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**Drawing the Apocalypse:
a biological imperative**

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how drawing has re-negotiated its position in the digital age. One of the objectives of this research is to create a system whereby work is created that takes advantage of the qualities of the drawing medium, and contribute to the traditions, philosophies and histories of the medium. This research includes studio and theoretical enquiry made in tandem. Studio practice is discussed in terms of lived meta-narrative and autobiography, cipher, text, sequence, eroticism and material concerns

KEYWORDS

drawing
eroticism
apocalypse
comics
violence
superhero
Bataille

On September 11, 2001, two aircraft were flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, an event that would be one of the defining moments of the following decade. Thousands of citizens made digital photographs, captures and videos on cameras and mobile phones as the attack unfolded, documenting the happenings from a multitude of angles. Despite these thousands of now-famous images made documenting this event, only one series of art works were made describing the event as it happened. The artist, Gary Panter, went to the rooftop of his Brooklyn studio and made five drawings in his sketchbook. The drawings depict the towers on fire after the first impact, the second tower falling in a cloud of dust and smoke, and three drawings of the immediate aftermath. Each drawing is annotated with quickly-scrawled notes, describing the scene, the date, the time.

The act of feverishly documenting the events of September 11 illustrates the theoretical thrust of this paper. While the world watched this unfolding catastrophe through thousands of camera-eyes, it was through a maelstrom of media sensation- instant, indistinguishable and ultimately disposable vision. In direct contrast with this, five drawings were made that illicit responses not just through the reactions to the event, but through the artist's responses to these events. Although the act of drawing is not instantaneous in the

same sense a digital photograph is, it is far more economical in terms of creating an art work, pre-fitted, so to speak, with a completely unique voice that comes unedited and unfiltered through the intuitive hand onto paper, its final form. Digital imagery depicting the events of September 11 are still being sourced and referenced by artists today, over a decade later, whereas Panter's drawings, made in minutes, from life, remain vital, immediate and unique as the day they were made. This paper attempts to explain contemporary drawing's divergence from the frictionless, disembodied digital experience in the context of the sensual, multiplicitous, visceral experience of mark making, and thereby eroticism, inherent in the medium.

Recent centuries have presented the medium of drawing with many propositions that would move the medium away from classicism and into the popular arts. While drawing's past included many high-art aspirations during the renaissance and impressionist eras, drawing was subsumed into commercial art through lithography and then offset printing, which would cement drawing as one of the pre-eminent commercial tools of the age. This would soon be displaced again by the digital revolution. The digital impacted on drawing in two ways- it freed the artist from the chains of tradition, of drawing as preliminary design or compositional tool. This emancipation from commercial art allowed drawing to evolve into an autonomous medium. My research explores the shifting nature of drawing, and thereby also subjectivity and the subjective agency of the artist. Drawing is therefore defined as a process of unrepeatability – a process that, while no longer necessary for picture making, I posit as an essential medium in terms of transgression of the to the techno-capitalist digital status quo.

This tension is explored through the different methods of my practice, in a dynamic of violable-inviolable that is explored on the level of the personal-biological, and in terms of materiality and transcendence. This tension is also explored through a plethora of characters, or ciphers, that inhabit the meta-autobiography that is my studio work. These ciphers are presented through a variety of 'good' drawing, 'bad' drawing- a sublimation or distancing of an identifying style becomes a style itself. These ciphers are taken from a variety of sources, but for the purposes of this presentation, I will be focusing primarily upon ciphers drawn from popular culture, which are then reassigned roles and functions according to my own intentions for the work. In these terms, the narrative that runs through my work is both personal and specific to me, but open enough to be interpreted by outsiders. This research is very much contextualized through my perspective as a practicing studio artist.

