



Article

Walking avenue, tea pulling, trance dance, helicopter landing-pad: Sketching elements of perceptual consciousness

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Abstract: The visual essay presents and discusses four sets of sketches that find commonality in the drawing-based artist's concern with the observation of perception. All work was completed in Thailand although this is largely an incidental feature, since the sketches convey mainly generic interest in the human figure and/or the artist himself in movement. It may be said, however, that the individual nature of the situations had inspired the sketching. Concerning the first set, the artist walked the length of a beachside avenue with, in mind, the philosopher Husserl's crossing of horizontal and transverse axes as one's consciousness of time, piking up on instances of humans passing by and crossing his path. The second set, which is in response to Malay tea pulling, concerns more centrifugal movement, the theoretical reference in retrospect being to the philosopher Bergson's idea of the '*present image*'. With the third set, in response to trance dancing, the artist suggests to some extent a filtering of the highly animated nature of the occasion into his own anxious attempts to make the sketches. With the fourth pair of sketches concerning his walking the length and back of a helicopter landing-pad, the artist indicates differences between perspective views as shown in snapshots of the location, and suggests how perception is both necessary to observation but is also its own subjectively constituted phenomenon. The essay ends with two larger sketches that visually demonstrate the sustaining issue of the previously referenced sketches discussed in the text.

The avenue lined either side with palm trees that runs parallel to a certain beach in Thailand is a popular location for walking exercise. As a directive either into a meditative frame of mind or out of it, as the case may be, there is a sense of left-qua-right lateral perceptual axis mainly identified by stall traders crossing back and forth. Equally, as one moves forward there's a sense of the future coming to meet one as the momentary present before it recedes to the ever-distant past. As one who has occasionally sketched while walking, my honing in on whatever movements, activities and incidents that lie noticeably ahead of me may be thought to represent any present moment. The interrelationship of both axes gives a rounded sense to one's consciousness of time. According to Husserl's schema, horizontal intentionality (*Langsintentionalitat*) and transverse intentionality (*Querintentionalitat*) constitute the interaction of two simultaneous temporal flows (Kelly, n.d.). This said; such complex theorization is somewhat unfair to an activity whose slightness is more likely to

be associated with discreet form of pleasure than the heightening of the intellect. However, as will be seen, an approach to drawing that concerns the recording of transient activity and movement results in a degree of abstraction that could leave the viewer wanting of explanation.

The crossing of Husserl's two axes is the question that I start with, an idea worthy of reflection that tempers a relatively reflexive practice such as sketching. It gives me enough incentive to step out in an early morning to the end of the walkway that is nearest to me, and proceed slowly with a sketchbook to the route's designated beginning. The avenue covers a distance of some twenty-five minutes by foot. Traders set up their stalls more or less from daybreak, traders' children play, ice is delivered, walkers and joggers exercise, and dogs are frisky before the sun gets up. The scene in the following pair of photos shows the still relatively empty start and end of the avenue, Figure 1.



Fig 1: A beachside walking avenue from its end, left image, from its beginning, right image, 2017



Fig 2: A beachside walking avenue to show time-lapse image of cyclist moving towards the camera, 2017

Figure 2 shows the approach and time delay of a cyclist in between taking photos. The physical gap between the photo-pair is an instance of the perceptual blanks that occur for various reasons in one's participation in the situation.

It is this that the Husserl idea doesn't quite accommodate, at least in my understanding of the schema; that between further and nearer views of the cyclist's movement, usefully indicated by the separation of the two photos, there's an unaccountable gap of time. The following Figures, 3 – 12, show ten sketches made

across each of two horizontal dimension pages respectively of a small sketchbook while walking through the avenue from its end at zone 86 of trading allocations to its beginning at zone 1. The inclusion beside each image of a typed version of observations handwritten onto the sketch suggests not merely another means of recording information, but equally what causes such gaps in time, and how pausing during the reflexive or 'natural standpoint' of one's experience to reflect on it through placing it in 'brackets' is part of Husserl's phenomenological process. (Husserl, 2012, p. 59)



Started at 86, but movement forward caused a looking back, to the left.

Projected my gaze forwards to three walking figures coming towards me.

Small girl walked laterally to me, from the left.

Man walked laterally at almost the same time, out from the girl's destination to the right.

