

# The Building Blocks of Drawing

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## Abstract

In this article, I discuss the use of exaggerated drawings as a way to get a hold of drawing difficult forms. This approach arises from an interpretation of advice and images presented in drawing manuals and literature, applied to my own drawing practice. I examine the use of these exaggerated forms as a case of practitioner knowledge inherited from past practitioners, casting light into one way that practice-led and artistic research might constitute an ongoing development. Rather than being tacit and impenetrable, portions of drawing skill appear as a combination of different kinds of knowledge, such as procedural knowledge. At the same time, to understand drawing through practice is to examine time scales that go beyond single drawing. Drawing is not simply advanced by drawing the intended outcome repeatedly, but by shifting the drawing's exploration to address different topics and kinds of drawing.

KEYWORDS: drawing, practice, practitioner knowledge, practice-led research

## Introduction: The emerging focus

In this article, I present one element of my drawing practice, the emergence and use of what I here identify as exaggerated definition of the drawn forms. For example, when human forms are presented as distinct or simplified boxes in drawing guidebooks, it can be called an exaggerated form for the purposes of illustration and learning. Truly exaggerated forms, as I will show later, will go beyond simplification. In my practice, I deliberately draw such images in order to highlight and address my topics of interest and development, and gain fluency with the shapes I want to learn to draw.

Although I have drawn for my whole life, the current questions stem from a background

of design education in the field of spatial and furniture design, preceded by woodcraft artisan studies. For a long time I have concerned myself with the depiction of physical shapes and environments, switching between computer work and more traditional drawing and model building. The design and building tasks often required depiction of joints and connections in three dimensions. This seemed useful to my drawing in a more general way, without being able to point out exactly why. This article attempts to go deeper to this experience, probing an area of drawing and knowledge that is difficult to grasp and less discussed in drawing literature: to make a project for oneself of developing one's drawing skill.

As a researcher, I am interested in ways that drawing can become intertwined or even equated with a research process, what kind of knowledge operates within drawing, and how knowledge might be said to become transmitted through research output, drawing literature and drawings. I believe that the way drawing skill and knowledge is advanced, resides centrally within the practical acts of drawing. Yet I emphasize that drawing is not only achieved by drawing resultant outcomes directly in the hope that they become "better". Currently I am fascinated by how thorny issues may be resolved by engaging in a drawing process that probes different kinds of drawings than the directly intended outcome. In this case the drawings are overtly exaggerated in definition of form, or apply mechanical metaphors to the drawn motifs. Drawing, looked at this way, is a realm where thoughtful activity can be advanced by making moves through drawing. Some of these moves are formal, whereas some will forever remain elusive to explanation.

Here, I use types of drawings to help illuminate a part of drawing's knowing in a more general sense, yet still remaining within my particular case. With drawing I am not discussing art outcomes that are hanged on gallery walls, but as means to an engagement with things around us. Changing the drawing situation can be revealing about the way drawing operates, for example through drawing blind, drawing repeatedly or focusing on hand movements (e.g. Dobler, 2014) can be revealing for one's reflective thinking. Here I am interested in ways of dissecting drawings through drawings themselves, and not radically altering the situation where the drawing is made. The overtly defined drawings are not only for learning drawing, but as the kind of articulated outcome the research requires.

I consider my research approach to be practice-led, with influences more broadly from research in the arts. Practice-led research emphasizes the "inside" perspective of a skilled

practitioner finding research questions from the practice, seen through the lens of the practitioner. Barbara Bolt discussed Hockney's study into the use of camera obscura in old masters' work, arguing for the artists' knowledge and professional interest as primary to such questions in the domain of art (Bolt, 2007, 27-34). Restating my project in similar terms, as an artist I am interested in the ways illustrators and draftsmen in the past could apparently draw three-dimensional form with precision, yet without relying on reference images or apparatuses.

To me, the main influence from artistic research is the idea that research in domains of art and design ought not become overtly defined. Knowledge claims about research ought not be set in stone. As Borgdorff says, art research ought not to be limited to explicating non-propositional knowledge, shrinking it to a "decoding exercise" (Borgdorff, 2011). I would agree that with pointing attention towards formal elements in drawings, I want to avoid presenting means for deciphering drawings or art in any one-dimensional and one-directional way. I want to make clear that long-term exposure and engagement with a type of drawing is what fuels the theoretical portion of a practical work.

