

The Edge of Our Thinking



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Postgraduate Art and Design

*Selected papers from the research student
conference in art and design*

Foreword

Welcome to *The Edge of Our Thinking: Research in Art and Design*. This collection of papers arises from the inaugural multi-disciplinary, student-led conference held at the Royal College of Art in November 2011. The event attracted considerable attention from young researchers from across the UK and beyond. Its hallmark was energy, enthusiasm and originality. The organisers created a platform for new thinking in research across art, design and humanities. A feature of the two days was the range of presentation modes. Contributors felt strongly that along with what might be considered the 'conventional' delivery in the lecture theatre or seminar room, workshops would encourage interactive exchange and dialogue, suiting the intentions of much practice-led research. For two days, the Royal College of Art was a hive of activity, humming with an exchange now captured in this volume.

Even a cursory look at the subjects reveals that new research in art and design continues to question conventional boundaries. It is carried out in the studio, the workshop, or the library. It engages users and explores interfaces, both physical and virtual. Researchers in art and design remain in constant dialogue with other disciplines, but this is not a one-way street. Significantly, the findings of art and design can have impact on research being undertaken in science and technology, philosophy and aesthetics, as well as the social sciences.

Our thanks go to all participants and in particular to Florian Schmidt, Editor and Nanette Hoogslag, Designer, as well as to Martina Margetts, Senior Research Tutor, who led the project. *The Edge of our Thinking* marks the start of a biannual event at the RCA and we will look forward to the second conference in the series. For now, however, we congratulate all contributors to this volume on their success and for taking us to 'the edge'.

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**Drawing at the Critical Edge:
a systemic-functional semiotic approach
to the analysis of visual work**

This illustrated paper introduces a method of analysing drawings which facilitates - 'pushes the limits of' - the critical analysis of visual work in general. An innovative critical framework is developed and explained, adapted from the systemic-functional visual semiotics pioneered by Michael O'Toole in his 2011 book, 'The Language of Displayed Art'. The critical framework is presented in the form of a matrix chart, and its efficacy demonstrated through the analysis of drawings made by one of the authors. This paper is an extended and elaborated version of a presentation made to the conference.

From a materialist point of view, drawings are produced through the selection and combination of particular surfaces, drawing tools, and the marks resulting from their interaction. But semiotically speaking both artists and viewers of drawings take up positions, adopt attitudes and points of view which are influenced by their positions within their sets of social relations. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the drawings under discussion.

Such an ideological positioning involves a definite way of using signs, and a structured sensibility (an aesthetic) both grounded in a particular system of social relations. How the

artist selects and combines the compositional elements of the drawing, and how the viewer relates to that drawing are both functions of the social contexts in which the work is (re) produced.

To simply say that drawings reflect social structure, (or in this case, the social relations between artist, model and viewer) is too passive: drawing not only expresses the social context but is also part of a more complex dialectic in which drawings *actively symbolise* the social system, thus producing as well as being produced by it.

Variation in ways of drawing is the symbolic

expression of variation in social relationships. Drawing systems are produced within society, and help to produce social form in their turn. This dialectical relationship is what the sociolinguist Michael Halliday (1978:183) discusses in the phrase 'social semiotic'.

From this social semiotic perspective, any social context may be understood as a temporary construct which may be mapped in terms of three parameters which Halliday (1978:33) calls *Field*, *Tenor*, and *Mode*:

Parameters of Social Context	Function of Drawing Through which Social Situation is Realised
<i>Field</i>	<i>Representational Function</i>
<i>Tenor</i>	<i>Interpersonal Function</i>
<i>Mode</i>	<i>Compositional Function</i>

Field of social process - what is going on at the time of production of the drawing.

Tenor of social relationships - the type of drawing we produce varies according to the level of formality, of technicality, of need for clarity of communication, etc. It is the role relationships - the drawer, the subject matter, the viewer and their interrelationships - that affect the variations.

Mode of symbolic interaction - in the sense that how we draw, and with which particular medium, varies with our attitude: poetic, clinically objective, doodling, etc.

Any code of communication (language, dress, drawing ...) has three main functions:

1. To represent some aspect of our experiences of the world.
2. To both express our attitude, mood regarding

our experience, and to position the receiver in terms of mood and attitude towards that which is being represented.

3. Thirdly to structure these two into a coherent, perceptible form.

These functions may be termed the *representational*, the *interpersonal*, and the *compositional*.

