The Little Book of Haptic Drawing

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Elkhorn, CA
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Cover drawing: haptic drawn to a reading of an essay about the poet, Hayden Carruth, read aloud by M.A. Fink.

All art in this book is by Jean Vengua
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# Table of Contents

I  What is Haptic?  
   Touch  20  
   Smell  20  
   Taste  21  
   Listen  21  
   See  24  

II  The Politics of Drawing  5  

III  Haptic: The Experience  13  

IV  Drawing Haptics  18  

V  Taking it Further  27  

VI  A Reading and Viewing List  31
What is “Haptic”? 
Haptic drawn to a live performance of “Concerto for Flute” by Kevin Putz, with the Cabrillo Music Festival Orchestra. Acrylics, ink, and felt pen on watercolor paper.
This is a book about drawing and coming to your senses.

There are a lot of reasons one might want to draw. There is the enjoyment involved in the act of drawing itself. But how one draws is also influenced by ideas about being an artist, being creative, and identification with all the things that the word “artist” has had attached to it over the centuries, since a human picked up a stick or a piece of charcoal, and started making marks with it.\(^1\)

The ability to create art has long been associated with a certain sense of individual (or communal) freedom and power, even magic. Take the Lascaux cave drawings. Recently, archaeologists discovered that the strangely overlapping lines of animal drawings in Lascaux come to life when illuminated by moving torchlight—our first attempts at animation!\(^2\) Think of entering into the womb of the cave, walking in near darkness, feeling your way along the walls, then seeing the forms of horses moving, running, in flickering firelight. At that time, anyone with the skill to make charcoal marks come alive like that must have seemed a magician, perhaps even thought to have shamanic powers.

In the Philippines, one group of indigenous T’boli women engage in t’nalak weaving. They are called “dreamweavers” because dreams inform the designs they use in their textiles.\(^3\) Their dreams translate their perceptions of the world around them, manifesting physically through their skilled hands and onto the loom. Each thread, like lines in a drawing, weaves the shapes and colors of the dream.

When people first begin to draw, they often look to the work of artists who are able to conjure up beautiful and lifelike representations. For those engaged in digital arts and animation, the ability to produce finely detailed and lifelike images in perspective is very important. Other artists hope that they have the magic touch that will render their combinations of color and line—figurative or abstract—acceptable for gallery exhibits.

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Haptic drawing, as I use the term, is a practice in which a tactile and open awareness of the object of the drawing are integral. The haptic process depends upon sensory experience—interior and exterior—as a touchstone to the drawing. This does not leave out the thinking process, but it allows the senses to lead. Filipina/o Kali artist and teacher, Michelle Bautista, writes, “artists in my particular style of kali emphasize touch over sight and strive for a level of sensitivity in touch that allows them to ‘see.’ Because we emphasize the need to develop our sense of touch as much as possible, the greater the sensitivity, the greater the ‘vision’ of the world.” The term, “haptic,” has often been associated with “touch therapy,” where healing and creativity occurs through empathic touch. While we may not necessarily touch the object we are drawing, we can sensitize ourselves (through the various senses) to the object. In awareness of the drawn object and our own subjective experience (thoughts, emotions, body feelings), the body translates it all through our hands and into lines on paper.

This is not a results-oriented practice; the point is not to produce a stunning work of line art (although one may hope that the result is personally pleasing), but rather to increase awareness of the object drawn, as well as one’s own body—its creative, aesthetic, nervous and energetic impulses as it responds to objects and entities it perceives. As the drawings emerge, so does awareness of lines—the threads and connective tissue from which we record knowing and draw meaning, personal and communal—the primordial gestures and marks that make up artistic images.