Much as any research, research in the arts is concerned with "usability, transferability and novelty value of the research" (Hannula et al., 2006, 161) even if these are not always explicitly stated. This would give rise to questions about what kind of knowledge is being transferred. As Borgdorff (2011) says, "[...] artistic research seeks not so much to make explicit the knowledge that art is said to produce, but rather to provide a specific articulation of the pre-reflective, non-conceptual content of art." This encourages what Borgdorff calls thinking in, through and with art (Borgdorff, 2011). I interpret this to mean that what might be difficult to explicate from a propositional knowledge point of view, may be presented as a demonstrated articulation. To what extent does the burden of articulation fall on textual output?

The artist and researcher Kristina Niedderer already presented an overview of different kinds of knowledge in domains of art and design practice. Propositional, procedural and experiential would be the major knowledge types that relate to artistic and practice-led work. (Niedderer, 2007.) Barfield (2006) suggests that in as much research is concerned with ontology, this ontology has locatedness and is spatial. Thus art practices would also relate to ontological issues through art, contributing to ontological questions through their particular means. I would add that it remains for the researcher to choose whether to focus on spatial ontology or not. Whereas Barfield's examples relate to "dimensioned"

drawing and problems of representation in the outcome works, I am more inclined to dissect elements of drawing practice and the how-to inherent in the drawing task.

Looking at past drawing manuals, I engage in a development of my own drawing skill through thoughtfully considered drawing projects. This I see as a good case for examining the way the knowledge represented by the manuals might become “transferred” to me, not as a direct reception of facts but as an appropriation of skill and goal identification. Unlike the Hockney project that Bolt discusses (Bolt, 2007), this is not a historical uncovering through artistic means. Instead by adjusting my drawing approach, I feel I can bring into light different aspects of drawing. I sense that through examining the element of formal elements within my drawing practice, through drawing, I can become *literate* in the realm of drawing, and in this way also literate in research.

## The drawing project

Currently, my aim is to depict shapes and spaces three-dimensionally, without a direct external reference. This is free-hand perspective drawing, without a specific projective perspective method. Although my drawing is now mostly removed from explicit design goals, my intent has been, for some time, to be able to convey shapes, spaces and environments effectively and in nuanced ways. At this moment I feel my drawing approach has a connection with the subject matter I am attempting to reach through my drawings, an example of what can be seen below (Figure 1).

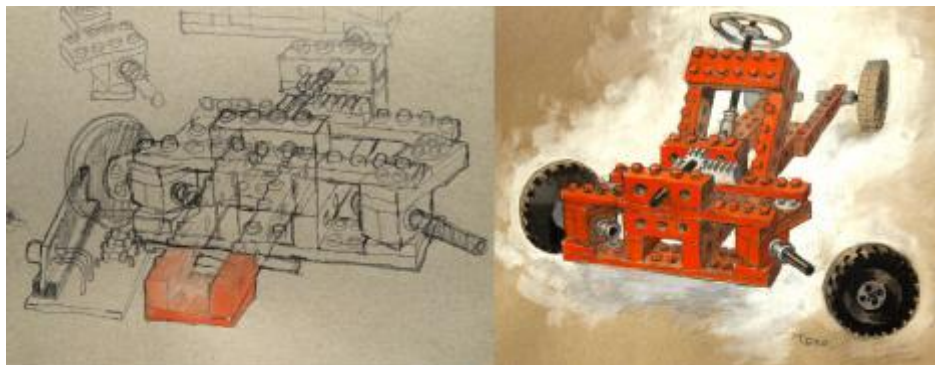


**Figure 1. Left: *May Day*, mixed media drawing/painting, digitally enhanced colors. (Author, May 2015). Right: *Countryside*, (Author, August 2015) 320x200 computer image made with *Multipaint*, author’s retro pixel drawing program.**

Practically oriented drawing manuals have suggested various methods for dismantling the

perceptual and “psychological” blocks that prevent from getting stuck in skill development. For example, if a person focuses overtly on drawing outlines of objects in a way that prevents learning, it may be a helpful exercise to draw objects with deliberately avoiding object outlines. (Edwards 2012.) The key idea is that to become more intimate with a type of drawing may require another type of drawing that is in opposition or even apparently unrelated to the intended drawing. This can be considered one way that knowledge is present within an artistic process, and is also an example of one of the many ways research may proceed.