Fig 3: Walking an Avenue 1 x 10, ink on paper, 21 x 29cm, 2017



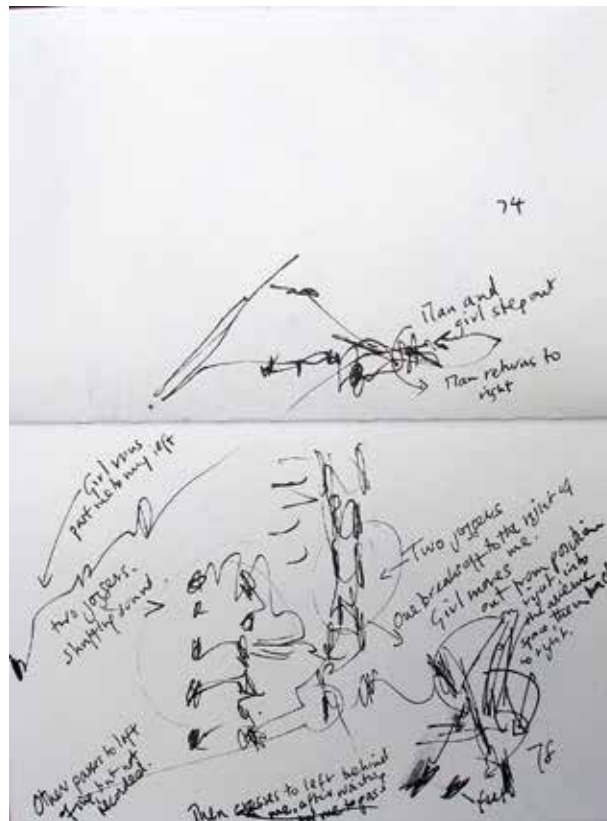
Two girls step out, one returns immediately, the other walks to middle and turns back.

Cyclists coming forwards.

Same inclination to look back to the left.

Moved from 82 to 80.

Fig: 4 Walking an Avenue 2 x 10, ink on paper, 21 x 29cm, 2017



74

Man and girl step out.

Man returns to right.

Girl runs past me to my left.

Two joggers, shuffling sound.

Two joggers, one breaks off to the right of me.

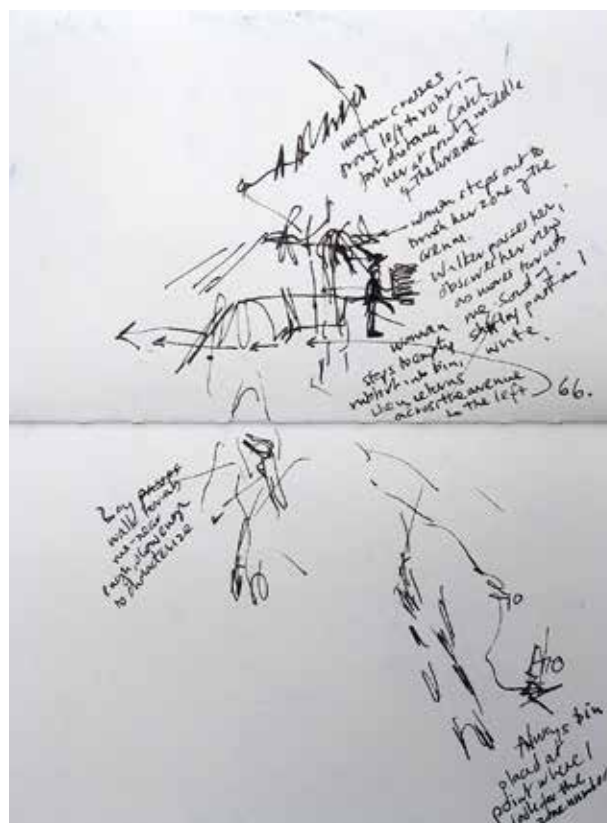
Other passes to left of me, but not recorded.

Girl moves out from position on right, into the avenue space, then back to the right.

78

Fig 5: Walking an Avenue 3 x 10,

ink on paper, 21 x 29cm, 2017



Woman crosses from left to right in far distance.

Catch her at point of middle of the avenue.

Woman steps out to brush her zone of the avenue.

Walker passes her, obscures her view as moves towards me. Sound of shuffling past as I write.

Woman stops to empty rubbish into bin, then returns across the avenue to the left.

66

Boy walks towards me, near enough, slow enough, to characterize.

70

Always bin placed at point where I look for the zone number.

Fig 6: Walking an Avenue 4 x 10, ink on paper, 21 x 29cm, 2017



Man steps across avenue as I'm stationary while making notes.

From this point I'm also recording the ice boy as I pass him. So there's the reciprocal movement forward, and as though backward.