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4 Kali is a Filipina/o martial art.
II

The Politics of Drawing
Haptic drawn to Jan Garbarek's "Ov Zamarahi" and "Surp" from the album, *Officium Novum.*
While “you,” as the doer of art, are crucial to the artistic process, *haptic drawing* is not necessarily about finding the “true artist” in you, or reaching down inside to find some essential creative stream within—“your passion,” or “your bliss.” And it’s not about visually following the contours of an object in an attempt to render a lifelike copy. It is about cultivating and engaging your curiosity, thoughtfulness, and empathy for the world, its inhabitants and other phenomena, and opening yourself up to possibility.

It is also about trusting and allowing your body to interpret and communicate with the world you live in. In that sense, it is about acknowledging and remembering the body and what it feels. In a world in which humans are increasingly bounded and bound by digital structures and processes, I think it’s always a good thing to allow the body, especially the fingers, hands, and arms—so often tied to a computer or tablet—to move freely, with a sense of play.

So why bring up politics? If you don’t like the word—if it conjures up visions of conference rooms, lobbyists, and political campaigns—another way you can think of this is through the terms “engagement” and “enactive.” Patricia Cain writes:

> “Considering drawing as an enactive phenomenon allowed me to regard the drawing practitioner not as an individual entity operating in isolation from the environment, but rather as part of an eco-system in relation to the world around him or her. In this scenario, thinking occurs within the processes of interaction between the two.”

Reaching out with curiosity and openness helps to loosen the hold of the anxieties, assumptions, and desires you may have about creativity. By observing and focusing your attention with empathy on the object of your drawing, as well as on your own responses (physiological, mental, and emotional), you learn more about yourself and what you draw.

Notice that I didn’t say: “you will unleash your creative powers as an artist.”

It may be that something like that happens. And it’s possible that the creative process may help you to process difficult experiences and memories. But this book does not make any new-age promises for spiritual or artistic fulfillment. The point and focus of this little book is to cultivate a tactile interest in the object of your drawing and the drawing process; you make contact, respond viscerally with your body, and engage in an open-ended process of learning and understanding. While you reach out, however, it doesn’t always guarantee a harmonious response. You may be irritated; your attention may focus and unfocus; you may find your gestures conflicted and erratic (for example, in your response to a particular piece of music, or to sounds in your

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neighborhood); all this is part of the thinking and feeling (also learning) process. People are conditioned towards “results,” and it’s possible that, as you draw, part of your thought is hoping for a perfect little picture. Let that thought, that hope, run its course. Thinking happens. Just continue drawing.

On the other hand, many times while drawing and focusing on an object, say, a sound, time seems to slow down for me, and I become much more aware of the thing I’m drawing than I ever have been before. For example, the last time I drew to the sound of crickets, I began to discern the various parts of the cricket song. After a few minutes, I noticed a different cricket song, an accompaniment to the main song—a response. It had been there all along, but I didn’t notice it for quite awhile. Crickets called out into the darkness of a warm summer night. Somewhere out there another group of crickets responded, but with a different call. And in my room, with the window open, I responded too, by drawing. It was amazing to see how my hand and fingers interpreted both songs; the lines were not what I would have planned if I had thought about it first. There truly is something beautiful in seeing this process emerge.
Haptic drawn to cricket sounds. Pen and ink on paper.
Returning again to the theme of politics and engagement, let me situate myself: I live in the United States. Its citizens and other “first worlders” have been emerging (I hope) from an intensely “me” oriented period, using up earth’s resources and amassing material goods and money with little or no thought or consideration for the countries and peoples who labor in our factories, fields, and mines, and little consideration for other living creatures, except as food for our tables and pets that can be bred to match our aesthetic tastes. We have treated the creative process as if it were an object that can be purchased, like a can of foie gras or a spa treatment guaranteed to make us desirable.

Moreover, many people who attempt drawing give up, because they approach it initially as a practice that only those born with a “special talent” can master. Evidence of such mastery supposedly makes itself known in one’s ability to draw or paint something that looks “real” or otherwise satisfyingly beautiful according to your standards of beauty—or, as is often the case, society’s standards of beauty or artistry, to which we are conditioned. That visual conditioning is so strong that, even as we search for an individual expression, we may subconsciously try to replicate shapes and forms that we’ve seen again and again, because they have been held as exemplary.

