Layers of looking

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Abstract. The films that I make are part documentary, part film essay, part visual poem. They are created out of a series of up to 30 drawings that are animated. The process from research to completion takes about 2 years, and at the end of it there is a film and a number of drawings that can be exhibited. This paper emerges out of the realisation that in the different stages of making a drawing and a film—from planning a drawing and seeking an image as a starting point through to the finished film being projected onto a screen in a gallery—I am looking at the image in different ways. There is a close-up kind of looking when I am drawing and a reflective kind of looking when I step back to take stock. There is a way of looking at darks and lights as they are built up that is different from the way of looking at the lines crossing the edges of the grid being used to transfer an image to the drawing paper. Seeing the drawings on the wall of my studio is different from seeing the same drawings in a museum setting.

Keywords: studio practice, different kinds of looking when drawing, looking-animating, looking-remembering, looking-reflecting.

1 Looking at looking

The films that I make are hybrid works: part documentary, part film essay, part visual poem. They are created out of a series of up to 30 drawings, fairly large in format, and they are animated. The process from research to completion takes about 2 years. At the end of it there is a film and a number of drawings that can be exhibited. It is a labour-intensive process with hours of drawing and almost as many hours of looking at what it is that I have drawn.

For four years now I have been keeping a ‘process journal’, a studio notebook in which I write down thoughts on the work I am doing. I make notes in it at different stages of working. A number of entries relate to the planning of a drawing. Others are more reflective and relate to looking at a drawing on the board in an effort to understand how it is taking shape and in which direction it should or could proceed. Still, others are made when a drawing is finished and I am thinking about its success or failure or its usefulness in the narrative I am constructing. Keeping the process journal is not only a tool for reflecting on drawing but also, crucially, a means to hold the project together. A film can take up to 2 years to make, and in that period there is ongoing research into the subject of the film and a growing body of pertinent information that I want to keep close at hand. As the research progresses, so do the ideas for images—ideas that I don't want to lose, ideas that need to be examined, explored, then stored for later use. Crucially too, the journal functions as a mental space within which the often opposing demands of historical or ideological content and visual or poetic form can be thought about in order to keep them in some kind of balance.

Added to those myriad scribblings on issues of content and form are, more recently, a growing number of thoughts on different aspects of looking. I have come to realise that in the different stages of making a drawing and a film—from planning a drawing and seeking an image as a starting point through to the finished film being projected onto a screen in a gallery—I am looking at the image in different ways. There is a close-up kind of looking when I am drawing and a reflective kind of looking when I step back to take stock. There is a way of looking at darks and lights as they are built up that is different from the way of looking at the lines crossing the edges of the grid being used to transfer an image to the drawing paper.
Looking through the camera at the drawing or at the thumbnail images downloaded onto the computer is not the same as looking at the whole drawing on the board. Seeing the drawings on the wall of my studio is different from seeing the same drawings in a museum.

I don’t think that I would have noticed these different aspects of looking, never mind started noting them down, had it not been for the series of conversations I have been having over the last few years with perception psychologist Johan Wagemans. Together with other artists and scientists we have been part of the Parallelepiped project, and through shared seminars and discussions, the artists in the project have been introduced to some of the complexities of looking and seeing. In his own paper for this special issue (Wagemans 2011) Johan writes in depth about this collaboration. The positive response that he has always given to my attempts at articulating studio processes and methodologies has encouraged me towards deeper reflection on these issues. My paper is thus very much the result of a close relationship that has developed between us over the course of this project.

In this paper I am going to consider some of the kinds of looking that I do as I work. The first set of observations follow the chronological order of the active making process. These include the period in which I am selecting an image to draw, the transferral of that image to the drawing paper, and the working up of that drawing through attention to lights, darks, and qualities of mark. Included, too, are observations on the process of animation and the structuring of the film. In these stages I describe an increasing sense of immersion in the processes of drawing and the construction of the film. The following sets of observations describe looking at my drawings after the active making process and in contexts other than the studio. These include seeing my drawings in comparison to those of another artist, seeing the film with the addition of sound, and seeing it as a finished work on exhibition in a public space. This second set of observations describes kinds of looking in which I feel myself to be disconnected, almost estranged, from the drawings and the film.