Placing the parameters of social context into a chart format illustrates how *field*, *tenor*, and *mode* are systematically related to the functions of the semiotic system.

In fact, those meanings that constitute our understanding of any particular social situation are made visible through the selection and combination of elements within the semiotic system. Such a model which theorises how the functions of drawing operate within a social context relates specific choices to specific social contexts. We are thus able to imbue the relationship between code and social structure with dialectic resonances.

Figure 1

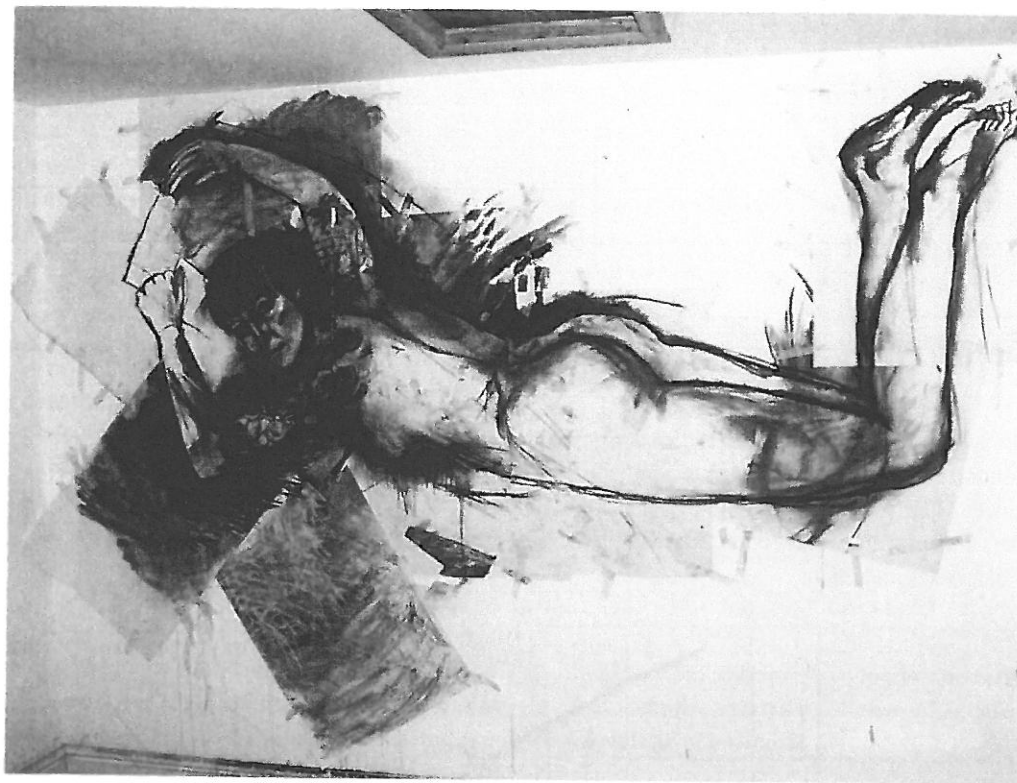
Figure 1 illustrates *Emma; Extended Study* a multi-perspective drawing produced as part of Roberts' research practice. The social context of this drawing at its execution can be explained in relation to Halliday's three variable parameters of social context:

Field: A private studio drawing session.

Tenor: Female model and female artist interact at close quarters, with the artist shifting viewing position at regular intervals.

Mode: The interaction is realised visually through a series of charcoal drawings taped together, unframed and displayed wall-mounted, in a small studio gallery.

It is worth emphasising here that each of these parameters is loaded with semiotic potential and represents a series of selective choices on the part of the artist. A private studio space



All drawings by Amanda Roberts. Figure 1 Emma; Extended Study. 2011. Charcoal on paper

is a very different working environment to a public life drawing-room, a consideration of the environment in which drawings have been produced can enhance and expand implicated meanings. The representation of a life-model – and the particular choice of a female model – generates socially and culturally specific associations.

The female nude is central to Roberts' research interests. That semiotics offers an appropriate strategy for examining the implications of the choice of life-model is illustrated by Wendy Steiner (2010) in *The Real Real Thing: The Model in the Mirror of Art* where she uses a semiotic adaptation of Roman Jakobson's (1958) theory identifying six functions of communication in order to examine the relationships between the life-model, the drawing, the drawer and the viewer. Jakobson's seminal work also underpins Halliday's, Michael O'Toole's (2011) and our own semiotic approach demonstrated in this paper.

