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Drawing as a Practice of Compassion

Rich Curtis

Thomas University

In this reflection I discuss methods of teaching the visual art discipline of drawing as an awareness practice grounded in compassion through service learning projects. With my background in both drawing and performance art, I integrate a focus on process, material, and conceptual meaning-making. As the only professor of art in a humanities division, I focus on strategies that introduce students with little or no art background to the idea of using creativity to mindfully raise awareness of marginalized and under-served populations.

Art is a Gift

“Let the merit generated by this practice benefit all sentient beings.”

– Bodhisattva vow

Art is a gift, not in the sense of a talent bestowed but rather as something to be given. Since 2011, I have been teaching in the Humanities Division at Thomas University, a small private liberal arts university in rural South Georgia. I am currently an Associate Professor of Art, which means I teach all studio and lecture courses. At the time of writing this reflection I am teaching Drawing 1, Art Appreciation, and two sections of Humanities Survey.

I have been a visual artist for more than 20 years. My projects have ranged from drawing and painting to more experimental performance art and sound poetry. More recently, I have moved toward deliberately integrating my art, teaching, and contemplative practice. How and why I make artwork, as well as how I teach art and art history, have changed drastically as a result.

Besides my course load and regular committee work, I partnered with a colleague to form the Mindfulness University Life Work Group. This is a campus-based organization that promotes mindfulness through weekly practice meetings, email blasts, and short, recorded meditations. We are now in our second year. It is really through the growth of this collaboration that I have felt more confident to bring contemplative practice more explicitly into the classroom and studio. One of the more effective methods I have found for integrating art and contemplative practice is through service-learning projects. What follows are some of the ways I teach and embody drawing as a compassionate service to others.

Reckoning with Ego

I remember my first semester teaching on the college level. I filled in as an adjunct instructor for a professor who was on sabbatical at the University of North Alabama, my undergraduate alma mater. I was assigned an evening Art Appreciation class, three hours long, one night a week. For those who are not familiar, Art Appreciation is a class for those who are not art majors. As a first-time teacher in my early thirties, I was trying desperately to seem approachable and cool. I made all the rookie mistakes. Basically, I was trying to entertain them, and myself, rather than teach.

I had just completed my MFA in performance art from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago a few years before. I was properly filled with a sense of art school entitlement and a healthy dose of arrogance. I thought I knew everything about art, and yet I couldn't talk about it for more than 20 minutes. So, I compensated by filling most of the time with outrageous spectacles. Once I covered the entire auditorium in a web of yarn so that students had to crawl over and around it to get to their seats. Another time I rolled myself up in butcher paper, then climbed a 12' ladder, and wedged myself between the top rung and the ceiling. Yet another time I showed a silent film while tearing a bed sheet into one-inch strips, then tied the strips end to end and rolled them into a large fabric ball. None of these antics lasted more than 45 minutes, which meant I would dismiss class two hours early. Frankly, I am surprised I was not fired or asked to not return the next semester.

My intentions were only for the good. In fact, my very first lecture was actually fairly productive. One of the opening questions I asked my students on that first night was, “What is art?” Simple enough. Several students gave some version of a generic definition focused on expression, creativity, and emotion. These were a good start, but I was hoping for something a little more inspired. “Art can be anything,” I heard. That may be true, but that is not a definition.

Then, a student humbly offered a response from the second row, “the language of freedom.” I asked him to repeat his answer. His gleaming smile cut through the dim lighting of the lecture hall. “Art is the language of freedom,” he said again, a little more confidently. I later learned he was a business student from Saudi Arabia, a devout Muslim. He and his wife and their young child had moved to the United States to attend school. To this day I am intrigued by his answer and the possible subtexts for his definition.

Learning to Teach with Compassion

In my second year as an adjunct, I transitioned to teaching a Drawing 1 class. It was there that I felt right at home. Saddled upon a drawing bench, tables bursting with still life arrangements, rendering tonal compositions on newsprint with the smell of charcoal dust in the air. This was my wheelhouse. Drawing is the most fundamental form of visual expression. It is the medium I am most passionate about.

The first lesson I teach in drawing class is about the use of line. Line is the most basic mark, foundational to all other marks. Lines carve out shapes from the blank space of a page. Qualities of line communicate texture and describe the edges of shadows. Contours overlap and interpenetrate. It is through the use of line that expressive marks convey emphasis and emotion. The work of German Expressionist artist Käthe Kollwitz has always captured me with its dramatic, expressive marks, and emotional gravity. Her line work is exquisite.

