

Drawing Research Network

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GOING ALONG TOGETHER: DRAWING, DIALOGUE AND THE CURATION OF THE WORK OF SALLY TAYLOR

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This paper addresses the tangible relationship between Sally Taylor's Arts Council England Mentoring for Professional Development Project and the artworks and exhibitions that it has enabled. It makes the case that the form her ACE bid took emerged from pressing questionings about how Taylor's drawings come into being and are encountered in the social world. It briefly discusses the curation of Taylor's work through three exhibitions: The Prison Drawing Project, Scarborough (February 2016); That Head, That Head, Rabley Contemporary Drawing Centre, Wiltshire (September–October 2016), and Some Spaces Left, Platform A, Middlesborough (November 2017). It frames the curatorial shift evident in these exhibitions via the writing of British anarchist, art historian, and poet Sir Herbert Read and anthropologist Tim Ingold to argue that the production and curation of Taylor's new work is a performative index of the inherently social apparatus of her Mentoring Project.

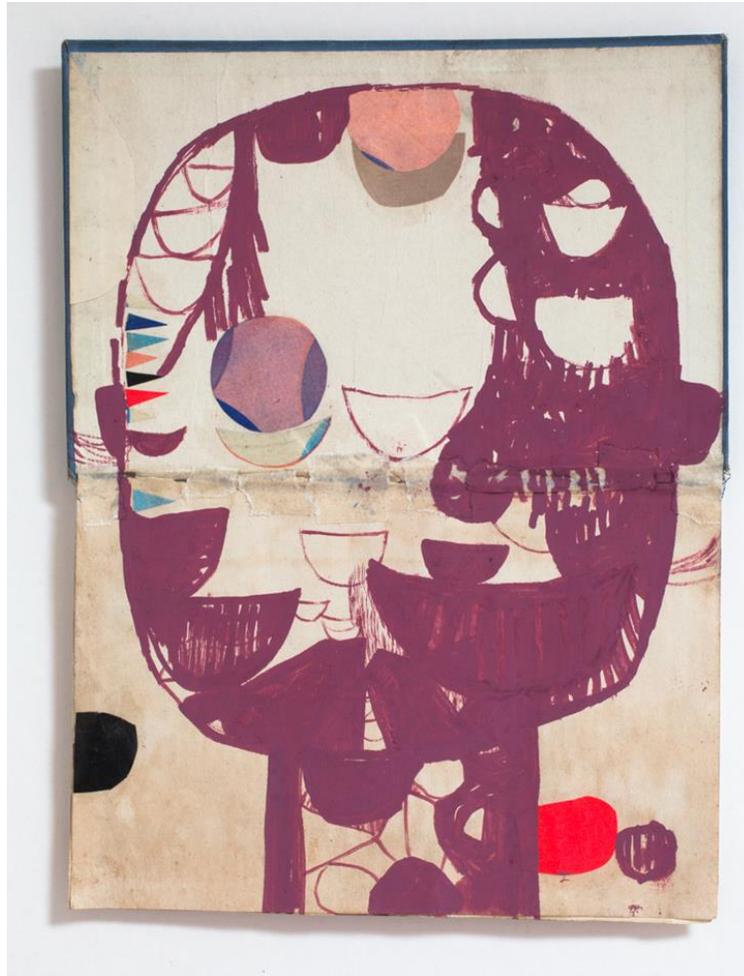


FIGURE 1: SALLY TAYLOR, CONFUSED HEAD 43, POSCA PEN AND COLLAGE ON FOUND PAPER (2016), 25 X 19CM

Joining with one another in the studio

The starting point of this essay is the shift in Taylor's practice over the course of the 2016–2017 ACE Mentoring for Professional Development Project. It is a movement through which questions latent in the works' production have come to the foreground via its curation. From 2011 to 2016, Taylor's practice worked through what she called the 'mouth motif' (Figs. 1 and 2), which formed the substance of her solo exhibition at the Ryedale Folk Museum. The exhibition catalogue essay, accompanied by an image from Taylor's studio, began by referring to the crowd-like combined effect of these drawings as an assault of silent yet raucous voices (2011). These gobby and mute but articulate drawings mobilised kitsch references and an aggressive, expressive vocabulary of childlike mark making. All of these elements set them up against the discourse of Conceptualism, which has dominated contemporary