

# A Purpose for Purposelessness? Seeking a role for perceptual drawing in historical research

*Dr Karen Wallis gained a practice-based doctorate from UWE and is a professional visual artist. Recent drawing residencies have included the Holburne Museum (Bath), REACT Heritage Sandbox (Bristol) and Fairfield House (Bath).*

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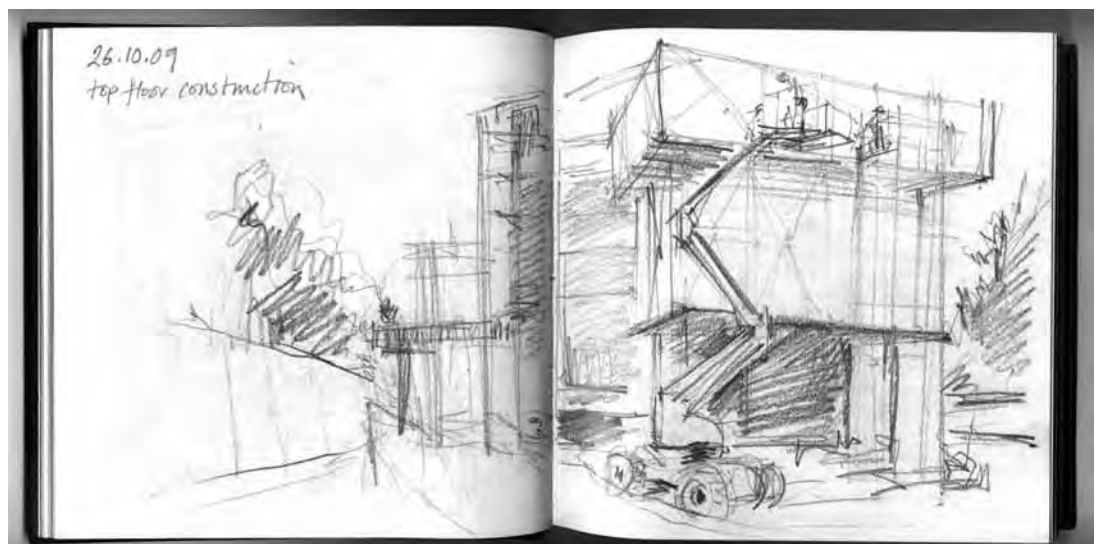
Karen Wallis

**I am a figurative painter whose work is rooted in drawing (both literally and metaphorically) from the world around me. After many years spent coming to terms with the purposelessness of my art practice, I have found that other people are beginning to find a purpose in what I do. This article will explore whether my artist's perception of a place, expressed through the indeterminate medium of drawing, can find some purpose by making a contribution to historical research.**

First some background on my artist's practice and recent work, to provide the context. In 2008, I began a residency at The Holburne Museum of Art, when it closed for redevelopment and renovation. This started out as a private artist's project, making weekly visits to draw in my sketchbook. I wanted to follow the progress of the building's transformation, from packing up, through the building works, to the reopening in 2011. Drawing was to be my sole medium - no photography, no written notes other than a title and date on each page. After a while I was adopted as the official Artist in Residence. The drawings were uploaded to my web site at regular intervals and used as PR for the development.<sup>1</sup> I also began drawing portraits of the people working on site and became thoroughly integrated as a member of the workforce. When the museum reopened, they wanted to create a display about the development and it was decided to make this an

exhibition of my drawings. I was given a small room where we displayed the sketchbooks in a case and showed their contents on an interactive screen. I also developed larger drawings from the sketchbooks: some in frames, some on large sheets of paper and some directly on to the walls. My contribution has since been acknowledged as a useful documentary resource and my sketchbooks will become an archive in the collection. The Director of The Holburne, Dr Alexander Sturgis, said that he has used my sketchbooks as a way of looking at the sequence of events. His own perspective was limited because he has been living through the development, whereas my point of view as an observer, shows a different narrative. My position outside the management / worker structure gave me an overall view of the whole project, following a range of threads in all departments.

