



Paper in the Floodplain, and Other Instructions for Drawing

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Abstract

This essay will bring together a body of work that attempts to capture human performance and natural phenomena on paper as a way of drawing and scoring encounters with place. In what ways do place (and land) escape our efforts to represent and capture it, while simultaneously embedding its temporal marks, ciphers, and imprints? In this essay, drawing is a mode of listening and attuning to change and a way to care and collaborate with land, that enables artists to reflect on environmental constraints and shifting landscapes. The drawings in this essay are works that engage with sites in transition - seasonal floodplains, coastal range watersheds, weather patterns, and other material flows, to ask, how can drawing guide movement and pathways toward a way of understanding and caretaking of the land, past, present, and future?

Keywords

drawing, time, material, event score, invisible, paper, performance

1. Introduction

This essay will emphasize the actions and encounters from which drawing emerges as an exploratory indexing of time and place, and as a way of being with and caring for lands and sites of artistic research. I will share two sites where this method has led to overlaps between drawing/performance, artistic research, and stewardship. I will also attempt to situate my practice within a genealogy of artists and groups whose early work emphasized material and phenomena in the new field of expanded drawing in and with place. I find it useful to think about the changes in ethics over the last fifty years, specifically as it relates to care, climate change, and de-colonizing the practice of 'land art'.

John Berger (2007) describes drawing as discovery, an act that allows one to look at the physical world in front of them while conjuring past observations and mem-

ories. Drawing will "lead you on to see," bringing "you closer to the object", until finally you are "inside it" (Berger, 2007). Merleau-Ponty (2005) adds that perception is a relational experience of being in the world and moving through space, in which, "nothing is more difficult than to know precisely what we see" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005).

2. Land / Place: Rural Alchemy Workshop

Encounters with one site in particular have led to ongoing discoveries of material and phenomena. Rural Alchemy Workshop (R.A.W.)¹ is a site, a collective, and project of artist-researcher Karin Bolender. The R.A.W. operates in a pasture on land in the Oregon Coastal Range. At the heart of this pasture is a small seasonal pond, which fills up and flows out into the Marys River Watershed in the winter, and then by mid-summer, evaporates into a bowl of dry ground (figure 1).

1 - Bolender, K. <https://ruralalchemyworkshop.com>



Figure 1. Three states of the pond at Rural Alchemy Workshop.



Figure 2. As the water in the pond evaporates, the muddy edges, along with any frog egg masses, dry out. This raw material becomes an artifact of the pond's cyclical life.

Over cyclical visits and collaborations across several years, the R.A.W. and its pond have taken on a central role as a dynamic site of reflection and inquiry into time, material, and ways of being with and inhabiting places. On one visit in May, frogs inhabited a lush pond. Just two months later, as the water evaporated, we noticed frogspawn², or egg masses, along the muddy edges (Fig-

ure 2). This “frogspawn” dried into a crackling paper-like material, what I am calling ‘Frog Paper,’ that could be loosened and peeled from the edge of the pond. By recognizing material created from non-human systems, the material takes on a role as a collaborator. The site of the pond becomes activated to artistic practice by “bringing matter to life” (Munroe, 1994).

2 - Frogspawn refers to the gelatinous egg clusters placed in shallow water with vegetation. Egg masses protect tadpoles as they hatch.