art since the 1970s. The impetus to that intervention lay in Taylor's working-class background, which made her acutely aware of the privilege assigned to intellectualism over materials in the arts. A key motivation for Taylor, therefore, was the knowledge that specialist language often functions as a barrier between the arts and wider audiences. However, while the studio posed questions about the 'masses', the presentation of individual drawings for exhibition offered a very different experience (for a more detailed consideration of Taylor's work and the representation of the masses, see Corby 2017).



FIGURE 2: SALLY TAYLOR'S STUDIO (2016), STONEGRAVE, NORTH YORKSHIRE

Therefore, a tension was beginning to emerge between the collective making and display of Taylor's drawings in the studio and framing them individually for exhibition. As the artist's young son grew into a toddler and she began to work with POSCA pens, the disembodied mouths that filled her drawings gave way to a sustained engagement with Confused Heads. The human nature of her drawings thus became more marked and variations of colour, line, material, and surface began to form communities amongst the crowds of drawings that populated Taylor's studio. When tacked to the wall unframed, Taylor's works sat in conversation with one another; the viewer could wander through the visual jibber-jabber that simultaneously revealed the similarities and differences of the drawings' co-emergent personalities.

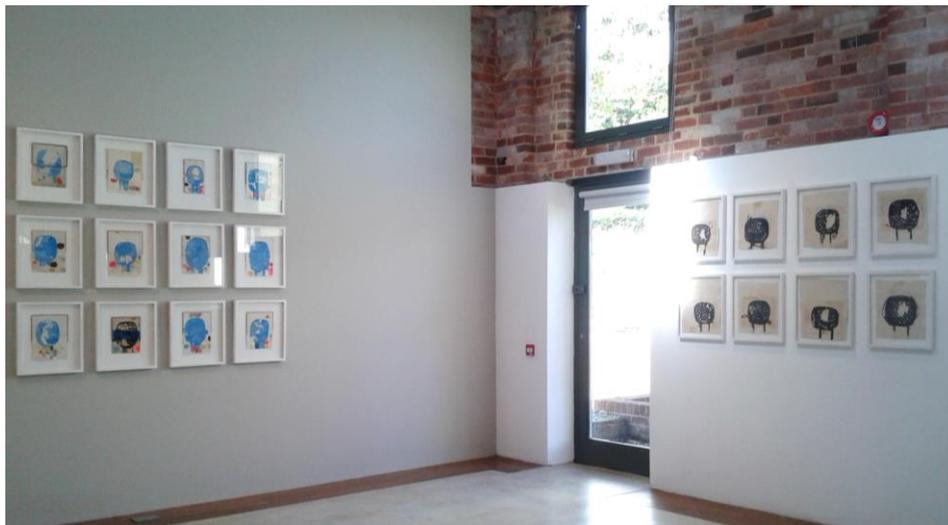


FIGURE 3: THAT HEAD, THAT HEAD (SEPT 2016), RABLEY DRAWING CENTRE, WILTSHIRE

Once mounted and framed (Fig. 3), however, the uniform gaps and clean straight edges intercede in the dialogue between drawings; formalising them in a way that ran counter to the simultaneity that characterised their making. The frame does not silence the chatter of the drawings completely but it certainly ruptures their lateral focus, thereby shifting their attention to the viewer who now stands before individual personages rather than a community that exceeds the sum of their parts. The typical movement of the work from studio to gallery was thus transformed into a pressing curatorial dilemma integral to the work's ability to communicate with its audience.