I have found that indeed the depiction of difficult topics, such as living bodies and organisms, it becomes tempting to revert to learned types and find techniques for “hiding” or simplifying difficult forms. I may refrain from drawing the shape I cannot define, much as in speech or writing I might be vague about a thing I do not really know about. To be clear, I understand that for art it is a viable strategy to explore any drawing tendencies and even seeming unskilledness, or to be innocently ignorant about them. In my current project I am personally interested in clearly defined forms.



**Figure 2. Drawing a Lego car from memory required a focus on placing known elements correctly. The first sketch (left) becomes an exercise of “building” the car from established parts. (Author, December 2014).**

The beginnings of this study is in a drawing of a Lego car I made from memory. (Figure 2, Figure 3) The drawing was made relatively fast, in one session, without making many preliminary guiding lines or other assistive devices. The felt personal success of the outcome surprised me, and I wanted to think how this came to be. To draw the object in this case is about knowing the shapes and dimensions of the component parts and putting them together as a whole. Building the model on paper, each addition served as a reminder of the next stage. This would then fall within the domain of procedural knowledge, but also hinting at propositional knowledge as the pieces are discrete

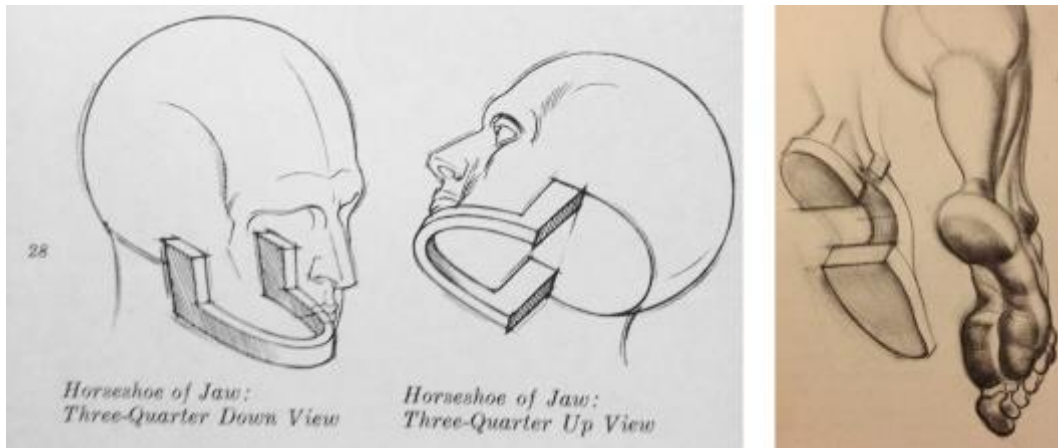
elements that only connect in certain ways. The work with this Lego car image reminded me that although experiential skill and difficult-to-explain knowledge are being used, the procedural and discrete propositional knowledge cannot be ignored when explaining the drawing process. Reporting only discrete knowledge or explain it away as intuition would be a disservice to an analysis of knowledge and know-how that pertains to this drawing.



**Figure 3. The Lego car from another angle, with corrections. (Author, December 2014).**

Looking at the motif as discrete cubes, I felt I was revisiting the idea that skill development may begin from a yearning towards formal, analytic understanding, before proceeding to a level where the skill may no longer be explained (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986.) As the building blocks as discrete physical items already enforce the formal definition of the shapes, the subject matter was instrumental in creating and also assessing the image. Despite a few ambiguities, the model would be mostly buildable from the outcome image, which makes the image more “correct” from this standpoint. To me there was something liberating about drawing the Lego car as opposed to drawing a car from any imaginable shapes and materials. To focus on the blocks established a rigor in the level of detail which was followed through in the drawing.

It is in this point I began to see the drawing in terms of it’s definition, meaning the separation of a form into component parts, and allowing this separation to show in the drawings. This definition is different from stylistic, controlled modulation of the outcome’s sketchy appearance. One drawing manual offers that such articulation is a counterpoint to suggestion when establishing drawing’s texture: “to articulate something is to draw it carefully; to suggest is to summarize it.” (Dodson, 1990, 148). Articulation appears as lucidity that threatens the drawing’s appearance as a drawing, a tension between suggestiveness and articulation.

