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Invasive Assessments, Surprise and Performing the Self in the Sketchbook

Felicity Allen

‘...that's what keeps me in the studio, the not knowing part and always being surprised.’¹

A contemporary artist's sketchbook, I want to suggest in this essay, is frequently an intimate laboratory through which to repeatedly become and perform an artistic self and through which to learn to become that self; that is, to develop a practice. Shifts in how sketchbooks are used could be tracked according to the prevailing identity of the artist as she or he lives their life, as well as the identity of the art product.

As the sketchbook hits a kind of crisis related both to its ubiquity and its archaic form, it is transformed by commerce, conceptually and as a medium, to turn the Joseph Beuys dictum 'everyone is an artist' into 'everyone can be commodified to simulate becoming an artist'.

I am writing from my own experience of keeping a sketchbook, as well as looking at other contemporary artists' and students' sketchbooks. I am using the word 'sketchbook' to suggest a wide variety of note- and sketchbooks that include many types of text and image, and contribute to different stages in the production of art.

The sketchbook and art education

How does a sketchbook function in education, in learning and in the production of oneself as an artist (or independent thinker)? How are educational structures teaching us to develop as we produce sketchbooks?

¹ Bruce Nauman, 'Setting a Good Corner', *The Studio Reader*, eds. Mary Jane Jacob, Michelle Grabner, University of Chicago Press, 2010, p.66. From an interview with Bruce Nauman conducted for the documentary series *Art:21 – Art in the Twenty-first Century* (2001), originally published in the companion volume of the same title (vol.1, 2001)

In Britain, producing a sketchbook is a curriculum requirement in the study of art in both school and higher education and, in different ways, becomes part of the assessable work a student produces. The crisis in the British education system has been well documented, as the citizen / student is re-positioned as the consumer / student.² As educational institutions enter the market, the purpose of education is contested, and with this contest come challenges to long-standing, nation-building concepts of the individual, self-realisation, social mobility, dissent and knowledge itself. Public educational assessment is an intrinsic part of the shift to the market, promoted by the government as ensuring public value for money and offering consumer choice, while teachers and lecturers experience it as ever-increasing administration and drudgery.

Both to educators and to students a sketchbook is frequently seen as a site of creative learning, although, of course, 'creativity' is a concept with political form. As Pen Dalton has noted, educational priorities of certain art courses in UK higher education match the business imperatives promoted by the Confederation of British Industry; these she cites as 'Initiative, self-motivation, creativity, communication and teamwork'. She suggests 'the paradigm of postmodern economic man is the playful, creative, risk-taking, entrepreneurial artist.'³

Reinforcing this, the collective Radical Philosophy noted in a journal editorial that the demand now is for workers 'with uniquely individual abilities'. Creating a picture of the endless networking and socio-cultural performances of the self a 'flexible' worker must operate, the editorial states that the 'self is no longer a place of retreat but a productive force,' and a flexible worker must 'maintain a good mood in order to appear creative and original – survival depends on it.'⁴

How, then, is a sketchbook's assessment by an educational institution affecting the production of the self as a creative but potentially dissenting individual? To understand the ways in which sketchbooks operate as performative manifestations towards becoming an artistic self, one can take as

² Regarding art education, see many texts included in my own book *Education* (MIT / Whitechapel, Documents of Contemporary Art, 2011), for instance, Pen Dalton, extracts from *The Gendering of Art Education* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2001).

³ Pen Dalton, *The Gendering of Art Education* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2001) 66–76; 110–11.

⁴ I am not suggesting here that the 'self in a place of retreat' is imagined as somehow other from and uncomplicated by social and economic realities. Radical Philosophy Collective, extract from 'The University and the Plan: Reflections from Vienna', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 162 (July/August 2010) p.1.

an example the early notebooks of the artist, choreographer and film-maker Yvonne Rainer. She kept these when she was making the transition from school to university. The first, from 1951 when she is a teenager at college, opens with a description of an argument with a teacher about what and how the students should be taught. She goes on to vividly describe what it feels like - physically and emotionally - to be her. She determinedly digs below the surface of her feelings in writing about them. More than fifty years later, in a 2009 interview with Robert Storr, Yvonne Rainer comments about the dance, *Trio A*, that she choreographed in 1966 and in which she was filmed performing in 1978:

'One of the main characteristics of this dance is that the gaze of the performer never looks directly out at the audience. ... I refused to look at the audience, so the gaze becomes inward ...'¹⁵

While her concerns fit with the aesthetic, political and social concerns of the period in which she developed and performed this dance, the comment could equally be applied to the work of her notebook. Essentially it is a similar position. Watch Rainer's films to understand that actually her notebook is also a place to form arguments, to practise writing and form an artistic self; it is absolutely possible to see this early notebook, which might be dismissed as a teenage diary, as an experiment in writing that contributes, say, to the film *Lives of Performers* that she made twenty years later in 1972. The voice and experimentation develops: in 1972 her notebook becomes a dream diary, combining elements of fantasy and realism with a self-conscious awareness of the position of the narrator, seeking potentially a Freudian reading between the lines of not just the story but its telling. While its intention may have been partly therapeutic, Rainer is practising the art of storytelling as well as writing. A sequence in the film shows a man in a relationship with two women. He is at the centre. The sequence uses voiceover which is directly comparable to the voice of a diary. It is eerie like a dream. The voice is a story-telling voice, describing events and reporting speech attributed to the individuals; the voiceover keeps each individual - either of the two women, the man, or the voiceover - remote from the viewer, making identification impossible. In this sense Rainer's work once again refuses to make eye contact

¹⁵ Yvonne Rainer in conversation at Boston University with Robert Storr. Hosted by College of Fine Arts School of Visual Arts on April 9, 2009. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t190iGzcjzY> (Downloaded on: 5 May 2012).

with the audience. But this is also characteristic of the self-conscious diarist; her diaristic notebook is a rehearsal both for the development of her artistic self and for the work that she produces.

So let me attempt to distinguish between what Yvonne Rainer does - using her notebook to learn and develop while producing herself as an artistic self, while also learning to write and think as part of her practice; and the idea suggested by the Radical Philosophy editorial, that 'the self is no longer a place of retreat but a productive force'. How is the first 'self' different from the second? Significantly it is different because of the power relations that surround the production of the self. Rainer 'refused to look at the audience, so the gaze became inward.' She argued with her teachers. She transformed real life relationships – whether real-time encounters with her boyfriend, or dream-time encounters – through her notebook work to become material for her artistic productions. In producing her self she was producing her work; she owned it, it was her work from her self, and it was hers to sell. The self that Radical Philosophy describes is the opposite. There is no retreat into a notebook, no practice, there is simply an endless performative round of insecure encounters at gallery openings along with insecure labour relationships. The value of the self produced does not belong to the person producing it but to the potential contractor of that person. The self is reduced to the labour to be exploited by the contractor, in the Facebook model: that is, the Facebook Friend as both the commodity for sale to the advertisers and the unpaid labourer.

Yvonne Rainer argued with her teachers. Self-reflexivity and dissent are integral to developing as a critical and creative, educated citizen. Not just the freedom but also the individual strength to dissent is essential. While it may not appear to be a part of an artist's productions, the possibility for dissent has to be a part of what informs artistic practice. Some would argue that in fact producing a work of art is in itself an action that counters the passive consumerist model. How does this reflect itself in the sketchbooks of today?

Sketchbooks and reflection

Looking at sketchbooks from different sources, archives and working studios, I discovered that, as post-conceptualism has developed, not surprisingly sketchbooks have significantly increased the proportion of verbal text compared with the visual. However, while I could often sense development from one page to another, these pages were not necessarily in sequence and certainly a sense of linear, literal progress was largely absent. The many different types and uses of text were possibly more wide-ranging than the types and uses of drawings. Sketchbooks seemed to be manifestations of what might be termed creative learning and production. It became clear that drawing and writing frequently overlapped and echoed each other, and that an assemblage of thinking, including quotation and interpretation, was being made. I observed that the artist's signature aesthetic emerged through application as well as content and selection: that, for instance, Michael Landy was always paring down; the language, the handwriting, the drawings and the thinking had a kind of brutalist, possibly punk, poignancy. On the other hand, Cornelia Parker's language and handwriting and drawings all felt fluid; there were stops but they seemed like punctuation to the flow. The contemporary sketchbooks that I looked at usually contained a voice spoken directly to the self which became especially noticeable when the voice told the self off or explicitly reminded it of something: in her cutting books, Tacita Dean expresses frustration with herself and her team from a particular moment when they were filming, or Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller pull the plug on procrastination: 'Must have drawn this a dozen times. Just start building it.'

