictive algorithms to increase addictive engagement patterns, I argue for exhibition related creative practices as sites of attention care.

The practice-led inquiry interrogates practices traditionally associated with exhibitions, like outreach or exhibition design, for their potential role of caring for human attention processes. The current and ongoing stage of this research project navigates expanded forms of drawing workshops. The project seeks to expand the framework of outreach practices and reclaim them as research and artistic practice, particularly in the context of outreach roles being potentially undervalued as art practices, research and as creative endeavours.

This practice-based inquiry aims to construct an iterative series of expanded, multimodal drawing events and sessions, with an aim to probe for their role as sites of attention care. It also envisages progressing into similarly examining other exhibition related practices like elements of exhibition space design and event concept, curation and production.

Attention economies, creative and aesthetic attention, and attention care

Attention is our psychological need and our tool of survival. It is a necessarily selective process, due to limits to our ability to process information (Carasco 2011: 1486). The concept of attention scarcity predates the age of digital media (Doyle, Roda 2019: 12) and it was first considered in relation to older types of media, like television, newspapers or even street posters. In 1971, Herbert A. Simon, American political scientist and Nobel Prize laureate who considered new factors in economic theories, defined the problem of 'information overload' and coined the term 'attention economy' (Crogan, Kinsley 2012: 4). Commercial online platforms of the twenty-first century, including social media platforms, introduced new scales and new aspects to the idea, by following the attention economy model, which profits from prolonged attention of the users of their products (Odell 2019: 11). As the revenues of the digital media companies come from advertisers, not their users, and the user data is also being harvested and monetised, the user's attention becomes a commodity and a product (Bhargava, Velasquez 2020: 340).

Potential implications of the accelerating claim of the digital realm on its users' attention have been the subject of debates by specialists working in fields as diverse as business ethics, psychology, neuroscience, media theory, cognition studies and digital geographies. The issues of attention scarcity and attention economy put forward a range of questions regarding the nature of attention itself and its different facets. They also point to uncertainties in relation to both immediate and far-reaching consequences and ethical implications of the attention-economy models. This includes their already ongoing as well as projected far-reaching effects on the offline realities and physical environments, going as far as the concept of 'non-lived lives' (Debord 2021: 16) of digitality. Taking the emergence and the ongoing growth of digital attention economies and the harm they may cause to their users as a point of departure, I introduce and argue for the term and function of 'attention care' as a potential role of a specific range of creative and artistic practices. I locate the concept of 'attention care' within and as a response to the attention economy context. Creative and artistic practices I focus on are what I refer to as 'exhibition related practices', which I define as artistic and creative practices associated with exhibitions, organised by and within institutions like museums, galleries or arts centres, which include outreach, curation, as well as event and exhibition concept and design.

I locate my concept of 'attention care' within exhibition related practices and in connection to the concepts of 'creative attention' and 'aesthetic attention', as conceptualised by Yves Citton, Professor in Literature and Media at the Université Paris 8. Citton discusses occurrences and examples of what he refers to as 'creative attention'. According to Citton, this form of attention occurs outside of the regions of categorisation and of recognitive attention, which classifies objects according to already established categories (Citton 2019: 105). It may be argued that creative attention, like other types of attention potentially negatively affected by online interactions, may be fostered and activated by a range of diverse encounters and activities, such as exposure to natural environments, as postulated by Stephen Kaplan back in 1995 (Kaplan 1995: 169). This research project focuses on experiences which are enabled and constructed by artistic practices. It is worth noting that both Citton and the writer and artist Jenny Odell relate the experience of art to the context of attention crisis: Odell notes in her book on attention economy how art can teach us 'new scales and tones of attention' (Odell 2019: 21). Citton also discusses the concept of 'aesthetic attention' which is possible to achieve and can be derived from 'going to a museum or to a performance of contemporary art' (2019: 105), where we expect to be presented with objects and experiences which defy or exceed our preconceptions and existing categorisations. As a result, we can experience the delay between the perceiving moment and the hypothesis about the nature of what

is perceived, enabling processes of what Citton refers to as ‘creative attention’. I posit creative attention as the type of attention absent from ‘continual partial attention’ (Turkle 2011: 161) of online distractedness and digital multitasking, and as arguably less profitable and therefore less supported by interactions with attention economy-driven online platforms. I posit creative attention as one of types of attention which attention care events aim to activate and support.