Ice boy steps in front of me. Crosses to left, off the avenue, and moves parallel to me.

62

Man steps out immediately in front of me. Time to catch movement back to the right. Baseball cap.

Fig 7: Walking an Avenue 5 x 10, ink on paper, 21 x 29cm, 2017



Woman stationary, then moves to the left.

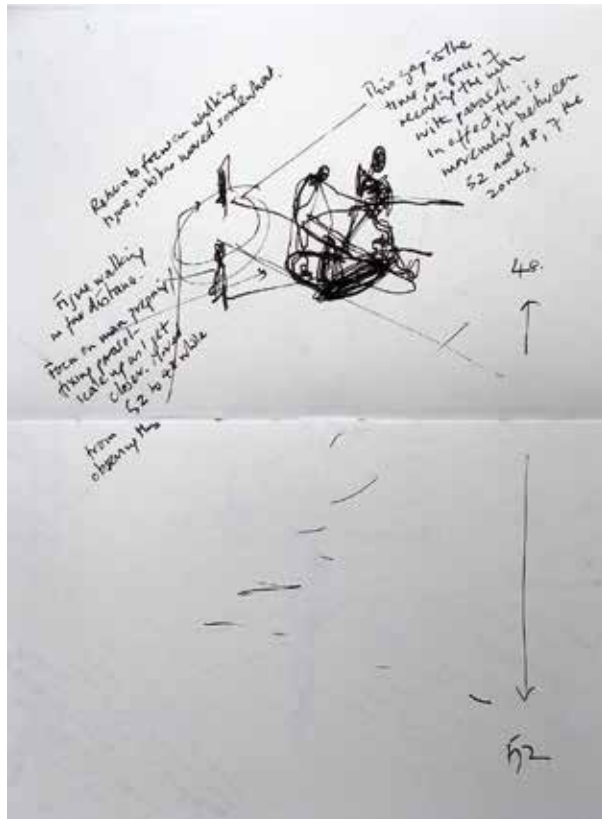
Joggers coming towards me.

Ice boy moves out behind me.

Man crosses from left to right, very close. Pick up pattern of legs only.

58

Fig 8: Walking an Avenue 6 x 10, ink on paper, 21 x 29cm, 2017



This gap is the time, as space, of recording the man with parasol. In effect, this is movement between 52 and 48, of the zones.

48

Return to focus on walking figure, who has moved somewhat.

Figure walking in far distance.

Focus on man preparing/fixing parasol - scale up as I get closer. Moved from 52 to 48 while observing this.

52

Fig 9: Walking an Avenue 7 x 10, ink on paper, 21 x 29cm, 2017



Figure in distance moves towards me, veers to the right before parallel with me.

46

Between 47 and 46, void area - space is greater. Observation splits into three. Two and three overlap. Three defined by the figure moving towards me.

Past the void, area of clear beach looking out to sea.

Figure passes me, very close.

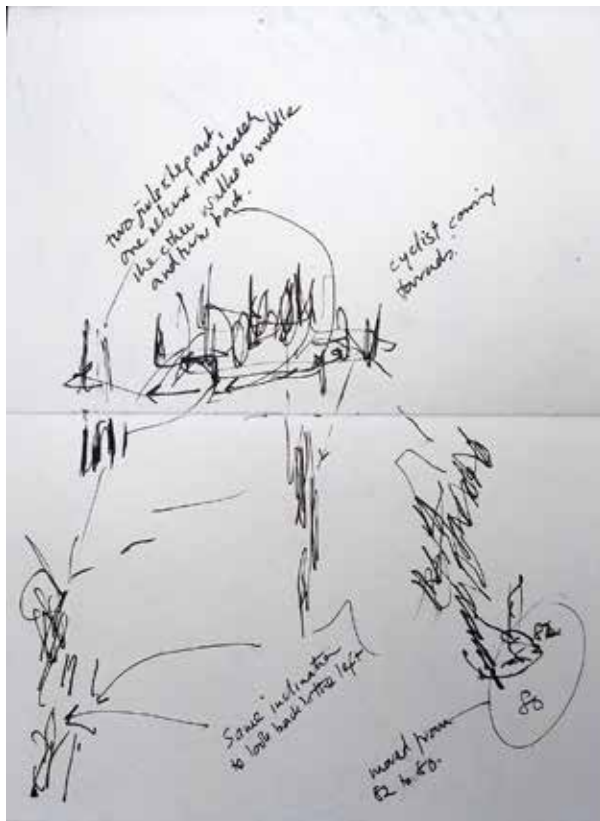
Void passageway between road and sea.