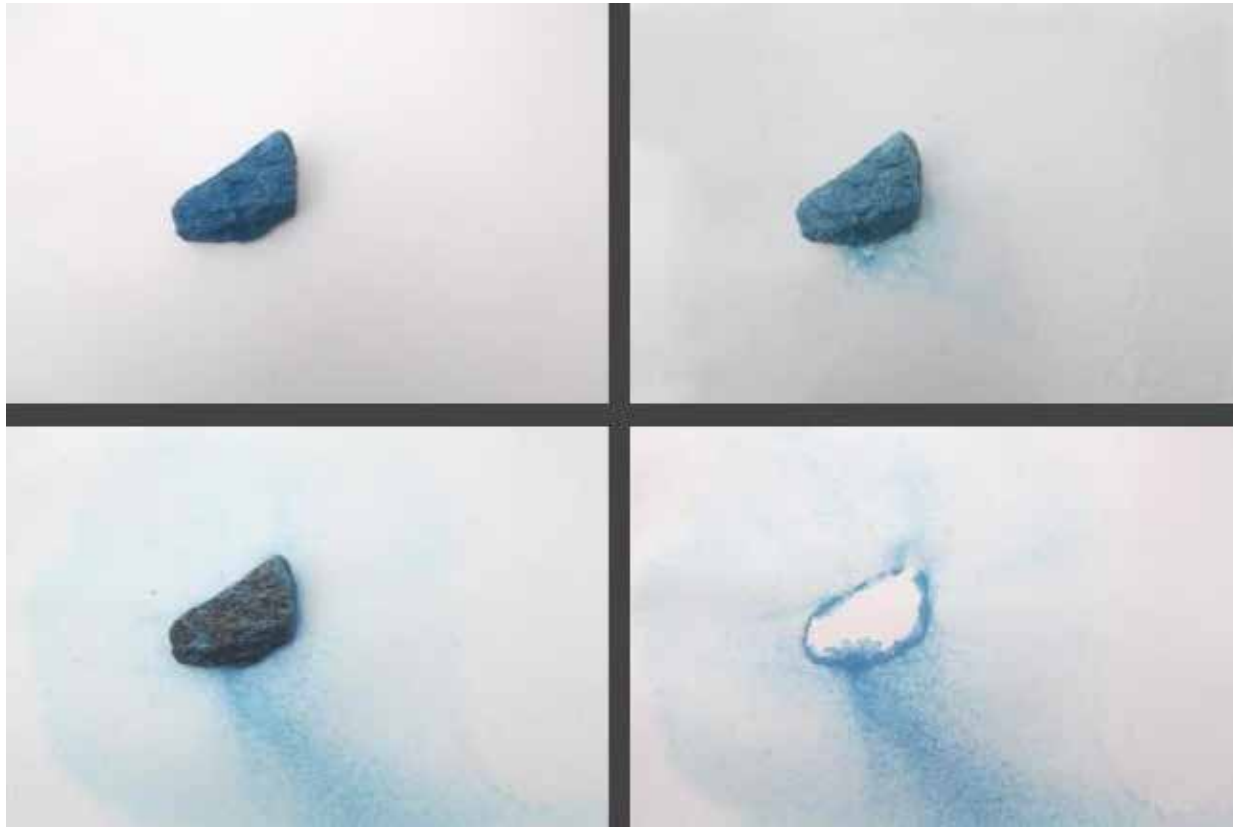


Figure 3. *A Rock Pretends to be a Cloud*, 2021, gouache, rock, paper, rain.

In 1956, artist Yoshihara Jiro of the Gutai Group published the Gutai Art Manifesto that defined art as a site of creation, and material, or matter, as the form that records the process of its creation. For the Gutai group, and the Fluxus artists who followed, art should be a collaboration between action and material, what Yoshihara referred to as “human spirit” and “matter” (Munroe, 1994). The act of drawing, or the performance of drawing, embodies phenomena or material rather than seeking to represent it as a subject.

An example can be seen in *Work* (1955) by Shiraga Fujiko. *Work* comprises three large sheets of raw Japanese paper that the artist has torn and creased. By exposing both the characteristics of the paper and the human gestures of the hand and body, Shiraga allows the “matter” to remain “intact,” to tell “a story” and even “cry out” (Munroe, 1994).

3. A rock pretends to be a cloud

Materials tell stories. In *A Rock Pretends to be a Cloud* (2021), drawing is a time-based format in which the event that generates the marks is as important as the marks themselves. On a cloudy day, I painted a desert rock with a blue gouache and placed the rock on a sheet of paper and waited for the rain to wash the paint off the rock and onto the paper (Figure 3).