After using line to describe the contours of objects, and the areas of light and shadow, I shift the focus to noticing the spaces in and around objects because this is the element of art that begins to open students to a new way of seeing.

I was interested to read Renée Hill's reflection on negative space as conceived by Bradford Grant. As Hill explains, the term "negative space" is not meant as a value judgment. Rather, it is a way of distinguishing between the object of focus and the surrounding area of a composition. Having students focus on the relationships of the space surrounding an object effectively causes a reversal of attention. They are no longer passive observers of the physical forms. For an instructor there are a number of drawing exercises that can be assigned to illuminate this visual property.

Many of the designs by the artist M. C. Escher use anthropomorphic characters. These black and white animal forms morph and dissolve into each other like a hallucinatory chessboard. The alternating squares come alive as bodies interpenetrate. The negative space of one square enters and becomes the positive space of its neighbor. A flock of flying geese is transformed into a school of fish.

The Japanese concept of *ma*, which can be translated as a gap or pause, is closely associated with the use of negative space in disciplines ranging from painting to garden design. To achieve perfect balance, the open spaces are as important to the composition as the areas of emphasis.

Integrating Creative and Contemplative Practices

In 2011, I was hired for a full-time teaching position in the Division of Humanities at Thomas University in South Georgia. It was January, mid-academic year. My wife, Lori, and I moved down to the little town of Thomsville on New Year's Day. With the help of my parents, we managed to load everything into a U-Haul and make it in one trip. Two days later I reported to campus to start my training.

While the physical move was swift, the emotional migration was much slower. In fact, integrating into the community took several years. There was a lot of emotional upheaval, homesickness, culture shock, and feelings of groundlessness. In some ways, it is still an unfolding process.

I began a sustained meditation practice about five years ago. Like many, it was born out of the ashes of personal crisis. The same self-obsession that undermined my art-making and early teaching nearly derailed my life. A breach of trust and communication in my marriage led me to

seek counseling. Subsequently, I was diagnosed with Adult ADHD and prescribed medication. I also changed my diet and began exercising more regularly. I tried yoga, Tai Chi, and other forms of embodied practice. The one that really stuck with me was seated meditation. In particular, I have been studying in the Soto Zen tradition. The simplicity and directness of the practice, as well as its connection to a broader ethical life, are the reasons I have embraced it so enthusiastically.

In many ways, meditation is analogous to performance art. There is a level of deliberate intention that the artist must cultivate. Awareness and focus are generally strong components of performance. Artists such as Marina Abramović and Anne Hamilton more explicitly employ meditative practices in their performances. However, there is a common pitfall that can imprison an artist, especially one creating something as personal as a performance art piece. In my own study and practice, I failed to realize that even though the artwork comes from my body and through my actions, it is not *for* me. Art is not about *me*. (*Not me, not mine, not my self.*)

The focus of my art-making has shifted since moving to South Georgia. I have returned to drawing and painting as my primary medium. Performance has become the lens through which I think about my process and material study. I have become interested in historical materials and methods. I now focus on gathering and using natural materials to make ink and pigments. I have experimented with walnuts, rust, charcoal, berries, ocher, lichen, clay, wasp nests, and pollen. An ongoing series of drawings I have made document the places from which these materials were gathered. Through demonstrations to my classes I share my experience and impart a respect for nature and natural processes to my students.

Four Ways to be of Service

1. "The instruction is simple: we must intensify our presence to these benign moments and inhabit them through awareness." – Christophe Andre

I began inviting the local chapter of Easterseals into my studio art class. This is an organization that serves adults with cognitive disabilities. There are usually five or six participants in the day program at any one time.

They come to the studio and sit among my college students and make art with them. I have been impressed with how my students engage the Easterseals clients. They talk with them naturally and help them if needed. The interaction changes the energy in the studio. Drawing together dissolves the boundaries between abilities.

2. "Noticing is the first discipline of compassion. Without the capacity to notice, compassion does not fully rise." – John Paul Lederach

Earlier this semester, my drawing students designed Valentine cards for hospice patients. At the beginning of the year I trained as a hospice volunteer. I began visiting with people at homes or in nursing facilities who are at the end of their lives. My students tend to front a shell of cool indifference. However, they seemed moved by the realization that for many of those patients, this would likely be the last Valentine they would ever receive. We made nearly 100 cards, enough for every patient and family member. Other volunteers and I delivered them to clients, families, staff, and workers during visits over the following week.