A significant event that has shaped my own practice was my diagnosis and subsequent treatment for Leukaemia ten years ago. The further into treatment, the more vital I found it to describe the experience, sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically. I found most literature written by and for cancer sufferers almost unbearable, bursting at the seams with clumsy homespun rhetoric and self-help positivity. Much more interesting to me was the operatic melodrama of superhero comics, a genre I had not been actively engaged with for several years. The constant struggle and end-of-the-world turmoil resonated strongly with my own experiences with treatment. Mad scientists, genetic manipulation, cybernetics, mutation, massive physical traumas, chemicals and radio action had somehow perversely become my every day. Leukaemia itself is represented by metaphor- after all, how does one depict an illness which has no obvious physical signs? An altered, post-nuclear version of Australia is a potent symbol for the post-chemo body, particularly considering the impending ecological apocalypse the world now faces.

The idea of the creation of a new Australian post-colonial mythology is one that greatly appeals to me. The idea of Australia as a country of mystery and power seems to be disappearing as the country is gentrified. Usually this environment is post-apocalyptic, a ravaged outback that has been scorched and hammered, not unlike my, post-chemo self. It is a raw physical and psychological space that needs to be repaired, reassembled and reconfigured, much like the violent cyborg. Interesting then that the ciphers that find themselves in these ravaged environs are most often engaged in acts of violence; an imagined reclamation, and re-writing, of the year of treatment. The metaphor of the body as territory, or specifically a battleground, has had a great influence on my post-illness studio practice, and recently I have been using 'landscape', or 'widescreen' format paper for its' cinematic qualities. The violent cyborg, itself colonized by technology, wanders through, searching for answers. To rationalize why I am writing about drawing, I must explain why I draw, and explaining why I draw is like explaining why I eat or draw breath. It is a state of being. It is my life, and always has been. This, for me, has always been the most difficult part of academia- explaining the propensity to draw, when it is so deeply ingrained in my being, as if there was a need to justify, or validate the practice. The way I see drawing is that of a biological imperative. Drawing is a constant impulse which, because of its obsessiveness as a medium, often threatens my social life, sleeping habits, and even relationships. My practice has become less about over-arching goals and messages and more about applying a system of image-making that allows a personal, intuitive methodology that filters, processes and analyses events real and imagined to each work, and each work then becomes a part of a

broader whole. If this system is operating properly, the studio process becomes fluid and efficient, compulsive, compulsive, consuming... and erotic.

Georges Bataille's *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* explores the functions and manifestations of eroticism including, notably, war, transcendence, ritual, cannibalism, taboo and death, and serves this research as a rigorous investigation into the very nature of eroticism, and its uniqueness to humans. Bataille rejects the notion of god, but finds a kind of replacement in his base-materialism, a base matter, which destabilizes foundations, disrupting the opposition of high and low. Thus, Bataille's use of base, erotic and tactile symbols are particularly applicable to the physical elements of the act of drawing, which this research poses as a sensual and very human act, capable of exploring the cerebral and the physical simultaneously. I see this as a discourse for the exploration of the ciphers that operate within my work. Bataille links eroticism to death, highlighting the taboos associated with sensuality and the orgasm as akin to a final act, leading to that last moment before nothingness and the horror of decomposition (1).

Concluding *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag called for an 'erotics of art' (2). Certainly superhero comics, a lifelong source of imagery and mythology to me, as well as my own gateway into the fine arts, has been contributing to an erotics of art almost since the form's inception. The doomed love triangle of Superman, Lois Lane and Clark Kent; Wonder Woman's overt bondage themes; Batman and Robin's inappropriate friendship and domestic situation. The Batman and Robin 'situation' is a particular favourite of mine. The act of dressing in exotic, and often quite erotic outfits, and beating similarly-attired people senseless is quite a sexual act, as Alan Moore made so clear in his comic book series *The Watchmen* (1985). Perhaps this is why I return to the the genre so often- it has a certain level of optimism, yet dresses over something quite bleak, even ugly, with colourful spandex, even if we are unaware of it. On paper, Batman's quest isn't so different from that of a clansman: a white man perceives a wrongdoing, dons an outrageous costume with a pointy cowl, and sets out to right the perceived wrongdoing. Equating Batman with a clansman is a disquieting comparison considering the character's popularity across a plethora of media. These elements that contradict the hero's marketable ethos- truth, justice and the American way, etc. – are mixed in with a whole lot of fringe material, usually associated with eroticism or violence.