In the context of this inquiry, my term of ‘attention care’ is postulated as a set of considerations and debates which acknowledge the importance, heterogeneity and vulnerability of human attention processes. Attention care interrogates possibilities of actions and strategies which might have a positive impact on attention quality and support its continuous potential. These actions and strategies can utilise and acknowledge small gestures and indirect interventions, as practices of maintenance and care often go unnoticed as unspectacular events and actions. Attention care as part of the scope of this research project is specifically located within the context of attention economies of commercial online platforms. The research interrogates attention care as a postulated new role of some specific exhibition related practices like outreach and education activities or exhibition curation and event concept, as an objective which can be recognised and specifically designed for.

Drawing attention – interrogating expanded multimodal drawing workshop format as a site and strategy of attention care

My research project includes the practice-led stage of design and facilitation of an iterative series of one-off expanded drawing event-workshops. The events are designed in the process of their progression through iterative construction and assembly of elements. Workshop design and facilitation strategies are applied to the series of drawing events which experiment with multimodal input sequences combined with drawing and mark making processes employed as an interpretation of non-visual clues like sound, touch or smell, or visual input mediated by other sensory clues. The analysed record of the events includes collected written feedback, photographs and my own subjective record of embodied, lived experience of the workshops.

Drawing and mark making are used as a process and a tool of attention, a function which I posit as that of the ‘attention anchor’: an act which aims to hold the attention in the perceiving moment through generating a visual response. Working across media, modalities and senses is posited as a potential antidote to hyper-ocularcentric eye-to-screen interactions with online media platforms. I introduce the term of hyper-ocularcentrism here to stress and indicate that online interactions have moved beyond the long-standing and acknowledged concept of ocularcentrism present in our

culture. The objective proposed in relation to that premise is to reshuffle perceptual habits, as part of the process which I refer to as ‘re-tuning attention’, moving away from everyday repeated attention modes. I argue that drawing as a visual account of multimodal experience might also activate and reveal subjective, individual responses to non-visual or mediated visual stimuli. Drawing output may additionally bring awareness to the subjective perspectives and to the non-neurotypical range of embodied experiences. This awareness may bring forth an argument against the universal subject and normative sensorium, by making visible both culturally conditioned and highly subjective, situated, embodied perspectives. Drawing event-workshop thus becomes a site of emergence of the visual processes of recording experience, of reclaiming sensory nuance and potentially manifesting subjectivity and neurodiversity. I argue that this latent knowledge is manifested in drawings which attempt to depict sensory bodily experience, particularly when comparing different drawing responses to the same prompt, e.g. drawing skin sensations in the present moment (**Figure 1**).

As the event-workshop series is progressing, individual events are variously titled ‘a workshop’, ‘drawing event’ or ‘drawing session’, in order to best describe the type of activity and involvement the participants may expect. The event-workshops are referred to as ‘expanded’ as they include input other than purely visual and involve ways of working which might not be associated with traditional drawing workshop formats, like listening to a radio show on headphones conducted as a listening and drawing session. The events can be described as semistructured and unfixed, with some elements unresolved or open to change and alteration, and thought of as temporary and transient constructed situations. One of the defining aspects of the events is their intentionality: they are designed to be sites of attention care, which is communicated to the participants. As such, the events can be seen as sites of resistance in the context of attention economy models and, by implication, as a form of quiet activism. Consequently, the event-workshop format can also be understood as a container for evoking experience which might evolve into a catalyst for change extending beyond

