Drawing to Tell Versus Drawing to Intrigue?

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The article "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review* (Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 97–113) focused on the use of images in early anthropology. The drawings by Arthur Bernard Deacon (1903–1927), which he made during his field studies in Vanuatu, New Hebrides from 1926 until his sudden death caused by blackwater fever in 1927, are the starting point of Geismar's inquiry.

The author discusses Deacon's drawings and infers the potential of drawing as a methodology for anthropology. Deacon was a young PhD candidate who was sent to Vanuatu from the University of Cambridge. It was his intention to continue the studies of the indigenous culture of the New Hebrides at the time, which had been started by the Department of Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. In contrast to his expectations, Deacon found a culture in the process of decay. The subject of his study, the indigenous culture, had been threatened by diseases and cultural influences that settlers, missionaries, and traders imported with them since they landed in the middle of the nineteenth century. Deacon described the impossibility of protecting the indigenous culture and critically reflected on his role as an anthropologist (Geismar 2014, p. 102).

Drawing and Visual Communication

We can compare the fields of anthropology and visual communication through their aspiration to capture the very essence of a culture, or the essence of a message as an utterance within a specific cultural context. Both disciplines pursue their goals through the representations of our world in different media, ranging from the most abstract forms of language and the most direct gestural imitation to a mere trace of a gesture in a drawing.

In visual communication, the methodology of sketching plays a central role. But it has a different purpose than sketching in anthropological field work. Visual communication pursues the goal of transferring information. But beyond "pure information," a visual message has to deviate from what has been seen before and is stored in our collective memory in order to be intriguing and convincing (Lyotard, 1997, p. 36). The continuous search for this slight deviation, situated between an understandable message based on convention and a deviation from the expected, is a core quality a visual communication designer is looking for. In the process of searching for the unknown and a surprising image, drawing becomes an important methodology. Jacques Derrida (1993) compared drawing to the groping of a blind person (p. 2). If we drag a drawing tool over the paper, we do not know if the line is successful or not. A relentless critical evaluation

in the process of drawing lines will not lead to a successful drawing. In the moment of the gesture, during which we cannot control the outcome, the unexpected can emerge. Since, in the action of the gesture of drawing, the control of our conscious thinking is limited, the outcome is often considered to be accidental. But an individual's gesture, as well as an individual's voice, is the most significant utterance expressing a unique identity (Arendt, 2010, pp. 219–220). As a theoretical model of cognitive science describes, the dispositional space in our memory is the unconscious repository, where individual traits are formed through heritage, early childhood experiences, and the ongoing experiences we collect (Damasio, 1999, pp. 331–332).[1] These traits, not accidents, are responsible for the unconscious, intuitive decisions made in the gesture of drawing (Renner, 2018). These prefer-ences, guided by our dispositions, make it possible that—in the processes of experimental sketching—we can overcome what we would achieve by a fully conscious act of creating a drawing. But the process of drawing does not only consist of intuitive gestures leaving a trace. In order to frame the intuitive gestures in both fields—visual communication and anthropolo-gy—a goal of the act of drawing, which can be verbalized and, therefore, is part of our conscious process of thinking, has to be defined (Renner, 2011). This goal and the inferred criteria make it possible to evaluate the outcome of the intuitive process of creating lines through gestures. In these iterative phases, between conscious evaluation and intuitive gesture, the mediation between an individual interpretation and the preconceptions formed by the sociocultural context occurs. In contrast to the goal of creating an unseen image through drawing processes in visual communication, the goal of an anthropological drawing is to create a record of an object, a cultural practice, or an experience in the field of study.

## Deacon's Drawings—Looking at Drawings

If we turn now to the concrete examples of the drawings by Arthur Bernard Deacon, presented in "Drawing It Out," we find three distinct categories of drawings: drawing by observation, rubbings, and schematic drawings of the practice of sand drawings.

If we first focus on the drawings by observation, Figure 1, presented in the paper, is a drawing of a Nimangki shrine.

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1   "The image space is that in which images of all sensory types occur explicitly. [...] The dispositional space is that in which dispositions contain the knowledge base and the mechanisms with which images can be constructed from recall, with which movements can be generated, and with which the processing of images can be facilitated" (Damasio, 1999, p. 331).

