

Walking Through Drawing: The Collaboration of R and R by Ben Reeves

Catalogue essay for the exhibition, Rodney Konopaki and Rhonda Neufeld | Drawn Passages

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I cleared an evening to consolidate my thinking around the works in Drawing Passages, and went to the Emily Carr University Library only to find that their internet was down. I knew some titles in the collection, but could only guess their location. On my forays I found a number of unexpected things. Some were happy distractions, while others usefully advanced my thinking around R and R's work: suggesting surprising, new directions, or forging connections I would not have made otherwise.

I soon gave up on specific searches and contented myself to browse. I found artists who take walks, ranging from Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, to Francis Alÿs. And Robert Smithson's "Mirror Trail" in Ithaca. I wandered into Daniel Spoerri's snare pictures, a section on automatic drawing, the blind drawings of Luco Pozzi and William Anastasi (and Anastasi's subway drawings where he travels on New York's subway with a pen in each hand, letting the movement of the train generate the work). I encountered Ann Kipling whose landscape-based work has aesthetic ties to R and R. I hadn't connected Cy Twombly before, but as my fingers (running across the spines of books like a child aimlessly dragging a stick along a picket fence) found a volume on his work I realized that it can have a place in this discussion too.

I am not interested in a Luddite reminiscence here (that digital searching may miss-out on rich associations and a sense of interconnectedness that physical browsing enforces) rather that my 'inefficiency' echoed R&R's method. My fumbling around refused me the possibility of cutting to the chase, and I was forced to embrace the search, the exploration. Similarly, R and R's drawings are not about a final destination or finished picture, but revel in the verbs: walking and drawing. Their drawing does not start with a final image in mind, but unfolds by stumbling over things. And I was pushing through the literary terrain in an equally bodily way.

I imagine R and R's unorthodox working method is a bit like a 3-legged race. It makes things (going for a walk and making a drawing) 'unnecessarily difficult'—the collaborators are working together, but seem to impede themselves in the process. Each holds one side of a drawing board while they walk and draw with their free hand. And they are mischievous: sometimes R will unexpectedly yank the board to one side to disrupt the flow of the drawing and shake them out of a groove, while R might pick drawing implements from a bag at random, or grab a fistful and use them all at once. They tend to avoid looking at the paper while walking/drawing and the board obstructs their ability to see where they are going (much of their drawing is done "blind"). (Relatedly, Twombly has described making an effort to evade his own skill in a refusal to commit to taste.) They speak of feeling their way with their feet—feeling their way along a path *and* feeling their way through a drawing.

When I mentioned to R and R that they seem to deliberately work against themselves, they gave me a blank look. I pushed on to explain that their process not only makes drawing difficult, but just walking is harder as well. I was met with silence and I understand now that my statement betrayed a fixation on the end result: arriving at a destination/finished drawing. But for R&R their 'awkward' collaboration makes things easier: easier to be attuned to the walk and to the process of drawing.

As they stumble along, their hands voluntarily and involuntarily respond to their surroundings. R might decide to make a short dash for every manhole they pass. And tripping over a rock or curb may result in R's pencil digging in or jetting across the page. Some of the lines are referential, while some are more of a moment, like lines from a clumsy seismograph, bumping over the paper in direct correspondence with the artists' navigation of the terrain. In one way or another, R and R's presence and gestures—stumbling, walking, drawing, and conversing—intersect in an intimate and immediate way with a given location at a particular time. (R has noted a connection to the simultaneity described in Bruce Chatwin's, The Songlines, where the cadence of a song is in step with the traveler and the nature of the land s/he passes over.)

This differs from Western tradition where pictures operate as a window onto a complete world behind its

surface. Western perspective organizes things to line up for a viewer on *this* side of the frame, in a fixed place and time, and naturalizes a separation between subjects and the world. The world on *that* side is full and finished, and on this side the viewer is complete without the world. This suggests that individuals have a private, fully formed consciousness, prior to contact with the world and it sets the stage for individualistic expression in art.¹ But for R and R, isolated, personal expression is tempered and given over to the immediacy of walking/drawing. There is reciprocity with the terrain and expression emerges from relationships.

The verticality of most of their images relates to this. On one level it is pragmatic—carrying a drawing board vertically between two people makes it easier to navigate a busy sidewalk, move through a forest, walk a narrow path. And when vertical, the board is most in line with the body (in *portrait* as opposed to *landscape* format). Verticality aligns with figures moving *through* landscape. And the work is no longer about the exposition of a single individual, but with two working together and bumping into each other, there is a social dynamic—enacting a phenomenological mutuality of subjects and the world.

Their prints underscore this and enhance the resonance of the project. If the drawings have an unusual, awkward process, the prints are more so. Each of the colour prints was typically made with four plates. This means that the waking/drawing procedure had to be repeated four times—once for each soft-ground covered plate. Every mark still carries the directness of its making, but is especially honoured through the highly skilled, technical labour of marking, etching, inking, and printing. The record of marks, from soft smudges to hard lines, is astounding and faithfully maintains the immediacy and casual attitude of the drawings. And their caring, intricate production amplifies the significance of every mark.

I started this essay in a library, but I am conscious that—while literature might run alongside the artwork—it cannot to take its place. Trying to explain the work is beside the point and might harmfully sort-circuit it. Instead, the hope of this writing is to encourage and prolong looking. These drawings and prints are not

interpretations of places, and are best not interpreted. They embody experience. I am reminded of Rodney Graham's statement for his "Phonokinetoscope"² — "...the trip is the thing."

Emma Dexter explains that drawing has a tautologous nature in that it "...forever describes its own making in its *becoming*."³ R and R's marks enact the walk through their very ontology. We walk through the drawings and (with a sympathetic synesthesia) can feel jostling of elbows and rough ground under our feet.

Endnotes:

- ¹ This accounting of pictorial tradition is indebted to Rosalind Krauss who pushes on to conclude that, "[t]he ground of w Western Illusionism is an entrenched Cartesianism." See: Krauss, Rosalind. "Line as Language".
- ² An E.P. record and film loop bases on Graham dropping acid in Berlin's Tiergarten
- ³ Dexter, Anna. "Introduction", Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing. Phaedon Press Inc., New York, NY, © 2005, p.6