2 Looking: Sorting

The first kind of looking, then, is the search for an image through which to convey an idea. During the research period I collect visual images that I store for later use, but I am also on the lookout for those anecdotes or descriptions in the reading that suggest to me images or sequences that could be developed. It is from such an anecdote-description that the drawing *Grinning Orientals* in *Off the Record* came about (Figure 1). In the *War Illustrated* of 1918 a British journalist described a tour of the front in which he met up with a group of Chinese labourers returning to camp after a day’s work. He noted that these ‘grinning Orientals’ ‘looked so alike that one seemed to see the same man a hundred times over’. The tone of the article was overly paternalistic, and I wanted to make a drawing that took issue with his attitude. Since the journalist was talking of the faces of these labourers, it seemed obvious to me that I could refute this statement by drawing a number of portraits of Chinese labourers in which I paid careful attention to the particularities of their different faces. Searching through World War I websites, I found enough detailed images of Chinese men to allow me to make a large full-length drawing of one man and have his face transform through five other portraits, thereby drawing attention to very different Chinese faces (Figure 2).

The first kind of looking, then, is for an image from which to work. This can be a sorting process, seeing what can feasibly be drawn. Of the images of Chinese labourers that I have collected I need to select those that have potential for manipulation. Those that share a frontal view allow me more easily to transform one face into another. Hats or beards, for instance, give me ideas about elements that could be interchanged. So, while I am sorting, I am thinking about possible animations of the elements in the image. As the drawings are
often quite large, the source image needs to be detailed enough to allow for this blow-up. If one image does not provide all that I need, then I will use fragments of different images.

It could be that instead of going from an idea towards a drawing, I could go from a drawing towards an idea. At times I have an image or object that I really want to draw even though it does not necessarily connect to an idea for the film. By combining it with something else, I can usually find a good reason for including it. The matchboxes that keep reappearing are one example. I like drawing them. I like having them open and release unexpected contents. I like the space on their covers that asks for information to be added. Not every image has to
be important to the narrative. At times I draw things for no other reason but that they interest me, and then I give them some small function in the film.

### 3 Looking : Transferring : Marking

Once the image is chosen, I start to draw. The first step in the process is to transfer the image to the drawing paper. If it is a complicated image, I draw a grid onto both the source image and the drawing paper as an aid to setting it out in reasonable proportion. In my hand I have an A4 photocopy of the image—laden with information—and in front of me an expanse of white paper, and I’m looking from the one to the other as I transfer the image. I’m looking at the photocopy and seeing the image divided up into little squares—and I am concentrating only on the lines or shadows that intersect with the grid. And I have to briefly memorise this intersection so as to recreate it on the larger grid on the white paper.

It is a measuring kind of looking and drawing. I’m not seeing the whole object or image, only that line or shadow that intersects with the grid. It feels like a process of mapping, of registering the co-ordinates. It would make little difference if at this stage the drawing was upside down. At this ‘technical’ stage I am not yet committed to the drawing. The placing or size of the object may not seem right, and often I erase all that I have done, repositioning the object on the paper or redrawing the grid so as to make the object larger or smaller. It is the least interesting of the drawing stages, and while it involves a level of concentration to transfer the image, it is a fairly automatised process requiring little conscious thought. It doesn’t feel demanding in any way.

When the outline and placement is established, I often stop drawing for that day. I don’t switch easily from this stage to the next—which is the working up of the drawing, fleshing it out with more complex shadows, and thinking about the kind of mark that I am making.

Now I am looking and drawing across the entire surface of the drawing. I am hardly noticing the grid. I am still working from the source image and am concentrating on the darks and lights, seeing the object through the relationships between the shadows and the lit areas. Often I am looking with half-closed eyes, squinting at the drawing, the better to see the illusion of depth and mass being created. It sounds obvious but the longer I spend drawing an object the better I see it. I start to see details in it that I hadn't noticed earlier and start to really know that object.

In a personal response Johan Wagemans has questioned whether when I write ‘that object’ I am referring to ‘the thing out there in the world’ or to ‘that image’ and the ‘particular rendering of it, from that particular angle, with that particular set of gray values, etc’. And he responds with:

I guess both. Clearly the image because your way of looking at it and copying it meticulously makes you see things in it that others do not see (details in the literal image, not the thing it stands for), but at the same time (by thinking about its meaning, relating it to its context, both in the drawing and the overall movie it is going to play a role in, and all of the personal associations in your memory and notebooks) it becomes a full and quite rich ‘object’ too (loaded with content). It is an interesting question to what extent the first leads to the second. It is perhaps through the slow, laborious kind of focus on the image that you give yourself time to load it with content (adding the cognitive and emotional associations while working on it) and create the full object.

