

Five Layers of Looking

The more significant of the two entries on Observation in Fern's *Small Encyclopedia of Instruction* relates to events that took place during the author's prematurely terminated studentship. The same is true of many of the entries. Here she favours the anecdotal form.

Fern had been alone in the studio when a tutor whom she does not name came in unexpectedly and engaged her on the approach she was taking in her work even though, as she recounts it, she was not encouraging his attention. The significance of this, the Second Entry on Observation is drawn out more fully on account of the first, which is presented in the *Encyclopedia*—as are all of the entries and as would be expected—to imply that it can be read independently.

Fern gives an account of a field trip organised by another member of staff to a nearby thoroughfare, the purpose of which was that they should be introduced to Clifford's Drawing Procedure, a tenacious form of drawing that the tutor after whom it was named had been promoting for some years as a way of understanding the world. It was not Clifford's style to give his ideas theoretically. That task is taken on by Fern, here as elsewhere in the *Small Encyclopedia*, only to the extent that she requires it in order to build towards a thesis. All the book's entries contribute but Fern will leave the thesis unstated so that the entries themselves might be driven to do that work, as it were, solely through their relations to one another. She is a strategist, Fern acknowledges in the book's preface; at the same time, if anyone is being wrong-footed, it is she, the writer, as her book begins to make demands of its own.

The First Entry on Observation is described as follows. After giving his introduction in cryptic terms Clifford disappeared, returning when his students were deep into their concentrated worlds of drawing. Then approaching each in turn, in different ways according to what they needed he entreats them to look

again, to interrogate the curves, the meeting points of things, the order implied by shadows, the value of forms disappearing and so on. Clifford's message was always 'more': more looking. Not longer looking but another looking. "Five layers of looking over ordinary looking" was his concise demand. At the close of the session he asked all those in attendance to take part in a ceremony. They had arrived in the morning as mere students; now they were initiates. "Relax into the company of your works on paper," Clifford had said. "They have credentials themselves, on a par with those of their makers. And so all are admitted into this honoured company,".

Was Clifford teaching a technology that leading to an understanding of the world, as he claimed? Or was his Procedure one aimed to transform the act of observation, so that something different might be seen? The latter possibility is compelling—just as compelling as it was for Walter Benjamin perhaps, when, fifty years before Fern, he wrote about the photographic apparatus and considered a similar distinction. In his 'Small History of photography' Benjamin comments: "It is a different nature which speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye." Using the simple act of walking as an example Benjamin writes: "we know nothing definite of the positions involved in the fractions of a second when the step is taken. Photography however, with its time lapses, enlargements etc. makes such knowledge possible." The photographer can see a different nature because the camera has seen a different nature; and likewise where Clifford's Drawing Procedure is concerned, the student of drawing can see a different nature because the procedure makes that different nature visible.

Fern's description continues. After an hour or so she was coaxed out of the concentrated state by her teacher's return and was puzzled for a moment as to where she had been all this time. Through these passages of the First Entry on Observation Fern is reaching for the more effective way of thinking. Clifford's imperative to *look again, look more* caused the minutes of the session to be "burrowed into", she remarks, as if "caves and potholes were found, involutions

that seemed to extend time inwards.” Fern will judge whether it is better to think these things through in terms of time, in terms of space or in terms of the act—an acting on verses a being acted on. In any case Clifford’s Procedure seemed to result in a minority of attention being paid to the actual qualities of the drawing itself. And this highlights a problem. Despite the unusual status given to the drawing procedure, the artefacts that resulted were still very much of a kind shaped by the conventional histories of exhibition. Surely these works were been produced as if to be hung in the way drawings have always been hung. Yet it cannot be assumed, Fern notes, that images made in accordance with the Procedure would function for the viewer as they had for the maker through that process of making. Clifford knew as much, of course, which is why he involved his new initiates in the cabalistic gathering, inviting them to encounter their works not on the basis of inherent qualities—actual or virtual—but more as tokens of the survival of their makers who had returned from the Five Layers of looking transformed, with bloodshot eyes, but with bodies and souls still together.

She recalls the concrete bench she chose that day as a place from which to watch the passing bodies, how her gaze had tried to grasp moment of gesture, an arm in relation to the leg taking weight, the orientation of the head; the sweep of loose clothing, imagining the bodies’ insides so that these dimensions too might somehow charge her drawing implement. That day’s works are lost now. But Fern is pleased for it to be so. In the contingency of the present, those images might result in something contrary, robbing her of the mantle of initiation she had achieved and that she still feels she possesses, despite the many equivocations of her maturity. Although a drawing may be imbued with some quality on account of the tenacity of looking, she remarks, we cannot say with any certainty that the quality will lead the viewer to anything like the time-inverting interrogation experienced by the maker in the process of making. There is something forgotten in Clifford’s method. While a profound question of what it is to look is being built into the instruction, what’s not considered is how that question will manifest itself

for the viewer. An event of viewing is precisely that: a singular encounter in which time is implicated, but always a different time. We know this problem well as the one that provokes a relativist solution: your encounter with the image is different from mine but both are equally valid, and so on. And we know how such apparent generosity gives rise to isolation. The predictability of viewing scenario, which is the artist's predicament, is made more certain by Clifford's Procedure as it mitigates against the singular encounter. And maybe the habits of working practice mean that the Procedure can never be replicated for those now initiated, who are predisposed simply to reproduce the excitement and intensity of their initiation, so doing violence to the very ideas of excitement and intensity.