This simple action asks the critical question: how do we make visible, the invisible phenomena that exists between event, artist, and material? Richard Long, whose lines made by walking make the act of walking a visible, recorded event, “as an imprint, a form or shape, a physical fact both ‘inside’ and added to the landscape...” (Roelstraete, 2010). Long’s durational performances that make drawings in the landscape ask us to consider ‘when’ in making the artwork does ‘drawing’ take place.

Kirsty Badenoch (2024) asks,

“Is there a clue in this intentional temporality both of the act of drawing and the distinct separation of the recording of it, for how to approach landscape drawing as something more temporal? Landscape is in its nature a set of activities, and requires a time-based approach.” (149)

Long’s drawings (or sculptures or performances) made by walking have also been discussed in relationship, or counter to, ‘land art’ or ‘earthworks.’ Lucy Lippard (2014) prefers the term “land use” realizing that “land use” could be “a more realistic representation for the too easily romanticized notion of ‘land’ and ‘earth’ as in landscape, land art, and earthworks”, and more “focused on what we learn from living in place than what we see when we look” at a place. (Lippard, 2014).

In fact, land use at the R.A.W. asks us to ‘see’ what we can’t see by merely looking at the pasture or pond as a landscape. In working with sites in transition over seasons and often rapidly changing atmospheric events where material and matter such as water, shadows, green grass, earth cracks and soil shifts, mud and dried clay, are impermanent, I have learned lessons about attempting to capture these tenuous states in some kind of representational image or object. They flicker in states of visibility and chance, unfinished. The pond is never the same pond when it returns in the fall, and its matter will never contain the exact same elements more than once. And at some point in the future, the pond may not fill with water at all.³

4. An Event Score for the Invisible

During the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown, Bolender invited me and my son (then age 6) to participate in a project titled, *Welcome to the Secretome*⁴ at the R.A.W. *Welcome to the Secretome* invites ecological exploration, mapping, and storytelling. Because we were meeting during lockdown, my son and Karin’s child could not play together in the same place at the same time. This constraint led to experimental ways to think about play, time, and mapping space.

What ensued in the pasture was an improvised performance of ‘play’ enacted as my son explored the R.A.W. pasture. His playful choreography within the pasture on that spring day resulted in a written and graphic score for Karin’s daughter to interpret after we left (figure 4). The score became embedded with temporal meanings, as ‘play’ occurred on shifting planes of the visible and invisible.

Brooke Carlson (2016) asks, “If drawing is the trace of an action, and action is transitory, could drawing then exist as a perception of time in space?” The actions in the *Secretome*, or pasture, determined by ‘being-in-the-world’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2005), created a kind of spatial array (figure 5). Choreographer Annie-B Parson (2022) describes an array as a spatial pattern measuring time and distance between things like bodies in a dance or trees in a forest, crafting “our paths and proximities.” She notices other patterns and “dances” between places, objects, and bodies from everyday life; she writes, “We move like nature, curve and spiral like shells and cats and snakes, we lunge and dive and bob like wind and lions and waves, we crawl and duck and jump like frogs and drops of water...(Parson, 2022). The score was an array, an invitation into the pasture, and a drawing that fills in the invisible, inviting new and creative ways to explore a familiar site.

3 - It is important to note that the pond at the R.A.W. should not exist in a natural watershed. It is human made for human purposes.