Figure 2

This shows *The Systemic-Functional Semiotic Model* which maps the three functions of drawing to the matrix of systems of choices available to the drawer and is based on Michael O'Toole's (2011) format for analysing paintings. It should be noted that each term within each cell of the matrix – for example, Theme – represents the whole range of available selections embraced by the term itself: every theme available to the artist (or indeed for the viewer's interpretation). The range of available choices implied by each of the terms within the matrix is what Halliday meant by *system*: a Hallidayian *system* represents a range of available choices. Hence the term *Systemic-Functional* semiotics.

In practice the application of the semiotic model is more flexible than the layout of the chart implies. Interpretations and their implications need not occur in an ordered or linear way. While the chart offers a structure within which these connections can be separated and categorised, the images examined can offer

LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT	REPRESENTATION	INTERPERSONAL	COMPOSITIONAL
<i>The Drawing as Displayed</i>	Theme Narrative Genre	Attitude, modality Rhythm/focal points Intimate/Monumental Public/Private Dynamic/Static	Overall format and size Gestalt relations: horizontals, verticals, diagonals Framing/Mounting Systems of geometry Range of colors
<i>Episodes of the Drawing</i>	Actions events supporting central narrative	Orientation of viewer Perspective/non-perspective Gaze/Eye-work Modality: range of moods/attitudes conditioned by Compositional choices	Relative position in drawing Interplay of figures Contrasts of tones/textures
<i>Combinations of Marks (Sub-assemblies)</i>	Direction Transparency/Opacity Atmosphere Time of day	Viewer distance Force Heavy/Light Weight Flatness/illusions of Depth	Relative positions of marks Relative size of marks Division of picture-plane: ratios, angles Overlap of shapes/tones
<i>Individual Marks</i>	Effects of light on surfaces and media (air, water) in the environment	Hard/soft Matt/gloss Wet/dry Indices of maker's movements	Position within picture-plane Texture of surface Medium Size relative to picture-plane

Figure 2 Systemic-Functional Semiotic Model

several different interlinked observations, associations and responses simultaneously. Materialist or denotative readings of how and what the drawing communicates are necessarily combined with connotative understandings of what is communicated.

As the chart is especially suited to in-depth extended analysis of art work the remainder of the paper focuses on the efficiency of the chart's matrix to facilitate, instigate and create dialogues between the viewer and viewed works. The drawings referenced are sourced from a body of work, produced as a component of Roberts' research, collectively titled *The Extended Drawing Series*. The term Extended Drawing refers to a specific multiple perspective method, developed as a means of retaining observational figurative representation and the contained form of the figure, without the rigidity of one point perspective.

A Systemic-Functional Analysis of the Extended Drawings

The initial impact of the *Extended Drawings* series can be analysed through the *Compositional* function at the level of engagement labelled *Drawing as Displayed*, and relates to their large scale. In relation to the *Representational* function at the same level of engagement the drawing represents a single figure. The represented figure is so large that, viewed within the context of the studio, it dominates the viewing space. The absence of any background – other than areas of blocked tonal differentiations that operate as a ground against which the form of the body is defined – combined with the unframed edges of the work, counteracts the concept of the drawing as an autonomous space; instead the figure inhabits the space within which it is exhibited. So narrative interplay exists, not between figures depicted within a pictorial construction, but between the represented figure and the viewer within a shared space.

The large scale of the drawings within the con

text of a confined space restricts the viewer's choice of positions for close-ups from a variety of viewpoints, thus physically positioning the viewer, which in turn affects their mood and attitude towards the subject-matter. This arrangement also provides the viewer with opportunities to compare the perception of pictures with the perception of our four-dimensional world; we view these drawings, as we view the world, from a moving path of observation. This reality of the perceptual process is implicit in these drawings within their confined space, rather than obscured in the conventions of a single point perspective projection system of geometry. The small studio does not afford far-off viewing positions and encourages the viewer to move along or around the work, considering it from variable viewpoints. This corresponds to the working practice of the artist in producing the drawings, and also to conventional associations of the female nude with the 'viewer active/model passive'. This is contradicted by the size of the works which allows the represented figure to physically dominate the viewing space.