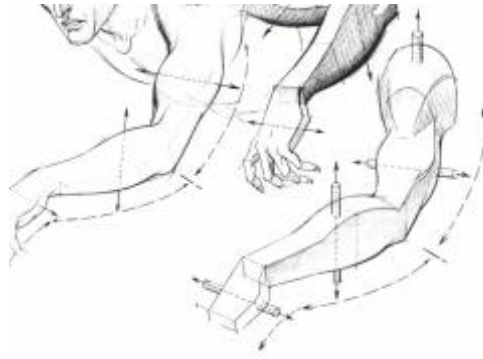


**Figure 4. Burne Hogarth's (1965, 28)(1970, 38) illustrations give exaggerated definition to difficult anatomical constructions.**

I distance myself from the notion that drawing needs to look like a drawing as a stylistic choice. In my personal process, I do not establish a slow and painstaking fidelity towards naturalism, but an approach towards the motif I want to know and inspect in drawing.

Drawing manuals and guidebooks are replete with suggestions to simplify forms into blocks or tubular constructions, but they less often offer insight about the mechanisms of how to instrument this idea in learning and studying one's drawing. For me, the most interesting images can be found from Burne Hogarth's (1965, 1970, 1977) books on drawing (Figure 4). Hogarth accompanied his anatomical drawing books with images that highlight proportions and body composition in exaggerated ways, leading the viewer through changing detail and varied compartmentalization of the drawing task. The pictures are not meant to be copied, as they are instructive drawings that illuminate goals in drawing. For example, a person drawing a human jaw may find the result lacks definition as the jawline is a very subtle form. Hogarth presents a sculptorly "horseshoe" that summarizes the proportions and dimension in a stylized way that is easy to remember and might be helpful for grasping the fundamentals of the form. Hogarth also uses mechanical metaphors to illustrate relations of arms and their intrinsic motion.

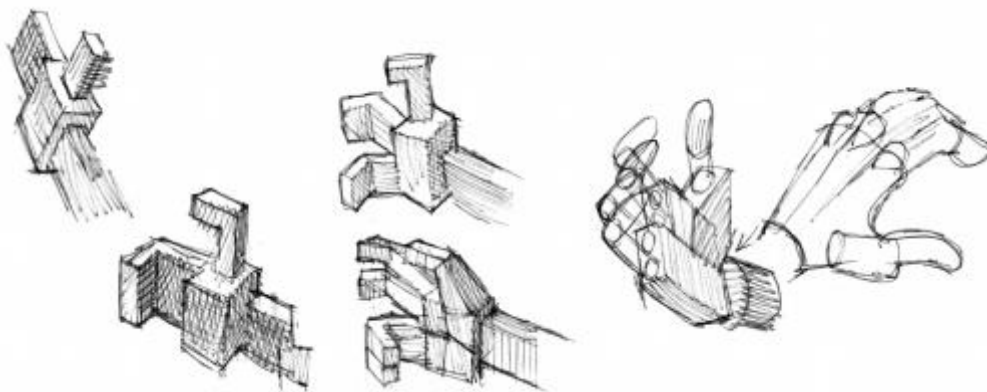
These inventive images are something I have found lacking in most drawing books which simply suggest using ball-tube skeletons or box shapes as scaffolding and structuring of form. Looking at Hogarth's illustrations, to me the question arose whether devising such drawings for oneself would be possible, even if the manuals provide no direct method or course of action for applying this type of drawing in one's own practice.



**Figure 5. Detail from a figure demonstrating the underarm curve, from Hogarth's *Drawing Dynamic Hands* (Hogarth 1977, 13).**

Hogarth also dedicated a whole book to the drawing of hands (Hogarth 1977), which has served as partial inspiration for this study. However the book addresses a different focus and a level of detail I am currently interested in, and perhaps as a consequence the book had less impact on me than the earlier volumes. The overall structuring of the arm and the mechanical metaphor are present, but more as a starting point. (Figure 5) I continued with the insight gained from the Lego car drawing, feeling it would be a more natural trajectory for me at this point. Muscle and tendon articulation may become relevant later.

I perceive the motif of human shape as more difficult than the Lego car. My goal was to simplify the hand shapes to blocks, so that drawing hands would become a similar task. The car image succeeded as it was made from discrete, immobile blocks, and in this sense it is simple even though it has a large number of parts. In contrast, a human shape may be summarized fast but drawing it with equal definition is loaded with difficulties. I now chose to direct my focus towards drawing human hands. Working with this motif introduces additional hurdles, as hands flex and are in motion. I am not looking at just the static envelope of a hand but also an articulation of motion, grip and action.