Figure 1:

Drawing of Nimangki shrine, S W Bay, Malakula, by A. B. Deacon, in small fieldwork notebook. MS 90/4/D365. (Image and caption as presented in "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review* (Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113)).
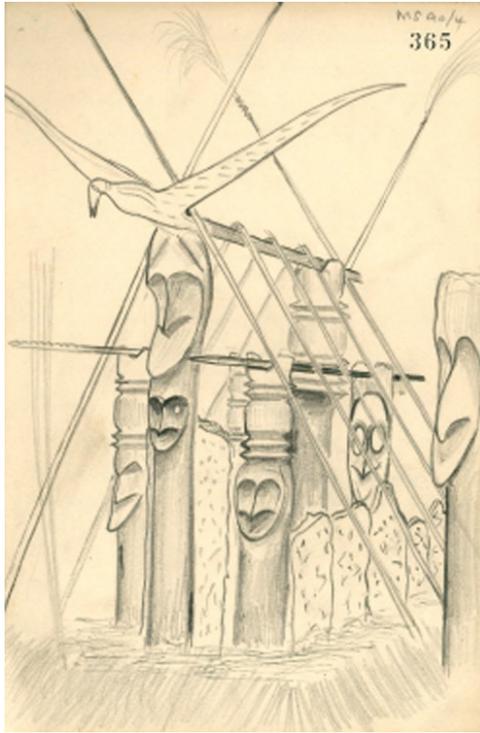

The author describes the drawing of standing stones and carved faces as a "typical ethnographic drawing" (Geismar, 2014, p. 98). The sculptures are placed within a tent construction, which is usually covered. In order to present the arrangement of stones and sculptures in an analytical way, only the beams of the tent construction are shown, while the cover is left out. The drawing explains the three-dimensional space—floor, sculptures, and tent—in the tradition established by the Western culture of representation ever since the Renaissance. For the horizontal lines, two vanishing points outside of the paper format are used to create an analytical explanation of the space. Following this convention, the vertical lines are parallel and do not vanish toward the top of the format. In order to achieve a more naturalistic representation, textural qualities of materials and the light situation are represented through a variety of grey values and textures created with a pencil. The drawing is not intended to be an individual inter-pretation of the situation, nor does it reflect in any way a ritual connected to the use of the shrine or other aspects of the context. The drawing is not a tentative sketch, but rather, the attempt to create a record of the mate-rial situation by a distant, objectified approach, informative for a beholder trained in the interpretation of representations of three-dimensional space in a Western culture. Tim Ingold (2013) classified the drawings that describe

a spatial detail or situation as drawings which do not tell, but rather intend to specify and articulate (p. 125). Following this line of thought, the drawing of the Nimangki shrine is a typical drawing of an ethnographer studying a culture with a distant attitude of observation.

Figure 2:

Annotated drawings of ears, indicating both the names of the individuals, with notes about the physical characteristics of their ears. Annotations: rainbow+mbat imeet; (top ear) slight widening; Masenrean; antihelix = in level to helix; pl of attachment; (middle ear) distinct overfold; no overfold; slight depression; pt att. Antihelix depressed below level of helix. Angle 1; (bottom ear) MILMILIAG Albino at Venian, man and his mother albinos. LOKON MS 90/2/1632. (Image and caption as presented in "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review* (Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113)).
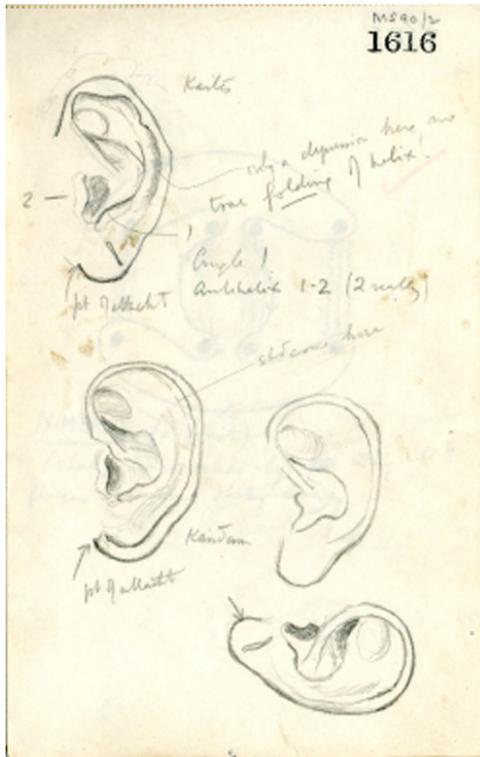
An opposite approach becomes evident in Figure 2, a study of the ears of individuals Deacon observed during his field work. Ears were of special interest at the time, as they contributed to the discussion about Darwin's hypothesis of the evolutionary development of monkeys and humans. In contrast to a comparable representation of ears of indigenous people and monkeys, Deacon has named, among other annotations, the individuals whose ears he has drawn (Geismar, 2014, p. 103). In contrast to Figure 1, the drawings of the ears were made with the attempt to record the observed. Through a careful and faithful observation, they provide a representation, which can be interpreted by their beholder. The ear studies are less schematic in comparison to the Nimangki shrine. Deacon did not make the attempt to classify what he observed one way or the other through a visual interpretation. The attempt to represent what he observed carefully turns the ear drawings into a record of a witness, compared to