Figure 3

The range of choices under the term *Modality* within the *Interpersonal* function at the level of the *Drawing as Displayed* is inextricably linked to the viewer's own preconceptions and expectations. *Tonya: Elevated Perspective* is a representation of a woman lying naked on the floor. The drawing is also displayed on the floor, resulting in an elevation of the viewer's position. The viewer is positioned as an active participant, invited to adjust their viewing position, in contrast to the vulnerability of the model's passive, static pose. The power relationship between the depicted form and the viewer is explicit: the viewer looks down onto the represented body. How the viewer interprets this positioning is liable to differ from individual to individual. While producing the drawing Tonya was peaceful and self-

contained, but this might not be interpreted in the image produced. The figure could be open to sexual objectification, the model's eyes are averted from the viewer, the position she lies in could be interpreted as sexually responsive, but the figure is also vulnerable and exposed. Emotions generated will depend on the viewer's personal and particularised response to being placed in this relational position to the represented figure.

The permutations of potential meanings to do with gender/power relations, both between artist and model and between the drawing and its viewer, may well stimulate the viewer to reconsider their individual preconceptions about, and stances towards, the possible permutations of those relations.

The paradoxical treatment of the theme of containment within the *Extended Drawings* re-occurs at every level of semiotic analysis. Containment and the frame as they relate to the female nude carry connotations of objectification, restricting the female body inside a box where it can be looked upon as an object. In the *Extended Drawings* the female body is unrestricted by predetermined compositional requirements and the represented figure dictates the edges of the pictorial plane. The compositional decision *not* to frame, from the range of choices (that Halliday termed a *system*) labelled in the chart, as the system of *Framing/Mounting*, carries significant semiotic potential; the figure is contained within a compositional whole, but not contained within a frame, and in some instances areas of the drawing extend out of the paper and continue directly onto the gallery wall.

Above: Figure 3 Tonya; *Elevated Perspective*. 2009
Charcoal on Paper.
Below: Figure 4 Tonya; *Extended Perspective*
(Reconstruction Series)