Parked police bike.

Movement past parked bike - scales up and disappears from view, to my left as I pass it.

47

Fig 10: Walking an Avenue 8 x 10, ink on paper, 21 x 29cm, 2017



Break in visual recording. On continuing, immediately notice a woman crossing dragging a broom.

Moves forward to right of the avenue.

Figure passes immediately in front of me, crossing to the left.

Two figures join two others as group.

Figure passing.

Tiny girl standing. Mother's feet as I pass.

30

Bin

Fig 11: Walking an Avenue 9 x 10, ink on paper, 21 x 29cm, 2017



Gap of seated woman while drawing man on bike.

Gap of man on bike while drawing seated woman.

20

Man on bike seated woman.

Man on bike seated woman.

22

Resume drawing at 22.

Girl on bike.

Couple standing.

At point of passing by them.

Gap between girl on bike and her present position,
as I record the standing couple.

Girl moves across to left, then stops to look at me.

26

Fig 12: Walking an Avenue 10 x 10, ink on paper, 21 x 29cm, 2017

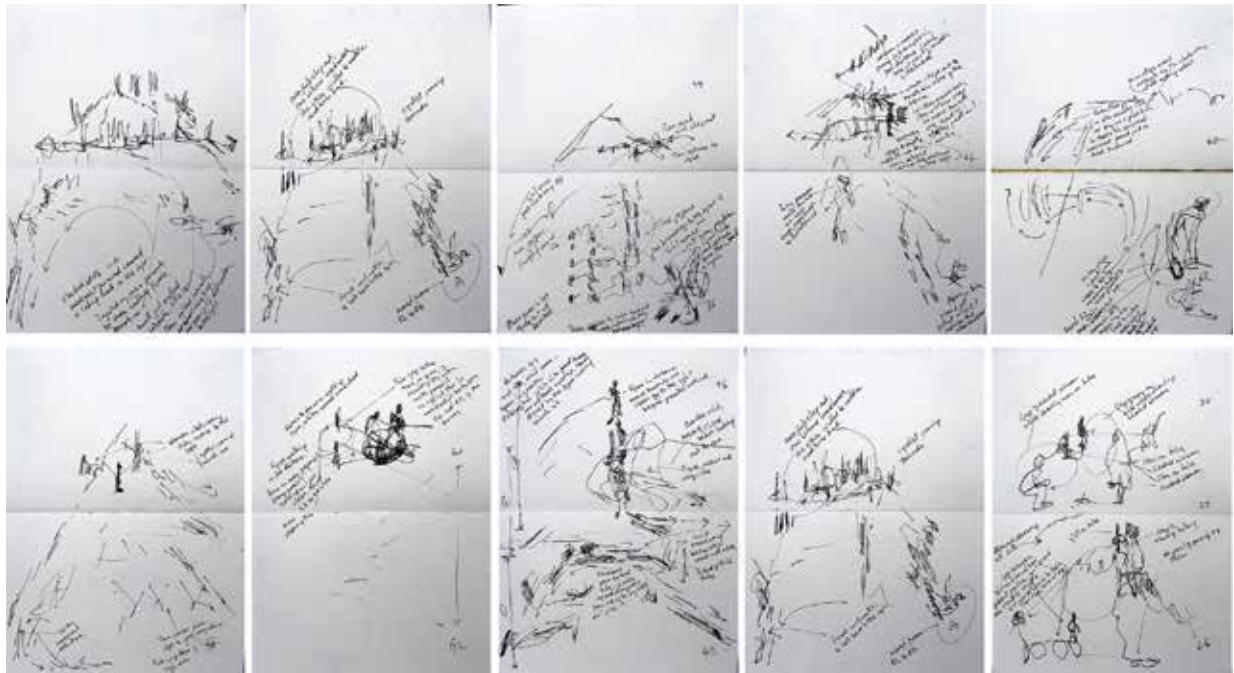


Fig 13: Walking an Avenue 10 x 10 complete set, ink on paper, 2017

While the sketches register perceptual elements concerned with observing selected surroundings while moving, in their set they read quite differently as still-image scratchy indications of things happening on a single plane of space and time, Figure 13.