What I am describing here is my sense is of knowing the object, ‘the thing out there in the world’, though frequently I have never seen the actual object and am working from a photographic image of it. Of course, I only know those parts that are being shown in the rendering, so it cannot be the object as a whole that I feel I know. But the information that I deduce from that photographic rendering is very telling of the material quality of the object. The way the light and shadows are rendered gives me a sense of the ‘matter’ of this object, a
sense of hard or soft edge, smooth or rough finish. Through a concentrated looking at this image of an object as I draw it I start to see details that I missed at earlier stages of working from it. My looking becomes more perceptive. What started off seeming like a dark smudge or a deep shadow slowly divides up into details and nuances of surface that I had not earlier noticed. So at this stage it is all about the ‘objectness’ of it. It is that quality of it that I am seeking to reproduce in my drawing and to describe here.

Johan is correct about the other aspects that come into play, too. I am very aware, for instance, of how, in the process of drawing, meaning is projected onto, rather than drawn out of, an image/object. When I was drawing the two missionary wives and their 19 children (see Figure 3), my intention was to concentrate on the things that I knew about these people—their names, dates of birth, and so on. The three portrait photographs that I had of one of the women, Sarah Jane, and from which I was drawing, gave me information about her facial features, the quality of fabric of her dress, and the way she did her hair. But they told me nothing that I really wanted to know about her. Rather than a process of excavation of information, then, drawing these women and babies was about projection onto the drawings of my desire to know more about them. It was a means of creating an ‘arena’ in which I could think about their stories, and about my relationship to them. So Johan is correct when he suggests that ‘it is perhaps through the slow, laborious kind of focus on the image that you give yourself time to load it with content (adding the cognitive and emotional associations while working on it) and create the full object’.

When the object or scene being drawn seems to make enough visual sense, then I am ready to start animating. Again, I notice that I don't go straight in and start animating, but will stop for the day at this stage, too. I don't know whether it is as much an issue of switching from one mode of looking and drawing to another as it is a moment that I like to savour. If I have a drawing on the board and it is in a state of ‘readiness’, then I am content to go and do other, more mundane things, knowing that I have a drawing ready and waiting. It is a moment of pleasurable anticipation. Animation is the most enjoyable part of drawing, but it is also the most demanding, and before I start a sequence I need to be fresh and to have my wits about me.

4 Looking : Animating : Remembering

Animating a drawing is not unlike a performance, at times in slow motion, at times at speed. There are three points to it: making the change on the drawing, stepping back to the camera and activating the shutter, stepping over to the log-book and noting down the shot. Depending on the complexity of the drawing, an alteration to the image can take a few seconds or a half hour.

When I am in the process of animating, I work for longer periods between breaks. I am more engaged in the process than I was in the earlier stage of setting up the drawing. There my concern was with the ‘technical’ aspects of drawing—mark registration, revealing the object through lights and darks, making it recognisable. Now there is a switch towards thinking about the actions that will occur in the ‘arena’ that has been created. I don't work with a storyboard, and it is not decided in advance in which direction an animation will be heading. I do have an idea about where it might be taken, but drawing is an uncertain art and there can be a wide gap between intention and result. By this I do not mean that it fails to go where I hoped it would go, but rather that interesting possibilities or unforeseen difficulties arise during the process and suggest or demand other, often far more interesting, routes. It is this unexpectedness about the process that keeps me coming back to it again and again.

A few months ago a visiting South African friend brought me a packet of Strelitzia bulbs. This flower, which is sometimes called the Crane flower because of its resemblance to the
Crested Crane, is one that grew in my mother's garden in Johannesburg. I disliked it then because it bore the colours of the old South African flag—orange, white, and blue. Thirty years later and with that flag safely stowed away in the archive, I looked at the Strelitzias anew and realised not only that they were very beautiful flowers but also that they made me nostalgic for an earlier period of my life. I decided to include them, together with other plants from my mother's garden, in Orlando's Book, a little film about memories of places—both literary memories and memories of places experienced.

