

DP Henry: Drawing with Machines, with Spontaneous Exhilaration

J Chuhan, 2016

Several years since my initial fortuitous encounter with the drawings of DP Henry I gaze again at his works by kind invitation of Elaine O'Hanrahan.

The rainy wintry afternoon suffuses a pale light, creating delicate soft tonal gradations. Mostly created in the 1960s, Henry's drawings resonate with such subtle granular tonalities to works with dramatically stark contrasts including sheer black and white, and with lines from straight to seemingly endless gyrations. The images suggest a parallel reality, an abstraction from his process of working, especially the use of machines as drawing implements. The works record mechanical and human movements, encompassing complexities of forms that may appear computer generated within a nexus of deliberation and accident, raising questions concerning the accidental, human will, intelligence and imagination. The interaction between the human and machines, especially computer and photographic based technologies, is increasingly central to contemporary life, overloaded with an excess of information in an era whose defining feature has been described as supermodern by the philosopher Marc Auge¹ writing about the contemporary excess of time, ego, and space (including virtual space).

Henry's drawings create architectural, sculptural forms situated within an ambiguous space – space that is unspecific and could be interpreted as immense and immersive, while the actual scale of the paper the works are created on has the intimacy of being the span of his hand or arm, or a machine or part of a machine of domestic scale. This reading of space as macro and micro offers open-ended metaphorical speculation, bringing to mind all kinds of physical things, from biology such as microbes and from astrophysics such as atomic particles and the stars in our galaxy and the universe beyond. Also psychological states are suggested, emotional responses to complexity presented as the clarity of forms, exquisitely balanced in space.

The implied movement of forms traversing space is a vital feature of the works, the sense of relative speeds in the creation of lines, rapid and mechanical, that leave different kinds of traces according to the drawing materials being used, in some cases juxtaposed with deliberate hand drawn lines made with a ruler. The fluidity of interactions within complex geometries alludes to organic, sensuous and figural forms within architectural and theatrical spaces, as in the works of contemporary architect Zaha Hadid. The rare embellishment in some works by hand-drawn images of human forms reminds me of the visionary paintings of William Blake. These may be considered eccentric in the context of a purist modernist abstraction, whilst current post-modernist sensibilities may better facilitate sympathetic connections with the aims of the Surrealists and their experiments with automatic writing and drawing to reveal the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious, the notionally accidental and the deliberate.

The spin paintings by Damian Hirst, created by using a spin machine rely on chance spontaneity that contrasts with the carefully controlled application of flat colour in his spot series, both exploring notions of painting in a mechanical manner. The images derived from the spins are controlled only by the artist's selection of colours and the spinning movement of the machine. There is a sense of sheer joy in their making, documenting the accelerating speed and velocity that affects paint, with relative degrees of control and loss of control in the production of visual imagery. This exhilaration in the making also appears to be a fundamental trigger for Henry's creating works that richly and experimentally explore multiple permutations produced by machines that work at different speeds with different kinds of movement.

Artists have a dialogue with each other through the network of influences from seeing work by other artists, and Henry would have been keenly aware of international developments in art, especially art with affinity to his own interests. The potentiality contained in the drawings towards works in other media and disciplines includes the sculptural, if considering sculptures by artists such as Naum Gabo and kinetic works by artists such as Jean Tinguely. The viewer also makes connections, and I am struck by the analogies between Henry's works and the work of many other artists, including the internationally influential Russian Constructivists. Interestingly, the Constructivists were an important influence, among others, in the work of the

modernist Indian artist Nasreen Mohamedi, whose first solo exhibition in the UK was staged at Tate Liverpool in 2014. Her exquisitely intricate black and white line drawings have a strong resonance with Henry's drawings. As well as movements in the fine arts, there are other cultural contexts for Henry's artwork, such as his extensive travel including to the USA, and European post-war art and design. Henry's drawings reflect popular 1960's machine generated minimalist designs, corresponding to the 1960's *zeitgeist* of technological optimism and non-conformist individualism.

Similarly to Mohamedi's art, Henry's drawings use the qualities of light and of darkness, as twin components explored in the marks he creates, and in his choice of materials to work with – white lines on dark colour paper and vice-versa. Henry's work elicits musings on change, on the ever increasing scientific understanding of light, moving in straight lines and sound waves moving in curvilinear lines, and of many other kinds of waves such as gravitational waves, extending our knowledge of things such as black holes – knowledge that is difficult to grasp and visualise, knowledge which may be enhanced by contemplation of creativity in art forms.

Manchester, where Henry produced most of his drawings, has a rich history of innovation in computer science including development of the world's first stored-program computer. In 2016 Manchester Art Gallery staged an exhibition exploring machines and the imitation of life. The exhibition title, *The Imitation Game* was inspired by the Turing Test devised by Alan Turing², introduced by him in an article in 1950 while working at the University of Manchester (where Henry also taught for many years). The Turing Test considered a computer's ability to imitate human thought, and Alan Turing posed the question 'Can machines think?... are there imaginable computers that would do well in the imitation game?' These speculations link with Henry's explorations, and this exhibition presented intriguing contemporary responses by artists including Lynn Hershman Leeson, Paul Granjon and Tove Kjellmark.

It remains true that computers cannot think, they cannot pass the Turing's test. Yet artificial intelligence increases exponentially, as computers become more sophisticated, as in the area of robotics and neuro science where brain-inspired

machines are able to initiate neuron spikes in biological bodies to enable movement of artificial prosthetic limbs - harking to the science-fiction of films such as the *Terminator* franchise. Silicon brains are good at computing, faster at solving puzzles and dealing with big data. However wet, organic brains remain faster at virtually all the things that humans engage with such as fully recognising each other's faces. Scientific exploration continues to be in discourse with art-making including through using machine and photographic technologies – a discourse in which Henry's work continues to make a distinct contribution. This includes his work significantly contributing to exhibitions such as the seminal *Cybernetic Serendipity* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (1968), curated by Jasia Reichardt, and recent exhibitions of his work including at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester (2011).

We know the universe is expanding, and Henry's drawings seem connected to how the universe works on a molecular level. In his writings on telematics Roy Ascott³ cites the coalescing of 'multiple and relative realities of the observable universe' into a consciousness of ultimate singular realities in verse by the medieval Bengali poet Chandidas:

Nothing is far,
everything is near:
The Universe
And the painting on the wall.

Ancient Indian philosophical notions consider sound to be primordial in the beginning of the universe, connected to the concept of zero. The painter Wassily Kandinsky was interested in synaesthesia and aimed to make visual analogies to music, to slow and fast sequences, crescendos, rhythms, melody – terms that apply to Henry's art that has pattern, a balancing of marks, diagonals, circular forms, arcs and ellipses, seemingly receding or emerging in space, suggesting multiplicities of movement and time, light and shadows, sensitively attuned to the intricacies of nature, the visible world and the world of the mind.

- 1 Auge, M. (1995) *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, Verso, London & New York
- 2 Turing, A. M. (1950) *Computing Machinery and Intelligence* in *Mind*, Oxford University Press, pp. 433-460
- 3 Ascott, R. (2000) *Art, Technology, Consciousness: Mind@large*, Intellect Books, London, p.79

J Chuhan

Jagjit (aka Jai) Chuhan is a British-Indian artist, and part-time Professor at Liverpool John Moores University. Jai's paintings of isolated figures in shifting architectural spaces reflect feminism, the transcultural and interplay between the personal and the political. Her work has been exhibited internationally and is in collections including Arts Council Collection and Tate Archive.

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