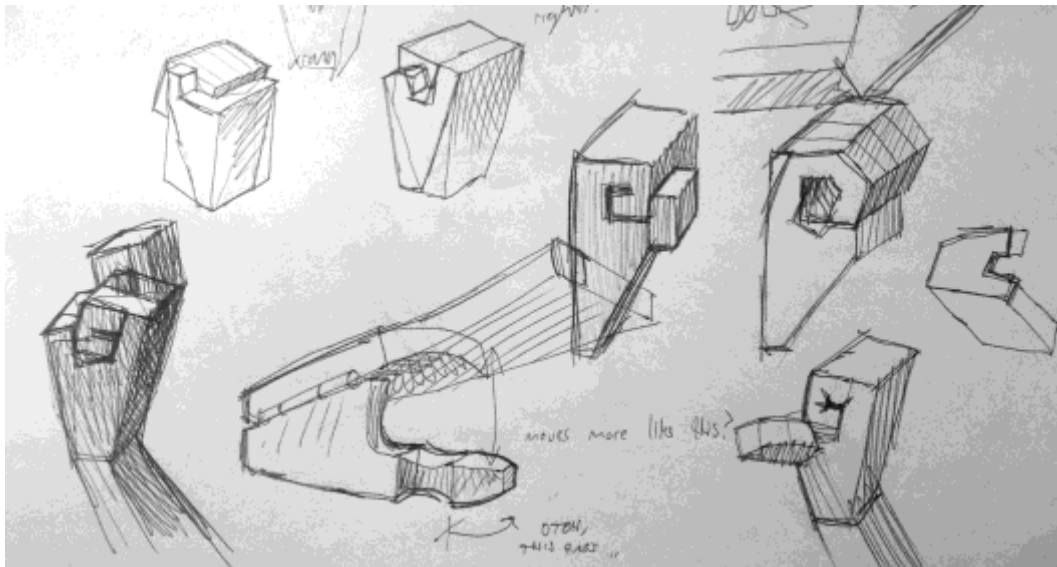


**Figure 6. Sketches of hands, exploring various levels of detail in the fingers and the hand (Author, May 2017).**



Figure 6 presents a series of images that show my attempts at summarizing a hand as a set of strong geometric shapes, partly inspired by the Hogarth example of the jaw and the foot, partly following the Lego car project. The drawings are not preparatory drawings or studies for any one finished work, but posing the initial question of how the hand ought to be simplified for understanding it as a shape in motion. As the level of detail increases, the problems of depicting a credible-looking hand become highlighted. The right-most images show a shifting of approach from the block-based work towards establishing round masses. These drawings are an example of how a problem emerges to allow itself to be identified.

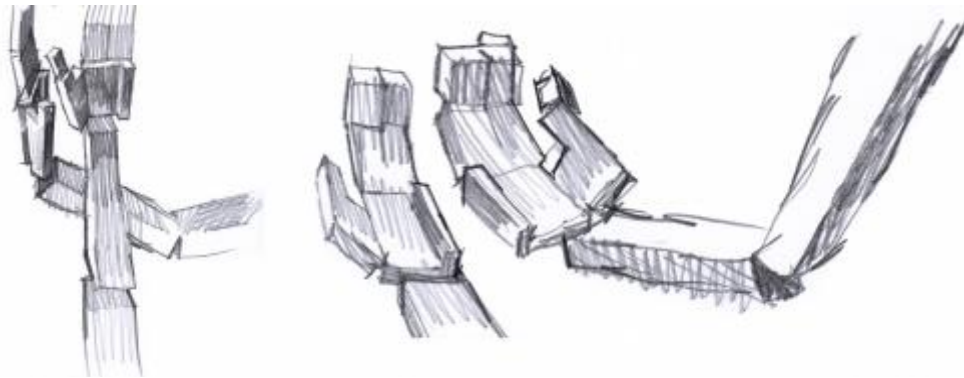
As a problem makes itself present, this dedicated process can also be framed as designing of a suitable mnemonic shape for drawing. A few component areas arose as important within this designing. Finding a way to incorporate the thumb and the connecting muscle as a moving element proved to be an important challenge. Secondly, related to this, examining the reduction of the fist as opposed to the open palm was also instructive about the overall approach. (Figure 7) The fist and open palm represent oppositions that need to be incorporated in the understanding of the shape. Solving these partial problems lead towards an overall solution.