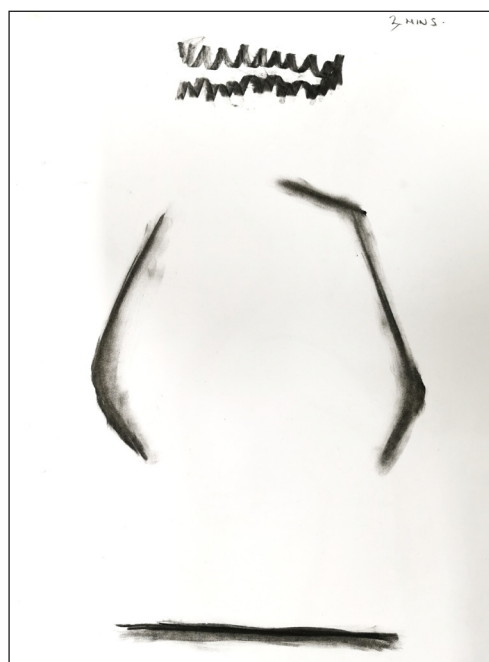


Figure 1: Drawing of skin sensations, at a Sensory Boundaries drawing session (April 2024). Photo Renata Pekowska.

the space and time constrictions of the actual event. This intentionality acknowledges at the same time the possibility of the events fulfilling other functions or objectives, like revealing subjective responses. They can also be experienced by the participants as relaxing (evoking the sense of calm, the feeling of slowing down), inspiring (giving participants ideas for drawings or activities they might execute or engage in outside of the workshop timeframe) or thought-provoking (eliciting the sense of discovery, such as in evoking awareness of ambient soundscapes, or of information which can be revealed by the sense of touch or smell) (Figure 2).

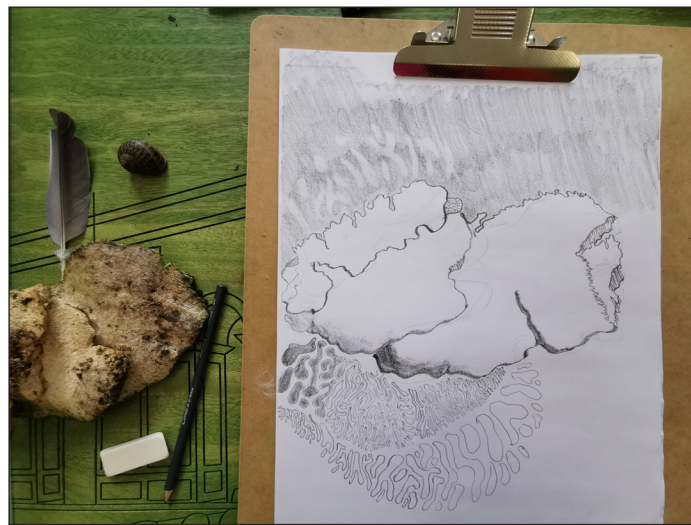


Figure 2: Discovery of information available in tactility and textures (April 2024). Photo Renata Pekowska.

Drawing event-workshops are social and intersubjective sites of presence and co-presence generating sociable togetherness through liveness and embodiment. They are lived experience events which are shaped by all who participate, through their attendance, responses, interactions with others, comments, suggestions and other input. The workshops are participant-centred events, where all who take part are understood as active agents shaping their own experience, and the experience of others present. The events are seen as constructed sites of individual and collective sensory presence and attentiveness, or ‘collective reception’ (Crary 2000: 51). As one of the participants of a listening and drawing session remarked: ‘It’s nice to have a free and open space to interpret and to see other people’s interpretations’ (Figure 3). The events generate simultaneously collective and individual responses as participants engage with the situation and make responses visible through the acts, processes and gestures of drawing and mark making. The workshops are understood as test and exchange sites. They are one-off events, each one testing out a new set of

elements, and exchange sites of interactions between participants and the one-off set of elements, interrogating the tasks, probing and unfolding the situation over the course of their duration. The performance practice associations of liveness, embodiment, and temporality are offset by lack of audience, spectators or observers, as all who are present are active agents structuring the event as it progresses.