I drew a Strelitzia plant and planned for the spathe to open and the flowers to fan up and outwards, releasing pollen as they emerged (Figure 4). Simultaneously, leaves and other spathes would rise up around the main flower. It wasn't a great animation. The flowers emerged from the spathe too quickly, and there were too many movements in different directions. The attention was taken away from the central flowers by the other two spathes that appeared alongside it. The shadows of the leaves in the background were distracting, the entire sequence was too short, and the flowers were too small in the frame. As an animation, the movements of the flowers up and backwards were too irregular. I wanted the movements to be more flowing and rhythmical. The flowers needed to burst out, stretch, bloom, elongate,
and wilt, even as the next little flower was doing the same. I wanted the spray of pollen to flow into being something else, to sweep upwards and out of frame—so as to make a following drawing inevitable.

**Figure 4.** Detail of drawing for *Bully Beef*. Charcoal on paper. 2004, 150x115 cm.

I started a new drawing. This time it showed only one, larger, spathe. I slowed down the opening up of the flowers and the release of the pollen so that the sequence was twice the length of the first one. There was more pollen, and it created a denser pattern of marks across the surface. Reviewing the sequence afterwards, the simultaneous movements of the flowers arching upwards and the spraying of the pollen seem to work together better than in the previous drawing. They are more in harmony with each other, and it is possible to follow both sets of movements without the one dominating or drawing attention away from the other. As an image, this drawing is more striking than the first.

It frequently works out this way; as I make a first animation, I become aware of how it could be improved—as image, as narrative, as an action that can lead to another action. It is through the act of drawing that ideas or possibilities for other drawings and animations occur. It is difficult to plan these in advance. Better, I have learnt, to simply start drawing from however small an idea. The discarding of a number of drawings is not wasted work but part of the process towards making those drawings or animations that are interesting, apt, and that add density to the film.

If I have decided that I will be animating a certain object or part of a drawing, then I try to keep that object as simple as possible, so that it can be reasonably animated. Imagine that I am drawing Leopold II’s tricycle and it needs to move across the paper (as it did in the film *Bully Beef*; see **Figure 5**). The tricycle has to contain enough detail to ‘read’ as a tricycle, but no more than that, or it becomes too difficult to redraw over and over again. For each frame that I film, the tricycle must be erased and entirely redrawn a centimetre or so further on. There is, then, an issue of looking and remembering involved in this kind of animation. Even though some charcoal traces are left on the paper, the tricycle does disappear, and I have to remember how and where it was. I have noticed that after having erased and redrawn it a few times—referring each time to the source image that I am using—that I start to develop a memory of this object, or at least a memory of the lines that I am using to reproduce it. I sort of schematise it so that its reproduction becomes easier and easier and I become less dependent on the source image. While the sequence is being animated, I am unable to look though the camera for fear of bumping it, and so can’t see what has come before. I have to try to remember it.

At an earlier stage of thinking about looking, I had written that ‘the constant redrawing of an object eventually etches it into my brain and I find I can run through the entire sequence, even the entire film, transformation by transformation—with my eyes closed’. I remember when I was working on 35-mm film and couldn’t see the exposed film for about 3 months—because I needed to expose the whole roll before sending it to the film laboratory for development—that I would repeatedly go over the sequences with closed eyes so as to
remember them. I needed to hold the film in my head so that I could plan new sequences and fill in gaps in the ‘story’.

In response to the statement that I could run through the entire sequence with my eyes closed, perceptual psychologist Johan Wagemans has queried whether this is actually possible. In a personal response he writes: ‘I wonder how much of the detail you experience is actually there, if you were really to shut your eyes and draw from memory. In general, for most people, visual experiences, let alone visual memories, are much less detailed than we think. For most people, the richness of visual details is an illusion. I can believe, however, that for you it is different because you have so much more experience at looking for details and remembering them.’

Rethinking it in the light of Johan’s response, I think that what I am rehearsing in my mind is more likely a series of actions, the steps in the animation. I agree with Johan that I don’t think I could redraw a sequence with anything like the same richness of detail of the original,
but I think I could recreate a series of actions that have recently been animated. I would hesitantly suggest that I could redraw the Strelitzia sequence with the flowers emerging, rising up, and releasing pollen, though there would very likely be an economising on the number of actions and the details. I think it is the repeated action of drawing a simplified shape over and over again that I could reproduce, due to the simplified ‘scheme’ I have made of it as it was being animated.