In retrospect, after the sketching idea has completed, what else *transverses*, apart from the Husserl referenced consciousness that occurs between the forward moving and lateral axes? While consciousness of time is complex enough in perception, the brevity of this mode of drawing limits the degree to which it can be considered, and bodes other questions. For instance, there is the question of the fast-drawing of moving images across the sketching of rapidly registered still images, mainly seated or standing figures of which I myself move past. Bergson refers to the '*present image*' as a cursory form of image '[...] being neutralized, at the very moment when it might become actual, by the obligation to continue itself and lose itself in something else', distinct from what he terms the '*represented image*'. (Bergson, 2004, p. 28) These are not two separate images so much as the image as subject to duration, and, when it's pulled out of time and captured, as it were, perhaps conforms to one's more familiar idea of image.

However, of this latter idea, Bergson's reference to the action of memory as inclined to [...] supplant our actual perceptions', and of what results, '[...] merely as "signs"', suggests that there can be something cursory even about the '*represented*' image. (Ibid, p. 24) (Initially, I find the suggested contrast between presence and representation very useful, but when more carefully considered in the context of drawing, I should not decry the relevance of more highly wrought image-based representation.)

Further to Husserl's idea of the crossing of axes in and as consciousness of time, the transversal of the image, whether due to its own movement causing its '*present*' nature, or the transient perception of a still image by the perceiver, is another kind of crossing. This is more of a movement "*in-place*," a spasm', according to Deleuze on the work of the painter Francis Bacon. (Deleuze, 2004, p. 41) Sketching lends itself to the latter consideration, but results in a kind of visual indexing of movement on the page as much if not more than image registration. The following images Figures 14 and 15 are sketches of mine of Malay tea pulling (Teh Tarik). (I assumed at that time that it was coffee pulling, but now know that the activity is more associated with tea.)



Figure 14: Malay tea pulling sketches, pencil on paper, 14.5 x 21cm, 2010



Figure 15: Malay tea pulling sketches, pencil on paper, 14.5 x 21cm, 2010

Unlike the walking avenue set, I didn't think to record the tea-pulling photographically, so without the aid of the handwritten naming of the activity the viewer of these sketches would have to supplement their visual ambiguity with either memory or imagination. Perhaps what will be conveyed, however, is speed occurring centrifugally. The issue that interests me when trying to capture fast movement is the extent to which, after the event, I can feel that I've responded perceptually rather than conceptually to the observed situation. There's a point at which the gap of time between looking and responding is necessarily just a little too pronounced, in which case memory jumps, as it were, to the rescue. There may be some similarity between the intervention of conceptualization in perception and *image schemas* of cognitive linguistics, which are familiar conceptual metaphors that we develop over time from sensory-motor experience. (Pecher, Boot, Van Dantzig, 2011, p. 233, citing the work of Johnson and Lakoff in the 1980s) Cixous alludes to both the philosophical and perceptual difficulty of capturing the instant when she describes the situation in relation to a Rembrandt sketch of Saint John the Baptist: 'To come back to what escapes: we want to draw the instant. That instant which strikes between two instants [...]'. (Cix-

ous, 2005, p. 38) With my sketches, it's the almost instantaneous trajectory of the tea through space, equaled to the speed of line. Where the lines bend in space is because I'm compounding the tea's trajectory with the arc of the tea-puller's arm. In retrospect, the absorption of two movements into one line may be the closest I come to indicating Bergson's '*present image*'. Linguistically, I may achieve something similar in the statement on the sketch, Figure 12: 'Gap between girl on bike and her present position, as I record the standing couple'. The transition of the girl to her next position is occupied by two figures standing together, conceived in the sketch as the duration of their recording. The same impulse courses through each tea pulling sketch as abstract gesture and presentation of an observed event; while the line as line indexes, line as signifier iterates, on the brink of incomprehension.

The following sketches, Figures 16 to 19, were made at a meeting of spirit mediums in a province popular for them in Northern Thailand. A defining characteristic of this social gathering is that the mediums, often elderly women, engage in a form of trance dancing, occasionally extending this to spiraling around a pole from the end of a length of twisted fabric that culminates in their falling to the ground.