Perhaps it speaks more of my own studio fascinations and fetishizations, but this kind of debate over Batman's queerness is precisely the type of discussion that the superhero needs to engender more overtly. This is not unheard of in mainstream superhero comics – J.H Williams III and W. Haden Blackman's 2011 iteration of *Batwoman* is a notable example –

but it remains somewhat rare. Gender and identity, however, are two seemingly endless starting points for contemporary art, and have been for some decades. Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) contextualized the cyborg as a particularly challenging and potentially game-changing symbol onto which could be projected ideas of queerness, race and violence, 'uncoupled from organic reproduction' (3). Batman, like many superheroes that wear a costume, which is a form of prosthesis with both practical and symbolic qualities, fits well within Haraway's definition of the cyborg, as well as Anne Allison's definition of the violent cyborg.

Popular culture, and particularly comic books are heavily populated by violent cyborgs. As Allison makes clear in her (wonderfully titled) essay 'Cyborg Violence: Bursting Borders and Bodies with Queer Machines', violent cyborgs are killed – and in that way reborn – through violence, which they then perpetually re-enact upon their enemies (4). Self-expression, empowerment and revenge through violence is a distinctly cynical philosophy but it does ring true. Violent cyborgs are also categorized as being inherently queer, not through sexuality so much as challenging gender stereotypes through their otherness and partial separation from the status quo with their prostheses and violent births. Cyborgs are a contemporary cipher with which to discuss the impacts on digital technologies upon everyday life. Ipods, phones and other 'devices' have become inseparable from the human day-to-day experience, to say nothing of cosmetic and medical prostheses now available.

In stark contrast to the violent and fetishized operettas of superhero comics, Andrew Wyeth's oeuvre is by and large safe, unchallenging and quiet. It is in this context that his so-called 'Helga' works were such a revelation, which were kept secret until 1986, even from his own wife and the husband of the model from whom the paintings were named, Helga Testorf. The works, which comprised some 247 paintings and drawings from life, all depict Helga over a period of years. While the works are still somewhat conservative, at least in the Bataillian sense of eroticism, they are undoubtably erotic by definition, revealing a somewhat obsessive side to the seemingly tepid Wyeth, rendered with exquisite care, suggesting a deeper longing that is difficult to convey through Batman's sublimated homosexuality and violent queerness.

Los Angeles-based Zak Smith is the urban opposite of the rural Wyeth. Smith finds his creed in an obsession with popular culture. A prolific draftsman, Smith generates drawings that form a kind critical mass of 'stuff', a detritus similar to the piles of toys, comic books, film posters, music magazines, and the women that pose among it for the artist.

Smith's career took an unconventional turn when he jokingly remarked to a porn filmmaker that instead of payment for his work appearing in a film he could 'fuck some girls in a movie he's doing for *Hustler*' (5). To Smith's surprise, the filmmaker agreed, and the artist has appeared, with the pseudonym *Zak Sabbath*, in several 'alternative' porn films, reportedly donating his fee to charity. This 'day job' in turn feeds his studio practice and inspired Smith's first book *We Did Porn: Memoir and Drawings*, a detailed account of both the LA porn and art worlds, which are unnervingly similar. Smith's work exhibits the Bataillan notions of eroticism through Plethora, particularly in series of work such as *One Picture for Each Page of Thomas Pynchon's Novel Gravity's Rainbow*, which comprises of 755 drawings, each an interpretation of a page of the novel, in sequence.