5 Looking : Reflecting : Structuring

The kinds of looking already mentioned are all done in close-up, with my eyes inches away from the drawing. The next kind is about looking from a distance, and it happens when I step back from the drawing. It is a pause in the drawing process. In many artist’s studios there is a chair positioned for good viewing some way back from the working space. Not only does mine afford me a chance to sit down, but it enables me to see the drawing as a whole, which allows for a different kind of looking than the concentrated attention to the drawing surface while working (Figure 6). It has been noted by the British artist Rebecca Fortnum, who researches artists’ writings on studio practice, that ‘many artists spend longer looking at what they have done than making it’ (Fortnum 2006, page 11). In my experience this reflective looking is about getting distance from the drawing so as to analyse what has been happening. It is an attempt to make sense of the evolving work. Only from a distance can I see how the different elements are adding up, how the black mark is distributed on the white paper, what the drawing might be missing. In this slow gazing period I see what I have done that I hadn’t realised I was doing. I notice rhythms developing in the drawing, rhythms that I can exploit to create strong directional vectors around and within the drawing. For instance, when working on the Sarah Jane and Her Ten Children drawing (see Figure 3), I began to see that the right arm and hand of the mother was linking her with the baby drawn underneath, and that together they were starting to set up a directional movement that went from the mother’s face, down her arm, along baby Henry, and across the surface of the drawing. By careful placing of the next few babies this became a circular movement that led back to the mother’s face. It came to add a dynamism in the image by leading the eye around the work.

A second stage of reflective looking occurs when a drawing is finished and joins the others on the studio wall (Figure 7). If the purpose of looking reflectively at one unfinished drawing is to gain understanding of the direction that the drawing is taking, then the purpose of looking at a wall of finished drawings is to try to understand the direction the film is taking. This second stage of reflective looking allows me to see the gaps that need to be addressed and to find the lead into a new drawing.

When making the film Off the Record, I wanted a sequence about the sinking of the SS Mendi, a ship that was carrying South African men to the front and that was rammed by a ‘friendly’ ship in the English Channel with great loss of life (Figure 8). The idea was not to ‘tell’ the story of the sinking but to explore it through a set of images that were suggestions or pointers towards the event. I started with a drawing that would show a scene under water, using a photograph of parts of the wreck of the SS Mendi on the ocean floor that had been collected from a published archaeological project on the shipwreck. To create a feeling of sinking, I thought to make a drawing with a downward movement. I began with the knitting from an earlier drawing and had it unravelling in the water. As the camera panned downwards, objects that were salvaged from the wreck—a knife, a plate, and a clock—were drawn sinking down to the bottom of the sea. As pointers to what was happening, I drew a brass plate with the name of the SS Mendi on it and a postcard image of the ship. To convey some idea of the loss of life that occurred, and to name those men whose deaths were
omitted from the official record, I included some of them in the drawing: the poet-priest Isaac Wauchope-Dyobha (and his pen name Citashe) and three Pondoland chiefs.

Looking at that drawing on the wall of the studio, I began to realise that it was not enough in itself to convey the sense of loss that I was after. Further, it came too directly to the sinking without any sort of lead-in that could prepare the viewer for that event. I decided that I needed a drawing prior to this to suggest a ship being rammed.

I collected a number of possible visual elements that could be used. There were four images of the interior of a ship circa 1914 that were potentially interesting for allowing a setting in which objects could fall, to create the suggestion of the ship being rammed. The first one I tried, of an officer’s pantry with cups hanging from the ceiling and plates on racks, didn’t work out and was discarded. The second one, of a wheelhouse or bridge of a ship, worked better and is the one that was used.

I decided to animate the drawing in a way that would show the ship running normally, and then have it registering a bump or shock, with the magnifying glass spinning in its casing, the speedometer shuddering, and a ball falling from its casing. Then water would fill the cabin (see Figure 9).

With these two drawings finished and on the studio wall, the sequence still seemed to be in need of a narrative element that could create a sense of foreboding, and that sense of loss was not yet enough in evidence. So working backwards again, I made a third drawing that was to go before the Flooded Bridge and the Sinking of the SS Mendi drawings.

