

On Half-Blind Drawing

Since February I have been using a process of half-blind observational drawing as a way to think about my broader studio practice. I call the process half-blind because it involves looking at the object but not at the paper, which has turned out to mean not taking my eyes off the object, and in certain corresponding ways, not taking my pencil off the paper.

I have found half-blind drawing satisfying because it admits a degree of immediacy between object and page that seems to me lacking in some traditional approaches to observational drawing—approaches based on using a handheld measure like the length of a pencil to gauge a set of relative distances between landmarks identified about the object, then translating and plotting this network of points onto the page for elaborating and thickening into a composed and proportioned image that should resemble to the eye just what the eye sees of the object before it. Such approaches mean constructing, prior to the finished drawing, an invisible apparatus of sight-lines articulating the gap between the object and the eye, and secondarily between the eye and the hand and the page: an apparatus that hardens the network of landmarked points and the features between them, extracts them, shifts them through the air and delivers them onto the paper. What I find unsatisfying is that the apparatus seems to get in the way, or seems to thicken the air and makes that get in the way, with the effect that the object and drawing are bridged by the very same lines of sight that hold them apart. Inhabiting the gap, the pencil darts about in the air like a scalpel or a beak, pecking at the paper rather than burrowing into it the sensitive and spontaneous excavations that for me make drawing with a pencil a compelling thing to do.

Meanwhile drawing half-blind seems to me to seal up the gap between the object and the page and the eye, contracting all this apparatus into one point of contact that sees, measures and marks in a singular probing act which, best of all, is always only the burrowing activity that engrosses me most about pencil work. The procedure is to plant my eye at some point on the object to be drawn and at the same time plant the tip of the pencil at some point on the empty page, which will hitherto refer to the corresponding point on the object. Now paired against their surfaces, the eye begins to root its way across the object's surface as the pencil begins to root its way across the page. The tip of the pencil becomes the tip of the eye—a groping proboscis creeping methodically about the object and seeing only the little dot of its surface presently under description by the point of the pencil lead. This pairing of pencil and eye does the measuring directly: you move your eye you move your pencil, and in this way the eye navigates the page by means of the blind point of the pencil, and drawing proceeds without ever looking down at the page.

Now if I set out to accumulate a half-blind drawing that bears some clear visual resemblance to the object, a number of procedural complications are introduced. Once paired, pencil and eye must move exactly in time with one

another: if either temporarily slows down or speeds up, inconsistencies of scale tend to be introduced. If they both move too quickly details might be missed that likely cannot be revisited for correction later on. There is little chance of amendment because there is no looking at the page—no aerial perspective from which the pencil might swoop and peck at earlier errors or omissions. Every detail must be attended to on the ground, so to speak, at the very time and place it is first encountered. Burrowing grub-like about the surface of the page, the tip of the pencil maintains contact with the object only by the contact it maintains with the paper, so if it is detached from the page, the object and the drawing drop out of sight and cannot be retrieved.

This said, I can sometimes find a brief window of opportunity to adjust marks laid down very recently and very close by. It can be possible to retrace a route just taken provided that the muscles of the hand can remember the last few flexes of its fingers or the last adjustment of its wrist, and is able to repeat this sequence of movements in reverse. The memory of the hand offers a couple of inches of revision—a second or so—and this redress can be put to use strategically. Unless the object is very simple indeed, frequent decisions need making about the route of the proboscis about the surface. At a certain scale the junction of knuckle and fingers, for instance, might comprise five approximate routes short enough that each finger might be traced onto the page with each return trip to the knuckle brief enough and swift enough that the muscle memory of my drawing hand can render it all quite well. It is a different matter at more complex or multiple junctions: where a forearm intersects a collarbone for instance, escalates into a hand of its own and then needs returning to the collarbone to intersect it a little further along, such that the positions and angles of the arm and the remaining length of collarbone look uninterrupted by my foray through the hand and back again. The muscles of my drawing hand cannot to remember a procedure as complex as this so tides of error are be introduced: the form ends up flayed across the page, elements pivoting through one another at every junction. Here a strategic approach might be to crawl along the ground in a series of branching advances and retreats, or to choose the routes that might be salvaged by muscle memory and attend to them together, accepting as inevitable that regions with sparse detail will disorient the pairing of pencil and eye. (There is always the possibility of introducing prostheses—string plumb-lines, blu-tac, the non-drawing hand—to mark up the page or even the object for tactile navigation; but add too much support and you might as well be looking down at the page.)

Drawing continues thus until the object is exhausted of detail, or at least of all detail accessible from the present point of probing. Poor planning might mean regions of the object become cut off, reachable only by air, and have to be omitted. Other regions might be omitted simply because they have been forgotten, their absence only surfacing when the pencil is set down and I finally look at the page.

I am reluctant to admit that when finally I look at the page I want it to look good. I want the drawing to resemble the object, I want to have strategized well, left nothing off, got things mostly in the right places.

Where there are tangles and errors I want them to be of the illuminating kind, giving the object new qualities in some way appropriate to its character rather than diminishing or distracting from it. I am reluctant to admit these preferences because they run counter to the project of half-blind drawing as I have set it out to myself: that the surface of the drawing and the surface of the object are conflated into a singular encounter with the object so undifferentiated that it is finally more of a mutual absorption than an encounter. By this formulation isn't the drawing really just the skin of the encounter, or better the skin of the absorption, a remainder left over in excess of the procedure? Really, isn't the drawing taking place on the surface of the object itself, with the paper just a reachable proxy for touch—a way of sealing the tips of my eyes against the thing they observe, and letting them burrow unqualified against its surface?