ANCHORAGE: a phenomenology of outline

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> *This insistence…arises from the fact that a particularly benighted landsman must imagine the act of anchoring as a process of throwing something overboard, whereas the anchor ready for its work is already overboard, and is not thrown over, but simply allowed to fall.*
>
> Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea,* 1906

Introduction

What is an outline? Like many people who draw, I possess a history that began with drawing lines around things, in an effort to keep separate what was 'inside' the lines from what was not. This grew into a realisation that, when drawing lines around my ideas in order to visually represent them, what mattered most was not the outline itself but the thing outlined. The outer line was there, but *not* there – at least, not in the way I once imagined it was. In a similar vein, psychologist James J Gibson used his ecological view of perception to describe the outline as a misnomer (Gibson 1986/2015, 287). On this account, outline serves only to deflect attention away from itself, towards that which is properly *other* than itself i.e. the thing outlined. But if 'outline' is simply a misnamed term for what the outer line appears to be doing, then what is the right term, and why? As a drawing researcher with an interest in phenomenology, I suspect the problem lies within our comprehension of the relationship between the act of outlining and the object outlined. If, however, this implicit understanding of outline could be made explicit through the practice of drawing, perhaps a more universal understanding might also arise?

So describes the purpose of this exposition to JAR. Functioning as both a relocation and extension of an earlier project, ANCHOR (2015), the aim of ANCHORAGE is to outline an understanding *of* outline by examining it in phenomenological terms. This means treating the outline as both a physical and conceptual notion, rooting it in the Greek term *phainomenon,* or "thing appearing to view" (Moran and Cohen 2012, 251). The objective is to combine practice and theory in such a way that what is uninspected or merely assumed can brought to light. As lead investigator of this ongoing project, I am actively joined in the current stage by two co-authors: Steven Dickie and Chantal Faust. Both are artists who contributed to the previously published stage (ANCHOR). In physical terms, we have produced between us are the various drawings presented here, using source material from ANCHOR as our guide. In conceptual terms, I will use this text to develop my own Husserlian (1950/1999) inspired methodology, in order to seek what was not sought in ANCHOR – namely, the invariant understanding of outline. This relates to what might be essential or truthful about outline in the context of drawing, contingent on the work presented here.

What is an outline?

As ANCHORAGE is a piece of drawing research, I begin with the same question used before: *what is an outline?* Is it simply the 'line around', constituting a peculiar object of some singular sort? If so, then perhaps Philip Rawson's (1987) articulation will suffice. Across a whole book devoted to detailing the history of drawing from a Western perspective, Rawson set aside but a few lines to describe the outline. Indeed, the, "line which runs around an enclosure, and which does not necessarily correspond with a single object, such as an area of empty space" (Rawson 1987, 94) is perfunctory, suggesting no further questions need be asked. Equally unfussy is the description put forward by drawing scholar Anita Taylor (2003). Treated as an everyday occurrence, Taylor describes, "a fluid back-ink line…used to define the characters and activity within the image" (Taylor and Thomas 2003,

51). Patrick Maynard (2005) describes the outline solely in relation to contour i.e. the line around which gives the appearance of shape. For Maynard (2005, 77), "we are most familiar with contour shape through a line, notably an enclosure (dimensional index 2) generally called the "outline" of a thing". As he goes on to say, "so universal is contour drawing across the ages that it stands in our minds as a paradigm for 'drawing' generally" (Maynard 2005, 77).

Yet this business of treating the outline as either a thing that defines drawing, or as a thing definable in itself, remains confusing at best. For what is common to all these descriptions is their evident desire to 'define' the outline, whereas it might be suggested that what the outline constitutes, in a rather more fundamental sense, is a summary, sketch or synopsis: indicating the general features *but not the detail*. In an effort to explain Gibson's approach, social anthropologist Tim Ingold (2015) adds, "Gibson is adamant in his rejection of the more traditional view of drawing, tied to classical optics, according to which the draughtsman mentally projects, onto the page, an image that has been first formed in the mind, and then physically traces the outlines" (Ingold 2015, 101). In a similar vein we are also rejecting the traditional view of outline that says it must be defined as *this* or *that* understanding. As practitioner's, Dickie, Faust and I are looking at the phenomenon of outline as that which is discovered via the physical act of outlining. This means circling outline as an idea, where the various works we have produced in response form a record of our movement around.

