DISTANCE AND DRAWINGS

Four letters from a correspondence between James Elkins and John Berger

December 2003, Cork, Ireland.

Dear John Berger,

For me drawing is a ghost subject. Once, drawing was indispensable to art itself; that is how Michelangelo understood it, under the name *disegno*. Later, in the French Academy and the many academies that followed, drawing was the foundation of whatever could be taught. Now drawing exists in a limbo. At the Art Institute of Chicago, where I teach half the year, drawing is still required of all students, but it has not been given the official standing of a Department. Perhaps that's because instructors can't bring themselves to acknowledge that drawing is still central to what they do, whether it is painting or video. Or maybe they don't want to come to terms with the fact that nothing has taken drawing's place as the foundation of art instruction.

That is part of the ghostly nature of drawing. The other part comes from the sixteenth century, when drawing was first valued as something more than a useful skill in the preparation of paintings and sculpture. A light drawing, which would never have attracted much attention, became a 'first thought' (a *primo pensiero* as Charles De Tolnay called it) – the invaluable record of the encounter of a moving, thinking hand with the mesmerizing space of potential forms that is simply called 'a blank sheet of paper'. By the nineteenth century drawing had become the name of that encounter, and in so doing it escaped forever from the possibility that it could be taught.

All the intricate philosophy of marks, signs, and traces plays out in drawing. Drawing is the place where blindness, touch, and resemblance become visible, and it is the site of the most sensitive of negotiations between the hand, the eye, and the mind. Much as I love writing, it is drawing that demonstrates

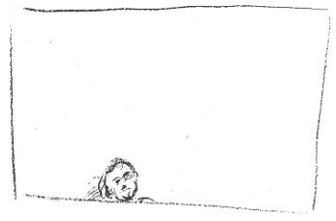
to me just how much can be said with a single apparently careless mark:

Letters in written words are like rows of little straightjackets in comparison with the abundant feeling of meaning in that mark.

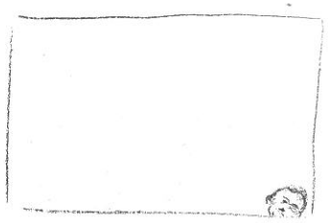
I have begun by casting my eye over the distant hazy horizons of drawing, to see how far it might extend. I suppose that makes me feel comfortable sitting here and attending to just one part of drawing. I have the illusion that I know where I am and where we might go if we begin walking in this enormous landscape.

For this first letter, I propose a subject that has been on my mind for some time. I am interested in moments when drawings go wrong, and in a particular kind of wrong turn that causes the drawn image to *shrink*. Let me illustrate with a story. When I was a young art student, before I turned to history, I earned some money one year by assisting a professor of drawing at the University of Chicago. The subject of his class was portrait drawing. At the end of the semester the professor, asked one of the students to tack all of his portrait drawings to the walls of the classroom so they could be compared.

This student - I've forgotten his name – was not specializing in art: he was a 'pre-med' student, aiming for medical school. Happily, in the American system, students of medicine and science often take arts courses, and this class was this student's only foray into drawing before he turned to a life of stethoscopes and operating rooms. He had produced a very odd body of work. All semester long he had been struggling to keep the model's face front and center in his drawings. Hard as he tried, he could not put the model's nose in the middle of the page. His sheets were almost empty, and his portraits were shrivelled like shrunken heads. Their chins rested on the bottom edge of the paper like this:



Some of the faces he drew were not even centered, but were sliding off to one side, as if the bottom edge of the paper were the surface of the ocean and the little heads were being carried off by a current, and slowly sinking –



The professor praised the student, saying his work was tremendous. 'Very expressive, really wonderful, sad, poignant, intense' or words to that effect. I was only the teaching assistant, so I didn't contradict him. But I thought something else was happening. That student had not tossed those heads down onto the margin of the paper in order to create an expressive effect. He had been earnestly trying to capture the faces of the live models, and he had almost completely failed.