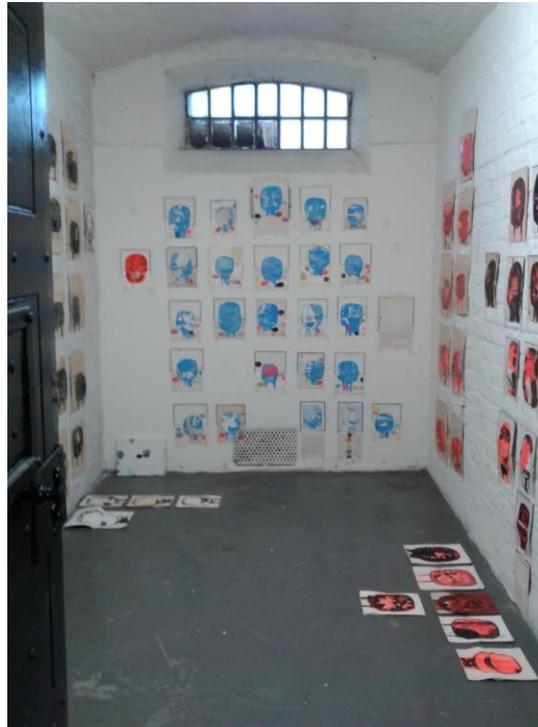


FIGURE 4: THE PRISON DRAWING PROJECT (2016), DEAN ROAD PRISON, SCARBOROUGH

The Arts Council England funded The Prison Drawing Project (Scarborough 2016) was a pivotal turning point in the presentation of the work. This pop-up exhibition took place over one weekend in February with limited time to set it up and the provision that no walls were to be damaged (drilled etc.) during the installation. The need to use temporary fixings and work quickly meant that the works were exhibited unframed and presented as they had emerged from the studio. These clusters reclaimed the work from the commercial polish of high art and reconnected them with their materials and with the aesthetics of the everyday.



FIGURE 5: SALLY TAYLOR, SOME SPACES LEFT (NOV 2017– JAN 2018), PLATFORM A, MIDDLESBROUGH

The work Taylor curated for *Some Spaces Left* at Platform in Middlesbrough (2017–18; Figs. 5–9) actively resisted this separation, however, by grouping head drawings in large frames on grounds of found paper. The absence of clean white edges open up the lines of communication between Taylor’s drawings, but also underpin the significance of the negative spaces between those heads as a key dimension in the work. Rather than simply blanks between drawings, they also act as spaces of possibility: rooms for what is yet to be made, known, or encountered, or gulfs that will simply remain.



FIGURES 6 & 7: SALLY TAYLOR, *SOME SPACES LEFT* (2017–2018, PLATFORM A, MIDDLESBROUGH, INSTALLATION SHOTS)

These aesthetic decisions embody the debt to and inextricable relationship with the other that makes us human. They register the support but also the strife that brings artistic practices into being in communities for communities. In the words of social anthropologist, Tim Ingold, they reveal the process of ‘interstitial differentiation’ through which ‘difference continually arises from within the midst of joining with in the ongoing sympathy of going along together’ (Ingold 2016: 13).



FIGURES 8 & 9: SALLY TAYLOR, *SOME SPACES LEFT* (2017–2018), PLATFORM A, MIDDLESBROUGH, INSTALLATION SHOTS

Mentoring beyond the network

Ingold’s vision of the social in which the lives of humans and non-humans are ‘joined with one another’ enables this essay to not only argue what is embodied in the emergence and display of Taylor’s head drawings, but also to consider how we might think differently about the operations of her ACE Project as a ‘networking’ activity (Ingold 2016: 2022).