What if we changed our perspective, and looked at artistic processes like drawing or painting—not as a way to find our special bliss, not as a way to enhance our personal identity—but rather, as a way of thinking and feeling, a way of “touching” the world? What if you viewed drawing and painting as an inquiry or deep conversation with the subject, rather than a way to privilege the sense of sight and gain mastery over the meaning and representation of the subject? How would that change your perspective on the experience of drawing? How would that change how you use your senses?

This brings up the idea of the privileging of the eye, the optic sense as a kind of surveying tool, over other forms of perception.

In “Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes,” Laura U. Marks defines the “…political stakes between…two kinds of visuality, haptic and optical.” Optical visuality is useful for making distinctions and marking boundaries. It is used to survey landscapes or discrete areas; it makes clear distinctions between figure and ground. Think of the surveyor or the scientist looking through a telescope or microscope. According to Marks, optical visuality “conceives of the other, the object of vision, as distant and unconnected to the subject of vision. Optical visuality is necessary. But it’s only half of vision.”
On the other hand, haptic visuality “sees the world as though it were touching it: close, unknowable, appearing to exist on the surface of the image. Haptic images disturb the figure-ground relationship.” Marks notes that the term, “haptic,” was borrowed from psychology (haptein) by the Viennese textile historian Alois Rieg, to explain visual perception that “grabs” what it looks at, thus eliminating the boundary between the beholder and that which is beheld.³

Still, it seems obvious: to draw, you need to see. We call it “the visual arts” because seeing seems crucial to the process. And yet, there are blind people who draw and enjoy drawing by using their other senses, for example, touch.

Over a period of 20 years, John M. Kennedy and a group of researchers studied blind people who made drawings, and found that…

“blind and sighted people share a form of pictorial shorthand…for example, both groups use lines to represent the edges of surfaces. Both employ foreshortened shapes and converging lines to convey depth. Both typically portray scenes from a single vantage point. Both render extended or irregular lines to connote motion. And both use shapes that are symbolic, though not always visually correct, such as a heart or a star, to relay abstract messages.”

Kennedy and his researchers found that there is more to a picture than only visual perception.

“…the brain region responsible for interpreting contours in sensory input from busy environments is a general surface-perception system. As such, it does not discriminate on the basis of purely visual matters, such as brightness and color. …Whereas sighted individuals treat brightness borders as indicators of surface edges, the blind treat pressure borders in the same way…the ability to interpret surface edges functions even when it does not receive any visual signals.”⁹

So, seeing is just one aspect of the drawing process. But there is also much more of us involved in that process: not only your senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, but also your whole body.

The actual process of drawing and observing the world around us does not consist of separate acts of “drawing” and “seeing.” It is thinking, it is feeling and sensing, and even communicating. It’s a whole experience, inseparable, as Carl Ginsburg explains:

“We think of consciousness as a thing. Observation of our experience indicates that we are actually consciousing, and that experiencing is closely related to movement and the muscular sense…mind and body are not two entities related to each other but an inseparable whole while functioning.”

III

Haptic: The Experience
Drawn after meditation with a “smashed” tip felt pen on brown paper.
All we have to open the past are the five senses and memory.
—Louise Bourgeois

While the experience of perceiving and drawing is a whole yet separable process of “consciouising,” we are accustomed to using our eyes to discern and to judge. There’s nothing wrong with that, except when it gets in the way of attending to the line and to the object—which can happen quite often. Sometimes it’s just fun to allow the hand to draw in response, and to see and enjoy the line(s) that emerge. In actual practice, one goes back and forth between visceral response and thinking and plotting (making judgments about how and where the line will go). This can happen even when you feel that your hands are practically moving on their own, without conscious decision-making on your part. The mind always finds some way to get in on the game. So let it happen when it happens, and let it go—over and over again, if necessary.