Sometimes in the intense effort to *see*, the object in front of you starts to shrink. You make an armature of lines, trying to catch the key points, but the object wriggles free. You make a scaffolding to hold it in place, and it slips out. You hold your pencil in the clichéd gesture, but the object can't be measured. In this situation, the longer you look, the more distant and insubstantial the object becomes, and in the end it may even slip down to the bottom of the page and drift away.

This is what I propose to begin our conversation about drawing, a subject that could easily fill the volume of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*. Why do some objects sink away from their bulk and solidity, and collapse like deflated balloons? Or, to say it the other way around: what kind of attention causes the object to shrink?

There is a famous example here, of course – I'm sure you've guessed it – a name that I mean to conjure, a spirit we can bring into the conversation: Giacometti.

All the best,
Jim Elkins.

Quincy, 18/1/04

Dear James,

I like your suggestion that drawing is a ghost subject – exactly for the reasons you give and also because, before drawing evolved into a "questioning" of something visibly there, it was a way of addressing the absent, of making the absent appear. As the act of drawing is now understood (or misunderstood) it leads us historically back to the Renaissance. Drawing, as I understand it, is however much older, indeed it is far older than any written language or architecture. It is as old as song. If the art of the Palaeolithic caves isn't a form of drawing – what else can we call it? There was a tradition of drawing – sometimes engraving into rock surfaces, sometimes drawing in colour on them – which lasted, as far as we can guess, for about twenty thousand years – that's to say the tradition lasted for 40 times the distance that separates us from the Renaissance. And some of those first drawings are as *accomplished* as anything done since, no?

What you say about drawing being the place where blindness, touch and resemblance come together is a moving description of what happened in those caves.

Why is it important to insist upon this – as I'm doing? It's because it makes us realize that *drawing* is far more than a subject once taught in art-schools, or a type of object that collectors began to be interested in during the 17th century, drawing is as fundamental to the energy which makes us human as singing and dancing.

Having said this, we are no closer to understanding what drawing is, but at least we have a better idea of the scale of its mystery.

My hunch is that drawing is a manual activity whose aim is to abolish the principle of Disappearance. (Or - to put it another

way – to turn appearances and disappearances into a game that is more serious than life.)

What makes a drawing shrink? Has it got something to do with its parts not contributing to a *whole*? And often what leads to this happening is a shift (unnoticed at the time by the drawer) of the drawing's viewpoint, of its chosen distance from what it is conjuring up?

This said, the shrinking of a drawing is not necessarily once and for all. Drawing is a ceaseless process of correction. It proceeds by corrected errors.

I like your story about the medical student. What leaps to my mind is that his drawings were not about the heads he was supposed to be drawing, but about something altogether different, which probably he wasn't recognizing. Drawings without interest but in rebellion! Is that possible?

This pen with which I'm writing is the one with which I draw. And there are times, like tonight, when it won't flow and demands a bath or a hand moving differently. All drawings are a collaboration, like most circus-acts.

I'd like to ask you a question. It's about tension. No drawing can work without this quality. It comes, I suspect, from the resistance to being drawn (that) something is offering to the drawing. It's to do with a kind of friction or antagonism. Do you have any hunches about the nature of this resistance?

With my best wishes,
John.

January 29th 2004, Cork, Ireland.

Dear John,

Let's pursue ghosts, and – as you say – the 'principle of their Disappearance'.

A friend of mine, the art historian David Summers, likes to think of art as a remedy for the 'defect of distance'. (That's a phrase he got from the 16th century theorist Gabrielle Paleotti.) Art objects, David says, are things at hand: they provide some comfort for the sad fact that as we go on through life, the people we love and the places we have visited recede from our lives, and then from our memories.

Art gives us 'real metaphors', concrete instances of absent people and distant places. (David thinks metaphors in writing are just pale figures for what takes place, thanks to art, in lived human spaces.) Art is therefore the most powerful cure for the defect of distance, and the most fundamental reminder of our capacity to find what is lost and bring it back where we can – almost – touch it.

This is especially true of pictures, even though it may seem they are a step removed from the raw substance of sculpture. Pictures only offer 'virtual space', but David makes a point of the fact that 'virtual' comes from *virtus*, power: the imaginary space of drawing is all the more powerful because it is both present to the eye and – nearly – absent to the touch.

