Chapter 16
On Not Being Able to Draw a Mousetrap

James Faure Walker
CCW Graduate School, University of the Arts, London, UK

ABSTRACT

A hundred years ago officers entering the Royal Navy took an exam where they had to draw a mouse-trap. At the time there was much discussion, and some despair, about competence, and about teaching. For amateurs, drawing manuals provided instructions on how to render a still life in 3D, or draw a running figure, tasks that would now be effortless given current software. Today much debate about drawing, its purpose, and about 'digital drawing', and de-skilling. Graphics programs are designed for 'realism'. But contemporary drawing looks in the opposite direction: into the processes of drawing; the expressive mark; and the structure and character of the line. Those who deal with the evolving gadgetry of digital drawing have had to contend both with unhelpful software, and with an art world that has yet to realise the scope of this new visual universe.

THE INAUTHENTIC DIGITAL DRAWING

In our normal way of thinking, a 'fine art' drawing involves direct observation, even if it is 'abstract' or made by collecting raindrops. It is something for the viewer to linger over: the sensitive touch of brush, pen or pencil on paper, the illusion of light and shade, that timeless moment of the Rembrandt drawing of a child learning to walk. Such drawings are intimate, tied to a certain place and time, as if we are seeing something through the artist's own eyes. It is not the type of drawing that we would associate with anything digital. Frank Auerbach's drawings are regularly described as 'intensely seen'. I am not sure what that actually means – you can stare at something intensely, but can see something intensely? – but I cannot

imagine anyone describing a digital drawing in those terms. The phrase crops up in a recent how-to-draw book, and it is no surprise that there is no mention in this quite thorough book of any kind of drawing involving a computer (Micklewright, 2005). In other words, if we are looking to make a drawing that is intimate, personal and expressive we are not talking about laptops and drawing tablets.

I am here embarking on an essay about 'digital' drawing because the context is 'visualisation'. That sounds like a more objective pursuit than drawing in a 'fine art' way. I am assuming that by writing about drawing here there is some common ground between the artist, the architect and the engineer. I acknowledge, too, that the approach of the artist in thinking about drawing has its own set of priorities, which have less to do with objective rigour than with throwing a few ideas up in the air to see what happens. Much of the 'digital drawing' discussed here has been made in that playful spirit. It has not been made to demonstrate a point, illustrate how a machine works, or to depict anything at all. I should stress that when I speak of the tensions between traditional and digital approaches, I am not really speaking of technical problems that can be resolved through an improved interface. It is more a matter of changing attitudes, changing atmospheres, and the way drawings are seen and used. It is not just about how they are made. It is the perception of 'technology'- or rather the misconception of what digital drawing involves - that gets us into trouble. Drawing software will not 'solve' that all by itself. In most contexts a digital drawing is still seen as 'impersonal', particularly among those attuned to traditional ways of thinking about drawing.

If I 'draw' an object digitally, a cup on my desk, I am not telling you what I feel about it, or what it feels like to stare at it. I just want to tell you what it is like, perhaps give you its dimensions, or show it in 3D so you can turn it about. I may photograph the cup and process it to give it an expressive 'hand-drawn' look, but if you see the telltale texture of the paint program, you won't be fooled into sensing my sensitivity. Nor, if you see it as a linear diagram of a cup, as an 'illustration', will you believe there was necessarily an actual cup there in the first place. There is no witness. I could have made it up.

Artists who have adapted to digital tools can find themselves hampered by this stereotype, as if they are working within an untrustworthy medium: to draw 'digitally' means to draw without the expressive power, the music, the personality, the honesty of the pencil drawing. Even the etching, which is mechanically produced, is popularly considered to guarantee an authenticity – that dark inkiness of the line – that is beyond the digital print. I have come across this perception so many times that I consider it as a reflex, triggered by paper texture and pencil workings, blind to any other qualities the image may show. The reflex rejects high tech to protect the sacred flame of the drawing tradition[1]. Equally, some digital artists – if I can still use that phrase – do work in a colder, or more raucous tone, and that conforms to the prejudice that digital equals an alienated and unreal world.

What I am suggesting here, by looking at a few how-to-draw books of a hundred or so years ago that have long fallen out of use, is that a cold, impersonal, accurate 3D representation was consistently aimed for, and was well within the fine art repertoire. Generally, there was less tolerance of the subjective and playful. Drawing was an accomplishment, a skill requiring hard work and discipline. It was also conceived as quite a mechanical process. They would have been quite at ease with Illustrator. Figure 1 shows the Cylindrical and Conical Objects, Plate 6 from Glass (1920).

In brief then, the story of the draw program, of the opportunities that all of a sudden expanded the repertoire tenfold, is something of a non-story. Drawing as a whole has not been transformed. Instead, you may have to ask why it was that 'fine art' drawing has been so little affected.

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