I find that drawing to the sound of natural life—crickets, birds, or the ocean, for example—can be unexpectedly moving. Often, this is simply because I have taken the time to really listen as I draw. I realize that previously I have listened with my ears, but not with my body. The same is often the case when listening to music. I discover passages in music that I have played on my iPod many times, yet have not noticed before.

The tools you use for drawing can really make a difference. I suggest that you begin by drawing with the most basic tools: ink (say, a fountain pen, ballpoint pen, or pencil. Do this so that you can see the line that emerges clearly. Lines made with ink and brush (as in sumi-e, or even a flexible brush tip pen) take on a very different, fluid quality from ball point or fountain pens, and pencils. After you do a few drawings with pen or pencil, it’s fun to try other tools. Sometimes drawing with “defective” tools, like felt pens whose tips have been blunted from drawing, or bamboo pens with broken tips, can be revelatory, producing beautiful, unexpected lines.

Paper, too, can make a big difference. Try different types of paper. Try drawing on a paper bag, on rough sketch paper, smooth white drawing paper, or toothy watercolor paper. Try drawing over paper that already has something printed on it, such as newsprint.
Haptic drawn to Philip Glass’ “Symphony No. 10.” A live performance by the Cabrillo Music Festival Orchestra. Brush tip felt pen and acrylic wash on paper.
In Chapter IV, I provide a series of haptic experiences you can try. These begin by separating out the senses. I think this is a good way to start, but after awhile you’ll see how the senses in fact overlap. Eventually, while sitting under a tree, say, or on a bus bench, your haptic may be simply a holistic response to all the sensory stimuli around you.

You can also develop your own haptic practice. Perhaps you’ll want to do a haptic in response to a dream, a conversation, or after meditating or gardening. In fact, if you do develop an interesting haptic approach, I’d love to hear about it. Contact me through my blog: http://okiranalog.wordpress.com
IV

Drawing Haptics
Drawn to “Dear Prudence” (Lennon/McCartney, 1968). Colored pencils on paper.
Touch

The tactile sense is a good place to start. Try an exercise to loosen up your torso, shoulders, arms, and hands. You can stand with feet planted about shoulder length apart. Loosely turn the upper part of your torso from side to side. You should be breathing in an easy and relaxed manner. As you turn left and right, swing your arms from side to side, letting them gently slap your hands against your sides or shoulders. Do this about 6 times on each side. When you are done, shake out your shoulders and arms right down to your fingertips.

Sit down with the materials you will use, in front of an object or objects that you will draw (and draw from). But first, appreciate your hands, fingers, and fingertips. Think about how your fingers and hands depend on the muscles and tendons in your wrists, elbows, shoulders, neck, and spine. Note whether or not your shoulders are relaxed or tight, or if you facial muscles are tense. You’ll get a more responsive line if these areas of your body are relaxed. Notice if your hands and fingers are relaxed or tight. Remember the importance of touch to this whole process.

Drawing: choose an object (grass, water, stone, etc.) to touch. Run your hands and fingers over the object. It should have a surface that is interesting to you. It can be water that you run your hand through, or a stone that you can feel with both hands or one hand. It can be an abrasive surface, or the fur on your cat—anything that you’d like to touch. Then, put your pencil to paper and begin drawing lines in empathic response to what you touch or have touched. Allow the lines to move on their own, to cover the whole paper, or parts of the paper, to cross over other lines, etc., until you feel it’s done.

Afterwards, take notes about the lines you create through touch, and their meaning to you. You might even want to keep a dated journal of your haptic drawings. Did you touch the object with your whole hand, or just your fingertips? Did you touch with any other part of your body? Did you feel a need to close your eyes while touching an object, even as you drew it?