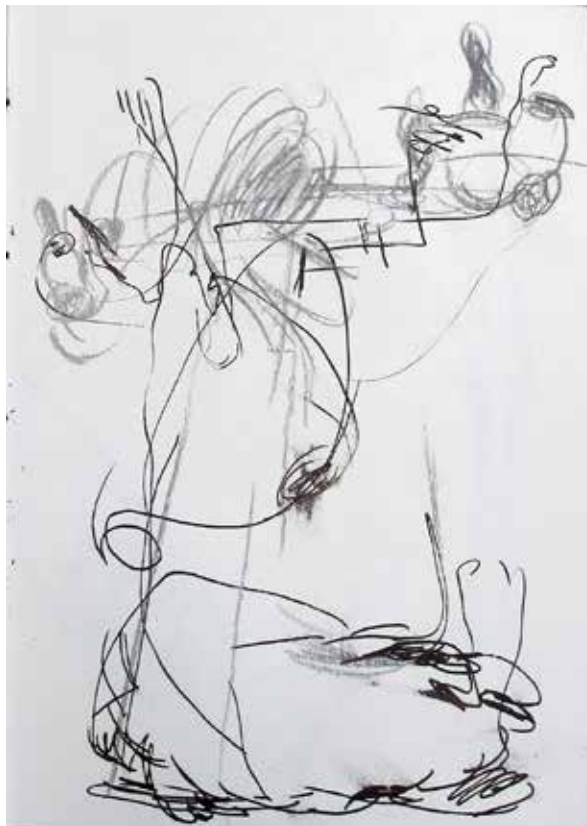


Figure 16: Trance dancer sketches, pencil on paper, 15 x 21cm, 2017



Figure 17: Trance dancer sketches, pencil on paper, pencil and ink on paper, 15 x 21cm, 2017



Figure 18: Trance dancer sketches, pencil on paper, pencil and ink on paper, 15 x 21cm, 2017



Figure 19: Trance dancer sketches, pencil on paper, pencil and ink on paper, 15 x 21cm, 2017

Again, I have no photographic reference, and any viewer of the sketches without knowing their context will likely see them generically as human figures variously in states of movement or rest. Their gender may appear ambiguous, although these were all women, often characteristically smoking very large cigars, most noticeable in the sketches Figure 18. While Figure 16 shows the mediums performing their un-choreographed dance, some of this animation conveyed to me will have been as the adrenalin involved in trying to capture frenetic movement, but still positions while never knowing when the standing figures will at any moment resume their routine. The movement as spasm will here have been the not necessarily un-pleasurable sense of anxiety I felt in trying to convey the essence of an occasion that was almost totally channeled into and through dozens, if not hundreds, of attendees representing an age-old animist tradition. When I speak of *essence* I make tacit reference again to Husserl, to the purpose of phenomenology itself to ask the question: "What is the 'perceived as such'?" (Husserl, 2012, pp. 18, 186) Merleau-Ponty suggests a more integral relationship between reflexivity and

reflection, where he suggests bringing together often separately considered processes: 'Seeing, speaking, even thinking (with certain reservations, for as soon as we distinguish thought from speaking absolutely we are already in the order of reflection)'. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 130) In my present practice I tend to record, transcribe and situate my speaking about drawing while drawing in relation to the visual work. (Croft, 2020) In such spoken and, importantly, enunciated circumstances, the activity of memory, which may be considered evoked as soon as one withdraws from the sense of focused loss of oneself into the process, is largely suppressed. The Cixous reference to the instant between two instants suggests an experience without the effect/affect of memory. Bohm refers to the 'flash of understanding' that can come to one in an instant. (Bohm, 2004, p. 54) Allied to this, or what may generate such occasional insight, Bohm proposes a mode of thought that [...] just comes out from the reflex system', and then that '[...] there must be some kind of intelligence or perception, something a bit beyond the reflex, which would be able to see whether it's coherent or not'. (Bohm, 1994, p. 53) Insofar

as speaking is like this – that one tends to speak first and then, if necessary, reflect on the content of what one has said – sketching, especially if it involves speed of execution, must also embody this automatic reflexivity. Speaking while drawing seems to enable me to notice, reflexively, the reflexivity inherent in the drawing

process, or at least causes the phenomenological mode of reflection after the event to be very close.

The following two sketches Figures 20 and 21 were the result of slow walking in each of two directions, respectively, of a helicopter landing-pad at the top of a mountain.