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My first attempt to address this seemingly straightforward question involved presenting it to a group of thirteen contributors, with the aim of collating material for a book. As editor, the various responses I received to the question (*what is an outline?*) were drawn, typed, photographed and printed. These were then shuffled and arranged in sequence, before being published in print as ANCHOR (2015), a limited run bookwork, published by Marmalade Publishers of Visual Theory, London. As a sustained piece of drawing research, my objective was to use these contributions to conduct a study into the phenomenon of outline, based on the concerns I've outlined above. This project was only loosely examined in relation to drawing – after all, if you ask a writer on drawing what an outline is, they may well provide you with a synopsis of their forthcoming book! Rather than seek to define an understanding however, my objective was to 'anchor' the collective responses according to how the phenomenon of outline appears. In other words, by inviting each contributor to outline their respective creative concerns, I hoped to outline an understanding *of* outline, letting practice-led research form an alternative mode of reply.

However, while this initial stage of my investigation was deemed successful in a number of ways, it also left one or two phenomenologically inspired questions unanswered. Chief among them is the question of whether it is possible to approach the task I had set aside for ANCHOR, i.e. defining an understanding of outline, but in a manner that would be in keeping with, and contingent upon, my phenomenological approach. This would require a delicate balancing act: on the one hand going beyond the tentative act of gathering various contributions in a curatorial capacity, yet on the other remaining committed to an indirect, loosely outlined form of approach. In phenomenological terms that I will expand upon shortly, to 'define' in this roundabout manner means to seek the invariant understanding from within the variety of work on display. In extending the original investigation here, the idea behind ANCHOR is allowed to fall a little further into the philosophical context from which it surfaced. As a group, Dickie, Faust and I are inquiring into what is uninspected or assumed from our first time around.

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To reiterate, as editor of ANCHOR my focus was compiling and arranging the responses I received, rather than describing the works in a manner that would allow any sort of invariant to emerge. On that

basis, ANCHORAGE can be thought of as a relocation of the original ideas away from their previous location in print, towards this new site online. The visual work produced by myself, Dickie and Faust is developed to answer the call for a range of variants that can be described. This is phenomenology in practice, developed as part of the original Husserlian motivation behind my work, and pushed forward as a practical understanding here via the more recent approach of philosopher Don Ihde (2008, 2012). To ground our investigation in the physical form of the original question, we have selected as source material a number of original images submitted to ANCHOR, produced by artists Claude Heath and Paul McDevitt. The process of re-drawing/re-thinking these original drawings is in order to generate the new 'data' from which our conclusions can be drawn, treating them as evidence in support. As I now fulfil the role of lead investigator rather than editor, this text serves as the explication of my argument in lexical terms.

The inspiration behind ANCHORAGE is Edmund Husserl's (1950/1999, 1931/2012) understanding of phenomenology as the search for invariants (or *essences*, to use the Husserlian term). Although I am an artist/drawing researcher and not a philosopher, I remain intrigued by the implications of Husserl's project for drawing research. This includes the connection between phenomenology and, "the power of line – engraved or drawn – to specify invariant form" (Ingold 2015, 102). I find appealing the idea that a general understanding about outline could potentially emerge, in unashamedly circular fashion, from within a singular question like: *what is an outline?* At the time of compiling ANCHOR however, I understood this task would require a more determined application of Husserl's rather unique methodological approach, namely: the gesture of 'phenomenological reduction'. Eugen Fink, Husserl's assistant, referred to this as simply the means for "doing phenomenology" (Fink 1988/1995, 29). Aside from its conceptual underpinnings, my practical interest resides in the descriptive method which validates it – variational practice. As Ihde describes it; "at the core of phenomenology in practice lay variational theory – in looking at any phenomenon, one must place it within its possibilities, its variations" (Ihde 2008, 6, original italics).

