

Drawings Blog (2/16/24): About This Blog

Each post features an image of a recent drawing and a short essay about it. The drawings are almost all done in pencil and brush marker, mostly 9"x12" and 10"x14." This blog is an outgrowth of my book *Writing With Things: Anarchy and Openness on the Cusp of Drawing and Painting* (available in paperback on Amazon-- with a brilliant book design by Jamison Lung). If you want to inquire about buying a drawing from this blog, this website, or from the book, contact me at livingston.ira@gmail.com. You could also call them *paintings*, but then they'd cost more. Scroll down for a brief bio.

Drawing and painting are for me-- as for many or even all artists-- an open process shaped by a mix of my initial intentions with a willingness to follow other paths that open up during the process. Sometimes this happens because I glimpse new possibilities, or just because I'm dissatisfied, frustrated, or feeling reckless. As much or more than I feel I'm in control, directing and making decisions, I feel like I'm responding to things that happen, riding the waves. Creativity is enabled by cultivating receptivity and presence in the moment more than it is an act of godlike sovereignty.

My intent in writing about a drawing is simple: to tell the story of how it evolved, which generally takes the form of *this happened* and then *that happened* (as opposed to *I did this* and *I did that*). Usually this comes down to one or two moments of transformation. I did not exactly engineer these moments but I was there when they happened, and I write as a witness trying to come to terms with what's happened. But sustained visual attention-- like psychedelic drugs-- inhibits the brain's Default Mode Network, which usually works to organize anarchic experiences and memories into linear stories of a discrete and continuous self and others. Sentence by sentence and paragraph by boxy paragraph, writing as dictated by the DMN is a kind of *shelving*. This makes telling the often nonlinear story of how a drawing evolved a challenge, but by the same token, it means that, in writing about it, I discover things I didn't know or didn't know that I knew, shallows that slant into surprising depths, things I've inadvertently revealed by acting them out, sometimes things that were too destabilizing or conflictual or just too big for me to think through.

There are a few related reasons why visual artists don't usually write in detail about their work, especially about how it was made and what it means, though of course there are exceptions (Kandinsky is one of my favorites even though half the time I hardly know what he's talking about). (1) Visual artists often aren't writers. Even if they are, they may feel reluctance to give away trade secrets or the sense that these are technical and thus of limited interest, especially next to captivating visual art-- or maybe above all, that *you're never supposed to let the audience behind the curtain*. (2) The work itself is supposed to deliver whatever experience or insight it delivers *on its own*-- whatever you're trying to embody or make visible in it-- so explaining this after the fact means that the work itself must have failed. (3) Talking about a work looks like an attempt to make it seem more profound-- or just a rather undignified bid to get the reader or viewer *to like it*. Wordsworth said he was reluctant to write a preface to his first book of poems (*Lyrical Ballads*) "knowing that on this occasion the Reader would look coldly upon my arguments, since I might be suspected of having been principally influenced by the selfish and foolish hope of reasoning him into an approbation of these particular Poems"-- and of course he

went on to do just that (producing, in the process, what became maybe the single most influential piece of literary criticism ever written-- go figure). (4) Writing about a work seems like an attempt to control the viewer's experience or interpretation of it, and especially since the 1950s and 60s, this has been regarded as anathema to the experience of art. When asked about the meaning of a work, modern artists typically say something like "it's whatever you want to make of it" or deflect grandiose readings with something matter-of-fact ("I just liked that color, but if you want to read something into it, go ahead"). The scriptedness of these kinds of responses marks the operation of a ruling ideology. (5) All these reasons derive from the modern dogma of *the integrity and purity of aesthetic experience*, and the anti-intellectualism and dualistic distinction between creativity and criticism that come with it. The purity part of this dogma is also why art that is explicitly political ("propaganda") or philosophical ("didactic") or religious ("kitschy") or serves some purpose ("utilitarian") is often considered to be lesser or not even art at all.

But *now hear this*: aesthetic purity and integrity, products of the modern regime of disciplinary apartheid, are ways of radically limiting, ghettoizing, and often neutralizing what art can mean and do. It's not any manifesto you might attach to a work of art but the idea of the purity and integrity of the aesthetic experience itself that insidiously controls what the viewer and reader can feel or recognize that they feel about art, what repercussions it is allowed to have in their lives, and what they can make of it. I reject the unity, purity and integrity of aesthetic experience (*turns head, spits on ground*). Just for a start, artworks can be studied like biological organisms and ecologies; art is a form of ritual and magical practice, a way of practicing philosophy by other means; it is always political, especially when it isn't (this is sometimes called *liberalism*) and if anarchism can be nurtured in the world at large, it has to have a place in aesthetic practice as well (*if I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution*); art can be autobiography (whether it can *not* be is an interesting question); it can be therapy, divination, mystical contemplation, meditation, obsession, escapism, a fantasy of control or non-control, the butterfly that causes the tornado, a screen for *the gigantic shadows that futurity casts upon the present*, an act of defiance, of kissing the ground.