Fern returns to consider again her metaphor of time, the one she used to describe the feeling of working process. Time seemed not to extend in the normal way but to flee into cavities of its own making. Perhaps what she noticed here can be accounted for much more straightforwardly as a diversification of the gaze. Think of how the body moves for the one lost in the drawing activity. The gaze extends to the world then diverts towards the representation-in-progress; the gaze looks away from the representation towards the world and finds a world subtly altered; then in looking back towards the sheet finds there not quite what it expected, and so on. The gesture of a continually diverting gaze is incorporated, made part of the body of a more stringent, complex looking. Furthermore, such stringent looking comes to include the many other views admitted even while concentration is high; darts of the eye elsewhere, as it were, by which who-knows-what kind of impressions are folded back into the supposedly straightforward, volitional acts of turning one's gaze onto this or that detail of the world.

Fern is obliged here to reconsider her earlier assertion of Clifford's slothfulness with the theoretical work. Her realisation of multiple forms of looking, of the diversification of gazes, only uncovers something already there in Clifford's Five Layers of Looking. She does, however, take her thought further by proposing

that what's folded or layered into the act of observation as Clifford would have it, is a diverse range of memory-images. Perhaps looking in any case is constructed that way. The value of Clifford's technique and the difference that qualifies his stringent observation is the accentuation of these fleeting diversities, which our habitual assumptions regarding looking tend to elide even while our everyday vision multiplies in complexity.

Fern's Second Entry on Observation elaborates the criticism of Clifford's Procedure already begun, doing so through the proposal of a resingularisation of image display. She can make this point, she says, in a way that surprises her, asking rhetorically: "is that not the best way of surprising a reader too?"

She was on her own in the studio adding finishing touches to a life drawing executed the previous day. The tutor whom she does not name seemed to have made his judgement already about the cul-de-sac this young student was wedging herself into ever more firmly. He had something he wanted to show her. Fern would have preferred not to be given this demonstration. She was, herself, well enough aware of the dysfunction about to be named but was not quite ready to address it; she was holding out for the sake of something valuable in the predicament. It has been noted elsewhere as a paradox that we desire the things that imprison us. All the same there is a clandestine work that can take place all, just as writers in prison produce their most profound works . . . but that point is a different entry in the *Encyclopedia*.

Against her will, Fern consented to watch and listen while the still unnamed tutor took a piece of paper and a pencil from her own desk then indicated that he would observe and draw something within view: anything, for instance the bag that happened to be lying on the floor under her desk. It is, Fern notes, only on writing the account of these events some years later that she realises the fascination she felt on watching this artist, whose work she did not hold in any great regard, in the process of constructing an image. His line was confident. He

held the pencil like a skilful chess player, investing his moves with something ineffable. When enough had been done to signify an observational drawing process, the unnamed tutor took the page in both hands and began, carefully, to rip the image into parts. The fragments were then laid out on the desk, then arranged in a different order. Now he was in a position to make the point to which his demonstration was leading: while the integrity of the whole was lost, he pointed out, in other respects, if the drawing had strength, that strength would not be lost in the destruction and reassembly.

So this, the Second Entry on Observation, is a rationale for collage. And it is a development of the thought on observation already begun in the First Entry. Fern could feel the disjunction between fragments of coherent image and their differently coherent arrangement on the desk. That was so because she had seen the drawing in its earlier manifestation and had invested in it on account of her enjoyment watching it being produced. She had identified with the process and in so doing, in a sense, had become the one drawing. Then as the unnamed tutor's gestures of ripping implied the same chess-player's care, she had identified with that moment of the demonstration too and so encountered the differently organised image, its conflicting coherence and incoherence. Her attention had jumped between what she recognised in the fragments of the drawing as it had been and the increasingly familiar new arrangement of parts. That disjunction of attention was a disparity in her assumed, single and consistent vantage point.

The flickering instability of her encounter with the image was short lived, the props for the demonstration were discarded. However, the later recording through memory allows what was valuable here to come into focus. To begin with she had been inclined to resist the lesson. Her resentment has persisted after the fact. Time had passed. Still, she has not been able to discount the point, nor forget. While things do not resolve in the passing of time, while feelings remain ambivalent about events and people, what those people have said and what they have shown, the incoherent narrative of memory creates a hiatus in which a

certain kind of work of the mind is done. Past selves and present selves superimpose. Knowledge appears in the wrong place, coming in advance of the one who knows. And Fern's entries on Observation work together to make a similar point. What distinguishes stringent looking from ordinary looking, is the uncertainty over whether observation is a volitional thing, something one does to the world or, on the other hand, something that is done to the one looking, so that to be an observer comes later on the basis of an observation that has always already taken place.