In the last few months, I have been making drawings to assist the archeological project at Stanton Drew. John Oswin, an archeologist working with geophysics had seen my drawings at The Holburne and had also seen my drawing of the Stennes Stones on Orkney in an exhibition at The Victoria Art Gallery. He asked me to draw panoramas of the horizon from the centre of some of the stone circles. Photographic panoramas were being made at the same time but John asked me to draw the shape of the land leaving out buildings, field boundaries and



Sketchbook drawing: the new build, 2009, graphite on paper



Sketchbook drawing: plastering a ceiling, 2010, graphite on paper

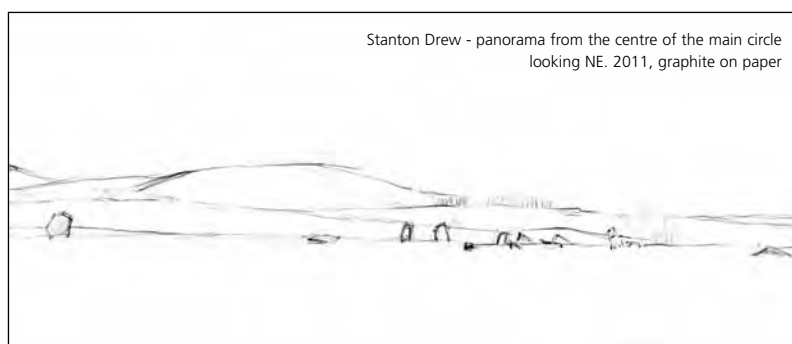


and perceptual research. For some years this has centred around the relationship between viewer and art work and how the visual rhetoric of a context influences the viewer's perception of meaning and value in the artwork. As a result of being an Artist in Residence, my interest has shifted to include the influence of the artist's active, but nevertheless neutral, presence bearing witness in the context. Recently, at both The Holburne and at Stanton Drew, I have been involved in *Research through art*, where I have contributed drawings that are seen as useful by others in providing information to serve their purposes rather than mine.<sup>2</sup> Such usefulness is strange and so it leads me back into *Research into art*, to explore how my drawings are functioning in the world beyond my own interests - specifically for history.

other modern features. He is interested in seeing what the eye picks out as significant parts of the landscape, as opposed to the camera lens that only responds to light. Accuracy is not an issue, it is more about how I emphasize what catches my attention. In archeology, where so much is unknown, any evidence, even perceptual, is of interest.

Is it possible that my art practice, based in perceptual drawing, can be regarded as a form of research, capable of making a valid contribution, both in art and for other disciplines? Artists' research has been the subject of much debate over the past couple of decades. To use Christopher Frayling's terminology, my own art practice could be described as *Research for art*, in which my thinking is 'embodied in the artefact' - such as the series of sketchbooks and other drawings made during my residency at The Holburne Museum. Alongside my practice I read and engage in *Research into art* in the form of aesthetic

It is my understanding that historians sometimes use art as a source of primary evidence. For instance, they may reference visual representations that are contemporary with their field of investigation - interpreting these to demonstrate social attitudes of the time. The potential inaccuracy of some art forms can be a deterrent but other images, such as satirical works and cartoons, are capable of presenting a contemporary attitude, which can be included in analysis. Other methods of using visualization include statistics or mapping - for instance, topography to show how geography may affect the interaction between groups of people. The question is, can there be a place for art to offer an alternative way of visualizing history, while



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maintaining empirical rigour - and does an artist's position differ from the historian within the research process?

E. H. Carr in *What is History?* states very clearly how a historian is situated in his own time. He also argues that, while the nineteenth century dependence on facts is absurd, we should nevertheless be cautious of the mid twentieth century view of 'a theory of infinite meanings - none any more right than any other'.

*The historian and the facts of history are necessary to one another. The historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dead and meaningless. My first answer therefore to the question 'What is history?' is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.*<sup>3</sup>

If I translate this into artist's practice, it can be seen as seeking to avoid both the blind mimesis of naturalism and total subjectivity of the imagination, in favour of a keen observation of the world combined with the artist's awareness of their own position in it.