3. "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled." – John Berger

Another assignment my class worked on was drawing with textures. For this project we made collages and drawings using textured surfaces on pieces of cardstock. I reached out to the Georgia Academy for the Blind in Macon. I agreed to make a card for each of their 89 students. As part of the lesson, I invited the Disability Services Coordinator to give a presentation and raise awareness about blind culture. The students took pride in their textural creations. It was an honor to deliver them to the academy the following week.

4. "Anything can happen at any time." – James Baraz

Our campus was closed midway through the spring semester of 2020 in response to the growing concern over Covid-19. All of our classes transitioned to online. The lecture classes were relatively easy to modify. Most of them already had an online component. However, the drawing class was a little more challenging. Part of my practice as an artist and teacher is being in the studio. A group of students sitting in relative silence and concentrating on their creative projects is a stimulating environment to me. Encouraging and guiding them in real time as they

negotiate a still life or how to visualize a sound is what teaching studio art is all about. No mark is too subtle.

Further Lessons on Drawing

One of the things I like most about drawing is that it can be done using almost anything. If a mark can be made on a surface, however temporarily, it is a drawing. Even the notions of “mark” and “surface” can be interrogated. For instance, is a mental formation the surface or the mark? James Benning concludes his contribution to the book, *Draw with Your Eyes Closed: The Art of the Art Assignment* with this instruction: “The next time you teach a class, just sit there. Don’t say a word and see what happens. I guarantee it won’t be nothing” (p. 120). This sort of conceptual dance is fine for advanced art students. For the students I am teaching, non-art majors with little or no experience, the act of drawing must remain more concrete.

My solution for teaching drawing online was not very innovative. I posted a series of video tutorials and asked my students to make drawings with whatever materials they had available. Under the circumstances, that was the best I could do. Giving feedback on a sketch that I did not witness unfolding, only seeing it from a badly lit picture taken by a student with her phone, is not ideal. But, it is better than nothing. I was talking with a colleague who teaches at another university. He was trying to figure out how to teach printmaking in an online format. I will be interested to find out how fellow educators negotiated these challenges.

Along with keeping up with classes, I sent a campus-wide invitation to anyone who would like to have a “mindfulness check-in.” Several students took me up on it, and I video conferenced with them one-on-one. I also sent out a short meditation that I recorded. These small gestures were my way of offering compassion during an uncertain time.

At some point during all of the talk about social distancing, I was reminded of the performance art collaboration between Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh, entitled *Rope Piece*. For one year, beginning in July of 1983, they were tethered together with a two-meter length of rope. There were only two rules. 1) They could not be untethered at any time for the entire year. 2) Their bodies could never touch. The perfor-

mance consisted of Linda and Tehching navigating through their lives in tandem. They were physically both connected and isolated at the same time. *Rope Piece* was meant to explore personal freedom and interdependence. The language of freedom was a line drawn between them, constantly in flux.

It occurred to me that in this current moment, our performance of social distance has become a sign of respect. Seemingly overnight, self-imposed isolation became both a survival tactic and a communal act of compassion. The more deliberately we navigate the world, and the more care and caution we exhibit, this directly signals our level of mindful awareness. This is our collective *Rope Piece*.

Returning to a Private Act

Wheel of Time is an ongoing project I have been working on over the past few years. As an act of both meditation and creative expression, I am drawing a continuous series of vertical lines on a paper scroll. To make the marks I use handmade walnut ink applied with a brush. Each mark is an intentional act. However, I allow for the natural flux and variation of lines without controlling them too rigidly.

It feels like the perfect artistic act for the current circumstance. Drawing in solitude is a valuable lesson. I recently read Stephen Batchelor's new book, *The Art of Solitude*. In it, he recounts various stories of contemplatives and artists. He weaves these stories with his own narrative as a seeker and meditator. He writes, "No matter where you hide your body, you cannot escape those timeworn habits of mind that keep reasserting themselves." I hope to find a way of imparting this lesson to my students through our virtual connection.

Sitting alone at a table in the cottage behind our house, dipping my brush into a jar of walnut ink, making a line on the paper scroll, and repeating this sequence again and again, I reflect on the nature of these lessons. By engaging in this solitary practice, I am exercising self-compassion.

Final Reflection

Over the past several years I have made a conscious effort to combine my creative, contemplative, and teaching practices into a holistic act of

compassion. By using artistic expression to foster a sense of shared humanity, I am teaching the gift of compassion. To use that gift as a way to connect with marginalized and underserved populations is to unfurl compassion in the world. As Thich Nhat Hanh has said, "Compassion is a verb." Examples of our interconnectivity are manifold. Especially at this moment, when it is easy to wallow in feelings of helplessness, the most potent remedy is an act of compassion.

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