The drawing events are thought of as not being drawing classes: there are no drawing techniques taught, and they are not designed to be overly didactic. Therefore they are not strictly education events, though it can be argued that they contain elements of 'education'. As education theorist Sharon Todd argues (Todd 2023: 4) in relation to 'encounters' constructed by both educators and artists, the demands placed on educational practices are 'significantly different' from those made upon artists (who construct encounters as part of their practice). Both practices are connected to 'the ideas of transformation, change' but education is additionally 'burdened' with the task of 'transmission'. While the workshop-events of this research project are related to the former concepts, they do not transmit knowledge in a way a traditionally understood educational event or a drawing class would (e.g. teaching a particular drawing skill).

It may be argued that the workshops of this project are not events of participatory art, which, as defined by Claire Bishop (Bishop 2006: 10) emphasise 'collaboration, and the collective dimension of social experience', as they do not focus on collaboration and do not produce a collaborative art piece. Their collective, social experience dimension is an important aspect, but not the central consideration of the events. The drawing events may contain elements of collaboration, but generally they focus on individual responses/drawing outputs and their group experience might be best described as situation-sharing, rather than being their central focus and the main aim. They are not relational aesthetics events, as, even if the intersubjective aspect is inherent, their focus is not generating, fostering and harnessing the potential of 'intersubjective social relations' (Austin 2020: 173). They are not community art or socially engaged art



Figure 3: Collective experience of individual responses. Participants at a listening and drawing session (January 2024). Photo Renata Pekowska.

practice, as their main value is not addressing social inequities of a particular group or community (Austin 2020: 173), and no group project involving professionals (trained artists) and non-professionals is pursued or realised. The events are not intensely curated, as some variables are left open to be shaped by the group of participants. They aim not to be perceived as the events of experience economy: they require some effort from the participants, and they might involve moments of discomfort; they are also not designed to be spectacular, dazzling events, as care practices often involve small gestures and unspectacular, or even anti-spectacular, actions.

The workshop-events are conceptualised to repeatedly and continuously redefine their components in order to mitigate embedded power relations and power dynamics. They are thought of as not top-down constructions but as 'horizontal' in nature as possible. 'Horizontal' is here understood as granting everyone present as equal a status as possible. One of the aspects which can be perceived as non-horizontal is the contingency (and the perception) of the facilitator advancing their own work while using the participants' input. This is mitigated by not attempting to maximise the amount of data obtained from participants. This non-extracting of data is also considered important within the context of the overall concept of mitigating the effects of attention economy: the events are not the means to obtain data in an extractivist way. Voluntary responses are limited to blank postcard-sized pieces of paper, which are mentioned towards the end of an event, as a way to leave comments should anyone wish to do so. Spoken, freely given and not solicited comments are also added (written down) to the feedback record used to shape the following events.

The participants' comments are collected together with the facilitator's own lived sensory experience written account, which serves as another way of reducing the need for data extraction from participants, and a way to analyse and include an additional embodied perspective. The power dynamics mitigation is also attempted through various strategies, including not collecting participants' data (names, ages, contact details etc.) and not photographing in an identifiable way. The facilitator joins in the actions as one of the active participants instead of being a mere observer standing 'above' and distant. The role of the workshop leader and facilitator may be conceptualised as that of a conductor, deviser, proposer, assembler, moderator or convener; one who proposes particular activities, tasks or activity stages to a group of persons, and then joins in the activities themselves. The facilitator may provide guidance, and answer questions but without being overly prescriptive. The events are variously described as workshops, sessions or events and provided with a description which attempts to clearly outline the types of activities involved. Another mitigating strategy is no selection process whenever possible and the event being available to attend for any adult, no experience

needed or necessary. Events are as physically accessible as possible (which may depend on the venue) and the only restriction is the number of attendees, which also depends on the individual venue's capacity and the exact nature of the event. Conducting events at public galleries/museums is a way to make them available to the general public to book and attend free of charge.