Walter Benjamin takes the relationship between past and present further and, in doing so, offers a place for the creative act. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* he writes:

*History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit].*<sup>4</sup>

For Benjamin, history is a continuum but, for there to be change or a shift in thinking, there has to be a revolutionary moment outside of time - an absolute now, a stopping of time -

otherwise you just get more of the same. The origin is not in the past, it is now, or even in the future. The process of origination is always about to happen, which shifts the emphasis, away from history as looking back, to history as you make it now. It is not just about forgetting history, history can only be remembered if you make it - otherwise it becomes a dead meaningless relic. In order to keep it alive it has to be violated in some way. Benjamin describes this as a kind of rhythm, an eddy in the stream of history, a constant shifting instead of continuing on its course. It is a resonance within history that happens through an interference or interruption by somebody - the writer, the thinker, the artist - in a moment of time. To be conscious of time and history it has to be seen for the first time - a beginning again. This is an approach familiar to art, where the creative moment puts itself outside of time. It is in a moment of aesthetic judgement that the artist decides, within the contingency of 'now', how they are going to translate what they see into an image.<sup>5</sup>

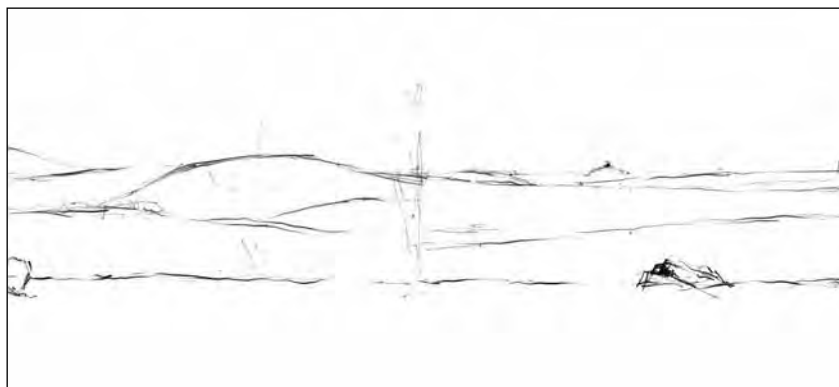
Artists who observe the world are, whether they are aware of it or not, using a phenomenological approach. They look and reflect upon the phenomenal world, in order to portray what they see. Merleau-Ponty describes phenomenology as:

*...a philosophy for which the world is 'already there' before reflection begins - as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated on re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world.*<sup>6</sup>

Indeed for everyone, visual language is our primary method of learning about the world. We understand other people and places by observing and interpreting what we see. It was how we

operated before written language and is still relevant to how we function in society today.

It is possible to bear witness in the present with reference to the past, by being in the place of an historical event. This is not about reenactment or the imaginative illustration of an



Stanton Drew - panorama in the centre of the south west circle looking NE. Note Kelston Round Hill is now visible from the higher ground of this circle. 2011, graphite on paper





event. It is about looking from the point of view of those who were there. If you spend time at an historical site, looking at a place where something happened, you get a feeling of distances, climate - and potential human behavior. For instance, when I saw Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* hanging near Couture's *Decadence of Rome* in the Musée d'Orsay, as they would have done in the Salon of 1851, I understood why the public were so alarmed and excited by the radical nature of the Courbet when it was seen for the first time. More recently, I have heard how observing people's behaviour and analysing levels of movement in the Bristol riot of 2011, can give an insight into experiences of riots and crowd disturbances two hundred years ago.<sup>7</sup> Drawing the horizon from the centre of each stone circle at Stanton Drew, I was standing where Neolithic man stood, seeing more or less the same shape of the land around me. Although I have very little knowledge of archeology, my drawings are adding to the information gathered on that site. By looking at the spectacle today, we can interrogate the spectacle of history. As Merleau-Ponty says in his essay on the philosophy of history:

*Knowledge is never categorical: it is always conditional. We can never be the past; it is only a spectacle before us, which is there to question. The questions come from us, and thus the responses in principle do not exhaust historical reality, since historical reality does not depend upon them for its existence.*<sup>8</sup>