I have concluded that, in some sense, the work of the sketchbook is in itself reflexive but not literally decodeable as such. Reflecting on the sketchbook, without a substantial period of time between the making and the review, can be sterilising rather than creative, unless the reflection contains the quality of chance that is an integral component of the relationship an artist (or student) has to their book.

The standardisation of the sketchbook

To acknowledge the inherently reflexive nature of keeping a sketch or notebook is significant because of the demand that British school students 'annotate' their sketchbooks in preparation for assessment. The teacher demands a type of uniformity in what a student cohort produces, in the name of fairness for students and in an attempt to contain the impossible weight of administration and assessment that teachers and lecturers now do. An idea that reflection and articulation helps reinforce learning - which it would, for instance, if you were learning to remember the Periodic Table or a Robert Browning poem - has been applied across the curriculum. Annotation routinely means that students look through the pictures they have drawn and write a commentary about their thinking. It is a process of sterilisation through literalisation. Even in higher education schools of art I have examples of comparable demands for uniformity in what are ironically titled 'critical studies log books'. The reflexive, demanding, critical, surprising individual is ruled out.

An example of a school teacher's management of sketchbooks demonstrates the demand that students produce standard format work, although this is certainly not confined to schools; it may not be the fault but is, possibly, the responsibility of an individual teacher. In this London state school all students are issued with the same type of sketchbook. In the front inside cover the teacher staples a standard form. It identifies the dates when she or he has seen the sketchbook, the grades they have given it, and their comments on a particular date. This is an example:

GCSE Fine Art Interim Assessment

UNIT TITLE: IDENTITY

NAME/TUTOR GROUP

Current grade: C/D

Target grade: B/C

Things to do to improve

1 Label all your drawings and experiments. You should explain how you created each piece

2 Stick black and white copy of Picasso 'eye' in your sketchbook

3 Draw view through window. Use pencil or pen and add tone

4 Produce more drawings of parts of the face using other drawing materials

Deadline for completion of work: (date)

Teacher (signature) Date

You might be reminded of Allan Sekula's famous work *School is a Factory* (1978–80) or even the TED lecture given by the educationalist Ken Robinson. He too identifies the factory as a model for the school, with its regulatory bell ringing to sound the beginning and end of lessons, a production line of intellectual and creative frustration. Robinson says that we 'educate children by batches [that is, by age group] ... as if the most important thing about them is their date of manufacture.' 'We don't grow into creativity,' he says, 'we grow out of it; or rather, we get educated out of it.'⁶ Given my concern with the student's development of a sense of self, there is a cheap irony in the example I have given, in that the project title is 'Identity'.

The sketchbook as an instrument of academisation

There are several issues I should like to raise in relation to this. First, there is an issue about what art and artists are. James Elkins writes about the problematic academicisation of the PhD in art, which, he says, demands that the student theoretically critiques their own work. While there is more variation than this might suggest, his comments about ideas of self-reflexivity are important. He writes,

'... self-reflexivity ... is the inescapable end result, and unavoidably the implicit goal, of every program. It raises a fascinating and extremely difficult problem. Historically speaking, artists have not always been very eloquent, or even very accurate, about what they do. Entire movements and centuries of art have flourished without the kind of articulateness that we now value, and if we're honest we should probably say those movements and periods may not have been possible if the artists had been able to write at length, lucidly, with historical and analytic precision, about what

⁶ Ken Robinson, RSA TED lecture 'Changing Education Paradigms'. Available at: http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_changing_education_paradigms.html (Downloaded on: 1 Oct 2012).

they were doing. Some art is hobbled by awareness ... the challenge in studio art education in general, and in PhD programs in particular, is understanding what kinds of art are served by self-reflexivity, what parts of art practice are bypassed in self-reflexivity, and what elements of art making self-reflexivity protects us from thinking about.⁷

As part of a Facebook exchange discussing this, John L Tran wrote, 'Reflection about my work, and reflection about myself are different (with some overlap).' I want to suggest that a note or sketchbook, by its very nature, contains the possibility for an artist to produce as yet unmediated stuff that is both the self and the work before one is refined and separated from the other. Crucially it allows for a direct link to different levels of consciousness and, as I have already suggested, the act of making contains the act of reflection.