The workshops/drawing sessions are events of 'directly lived experience' (Debord 2021: 16) attended by participants who are joined by others and asked to respond to an input present in the space. The liveness aspect of the workshops results in a range of uncertainties: as embodied events, they are fluid in nature and open to various levels of perceived success or failure. Their experimental character brings with it the sense of discomfort which might be shared by both the participants and the facilitator. I argue that there are types of discomfort which are the result of being presented with a challenge or an unfamiliar task, but this discomfort may be harnessed to achieve the workshop's goals of recalibrating attention and reshuffling perception habits. These processes can be understood as untying, unlearning or undoing. While attempting to identify and understand them, I provisionally name some of these processes, and coin and consider terms for activating multisensory-directed attention, like non-retinal attentional overtones and perceptual reverb.

The role of drawing in multimodal attention care events

If you wish to learn drawing that you may be able to set down clearly, and usefully, records of such things as cannot be described in words, either to assist your own memory of them, or to convey distinct ideas of them to other people (...) then I *can* help you, or, which is better, show you how to help yourself.

John Ruskin *The Elements of Drawing* (1883: 19)

John Ruskin famously and repeatedly claimed that to draw is to really start seeing. In the present age of online hyper-ocularcentrism and 'superabundant visuality' (Classen 2017: 7), can drawing, an essentially visual process and output, respond to non-visual input and thus be used to redirect attention from the dominant sense of vision? Or communicate the multisensory experience in a non-verbal way? Can the humble technology of pencil and paper assume new roles in our online lives of distraction and homogeneity, like caring for attention and expressing subjectivity and neurodiversity? Workshop-events of this project aim to interrogate the act and activity of drawing as non-verbal visual output which can be employed to describe embodied sensory perceptual experiences.

My understanding of the drawing process and activity in the context of this research project correlates with John Berger's claim 'a drawing is an autobiographical record of one's discovery of an event' (Berger 2007: 3). I assert the potential of drawing and mark making activities which can be harnessed to visualise, describe, interpret and express not only the perception of visual clues but other sensory input. I posit drawing's potential of recording a 'discovery of an event' as one which may activate modes of creative attention as conceptualised by Yves Citton (2019: 105), crucial for critical perception and meaningful engagement, but less profitable and therefore not supported by attention economies of techno-capitalism. I interrogate expanded formats of drawing workshops, constructing and assembling events which include input other than visual to be recorded using hand drawing. The events include multimodal sequences as ways to activate non-ocular and non-explicit modes of attention, through interpreting other-than-visual input by other-than-verbal processes of mark-making. I see the drawing workshop events as exploratory aesthetic practice, an artistic practice and a practice of care, which may foster and stand for the value of being attuned, receptive and attentive.

Can drawing be employed to respond to non-visual input and thus communicate multisensory experience, in an attempt to move away from the perceptual habits of ocularcentric eye-to-screen interactions? Joseph Beuys believed that drawing was capable of opening habitual thought processes, giving form to 'what is impossible to say' (Rose 1976: 16). I take the concept of drawing by Avis Newman stated as the 'evidence of the materialisation of an act of consciousness' (Graham 2021: 9) and argue that drawing workshops have the potential to be sites of subjective and intersubjective 'thinking through body' and making visible processes of implicit, non-verbal response and knowledge.

Drawing as a mark making process is employed as a response to a non-visual input, like sound, touch or smell, in a sequential or simultaneous combination. The sequence may include smell to be interpreted by sound followed by sound being described visually as drawing; simultaneous combination may involve drawing an object while looking at it and touching it at the same time. Thus, the events may also involve a visual input mediated by non-visual aspects, or manipulated or restricted in some ways, in an attempt to move away from hyper-ocularcentrism of eye-to-screen interactions and the restricted, impoverished sensory experience they result in. Margaret Davidson (Graham 2021: 71) claimed that the most important 'overarching concept' for contemporary drawing practices is intentionality which 'does not preclude any type of imagery', which is one of the aspects of the attention care drawing events. The type of imagery is not prescribed, although ways of interpretation might be suggested. The intended ways of drawing include what might be described as seeking the moment

when ‘mark making becomes primary’ (Melissa Gronlund, in Graham 2021: 76), understood here as the most direct response. Typically, the kind of drawing employed and activated during the drawing sessions is akin to automatic drawing techniques employed by some of the Surrealists (employed as a technique even if they were in fact trained artists, like André Masson or Hilma af Klint), where ‘skill is not a consideration’ (Rose 1976: 16). The ‘skill’ here means applying the traditionally understood drawing skill achieved through training in rendering from life or other types of drawing which may be described as ‘skilled’.