The basic premise of Taylor’s ACE application was a simple one; she had worked for a number of years and established a strong reputation for her practice through numerous appearances in the Jerwood Drawing Prize and solo exhibitions at prestigious venues, such as the Rabley Drawing Centre (2016). She came to know, support, and be supported by artists engaged with drawing in the Yorkshire region and beyond through participation in group exhibitions, such as *To Draw is to be Human* (2016), 20-21 Visual Arts Centre (2016), *The Prison Drawing Project* (2016), and *The Drawing Matters Exhibition* with Andy Black, Kate Black, Tracy Himsworth, and Lucy O’Donnell. On a day-to-day basis, however, Taylor works in isolation. In great part, this was due to the location of her studio in rural North Yorkshire. Apart from students who would occasionally come over from York St John University twenty miles away, visitors were few and far between; unless that is you count the chickens that wander about outside or the swallows known to fly about the studio’s rafters in summer. For many, the picture I am painting is that of an artistic idyll but the lack of heating in winter, demands made by the motherhood of two small children, and the lack of peer support is a harsh reality that would test even the most resilient practitioners. As Taylor therefore lacked a consistent exchange with an immediate community, her ACE Mentoring Project endeavoured to create and bring such a community to her and, crucially, take her to it.

The lynchpin of that community would be Professor Anita Taylor, who is also featured in this Special Edition. The artist has known Anita Taylor for the past 20 years and, together with Kate Brindley, now Director of Collections and Exhibitions at Chatsworth, they worked to set goals and create opportunities through introductions that would enable Taylor’s practice to flourish. While the ACE bid articulated those

activities under the banner of networking, I hesitate to describe it in those terms. That reluctance stems in great part from Lawrence Alloway's influential essay 'Network: The Art World Described as a System' (1973 [1984]: 3). In that text, Alloway described the art world as a 'communication network' which packaged art from the studio for distribution to the public in galleries and museums and critique by art historians or critics (Alloway 1984: .8). Success in this scenario depended on the artist's participation within the network, which in turn relied upon the ability to participate in the exchange of 'information' (Alloway 1984: 8) For Alloway, art was made up of two types of information: 'special characteristics' which are 'unique' and speak to the style and name of the artist, and those that are 'repeatable', that is which are 'transmissible to other artists' (Alloway 1983: 8–9). Participation in the network is dependent on the strategic assimilation of what is 'of the moment' and the production of nominally different outcomes that can be readily identified by the market (Alloway 1983: 8–9). Within this economy, our relationship with art and others is therefore instrumentalized and driven by self-interest.

It is my contention that this framework commits a kind of violence to Taylor's project, whose rationale can be better approached via Herbert Read's reminiscences of Unit 1. In the essay, 'A Nest of Gentle Artists' (1962), Read described the coming together of Hepworth, Nash, Nicholson, Moore, and others in the 1930s as 'a spontaneous association of men and women drawn together by common sympathies, shared seriousness and some kind of group criticism. There were no polemics and no programme' (Read 1993: 61). Of particular note is Read's recollection of Nash's letter to the Times that stated:

The peculiar distinction of Unit 1 is that it is not composed of, let us say, three individuals and eight imitators, but of eleven individuals. And yet there is still a quality of mind, of spirit perhaps, which unites the work of these artists, a relevance apparent enough to any intelligent perception (Read 1993: 61).

As Read concluded; 'there was a prevailing good temper [in Unit 1], an atmosphere in which art could grow' (Read 1993: 61).

Read's generosity leads me back to the writings of Ingold, for he too has described the way art 'grows' by the 'joining' of lives 'with' materials (Ingold 2013: 20–22). In his 2014 lecture to the Royal Anthropological Institute 'On Human Correspondence' (2014), Ingold makes clear that 'concrete form does not issue from ideas' or information. He questions the notion of a world comprised of discrete individuals, or 'blobs' as he terms them, whose relationships are governed by self-interest and modelled on the operations of the market. 'In the market', Ingold asks the audience 'it is what changes hands that matters not the hands themselves. The handshake seals the contract but is the contract not a binding of lives in itself?' (2014). As he points out the etymological root of the term 'contract' unites 'con' meaning together and 'trahere' meaning 'to draw or pull' (2014).

It is, therefore, in the spirit of Ingold and Read that I situate Sally Taylor's ACE Mentoring for Professional Development Project. It recognises the way in which art is drawn from the fabric of the social and grown via the joining of lives and materials. The performance of that relational process by the work's aesthetic and material operations, which are underscored by the artist's latest curatorial decisions is to bring their debt to others to the foreground of Taylor's practice.

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