A second issue in relation to the assessment and standardisation of sketchbooks is about doublethink, as George Orwell so presciently described it.⁸ In a section called 'Freedom to Learn' in the current issue of the US journal *Psychology Today*, Peter Gray reports on a research report undertaken by Kyung Hee Kim, a professor of education, which documents a continuous decline in creativity among American schoolchildren over the last two or three decades. Quoting Kim, he writes,

'... the data indicate that "children have become less emotionally expressive, less energetic, less talkative and verbally expressive, less humorous, less imaginative, less unconventional, less lively and passionate, less perceptive, less apt to connect seemingly irrelevant things, less synthesizing, and less likely to see things from a different angle."

⁷ James Elkins, 'Reasons to Mistrust the PhD: numbers 5-7'. Available at: <http://jimandmargaret.wordpress.com/> (Downloaded on: 30 September 2012).

⁸ 'To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget, whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself - that was the ultimate subtlety; consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word 'doublethink' involved the use of doublethink.' George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, London(1949), pp 32. See also Tom McArthur, ed., *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, Oxford University Press (1992), p. 321. 'The paradox is expressed most succinctly in the novel in the three Party slogans: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and Ignorance is Strength. The term is widely used to describe a capacity to engage in one line of thought in one situation (at work, in a certain group, in business, etc.) and another line in another situation (at home, in another group, in private life), without necessarily sensing any conflict between the two.' Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doublethink> (Downloaded on: 12 October 2012).

Kyung Hee Kim gives evidence to show that there is a direct correlation between this decline in what is identified as creativity and the imposition in state education in the States, as in the UK, of a target culture, with frequent testing that trains state-educated children to think in a behaviourist framework of right and wrong and good and bad. In particular, she notes that the most substantial negative shift is in what is called 'Creative Elaboration, which assesses the ability to take a particular idea and expand on it in an interesting and novel way.' Gray writes

'Creativity is ... stifled by the continuous monitoring, evaluation, adult-direction, and **pressure to conform** that restrict children's lives today. ... we are subjecting children to an educational system ... that punishes children (and their teachers too) for daring to try different routes. We are also, ... increasingly depriving children of free time outside of school to play, explore, be bored, overcome boredom, fail, overcome failure ...' (My emphasis.)⁹

The sketchbook, as you are likely to know if you keep one, is precisely the type of device one might turn to when bored or failing, and allows one to discover that one can challenge one's own doubts through practice, transforming frustration into something creative. This is an essential process for an artist but also for anyone to achieve a sense of one's own agency, an integral quality to a sense of self. The doublethink, therefore, is the desire expressed by educational regulators (government, corporations, some educationalists) for students to be better educated and to identify this through higher grades, while the regulatory system imposed does everything possible to disempower the students; to diminish their sense of independence, agency or ability to learn for and by themselves. Their teachers have been obliged, as Gray observes, to sublimate their own experiential knowledge to that of the testing mechanisms. The verbal annotations in sketchbooks may once have been introduced because they were thought to have educational value in the form of articulated reflection, but now their main purpose may be to relieve the examiners of actually doing the associative and complex thinking that reading someone else's sketchbook requires. They can assess it quicker. In any case, diminishing a

⁹ Peter Gray, 'Freedom to Learn', *Psychology Today*, September 17, 2012. Available at: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201209/children-s-freedom-has-declined-so-has-their-creativity?page=2> (Downloaded on: 27 September 2012).

student's sense of agency implicitly eradicates the very thing we believe is a Western tradition, freedom of expression and the right to dissent.

This leads me to my third and final issue in relation to the assessment of sketchbooks, linking the personal to the political through the psychological. I want to suggest that our managerialist assessment cultures in education, which are promoted as giving access, consumer choice, and fairness, in fact act as a formidable form of surveillance and regulation. It is repressive and it keeps people in their place. Repeated and 'unreflective' assessment is a psychological invasion of the student's mind which is constantly working, consciously and unconsciously, in its formation of a notion of self. The sketchbook can be an important location for that mucky emerging self/work. The political aspect of this is that, in Britain, regulation through assessment affects both students and teachers in the state sector harder than in the private sector. The higher education system replicates this class division, and this has real implications for ideas about social mobility, art, culture and society.