Drawing activity is a multifarious process which reveals bodily dispositions and communicates individual perspectives and perceptions in its traditional descriptive responses to visual input. John Berger (as cited in Graham 2021: 33) states that types and functions of drawings are those that ‘study and question the visible; those that record and communicate ideas; and those done from memory’. This research project investigates the concept of drawing processes which question the visible/ocular/retinal by bringing in the sensory input other than vision for interpretation and description. The project questions habitual modes of perception and embodied response. It attempts to complicate these processes and, as a result, bring to the fore more implicit modes of perception, and ‘background’ attention input which might normally be registered on a less conscious level (Citton 2019: 105). Drawing output brings awareness to implicit forms of bodily knowledge by making visible both culturally conditioned and highly subjective, situated perspectives. As a non-verbal form of a description of an experience and a record of ‘discovery’, drawing activity seems to possess simplicity and directness that appears as an undogmatic way of rendering a multisensory event. Assembling the situation of sensory attention binds the recipient to the present moment, situation or physical location as well as their own bodily disposition. It utilises the potential of drawing’s ‘immediacy’ (Treib 2008: 16) and its being a ‘disclosure’ (Rose 1976: 9) as its potential to communicate the experience (**Figure 4**).

Drawing’s capacity lies also in its multisensory, multimodal nature of the drawing process itself: drawing produces sounds, involves textures, friction, smells or even taste; there is an ‘intimate tie between drawing and touch’ (Rose 1976: 91).

Drawing, both as a process and as a visual output, has been described as containing a ‘surplus’, containing within itself ‘an excess of potential meaning’ (Graham 2021: 90). I argue for extending this concept to the whole event involving drawing activity, in this case a drawing workshop-event designed as an event of attention care. As it progresses, the drawing event or a series of events reveal and grow new emergent layers of potential scopes, capacities and roles which may expand beyond anything initially envisaged by their designer or facilitator.

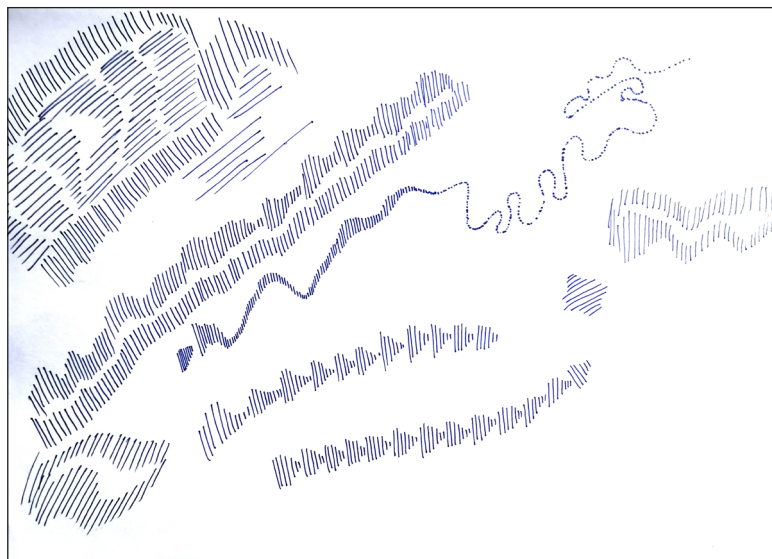


Figure 4: Drawing as a response to sound (March 2024). Photo Renata Pekowska.