Methodology

My methodology in practice begins by implementing the initial stage of reduction, namely 'bracketing'. This means suspending my working hypothesis: that an invariant understanding of outline will surely emerge from a variety of outlines presented for display. This step also prefigures our combined effort to draw. The aim is simply to recognise the assumptions we hold concerning what an outline *is* or *isn't,* followed by bracketing them, i.e. "putting into suspension" (Moran and Cohen 2012, 52) our thoughts concerning their veracity for the duration of the research. In practical terms, bracketing also means we can just can get on and draw, without feeling constrained by theory – we simply put this to one side while we draw. Our aim is to redraw Heath and McDevitt's ANCHOR drawings, plus some of our own, in order to provide a wide variety from which to seek the invariant understanding. Each of the sixteen rows of images seen here uses original material from ANCHOR as the starting point. Describing these drawings as 'outlines' just means they have been loosely copied by us, and then presented as artwork. We do not feel bound by the 'definitive' descriptions provided earlier, for we have bracketed these as well. The point is to open them all up to thought.

Once the act of bracketing has been implemented, 'variational method', or the practice of variational theory takes hold. As Ihde says, "in its simplest form the use of variations requires obtaining as many *sufficient* examples or variations upon examples as might be necessary to discover the structural features being sought" (Ihde 2012, 23). The key term here is the word 'sufficient'. Although we need to produce a series of outlines in order to seek the invariant understanding *of* outline, we do not need to produce an endless series. Quite the opposite – a small number might easily suffice for the key elements to emerge. In practical terms, generating variations of outline means re-drawing the drawings of Heath and McDevitt in our chosen material. As mentioned, we include some of our own contributions to ANCHOR as additional starting points. This means Dickie, Faust and I have copied

each other's drawings alongside those of Heath and McDevitt. We continued this process until we reached having to outline our own drawings, at which point we stopped. This formed a natural break in the process, suggesting the sufficiency of which Ihde speaks.

Various outlines

Ihde (2012) also states, "to *describe* phenomena phenomenologically, rather than *explain* them, amounts to selecting a domain for inclusion and a domain for exclusion" (Ihde 2012, 19). In other words, what should be excluded from this description of variants is any form of explanation about the work. But what is explanation? For Ihde it means any theory, idea, concept or construction that deliberately seeks to go *behind* phenomena, in order to give a reason for it. Watching Dickie and Faust at work, I interpret Ihde's 'domain for inclusion' to include my description of their drawing acts. Dickie draws digitally, using a graphics tablet. Drawing is watching the fluid movement of his hand describe a trajectory across the tablet surface, while vector marks appear simultaneously on the screen. Faust draws using black acrylic on paper, working 'freestyle' so no literal tracing occurs. Watching her work, it becomes apparent that she is following the original drawing with her eyes, rather than looking at the hand which draws. For myself, I draw on tissue paper overlaid upon the image, using a graphite stick. Of Heath and McDevitt's working process I can say nothing, as I have never seen them draw. Instead, their work is simply presented as it 're-appears' here, via our imperfect outlines.

For variational theory to function, an actual description of the drawings as they appear is required. Treating them as a series of 'outlined outlines' means acknowledging they all describe the same task in conceptual terms. On a purely perceptual level however, things are different. If we look at Faust's drawings, we can perceive a sense of fluidity within them that is less present in mine. For example, I compare *Chantal Faust, after Joe Graham, after Steven Dickie, after Paul McDevitt* with the image which precedes it, namely *Joe Graham, after Steven Dickie, after Paul McDevitt.* Faust clearly makes use of white space in a way that I do not. Each jet black gestural line is set standing forth from the space 'behind', whereas my pencil marks impress themselves into the grain of the tissue paper, declaring the surface upon which they sit. Likewise, *Steven Dickie, after Chantal Faust* presents drawn lines of various lengths, yet fixed in width, indicating a digital nib. But the way Dickie registers the form of a head is quite unlike Faust's original – lines appear scored and hatched, rather than daubed. It seems the variations could be endless, given the differences that accumulate via the vagaries of a personal style.