A sketchbook does have no deadline

One indicator of the ways in which sketchbooks are containers of a mucky emerging self/work is the fact that sketchbooks are frequently left incomplete. Pages towards the end of the book are left empty or, as part of the same refusal to complete, the artist resists conclusion by using the inside cover, cramming stuff in so that it virtually spills into the next book. To conclude a sketchbook would be a kind of death.

I think DW Winnicott, the twentieth century British psychoanalyst, might have understood this last statement. In his book about Winnicott, Adam Phillips records Winnicott's view about analysis: 'The risk was that interpretation in analysis would be formative in a way that actually pre-empted the patient's own half-formed thoughts and feelings. Interpretation could be merely a way of hurrying - on the analyst's behalf - and analysis, like development, was, for Winnicott, about people taking their own time.' Development has no deadline then.

Winnicott also considered that 'It was the mother's essential role to protect the self of her infant,' Phillips notes. 'If the mother ... was, herself, intrusively demanding, she would foster a precocious compliance in the child. To manage the demands of the mother, and to protect the True Self of personal need and preoccupation, the child would construct what Winnicott called a False Self.'

While a student is not an infant, and a teacher/lecturer is not a mother, I want to suggest that the education institution, for example in the form of the teacher's comments I discussed earlier and in common with much state education in Britain and the United States, had taken on the role not only of the legislative father in the Lacanian sense, but of the intrusively demanding mother, infantilising the students in the process. The student adopts a False Self, in Winnicott's terms, which prevents creative learning and development. Phillips notes 'that the significant moment [in analysis] was the one in which the patient surprised himself ... A surprise, of course, eludes the expectations made possible by a body of theory. It is a release from compliance.' Producing sketchbooks produces surprises, allowing one to become lost in time. But the mainstream has moved from the mid-twentieth century psychoanalytic perceptions of child development to the cognitive behavioural therapy that now prevails in school as well as for employed and unemployed adults reflected in the language of Human Resources and Welfare to Work programmes. Rather than thinking about relationships as, say, Winnicott or Klein did and, in particular, one's relationship with oneself, we think only about individual behaviour and how to correct it. I am not suggesting that keeping a sketchbook is equivalent to psychoanalysis; but I think we can consider some key qualities of the sketchbook as being analogous. For many of us an essential aspect of one's sketchbook is that it is private: it is a dialogue with oneself (Blanchot is illuminating about a writer's diary in this respect, particularly with regard to the unknown and unidentified space / time of making creative work¹⁰). As Adam Phillips says, 'one of [Winnicott's] therapeutic aims [was]: to protect the privacy of the self in the making of personal sense and, by the same token, personal nonsense.'¹¹ Winnicott attempted, he says, 'to establish an analytic setting in which the patient does not undergo authoritative translation - having his unconscious fed back to him, as it were - but is enabled

¹⁰ Maurice Blanchot, transl. Ann Smock, *The Space of Literature*, University of Nebraska Press, 1982, pps. 28 - 30.

¹¹ Adam Phillips, *Winnicott*, Penguin London 2007 (orig 1988), pps. 4-14.

by the analyst, as Winnicott wrote, 'to reveal himself to himself.' I found my exploration of some contemporary artists' sketchbooks reinforced this sense of the sketchbook as container of the revealed and the hidden, a place in which some things could be pursued and opened but others left to lie dormant. Any surprise or revelation was in private to the author, not to a public. This desire to allow for the pleasure of surprises to oneself is frequently a part of an artist's work. In the Cardiff /Bures Miller sketchbooks a comment next to a drawing reads, 'more interesting because it doesn't direct viewer too much.' Both Cornelia Parker and Michael Landy frequently use free association through wordplay, popularised through a Freudian understanding of the unconscious. Klein, Anna Freud and Winnicott developed their theoretical and practical work from their observations of children's play, identifying it as equivalent to free association. Typically play in this sense ranged through the verbal, which included 'wordplay', to include drawing, painting, acting things out with objects or building, all, in some sense, activities that parallel some current sketchbook practices.

As teachers we need to be reflexive and consider how best to help students develop a strong sense of self from which they can make effective collaborations with others, and find pleasure in the surprises they make for themselves. A private sketchbook practice, whether actual, metaphysical, or virtual, is a part of this, a good place to rehearse.

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