This notion of eroticism and fetishization through multiplicity is not unlike Bataille's ideas of Plethora, which he likens to a deeply-ingrained sense, or duty, that one must 'survive' through continuity – that is, reproduction – of species, 'surviving' through one's offspring. Bataille is fast to point out, however, that the individual does not actually survive the continuity. The same can be said of culture, particularly in relation to advertising and so-called 'cultural production'. Returning to the drawings, this plethora of cultural refuse, this plethora of images, is indeed selected in a somewhat promiscuous manner, in that beyond an initial, and generally intuitive, response to image, the selection of material is indiscriminate, lacking standards of selection; casual, random and confused. Elements of disparate sources of culture and humanity mingle together in the drawings. What one would have referred to as high and low exist side by side. This not only fuses cultures through the drawing process, but instigates an assimilation, homage or pastiche, of their visual and aesthetic elements as well. 'Good drawing' and 'bad drawing' is employed to capture these tensions of content and form. Raymond Pettibon's work is been interesting to me on several levels, both in theme and execution, which mirror my own studio practice in several ways; Pettibon is prolific, and works on many drawings at once, yet they all fit into a greater whole. The artist divides these into thematic sets for display. Pettibon often works in black and white and uses text in his work from other sources. This text operates with the image in unexpected ways, juxtaposing often differing sources of literature, with imagery which are usually sourced from TV and film. And importantly, Pettibon uses real and fictional characters from popular culture in his work. He does this without the cool detachment of Pop Art, but rather the sincerity of a child making drawings of their favourite cartoon characters. Pettibon adopts a complex codex of images, appropriated from different sources, but filtered through his distinctive drawing style, ending up somewhere between comic book and film noir in

appearance. These characters have thematic and historic weight. These characters include Batman, Superman, Gumby, Pokey, Ronald Reagan, Babe Ruth and Charles Manson, and are usually iconic of American culture, and come with an existing metahistory that Pettibon can explore, pay homage to or subvert.

When Batman appears, he is a literal and somewhat flabby shadow of his former self. Coming upon Robin in Homoerotic flagrante, Pettibon's caped crusader is confronted with his own sexual mores and the text reads, 'I'll stonewall your ass, you fairy fag-basher... Yeah, like we don't know about you and your Boy Wonder... ward? And you're Ward Cleaver' (6).

As in the work Howard Halle describes, the stars of Pettibon's vignettes are not safe from sexual deviance, violence or death – sometimes administered together for maximum shock value, slashing political commentary or dark humour. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh classifies the sexual deviancy and depravity that appears in Pettibon's visual index as a 'condition of resistance' (7). The artist himself is elusive when it comes to speaking about specific parts of his practice, choosing instead to discuss the different 'voices' of the work, rather than personal concerns or opinions. Pettibon's rapidly-executed drawings allow masses of work to be made in quick succession, and are an insistent reminder of drawing's continuing and growing importance in the increasingly digital world. Indeed, the lack of process or interference between Pettibon's visual ideas and execution of these ideas allows a machine-like production of images, while keeping the artist's unique aesthetic and literary panache intact. Benjamin Buchloh describes Pettibon's practice as resisting the digital age merely by continuing to make drawings. This is a particularly interesting viewpoint, considering the contemporary obsession with new technology.

Published one decade after the 9/11 attacks, Frank Miller's *Holy Terror* was published. *Holy Terror*, originally entitled *Holy Terror, Batman!* Was intended as a Batman vs. Al-Qaeda propaganda piece, in which the hero attacks the Islamist faction in Gotham City. The graphic novel would not be published by DC, Miller instead changing the character to a red-costumed Batman cipher called 'the Fixer' and publishing with Legendary Comics. I will leave you with the words of Grant Morrison, 'What would happen if all those macho men superheroes came out of the goddamn closet?' (Grant Morrison 2011: 8).

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Jonathan McBurnie is a PhD candidate at Sydney College of the Arts, and is best known for his intense, transgressive, and iconoclastic drawings, which he executes feverishly and exhibits nationally. McBurnie is also a contributor to online arts and culture journal REVOLT, and continues to tinker away with several side-projects, including a graphic novel and a screenplay.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

McBurnie, J. (2013), 'Drawing the Apocalypse: a biological imperative', *Peer Reviewed Proceedings of the 4th Annual Conference Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand (PopCAANZ)*, Brisbane, Australia, 24-26 June, 2013, P. Mountfort (ed), Sydney:

PopCAANZ, pp.321-329. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2013/>.