4 - *Welcome to the Secretome* (2017-present) “is a site-specific, performative, participatory workshop that playfully seeks hidden ‘treasures and untold stories in dirty, microbilicious meetings and exchanges across different bodies-in-places.” Rural Alchemy Workshop, <https://ruralalchemy.com/portfolio/welcome-to-the-secretome/>

A Score for the Secretome



Begin at the gate that is closed but not locked.	Look to the snag and follow it up to the sky. Wait for a hawk or maybe an eagle to fly over. Listen to bird songs.
Climb on the dirt pile and stand on the edge until your heels sink in and you slide off.	Point out the insects the frog may like to eat.
Peer into the pile of sticks and look for a tunnel entrance or hideout.	Talk to the salamander, beetles, and tadpoles.
Look toward the grassy hill and run up, through the grass. Fall down at the top and exclaim, Water!	Run around to the shady side of the pond to the water holes. There is a salamander buried in the mud, marked by a stick and 3 flowers. Add more flowers if you want.
Follow the spring to the pond.	Run through the daisies, past the snag toward the fence where the Donkeys are watching. Pick the petals from your wet shoe.
Follow the spring from the pond to the fence, jumping over the gully (canyon) as you go. Count how many jumps it takes to travel the length of the drainage.	Walk back through the sog, leaving footprints.
Put your finger in the running water to see how cold or warm the water is.	Catch the sun reflecting on the water.
Place a blade of grass in the water to see if the water is strong enough to move it.	Catch the wind that has blown open the gate while you walk back.
Run back to the pond to search for the green frog.	End
Sit on the edge of the pond and softly call for the green frog. Be still and wait as it comes so close.	May 5, 2020

Figure 4: A Score for the Secretome.

In late winter, we revisited the R.A.W. with the score. On this visit, the score became a register of place and material from the past, or perhaps the future. Where were the shadows, the deep lines carved by trickling water, the sounds of frogs? Reading an event score from spring affirmed that drawing, as a way of mapping and visualizing bodily movement through space, creates a kind of archive, registering both memory and time. We planted the score in the mud of the pond as a way of marking and adding to that archive (figure 6).

5. Can material tell time?

The marks and traces of mud and water on the score conjured another critical question: in what ways does material engagement index and register memory and experience of place? I first harvested mud from the R.A.W. pond in 2022 as a way of digging into the site's hidden scope, and then realized that the mud I collected at one moment will carry a different index than mud collected at another time or season.



Figure 5: Digital Drawing layered over video, mapping an array, and tracing movement through the pasture for The Secretome Score.



Figure 6: The handwritten score secured in the pond with a stick.



Figure 7: Drawing experiments, or mud sticks, with wild clay from the R.A.W.

If the material can carry time, then the site holds and occupies all of the past, present, and future. Soil composition is “ever-changing, with no end point at which one can say the soil is finished” (Wallander, 2014). Material has the potential for continuous looping and building, where any quest for ‘knowing’ is an impossible experiment. This

idea became the impetus for making ‘mud sticks’ with the pond mud/wild clay (figure 7). Some of these ‘mud sticks’ were then fired in an experimental kiln firing, allowing the small impurities like rocks, to remain in the clay rather than processing them out (figure 7).



Figure 8: A wand made of wild clay guides movements and pathways offered by place.



Figure 9: Participants at a R.A.W. hosted gathering share drawings and processes.

Artists like Michelle Stuart have explored matter such as earth or dirt to record “histories” about place and material (Lippard, 2014). Rebecca Solnit writes about dirt as “literally the common denominator of our experience, and it means many things” (Solnit, 2003). When I look at Stuart’s rubbings of earth from different sites, I question how we care and attend to land, culture, and place. Further, how do our bodily engagements with materials guide how we approach drawing? Can materials become prompts and pathways for how to move through and perceive place? How do we listen to their stories?

6. How can prompts for drawing guide movement and pathways toward understanding and caretaking of land?

At a R.A.W. gathering, I offered the fired clay wands, along with the Secretome Score, as a prompt for “seeing” the pond and the pasture (figure 8). We spent time wandering the site, immersed in the landscape of the pasture, and were drawn to the particularities of seasonal elements, signs, and constraints (figure 9).



Figure 10: Experiments with wild clay.

Exposed soil and erosion from a clear cut (left) and harvested wild clay (middle and right).