**Figure 7. Sketches for searching the clenched and extended form. (Author, June 2017)**

The primary leap towards a solution was in recognizing that the task is not about approximating the shape but arriving at a design that both exaggerates and omits. Figure 8 depicts the later drawings which followed from the process of exploring. This solution

removes joints by allowing the blocks to hinge loosely from each other. The portion that separates the palm from the thumb, has also been identified as a hinge. The palm of the hand is mimicked by an L-shape, so as not to forget the cup-like shape of the hand, even if this does not accurately correspond with a real form.



**Figure 8. Drawings of hands, arriving at a fruitful exaggeration and definition (Author, July 2017).**

A pre-requisite for engaging in the exact approach I have presented here, is the ability to draw forms with some confidence. For example, the ability to draw a cube and derivative forms, from multiple angles, is preferable. This in itself required a process of reflective examination of one's own drawing approach (Heikkinen, 2013, see also Heikkinen, 2017).

The reduction of elements becomes a process of narrowing down what the central difficulty is about. As only the key elements of the arm and the hand remain, I can concentrate on viewpoint and posture. As the simple geometric shapes can be memorized, it gives me confidence of form that allows me to draw the object from any desired angle. Likewise, the shape set provides enough constraints for positioning the hand in different ways. The continued use of this particular shape set addresses the localized personal problem at this time.

Arguably the drawing domain I am exploring has altogether to do with perspective and technical drawing methods – forms and spaces are depicted with clarity and unambiguity. Separate objects may appear more detached and deliberate than they need to be. Hence, to focus on highly defined form also opens space for questioning and inspecting the presence of these features in my future drawing outcomes. Is this what my art looks like? Or are these research drawings tangential to some further output?

If I was primarily interested in making one image that looks like a drawing of a hand, I could pick a reference photograph or a model, copy the desired shape in suitable detail and be done with it. This has always felt unsatisfying in my personal approach, and such an approach would take me outside the present drawing project, perhaps towards different kinds of research knowledge. To me the ability to play and alter the modality of drawing's articulation demonstrates one type of activity within the broad methodological space of drawing.

## Conclusions

The kind of translation required from making to reporting is by no means limited to image-text and text-image translations, but image-image translations of different kinds. It was through examination and probing the space of different drawing articulations that permitted the design of a drawn device based on past literature, that began to advance my knowledge of the drawn motif and make it more tangible. Researching the motif of the hand required translating a complex shape inherent with nuanced motion capabilities, into a definite, exaggerated form.

For drawing research, I always hope to illustrate that the extent of knowledge that relates to drawing is not visible in a single drawing's unfolding. Much thoughtful activity goes on in the ways the drawing person has chosen to approach the subject matter, while studying topics and the translation of forms. The time scales discussed here clearly extend beyond a single drawing situation, giving a glimpse of thought processes that take months or years.

There are immediate actions that may lay a path for the drawing at hand, such as choosing a particular perspective, reference, motif or a technique but there are also activities that may influence the drawing skill, practice and it's framing overall. Presenting this element of drawing knowledge as central also relates to what kind of research is conducted and how it may be presented to an audience via pictorial-textual means. In contrast to a research approach where tacit and experiential knowledge become highlighted, the present context also showed procedural and propositional knowledge to have been useful concepts.

The case of the overtly defined drawing provides grounds for saying that drawings

themselves can be directed to emphasize and synthesize novel elements within the drawing practice. This both requires and generates a richer understanding of the state of drawing within that practice. The goal is not to arrive at an exhaustive explanation of how drawings are made, nor to suggest that an explanation of an image resides in the procedures it was made with. Yet, for the artist researcher, the space of drawing is vast and it can be traversed in various ways. What I have hoped to illustrate is that certain kinds of drawings arise as catalysts towards situations where a more focused project of drawing is needed in order to understand and articulate what is happening in the practice.

All research filters and translates real phenomena, and a certain simplification may not only be necessary but desirable in order to articulate what one intends to present or say. Understanding this simplification not as a reducing filter, but as a carefully exaggerated articulation, seems one fruitful way to interpret research output. Analyzing the knowledge that relates to drawing, through drawing, in my mind presents one lucid case on how such an amplified articulation might operate within research in the arts.

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