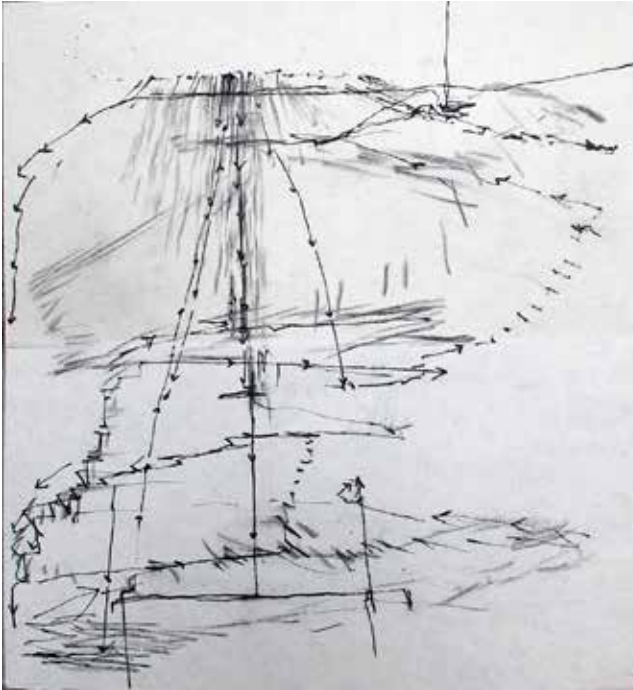


Figure 20: Helicopter landing pad, ink on handmade paper, 23 x 25cm, 2020 + photograph of site



Figure 21: Helicopter landing pad, ink on handmade paper, 23 x 25cm, 2020 + photograph of site



The process here involved looking between left and right either side and just a little beyond the sketchbook. In both sketches I use arrows to suggest that as I move forward, what I'm looking at seems to move towards me. I felt at the time that the line beckoned the present instant behind me and into the past. It was only when I'd reached the end of the landing pad in the direction as shown in Figure 21 that I mapped a speculative future direction into the road ahead. The precarious perceptual situation of the helipad is that in the context of steep inclines, the platform itself appeared curved rather than flat. By rocking back and forth with the line, I wanted to convey something of this illusion. In these examples the snapshots offer some comparison to the sketches and enable their reading. Perhaps what is noticeable, on close inspection, is that the biological mechanics of perception, coupled with subjective determinants that are difficult to ascertain, had caused me to look differently and even against the scene's perspective. In both sketches, the near plane gives way relatively soon and in strange ways, as I offer the sketchbook up to the scene further ahead.

While the mechanics of perception and their idiosyncratic influence by subjective factors may ordinarily be absorbed into the reflexivity of one's practice, in my case perception has itself become the subject of observation. In the above sketches I've tried to capture imagery on the move, which, as suggested by the Bergson reference, is impossible without it's becoming a representation. The nearest one can get would seem to be through attention to transitions, or, as is the case with more recent sketches of mine, through fixed focus on a detail of a particular object and drawing all other objects from peripheral vision, including not directly looking at the sketch itself even once before it's considered finished. By detail, this could be the black lock in the middle of a yellow steel retractable measuring tape in the foreground on a table, the point of focus in Figure 22.



Figure 22: *Objects on a table, viewed peripherally while focusing on a yellow and black measuring tape in the foreground, first state, various pencils on handmade paper, 50 x 36cm, 2021*

Arguably, the strategy of this sketch may encapsulate the impossibility of the objective of the others due to compromising the factor that one might consider the most important in sketching from observation, which is direct looking. This is not to say that the drawing is not focused – far from it, as registered by the discomfort I felt through staring fixedly at the chosen point for more than a few minutes. However, attending to peripherality, to coin a term, substitutes indistinctness for one's constant perceptu-

al consciousness of the movement of the image basis of objects through time and space, no matter whether the objects are mobile or still. Figure 23 comparisons between what was in front of me and the sketch itself, and an overlay, indicate that the ratio between one of the positions of the lock on the tape, the seat of the triangular stool in the background, and the perspective between the two books on the left is a fairly good fit.



Fig 23: A comparison between a sketch and a photo of its references, and an overlay of sketch on photo to assess the accuracy of the fit, variable dimensions, 2021



Fig 24: *Objects on a table, viewed peripherally while focusing on a yellow and black measuring tape in the foreground, second state*, various pencils on handmade paper, reworked with chalk and acrylic paint, 50 x 36cm, 2021

The rationale of using white acrylic in a reworking of the sketch, Figure 24, was to somehow suggest visual attention as vagueness of connection between elements converted to mass.

The following images, Figures 27, 28, 29, show a repeat of the sketch exercise and its reference, this time focusing fixedly on an easel nut at the top of its vertical support in the furthest distance of a view across a table top, while responding to all other objects seen and sensed peripherally.