the explanatory drawing of the Nimangki shrine. The ear studies are true representations of a living individual whom Deacon has met. They are not schematic records of space. We may even call them portraits, in a sense, as we are able to interpret the strokes as qualities of the individual character of the sitter. Also, the repetition of the four studies on a single sheet of paper supports the interpretation that the witness has worked hard and attempted several times to capture what he saw and experienced. Coming back to Ingold's (2013) classification of drawings, Deacon's ear studies are drawings that tell (p. 125). The lines and annotations have a synesthetic effect. In combination, they represent more than the visible object and trigger a broader narration in the beholder. From these drawings, Geismar (2014) infers a turning point of anthropology from the natural sciences to the social sciences (pp. 104–105). Deacon is more interested in the individual being in its social context than providing proof of evolutionary processes. In Ingold's (2013) sense, we could also see the difference between the drawing of the Nimangki shrine and the ear studies in his proposal for a distinction between ethnography and anthropology, the objectified explanation of the shrine by the ethnographer versus the study with emotionally involved and emphatic records of the individual ears by the anthropologist (pp. 2–4).

Figure 3:

Sketches of the Malakulan coastline, "[upper level]: distant hills; [middle level]: distant range; bay; d.n.; [lower level]: bay" interspersed in a notebook with notes on kinship terms, naming, and genealogies MS 90/7/H33A. (Image and caption as presented in "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review,* Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113).

With the landscape sketches of the Malakulan coastline (Figure 3), a third kind of observational drawing can be discussed. The three drawings, made from a canoe on a small format, are the most sketch-like. They have the most tentative character of all the drawings presented in Geismar's paper. It may be that the drawing from the canoe has influenced the sketch-like character of the drawings. But through their very elusiveness, these drawings of the coastline convey what Deacon describes as his struggle to preserve a culture that has already vanished (Geismar, 2014, p. 102). The drawings convey the attempt to capture something that is elusive even though the coastline, with its hills and mountain ranges,

would have been a still object to observe. Through the line quality and their sketch-like character, the coastlines appear to be more of a representation of Deacon's state of mind than a real landscape. In Ingold's (2013) sense, we can argue that the coastline drawings are drawings that tell of an anthropologist who is transformed by his work.

Figure 4:

Full-length rubbing of Nimangki figure. MS 95/9/. (Image and caption as presented in "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review,* Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113).

If we now turn to Deacon's rubbings, we have got a fundamentally different process of image generation to discuss. A rubbing is not a notation of visual perception transferred with traces of gestures. It is a direct transfer from the relief of an object to a piece of paper. The gestures of the image-maker are still blind, but it is not the dispositional space that is first and foremost determining every line. The edges of the relief define where the application of the grey value stops and the blank paper becomes visible. This is a technical process that is comparable to other technical

image-creation processes such as tracing, photography, or x-ray imaging. With all the technical processes of image creation, the preconception implies that they are less subjective, since the decisions are delegated to a procedure or an apparatus (Flusser, 1984, pp. 10–14; Galison, 1998, pp. 327–359). With a closer look at Deacon's rubbing of the Nimangki figure, we see that the image is not the result of an unreflecting, repetitive movement of the tool over the relief. The legs of the figure show, for example, a clear modulation of the grey values. The edges of the legs are drawn in a darker hue in order to achieve a three-dimensional representation of them. Also, the light grey values, which describe the torso of the figure, are not the result of a mechanical process, but rather, the consequence of a decision in the process of image-making in consideration of the overall appearance of the image. Typically, for the preconceived objectivity of technical imaging processes, many aspects of the outcome still depend on the decisions of the image maker.