Seeking the invariant

Once the various outlines have been described in this manner, i.e. based on how they actually appear, the task of seeking what is invariantly understood about them begins. Husserl's (1950/1999) preferred tool for this particular stage was something he called "imaginative free variation" (Moran and Cohen 2012, 93). Notoriously sparse with actual examples, Husserl does offer one description of this process, imaginatively varying the perception of a table: "Perhaps we begin by fictively changing the shape or the colour of the object quite arbitrarily, keeping identical only its perceptual appearing. In other words: Abstaining from acceptance of its being, we change the fact of this perception into a pure possibility, one among other quite "optional" pure possibilities - but possibilities that are possible perceptions. We, so to speak, shift the actual perception into the realm of non-actualities, the realm of the as-if" (Husserl 1950/1999, 70). Philosopher Natalie Depraz describes this as akin to placing the "factually described instances" on "imaginative parade" (Depraz 1999, 101). This 'parade' is the act of running through a series of variations in one's imagination, based upon what is factual i.e. the drawings we have *actually* produced. A purely conceptual run-through minus the drawings would be highly inadequate as drawing research.

This leads to the final stage, seeking the invariant proper. I examine the drawings as they are presented before me here in JAR. Selecting one image at random, *Chantal Faust, after Joe Graham, after Steven Dickie,* I try to imaginatively vary the configuration of marks I am looking at. Thinking of Faust's drawing as an 'outline' in the loosest sense means I remain bracketed towards the scholarly descriptions of outline given earlier, so the marks can be imagined as a different length, width or even tone. The only constraint is that they remain rooted in the task at hand, thus adhering to the one rule of variational method according to Ihde: "variations must genuinely belong together" (Ihde 2012, 23). But what does 'belong together' in this instance mean? Faust's outline is a re-drawing of *my* outline, which is a re-drawing of Dickies outline etc. These variations quite literally belong together within the context of the task embarked upon. However, even fictively altering the swirls of black acrylic marks seems immediately pointless. Why? Because to change them is to simply to outline them according to *my* desires. And this, in essence, is what we have been doing each and every time we embark upon a new drawing.

Conclusion

In short, the task of trying to imaginatively vary Faust or Dickie's work is not completed without the risk of changing something fundamental within the work itself. To be more specific, it seems as if the work in the form in which it appears here belongs *to* each artist in a manner rather different to the way in which it belongs to me as viewer. Although each drawing provides a viewer with the loosest outline of the individual's creative concerns, when treated as 'artwork' they reveal themselves to be very singular outlines, not easily disturbed. In an effort to bring further clarity to this point, Alain Badiou's (2004) understanding of truth in relation to art seems pertinent. As Badiou says, "a truth is an artistic configuration initiated by an event (in general an event is a group of works, a singular multiple of works) and unfolded through chance in the form of the works that serve as its subject points" (Badiou 2004, 12). ANCHORAGE can be described in these terms. As an event, it looks to unfold a set of variations with a view to discovering the invariant truth about outline. One which emerges via the various acts of outlining.

But what sense can this 'truth' about outline offer to the practitioner who draws? If I understand Badiou correctly, it is only within the chance form of these drawings as *artworks* that the essence of outline is revealed. Importantly, this essence is nothing specific: for if chance forms in drawing remain mutable, always developing across each variation, then each new artwork described as 'an outline' means *outline* is neither completed nor defined. In drawing this text to a close, I look to replace Gibson's (1986/2015) misnomer with a post-phenomenological statement of my own. To wit - what is potentially essential (Husserl) or truthful (Badiou) about the phenomenon of outline, is that it constitutes a peculiar form of immanence in transcendence*.* In other words, the particular outlines which immanently belong to each artist *at the same time* constitute a universal and understanding of outline that transcends any single contribution. This of course means that the phenomenology described here is fully contingent upon the various outlines we see presented *there*, *there* and *there*. And so ends this particular stage of the process. ANCHORAGE: a resolutely circular phenomenology of outline.

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