Figure 27: Objects on and around a table viewed peripherally while focusing on the black fastener on the upright of a wooden drawing easel in the furthest distance, first state, various pencils and chalk on handmade paper, 50 x 36cm, 2021

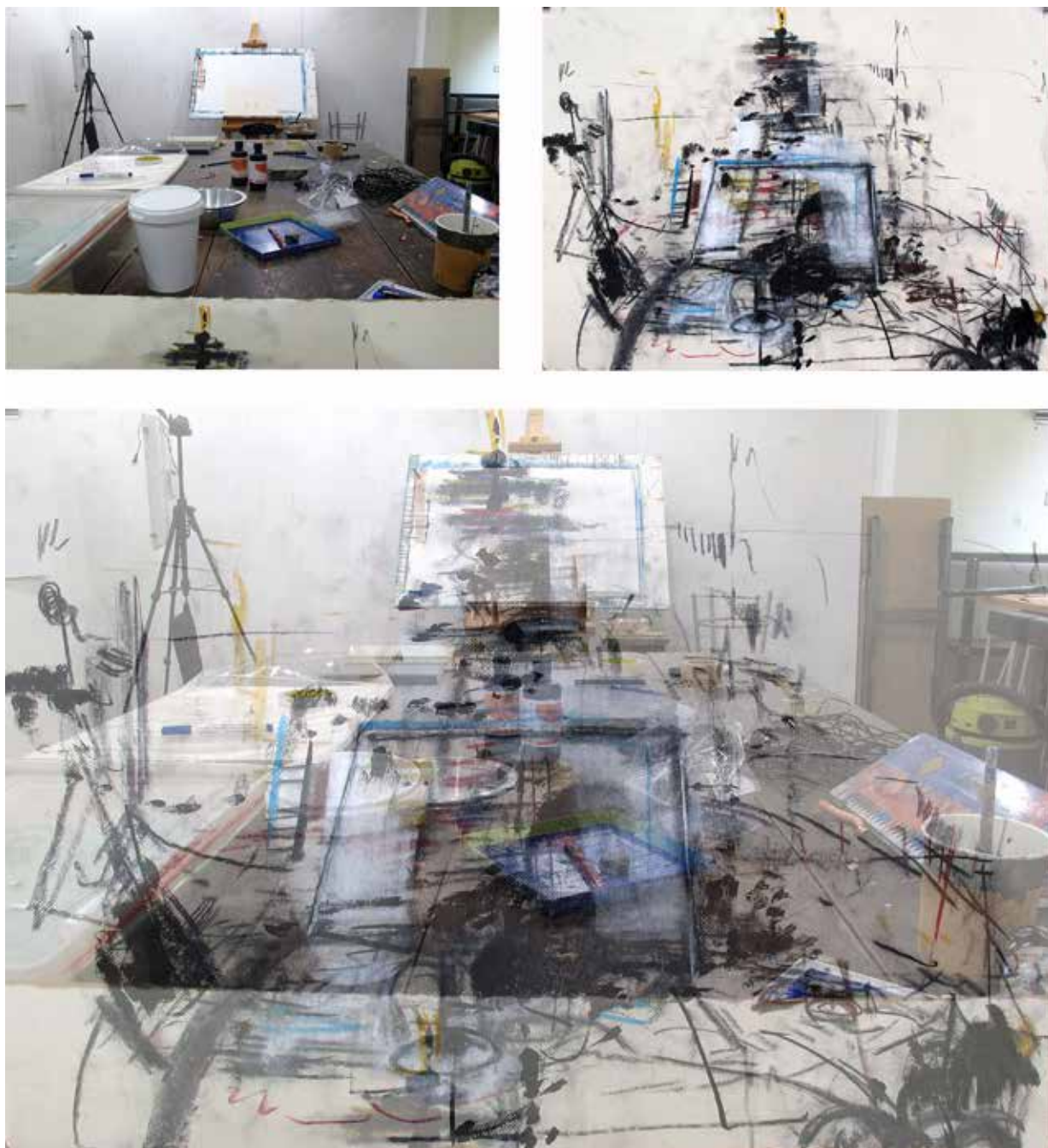


Figure 29: Objects on and around a table viewed peripherally while focusing on the black fastener on the upright of a wooden drawing easel in the furthest distance, second state, various pencils and chalk, reworked with chalk and acrylic paint on handmade paper, 50 x 36cm, 2021



Fig 28: A comparison between sketch 2 and a photo of its references, and an overlay of sketch on photo to assess the accuracy of the fit, variable dimensions, 2021

Such repetition of the exercise is the start of development of a narrative within and as the sketch, where *flux* could be a term for the smudginess and wetness of the medium that talks about the restlessness of my movement in relation to the objects even while I was apparently sitting still. By the same token, the objects will have been moving in relation to me, the latter of which is a ratio much less noticed in our daily interactions with inanimate material at our disposal.

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