But can the defect of distance be corrected? Can a real metaphor ever be wholly real?

As I draw, my pencil touches the paper, but so does my hand. (That does not happen in painting.) My curled fingers and the pad of my palm rest on the paper, and move gently across it, echoing the point of the pencil, which is the only thing that actually touches the image I am trying to conjure. If I am making a large drawing, my hand doesn't touch the paper, but then I tend to put my other hand on the paper, sometimes flat

against it, as if I needed to remind myself where it is. Unless I rub the drawing with my finger, I never quite touch the lines I am drawing. And even if I touch the drawing itself, my finger does not know the difference between a drawn line and the blank paper. The line I touch might represent the curve of the model's arm, or cheek: it wouldn't matter, my finger wouldn't be able to tell. That is the crucial sadness of drawing: it is unsurpassably close to the object, but always separated from it. (Painting has a skin, a mass, and an oily texture, and it insinuates itself into my own skin.)

Drawing bends my thoughts toward the nearly indescribable distance between the model and the motions of my hand – or should I say between the movements of my eyes as they pass over the model, and the sweep of my hand as it moves across the paper? Or the feel of the model (as I imagine it) and the texture of the paper as it slides under my hand?

So I agree, drawing works to abolish the principle of Disappearance, but it never can, and instead it turns appearance and disappearance 'into a game': I think your idea is exactly right. It's an odd game, though, because it can never be won, or wholly controlled, or adequately understood.

The game is intricate enough with its slant rhymes between the feel of the model in my mind and the feel of the paper. It is made more difficult because drawn lines have the power to remake my own imagination. Every line I draw reforms the figure on the paper, and at the same time it redraws the image in my mind. And what is more, the drawn line redraws the *model*, because it changes my capacity to perceive.

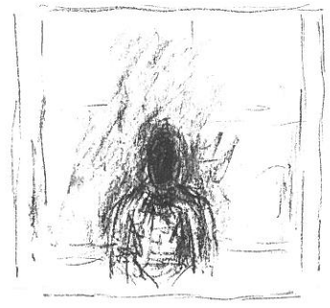
As I draw, the model becomes defective. The image in my mind is marred by the marks I put on paper. And so because a drawing cannot quite be touched, because it shifts when I try to fix it on paper, because it does not simply transcribe something in the world, because it can never bring back what I once loved – because of all that, drawing is an intense expression of the defect of distance.

This is why I am interested in drawings that shrink. Let me take up my treacherous example. When David Sylvester asked Giacometti about the thinness of the sculptures he had made without a model, Giacometti said 'they get narrow despite myself'. But then added, 'from life, they do this less'. Models put up resistance to the thinning gaze, as if they were resisting Giacometti's willingness to let them go.

I am weaving here, putting your question of tension together with mine of shrinking.

In the Art Institute of Chicago we have one of the paintings Giacometti did of Isaka Yanaihara. From a distance it appears to be a half-length portrait against a milky background. The smooth paint of the background turns out to be made of many translucent layers, intended to cover over outlines that Giacometti rejected, always in favour of a smaller and smaller head.

Giacometti was fastidious about the placement of the easel, the canvas, and Yanaihara's chair, and he put little red blocks of clay under the stretcher to keep the canvas at a precise angle. None of that helped him anchor the figure: still it kept shrinking. The principle of its shrinking is clear in the dozen preparatory drawings, because there many of the rejected lines remain visible. What mattered was the relation between the head and the borders of the drawing. That's why the drawings have drawn borders with lines scattered like matchsticks inside them –



(Forgive my little pastiche.)

As I imagine it Giacometti would have drawn a short line marking the side of Yanaihara's face, and then a line to mark the frame of the scene. Perhaps, working quickly, he fixed three or four such lines at once. But then, looking back and forth between his marks and their points of reference in the room, he saw discrepancies. Problems. The face was somehow too large. So he made new marks, squaring off a smaller head. And so Yanaihara tilted and shrank, and sank down toward the bottom of the frame. As he shrank down, he also shrank *away*: back in space, away in time and perhaps in imagination, away from firm memory and toward insecure recollection. At some point Giacometti abandoned the drawing and began another.