I chose to make an image of a letter sent from a man aboard the doomed Mendi to a family member back home in South Africa (Figure 10). The intention was to do two things through this drawing—to create a little twinge of tension that something unpleasant was about to happen to the ship and to draw attention to the relatives who would be left behind—thereby accentuating the sense of loss. To this end the letter was addressed to a fictitious female
relative of Rev. Isaac Wauchope-Dyobha and to the town of King Williamstown, where
Wauchope-Dyobha had lived. On the envelope is the army censor’s stamp of approval,
and it is postmarked two days before to the sinking of the SS Mendi. It is sent from the port of
Plymouth from where the ship set sail. Out of the envelope a postcard of the ship appears,
behind it a number of blank pages become the plate that was salvaged from the wreck. The
postcard image of the ship clouds over as fog starts to fill the sky.

It often works this way, building up a sequence in reverse order. Mostly it is because I
want to make a particular drawing that explores a certain event or idea, and then, when
that is made, I realise that it can’t stand alone but needs an ‘introductory’ drawing or set of
drawings to lead towards it. I’m sure many writers work like this too: their stories are fleshed
out in reverse. In a response to the above comment Johan Wagemans has queried whether I
am conscious of these steps and the arguments for them while I am still in the midst of the
process of trial and error, or whether this is a reconstruction of the history of such a sequence
‘after the fact’? So as to be able to answer his query, I went back to my process journal notes
of 2007 to see what had been written at the time. It seems that I made the first drawing of the
Sinking of the SS Mendi in July, then made five unrelated drawings before returning to the
subject in October with the Flooded Bridge and Letter from the SS Mendi. Days before starting
on the Flooded Bridge drawing there is an entry that reads: ‘The drawing [the project] has got
to a stage where a structure for the film must be decided upon.’ Following which are nine
pages of notes in which I remind myself about my intentions in making the film and explore
possible structuring devices. Shortly thereafter the two drawings are made. The idea for the
Letter drawing appears as a note while I am animating Flooded Bridge.

Thinking about what could or needs to be drawn is also prompted by studying the
drawings on the studio wall. During these periods of sustained scrutiny I find myself
organising and structuring the material so as to build my argument or form my narrative by
deciding which image will be placed next to which other image. Surrounded by the drawings,
I start to get a feel for how the film is taking shape. My concerns are not only about meaning and narrative but also about form, so that there is a variety of form in the film. If there have been a number of very dark drawings, then the next could be lighter. If there are many that are very complex, large, and ‘realistic’, then I might choose to make something more diagrammatic or ‘technical’, small and simple, or something more poetical and less literal. If there are too many ‘iconic’ images, by which I mean full frontal, single images, then I might decide to make a drawing that is more complex spatially, possibly one in which the animation moves more deeply into the space behind or in front of the image. At times I make ‘master’ drawings upon which many animations can be drawn and filmed, such as the Sarah Jane and Her Ten Children drawing (Figure 3); at other times I make more simple drawings intended for only one animation, such as the Strelitzia drawing (Figure 4). Looking at these drawings, I can also see whether too much writing appears, and can space its occurrence.

The next set of observations no longer chronologically documents studio processes but describes changing ways of looking at my work as it is affected by outside influences, such as seeing it next to a drawing by another artist, through the lens of a camera, or as it moves out of the intimacy of the studio into more public arenas. In some of these different stages I experience a sense of estrangement from my own drawings.

6 Looking : Comparing

A while ago I had the experience of seeing my drawings hanging next to the drawings of another artist, and I realised that through comparison, my perception of my own drawings changed. I had recently completed the drawing New Rush and had noted in my journal that

Figure 8. Sinking of the SS Mendi. Drawing for the film Off the Record. Charcoal on paper, 2007, 220x100 cm.
I was pleased with this drawing because it was ‘almost like a “technical” drawing, nothing romantic about it. Could call it “documentary”. And then I saw it next to a drawing by another artist working with the same material and realised I was quite mistaken. In comparison with this other drawing, *New Rush* did seem to have a ‘romantic’ aspect, and the sooty black charcoal marks against the crisp white paper suddenly looked quite sensuous. Far from being ‘technical’ it now seemed quite personal, dreamlike, narrative. More dramatic than I had first thought.
Looking directly at the drawings on the board or on the wall is a constant, but there are times too when I am looking at them through the lens of the camera, and this is, of course, another kind of looking.