The upside of the shortage of artists writing in detail about making art is that you can practically invent or reinvent the genre as you go. The most thrilling book I've ever read on the subject-- Joyce Cary's novel *The Horse's Mouth*-- is not just *about* painting but is itself a continuation or *transduction* of the painting process in which actual scenes are seen as paintings and sentences often applied like brushstrokes. If the narrator had been a watercolorist instead of an oil painter, the syntax would have had to be different. Especially inspiring to me, the making-it-up-as-you-go process practiced by the painter/narrator in his painting seems to work as well for the novelist in his writing, and the novel's title deftly flips the otherwise dubious enterprise of artists writing about their own work.

Yes, I agree, everything should be in the work itself and require no explanation-- and when I draw, I'm thinking of nothing else. But I'm a maximalist. If you can keep discovering new things and making new things by writing about it-- by using it as a prompt in turn-- if you can reinsert the product back into the creative process-- if it could catalyze or generate a blog or a daily meditative or ritual practice or wallpapers or tattoos or just a network of sensations and ideas that run like an underground rhizome in your mind until one day they start springing up

and flowering, why not? The reason I draw is the same reason I write about it and probably the same reason I get out of bed in the morning: because I keep learning things, some of which are surprising and heartening.

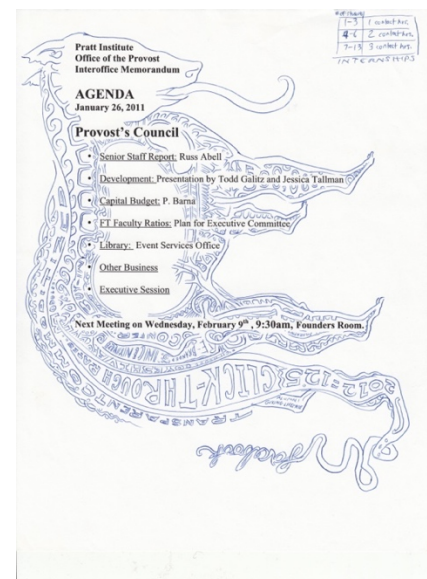
I'm all about making the process by which a drawing evolved visible and experienceable in the work itself. If you know how to look, you can see how everything, especially every living creature, embodies its history and the process by which it evolved. My drawings are inclined to wear their history on their sleeve. But in any of these cases, seeing it and experiencing it isn't the same thing as knowing what you're seeing, much less being able to talk about it.

The paintings of Kandinsky always spoke to me profoundly in ways I still can't categorize, since his influence has never made itself *visible* in my work. In high school when I first encountered Kandinsky, I practically worshipped him without being able to string together so much as a coherent sentence about why; I silkscreened a t-shirt with an image of his face (which you can just barely see in the photo at right). Several years ago, at age 65, I rediscovered his work at a big retrospective exhibit, where I stood rapt in front of one painting after another, nodding my head as if receiving messages from lightyears away via some alien brain implant. Again, I couldn't translate the messages into earthly language. I could only work them out in drawings, but as I did, this time around, I started figuring out what seeds they had planted in me and finally teaching myself how to talk about it. Fifty years that stream ran underground before emerging.



About the Artist

As a child I was always drawing and writing and making things. As a young adult I went to art school briefly and then, while working various shit jobs, thought of myself mainly as a visual artist. When I went back to college, I studied literature with the idea of becoming a professor: I heard that the big money was in literary criticism. Rubicon: to help finance my last year in college, I sold the etching press I had squandered my savings to buy. I became a professor and threw myself into academic research and writing and teaching; my career has spanned two millennia--though it feels like longer. I had always been a misfit, and when I moved from a research university to Pratt Institute, an art-and-design school, my writing began to shift into more of a post-academic mode. Through it all I kept drawing, and during my years as a department chair, I was known for the marginalia I made during long bureaucratic meetings (you can find more of these in the Visual Art



section of this website). At Pratt I started the Poetics Lab initiative and fell in with a motley crew of designers and performers (to whom I am eternally grateful), fully embraced my marginality and began self-publishing books, via Poetics Lab, on which I collaborated with brilliant book designers. These collaborations are primary among what has made me feel I'm finally where I want to be. I came to understand-- belatedly, as usual, since I've always followed my feet-- how in my drawing I have always been obsessed with the same set of principles that became the focus of my academic studies, mainly in the study of self-making and self-organizing systems, and this understanding continues to drive the convergence of my writing and drawing. I'm temperamentally inclined to tell the story as a crowning synthesis decades in the making, but as I'm sure you know, triumphant weavings together always coexist with heartbreaking frayings-- or as Blake put it, "Joy & Woe are woven fine / A Clothing for the soul divine." If you want to see what the simultaneity of weaving together and fraying looks like, that's exactly what the drawings are about.