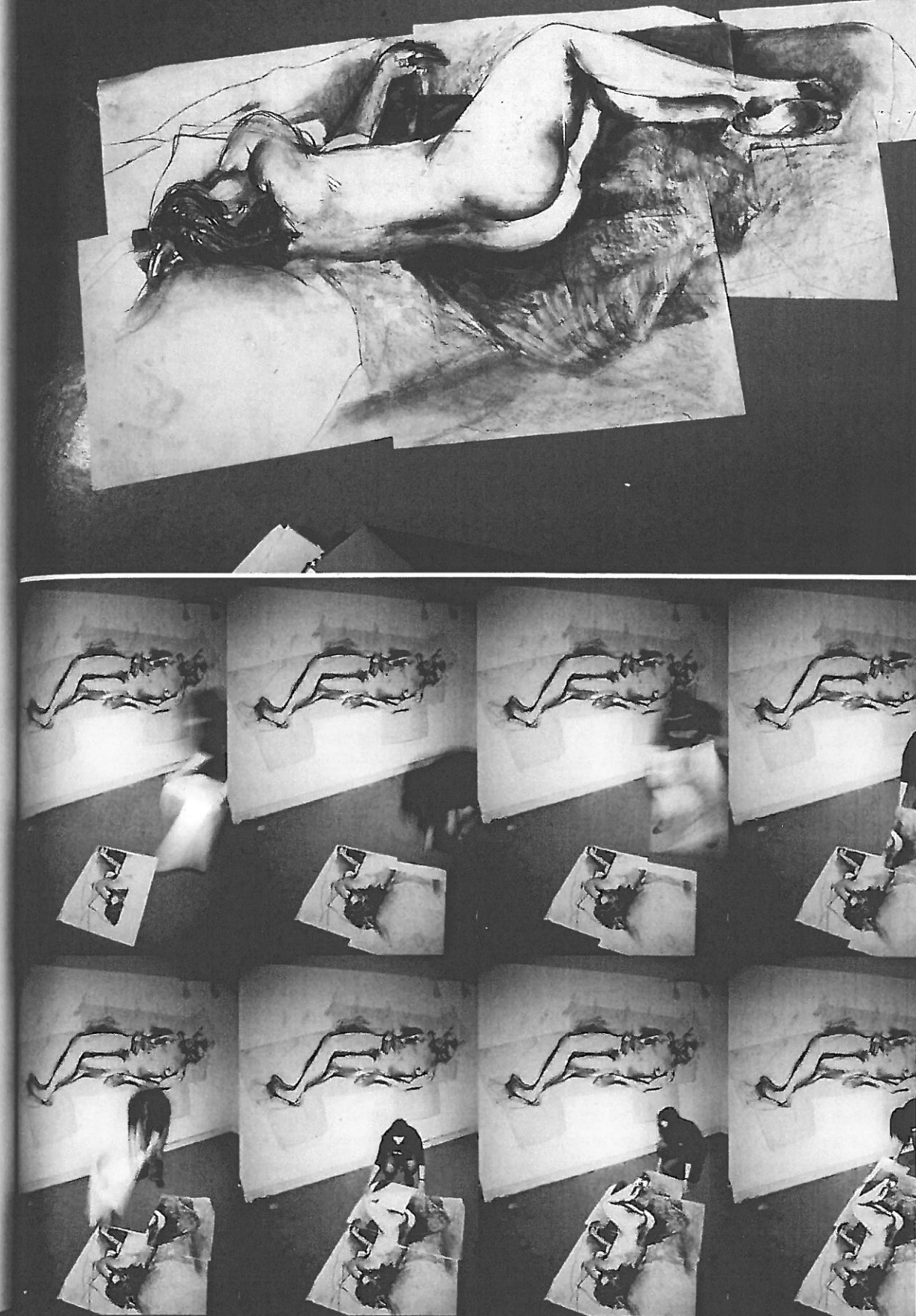


Figure 4

Conversely the multiple perspective system, which lends itself to fragmentation, is contained within a unified single form but the drawings, extending over numerous sheets of paper, lend themselves to fragmentation and reassembly.

Figure 5

The reconstruction of the drawings for display (the *Representational* function at the level of engagement *Episodes of the Drawing*) mirrors the drawings' construction process and results in a re-containment, or a repair of the fragmented form. Within the conventions of Western art the female nude is idealised, absolved from chaos or mess, and the concept of the female form as contained is associated with the conventions of the idealised female nude, where the female body is presented as hygienic and sexually available, but unthreatening. The *Extended Drawings* are not pristine or clean. At the level of engagement concerned with the *Individual Marks*, the dusty, grubby quality of the charcoal is transparently displayed, the drawings have not been cleaned, but smudges and even footprints form an intrinsic component of the mark making. Footprints directly evoke the position and the proximity of the artist in relation to the model. Although these were not made intentionally, the decision to leave them visible is a conscious decision on the part of the artist. The footprints reference the position of the artist in relation to the model. A boot print next to flesh is weighted with semiotic potential, and the visual link this makes to earlier works by the same artist reinforces their inclusion as deliberate and considered.

This rejection of the sanitised and the hygienic does not reference the abject. The drawings retain an aesthetic appeal and these elements of the mark making are integrated into the gestural and embodied quality of the works. The paradoxical treatment of the thematic

preoccupation 'containment' identified in the drawing is mirrored in the mark making. At the level of the *Drawing as Displayed* the figure is represented as contained, as a mass, a solid structure, but at the level of engagement *Combination of Marks (Sub-Assemblies)*, many of the lines are fragmented and disjointed.

Ambiguities and contradictions identified in the *Extended Drawings* can be seen as reflecting the concerns and the interests of the artist. Feminist theorists have established that historically representations of the female nude are produced by men for a presumably male audience. (Clark 1960; Pollock 1988; Broude and Garrard 1982). As such, figurative representations of the female body are susceptible to an objectifying and voyeuristic male gaze. The position of a female artist, working in the life drawing-room, producing figurative representations of another woman, remains unfixated and undefined. Although not a predetermined intention of the artist, to illustrate these concerns in the *Extended Drawing* series, the semiotic analysis reveals and articulates that the ambiguities and tensions of the artist's position are embodied in works produced and are present at all levels of semiotic engagement.

In conclusion, an application of the systemic-functional semiotic model is shown to enhance and extend meanings generated by drawings. This paper has demonstrated the rich potential of gestural drawing as a means of exploring social relations at the heart of all representational art: the relations between subject-matter, (in this case the life-model), artist and viewer. A model of systemic-functional semiotics such as the one featured here might well inform the future practice of those interested in extending the potential meanings of representational drawing in general, and can be utilised as a valuable analytical and evaluative component of visual analysis and as a tool for planning practical development.



Figure 5 Pippa; *Reclining Kick*. 2011. Charcoal on paper.

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