I seldom animate an entire drawing but select an area in which an action will occur. This has to be framed as a camera shot, and in this framing of shots I collaborate with a filmmaker. Jean Delbeke is a trained cameraman, director, and editor, and he frames shots very differently to myself. I hadn’t really stopped to think about this—the different way of framing—until I attended the seminar of Chris McManus in Leuven last year where he was talking about the differences in cropping or framing by professional and amateur photographers (McManus et al 2011). I began to realise that Jean’s and my differences in the way we framed the camera shot could be related to our different training. Jean’s training is as a storyteller, filmmaking being the construction of story through narrative fragments. I have no training in filmmaking or in animation. My training is as a visual artist, which is a largely non-narrative field. I even describe my films as non-narrative and yet, anything that is animated is narrative in some sense. When I frame a shot I am thinking in isolated fragments, concerned with the single image. When Jean frames a shot he is thinking dramatically. I tend to include more within the frame—loathe to leave out parts of the drawing that I have spent days preparing. Jean tends to exclude. He is thinking Sequentially, planning the dramatic build-up of a series of narrative fragments.

One fairly simple example of our differences in framing can be seen in this first shot of a sequence in which little sticks were to fly in to form a wooden construction (Figure 11). The image on the left is as I was planning to frame the shot; that on the right, the way Jean re-framed it. I had set it up as more central; he reset it off-centre, zooming out to allow for more space on the side where the sticks were to enter.

Once I have started photographing or filming the drawing, I cannot look again through the viewfinder of the camera for fear of bumping it. I do momentarily see each frame on the back of the camera on the review screen as I activate the shutter. Since I am frequently animating only a small part of a larger drawing, I have to remember where the edges of my frame are.

The drawing of a particular sequence is finished and is transferred to the computer. I watch as the shots download—concentrated little images, each differing minutely from the last. Once in the computer I view them as a screen of ‘contacts’—loads of ‘thumbnail’ images covering the screen. Scrolling up and down, I can see a wave of changes to the drawing—an animation flattened out in space instead of running consecutively in time. I can enlarge the individual images to full screen and then run through them in quick succession to see the
transformations. I do this repeatedly to get a feel for the animation. Then I run through them very slowly to see each small alteration. All the while assessing whether I can consider it successful. Will I keep it? Will I do it again? Will I do it differently? So it is a controlling kind of looking. Then I set the new animated fragment next to the previous fragment and watch how the one action flows into the other, assessing the movements both within and between the sequences.

8 Looking : Listening : Watching

The next stage in making the film also changes the way that I look at it. I hear it for the first time with sound. It is hard to describe how this changes the film for me. The pristine silence in which I seem to have been working all these months is gone. Gone too is the sense that this film exists in my head: it seems to have escaped, and I watch it from now on from a distance. Once the surprise is over, I start to listen attentively to the way the sound affects the flow of images. They resonate differently now, welded to new and unexpected sounds that add nuances and a spatial dimension to the film. The way the work is held together has changed, being driven now as much by the sound as by the transformations in the images.

The film is finished and is shown for the first time in a museum, and this prompts a different kind of looking, a self-indulgent kind of looking. It is the first opportunity I have to experience the work in the setting and on the scale for which it was intended—a scale much larger than the drawings out of which it has been constructed. This change of scale alters my perception of the film. In the studio the drawings felt equal in size to me; our relationship felt one to one. On the computer screen or monitor they were smaller than me. Now the images are larger than myself, and I watch and hear the film as it plays out across the screen in front of me, apart from me. At a film festival I sit in a cinema while my film is being shown. In a museum I stand behind a group looking at the film. In my studio I am aware that a visitor is looking at the drawings on the wall. I find in these moments that I am uncertain, no longer sure of how I see the film or drawings. I am trying to see it as they might see it. It’s an impossible task, of course, but in these moments I am able to step briefly away from my own convictions about the work and to consider how the work is being received. Looking at others looking at my work propels me into a mode of self-reflexivity that is usefully unsettling. Having seen the work so many times before that I have by then become immune to it, I now catch glimpses of it afresh.

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