Figure 5:

Schematized sand drawing showing an Ambrym geometrical figure named "The Turtle," MS 94/7/20. (Image and caption as presented in "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113).
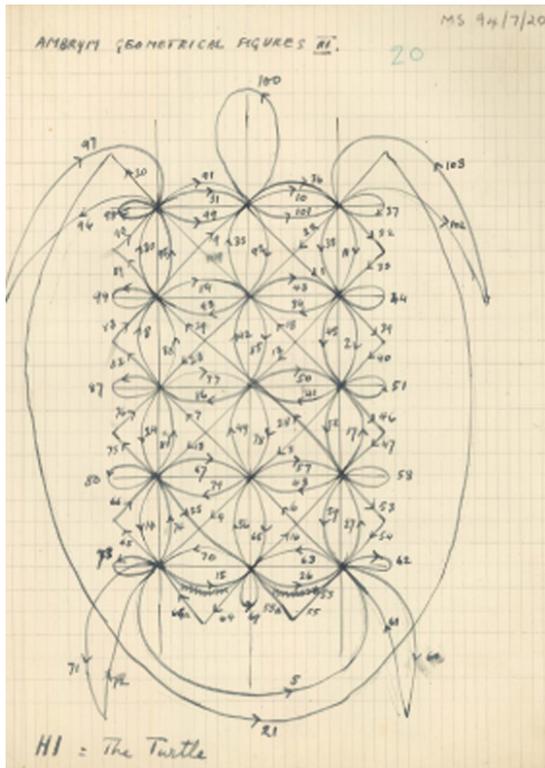
Figure 6:

John Teungkon creating a sand
drawing; Craig Cove, Ambrym,
1999. Photograph by Stephen
Zagala. (Image and caption as
presented in "Drawing It Out" by
Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual
Anthropology Review*, Vol. 30, No.
2, 97–113).

If we now turn to the third category of drawings,
the schematized sand drawings, a completely different purpose for these re-
cords can be described. While the observational drawings and the rubbings
had the purpose of providing a record of the indigenous culture and their
protagonists that Deacon studied, the sand drawings are an image-creation
technique of the culture he studied. The schematized figure of the turtle
(Figure 5 and 6) reenacted by Deacon was annotated with numbers in order
to record the sequence of movements in the standardized creation of the
sand drawing. Deacon's drawing can be interpreted as proof of his attempt
to learn how the drawings were made. The drawings are dissected and the
sections are numbered in order to learn the complex sequence of gestures.
But the practice of drawing them is also an intuitive process in which the
trained hand, comparable to a writing gesture, makes decisions below the
threshold of conscious thought. To be able to execute and use the sand
drawings in their cultural context, the same as the indigenous people of
Vanuatu did, made Deacon into an anthropologist in Ingold's (2013) sense.
Deacon was involved and transformed by the study of a specific cultural
practice (pp. 2–49). Whether he actually repeated the sequence of the turtle
drawing 10,000 times as Richard Sennet described (2008), as a prerequisite
of the mastery of a craft, is not transmitted (p. 172).

Conclusion

Geismar stated that Deacon had neither a methodological framework for drawing provided by anthropology, nor did he have any specialized training in drawing. Considering these circumstances, it is even more surprising how decisively Deacon described the limits of language in the context of his field work and, therefore, strongly relied on drawing as an epistemological methodology:

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>"Writing is so unreal, so terribly unreal, lending the illusion of movement to quiet and stillness, and holding back desire and vision and the cool, clear welling up of things."[2]

The limits of language are a crucial point, which can be also used to find a common ground between anthropology and visual communication. The awareness that the experience of being in the world is multisensory and cannot be represented exclusively by language fosters a common interest in images.

Another connecting line between anthropology and visual communication can be drawn regarding their relationship to a sociocultural context. What the participatory engagement in the field work of anthropology means is mirrored by the necessity of knowing the current culture in visual communication. In order to recognize the surprising deviation of the known from the involvement in the known—the established aesthetic of a culture—is necessary.

As mentioned above, drawing is an important competence in the field of visual communication and includes trained in any curriculum. In today's context of visual communication, it is not the virtuosity of drawing that is the ultimate goal anymore, but rather, the recognition of how important it is to find a balance between intuitive processes and conscious processes of thought (Renner, 2021). This awareness is crucial in order to create intriguing images in communication, but also to create image series in practice-led iconic research (Renner, 2014; Renner, 2017/2018). Even though I cannot answer this question for the field of anthropology, I would assume that drawings that are drawings that tell, as well as their epistemological outcomes, are also based on the mentioned balance between intuitive processes and conscious processes of thought. Seen from this point of view, Deacon's drawings can be read as examples of the varying combinations of these two components in the process of drawing.

2   Deacon writing to Gardiner, on board the SS Ormonde sailing to Malakula, August 25, 1925 (Gardiner, 1984, p. 15), quoted in Geismar (2014), "Drawing It Out," in *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113.

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