And later he adds:

*History is not an external god, a hidden reason of which we need only record our conclusions. It is the metaphysical fact that the same life, our own, is played out both within us and outside us, in our present and in our past, and that the world is a system to which we have various accesses or, if you prefer, various likenesses.*<sup>9</sup>

Despite these philosophical arguments for the usefulness of visual research, I can see that what my drawing has to offer history is perhaps an addition rather than a necessity. The artist occupies a neutral position in the marginality of art. Such neutrality can arouse suspicion, occupying an unknown area that may seem irrelevant or even a threat. Alternatively, it can grant unusual access to information - a fresh perspective that has the potential to stimulate further thought. In my own practice, I 'listen' to what my drawings and paintings 'tell' me. Although I read to inform my practice, it is

the practical work that leads any reading and reflection. Just as this article is a reflection resulting from drawing practice. Here I feel in sympathy with Carr who describes his historical research practice as the combined 'input' and 'output' of reading and writing:

*... reading and writing go on simultaneously. The writing is added to, subtracted from, re-shaped, cancelled, as I go on reading. The reading is guided and directed and made fruitful by the writing: the more I write, the more I know what I am looking for, the better I understand the significance and relevance of what I find.*<sup>10</sup>

In both disciplines, the parallel strands of practice and reading / reflection resonate and inform each other.

Is it then possible for my art practice, with informed reflection, to develop further in the



Self portrait as Artist in Residence, 2010, graphite on paper

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context of historical research? So far, the experience of my drawings being 'useful' has been in the role of a recorder of information. For Stanton Drew I have provided specific information on the landscape. Likewise, the work from my residency at the Holburne is an archive of the activity of the development. However, for me, that experience as Artist in Residence is more than that. I am still living with the memory of dust, smell, noise and above all conversations that occurred during those three years. My privileged position as observer placed me both inside and outside the context of the development. Rather like a Shakespearean fool, in particular Feste in Twelfth Night, I moved in and out of the different working areas, meetings and events; my presence always acknowledged but partially ignored, both involved and separate - and all the while I 'spoke' some sort of truth through my drawings.

My intention now is to see if, as an artist, I can become an imaginative tool rather than a recorder. While I continue to make work reflecting on the residency, there is an opportunity for further investigation, through an involvement with Ghosts in The Garden, the Heritage Sandbox project in Sydney Gardens, which is a joint venture for The Holburne, Steve Poole and their creative media partner Splash & Ripple.<sup>11</sup> This will continue my relationship with The Holburne and allow me to pursue my *Research for art*, through an exploration into the history of the museum building as it reconnects with Sydney Gardens.

Like all art practice it will, to some extent, be a leap in the dark and may well enter into the pointless zone that a lot of art occupies. But because such fascinating otherness is what makes art interesting, I feel encouraged to continue happily towards potential purposelessness - with the option of finding a purpose.

- <sup>1</sup> The complete project can be viewed at <http://www.karenwallis.co.uk/holburne.html>
- <sup>2</sup> Frayling, Christopher: *Research in Art & Design*, Royal College of Art Research Papers, Vol 1, Number 1, 1993/4, ISBN 1874175551
- <sup>3</sup> Carr, E. H.: *What is History?*, p 30, London: Macmillan 1961
- <sup>4</sup> Benjamin, Walter: *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations*, p 252, trans. Harry Zohn, Fontana Press, 1992. ISBN 0006862489
- <sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Professor Gary Peters, of York St John University, for his elucidation of Benjamin's approach to history
- <sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Routledge 1992. ISBN 0415045568
- <sup>7</sup> Interview with Rose Wallis, Associate Lecturer in History, UWE, 21/03/2012
- <sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *The Crisis of the Understanding*, p 194, trans. Nancy Metzel & John Flodstrom, in *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, 1964. ISBN 0810101645
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p 204
- <sup>10</sup> Carr, *op. cit.* p 28
- <sup>11</sup> For details and blog visit <http://www.watershed.co.uk/ished/heritagesandbox/projects/2012/ghosts-in-the-garden/>