Figure 11: A bucket for collecting mud from the pond. Mud and Reed Canary Grasses were mixed and allowed to decompose over the summer to use as raw material to make a kind of crude papyrus clay for future drawings.

In 2024, I was among a group of artists invited to Newledo Exploration Hub to experience a ten-acre pasture located approximately five miles inland from the Central Oregon Coast. In addition to being a major floodplain, nationally registered wetlands, and past cattle pasture for a large dairy farm, the acreage is slated to undergo major environmental restoration for the ocean linked Beaver Creek that flows through the area.⁵ A walk up the hillside above the floodplain to a neighboring tree farm that was clear cut in 2018 revealed exposed and disrupted clay soils⁶ 6 years later (figure10).

Working in this site of transition allowed us to consider what temporal marks were presently there, and what marks will disappear through seasonal cycles and future restoration. We were invited to interact with the theme of transition and flux, as we engaged with all aspects of the site, from the invasive grasses along the creek, to the decommissioned dairy barn, to the pasture's own constructed pond to capture flood waters (figure 11).

5 - Cousino, N. <https://newledohub.org> The name "Newledo" comes from the two towns in between which the land sits: Coastal Newport and the logging town of Toledo.

6 - Clear cutting not only destroys more than is needed to harvest, but the aggressive removal method also disrupts ground cover and soil health by releasing nutrients and carbon stored in the soil. (Griffiths, R.P. 2013).



Figure 12: Video still from *Paper in the Floodplain*, 2024.

Marks of the tide:

eel grass

time

sand

rock

force

the bodies of shore crabs

Figure 13: From *12 Tides in Tillamook Bay*, 2021

7. Paper in the floodplain: making the invisible visible

The icon of drawing paper in the landscape suggests image, marks, imprints, or even text. Artist Marlene Creates, in her series of photographs titled, *Paper, Stones, Water* (1979 - 1985), attempts to call attention to “unmediated processes of nature” (Garvey, 2017). Creates says, “Paper has a beautiful fragility...It is vulnerable and sensitive to any information that is acted on it: the waves, the rain, the wind, the forms underneath. The very deep past of stone becomes concealed by a very fragile present” (Creates, 2017). Garvey (2017) also notes that Creates’

interventions with paper render the artist present, just as “to perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

Paper placed in the landscape does take on the form, contours, and marks of these places, but more importantly, by resisting representational outcomes, the paper becomes a focal point for deep listening and waiting (figure 12). In placing the paper in different ecosystems, I am inviting non-human systems within those sites to become part of the process (figure 13).



Figure 14: Paper in the Tide, Orcas Island, Washington, USA



Figure 15: The paper waits to document seasonal and cyclical transitions: paper in the watershed at the R.A.W before and after the pond overflows.

The paper becomes a listening or focal station, or a presence, where the material comes to life in the phenomenological space between the artist and site/paper. The paper may be left until it is no longer recognizable, or for just a short time enough to allow chance and natural ele-

ments to 'draw' 'sculpt' or alter the paper (figure 14). The altered paper can also be thought of as a score, whereby the sensitivity of the paper records what 'happens' and documents movements and gestures (figure 15).



Figure 16: How to make a drawing in the grass, *Paper in the Floodplain*, 2024

In the floodplain, with grass waving in the wind, I stood holding onto paper, blowing like it too wanted to be tall grass. It occurred to me that I should let the wind carry the paper. As it crossed the plain, I paid attention to the way it moved through and above the grass, landing to pause before moving on again (figure 16). This is what I wrote in my sketchbook during this event:

Paper is an observation/listening station in a drying/evaporating marsh.

*Hold the paper in the wind over
the tall grasses (waves, hair),
let it go and follow -
the paper will pause.*

The grass will hold/form the paper.

*Something invisible is left
on the paper, a message, a cipher, a mark.*

I don't need to know what it is.

The tall grasses are for hiding.

The wind covers the sound of movement. I lost the paper in the grass.

Things shift quickly in the summer, becoming wet/dry, visible/invisible.

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