Drawing event-workshops

The analysis of workshops examines collected written feedback, drawing output, photographs and my own autobiographical record of lived experience of the workshops. The feedback from each workshop was used to shape the following events as the series progressed. The events formed an iterative sequence, each one adding new insights, although they were not iterations of the same design, but separate, one-off events. Working across media, modalities and senses was utilised as an attempt to re-activate the embodied, whole body perception, complicate concepts of one-size-fits-all solutions, reveal individual and collective sensory boundaries and re-shuffle perceptual habits. I employed social collective sensory attention experience as a strategy of making visible (and valuable) aspects which may relate to neurodiverse experience, moving away from the concept of the universal subject.

As the events progressed, it became clear that some of the drawing responses revealed more specific and less recognised bodily subjectivities, ‘drawing out’ perspectives on misophonia, or interpretations of smells based on personal preferences, dislikes, memory and experience. Since the events involved responding individually, but with other persons present, the workshop space allowed for an intersubjective process of collective critical inquiry, but not in a forced or prescribed manner. The exchanges happened during short discussions or commenting or viewing everyone’s drawings.

The latent knowledge emerging through the act of drawing included occasional cross-modal understandings, such as revealing aversions to certain sounds when

visually describing the smell sensations present while walking around the workshop space (Figure 5). I argue that drawing as a response to multisensory input can reveal, visually manifest and result in personal discoveries and understandings related to our own subjectivities and those of others. I posit responding and seeing others respond to ambient sounds, textures of objects, or smells of a room as ways to expand and enrich one's perceptual abilities.

I see drawing workshop events as exploratory aesthetic practice, which seeks to foster and stand for the value of being attuned, receptive and attentive. The concept of a multimodal sequence which includes an act of drawing/mark making may offer the ongoing possibilities of re-tuning the sensorial attention in an act of defiance against homogeneity and against submitting to the modes of attention economies.

I reclaim expanded workshop formats within exhibition related practices as research and artistic practice, and argue for their role as sites of attention care, employing the processes of drawing and mark-making as ways of paying attention, communicating subjective perception and experience, making invisible visible and formulating thoughts and concepts, against the modes of attention promoted by attention economy based platforms.

In the age of increasing presence of AI generated imagery I posit the process and act of drawing as image-making and non-verbal communication which can translate and express not only visual clues and concepts but other modal input and thought processes, while activating modes of creative attention less profitable and arguably less supported by attention economy modes of techno-capitalism. This new potential role of modest and banal drawing tools is rooted in what John Ruskin and other drawing enthusiasts always understood: drawing is a way of communicating subjective perception and experience, making invisible visible, of formulating thoughts and ideas, and a way of paying attention.

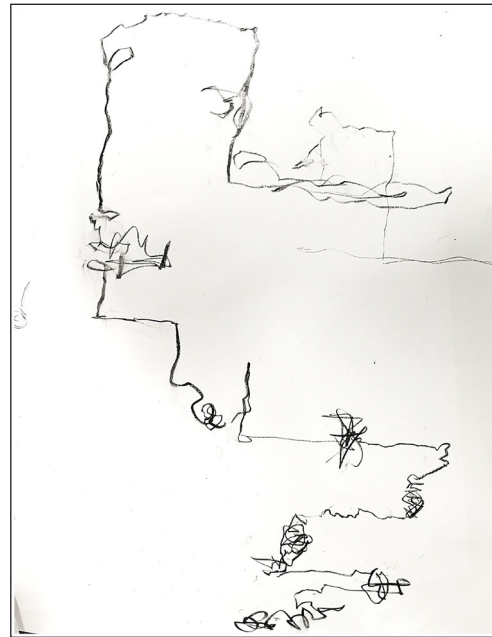


Figure 5: Visual representation of walking and smelling a space (April 2024). Photo Renata Pekowska.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Biography

Renata Pękowska is a visual artist, writer and researcher based in Dublin. She is a Government of Ireland scholar PhD Researcher at TU Dublin and a visiting scholar at the Department of Rhetoric of the UC Berkeley.

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