I find all this very complex, and hardly noticed in the literature. (With exceptions; Sylvester is one.) It matters that these drawings are extremely tense: as you say, a sign that the object is resisting. In Yanaihara's case there was good reason to resist, given their odd friendship, predicated on philosophy, and especially given that at some point in their relationship Yanaihara began an affair with Giacometti's wife.

Is this the way into the ghostly life of drawings? I hope so because the subject is tremendously important and very little understood.

All the best,

Jim.

Quincy. 17/2/04

Dear James,

I wonder. I'm not sure about the "defect of distance". As a concept it's sharp and witty – it's a good reply! But I don't think one can build on it or with it, because basically it's a half-baked term. Without distance (space) there would be nothing!

If we think about loss and its pains, we come face to face with absence. But absence does not necessarily mean distance. Absence only means not visibly here. (It leaves open the question of being *invisibly* here.)

One can look at Giacometti in another way. His so-called "shrunken" figures are not on the point of disappearing or leaving. On the contrary, they are more irreductably there than many other figures. Reduced to an essence they are essentially there. (One of the reasons why they are haunting.)

There was a conversation with Alberto G. which went something like this:

"The sculptures, where should they go when they leave the studio? To a museum?"

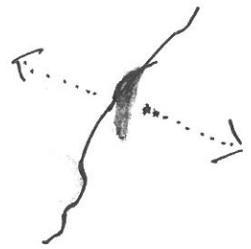
"No, bury them in the earth, like that they'll be a bridge between the living and the dead."

We can see this in another way. The more the figures have "shrunk", the more the space around them is charged with their presence. The spatial charge of a presence (a model, a tree, a mountain, some fruit) was Alberto G.'s primary pre-occupation right from the beginning. It's visible in his drawings throughout his life.

His figures inhabit invisibly the space around them. And this is why they have, in a sense, no contours, no frontiers.

If what surrounds a figure is "background", the figure is bound to be dead. What surrounds a figure is "the receptivity" of the

figure's presence and energy. This is why a line in a drawing, if it is tense, is always radiating, pushing and pulling in two opposite directions. No?



When I spoke of the resistance of material objects or living beings, I was thinking of the struggle necessary for their physical survival. A building resists the force of gravity, a tree resists the wind, an animal resists the cold, stones resist water. Finally the building falls, the tree is uprooted, the animal dies, the stones are reduced to sand. This is a law of the real but not of the virtual. To draw something well is to touch its resistance.

In my own very small experience the being or thing, which I'm drawing, never becomes defective, but often the drawing does. The drawing fails to embrace the presence.

We are agreed that drawing is an activity whose aim is to recognize and perhaps reconcile an apparent contradiction: that between presence and absence. (This is the sense of our exchanges.) All the little points I've been making earlier only concern nuances. And now maybe it's good to return to what is more essential.

To draw is to involve what will no longer be there when the drawing is looked at later. Drawing is about a company which, beyond or outside the drawing, will very quickly or eventually become invisible. This is why drawings whilst embracing, or trying to embrace, a presence, concern absence. But what is absent is where? Far away and lost in the distance? Or here but (apart from the drawing) invisible? I believe in the latter.

Now you might ask why I refer all the while to drawing, rather than painting, sculpture, videos or installations.

And I would reply: because the other media possess a corporality that drawing lacks. And consequently drawing is a

purer expression of what we are talking about: what we have physically seen and has physically disappeared is now where?

It seems to me that drawings – whether they are Giacometti's "shrunken" figures or Rembrandt's exaggeratedly square ones – do not lament distance, but reply with a single word: HERE. And this is not arbitrary. It has nothing to do with a *conceit* called Drawing. It refers to the essential structure of the human spirit – without which there would be no recognition of distance! Drawings offer hospitality to an invisible company which is with us.

With my best wishes,

John.