Smell

Sit where you can smell something interesting, say, a cup of Oolong tea, or coffee. Don’t try too hard to make the connection between the scent and your drawing. Just begin drawing. You can also sit on a stoop in a city neighborhood, and smell the grit of the city air, roasting hot dogs somewhere,
and car exhaust. Or you can draw by the ocean, smelling the salt air, the fishyness of organic matter on the wet sand. If you are in your apartment, you might place a vase full of wildflowers nearby. Respond to these scents with your lines. Take notes afterwards. It’s often said that the sense of smell can often spark vivid memories. What kinds of memories or thoughts arise when you draw a haptic in response to smell?

Taste

This is a different way to experience the taste of chocolate, coffee, a cup of tea, a prime rib steak, macaroni and cheese, an apple, a stick of gum, diet cola, or even snowflakes. Explore the subtleties, variations, and dimensions of taste. How does your drawing hand respond to sweet vs. sour? To iced tea, or hot? Taste is more than just the simple sensing of the taste buds; it’s a sensory collaboration of smell, texture, and taste. In fact, the olfactory sense is very important to taste, as is texture. Have you ever tried Durian fruit? Some people find it hard to even begin to taste the notorious fruit once they’ve smelled it. And the “creamy” texture can make it even worse. So, while taste may seem like a fairly narrow sensory experience, it’s actually more complex. What kind of line would a dark Mexican chocolate bar laced with chili produce? You might be surprised at your responses, and you might be surprised at what you actually taste when you pay attention.

Take notes afterwards. How did your lines respond to certain “notes” of taste? Did you experience the taste of something differently than you expected? How long did you keep drawing after a taste dissolved in your mouth? Did you find yourself responding to smell and texture, too? Did the taste arouse memories that also impelled you to draw?

Listen

Sound is probably the easiest thing to respond to with a haptic line drawing. After all, people often respond to the sound of music by moving their bodies and dancing. So drawing a haptic to sound is just another extension of that impulse to dance. Only this time, it’s your hands that are dancing! But how might you respond to other, more subtle sounds—birds singing, insects chirping, or dogs barking? How would you experience the sound of people talking on the bus; the sound of trains in the subway as they speed past you;
the sound of your thoughts? External sound enters your ears, and touches you; feel its vibrations in your body.

Try drawing to music. Experiment with different types of music. Draw in a dark concert hall while listening to a live performance. Sit under a tree on a breezy day and draw while you listen to the leaves rustle and the birds chirp. You’ll probably find your drawing hand responding right away. Let it move as it will. You may find that you want to fill up the whole page with marks. Or you may find a natural stopping point after drawing only a few expressive lines.

This might also be a good time to experiment with using your non-dominant hand. If you are right-handed, try drawing with your left, and vice versa. What might that under-used hand have to say?

Take notes; if you are listening to music, jot down the name of the piece and the composer. How did the sounds/music make you feel? Did you hear anything different this time around? Did your hand’s response correspond with how you were responding mentally and emotionally? Did you see anything different as you listened and drew? Did any other senses come into play as you focused on sound?
Haptic drawn to “Anitos” by Susie Ibarra, from the album, Electric Kulintang. Flexible tip felt pen on paper.
See

I find that drawing a haptic to something seen can be difficult. This is because the mind and the eyes working together tend to be very judgmental. My impulse is to make the drawing “look like” the thing I see. And that’s when the felt response can die. How do you respond haptically to something that you see? I found one way of getting around this when I responded to the sight of jellyfish with a haptic.

Of course, you can’t touch most jellyfish—at least, not the jellyfish in the Monterey Bay Aquarium. They are toxic and kept in large tanks behind glass. Yet, they’re mesmerizing and incredibly beautiful; there is also something very “tactile” about them that makes me want to touch them. It’s easy to “feel” or intuit their shape and movements. So, I took in and tried to remember the feel and vision of jellyfish as much as I could. I really paid attention. I also looked at photos of jellyfish. Then, later, I thought about them, and let my hand respond to the memory. I did not try to draw them “right,” but only as I felt them to be.

I did something similar with birds, particularly one kind of bird: the huge Philippine Eagle. I don’t have access to the real thing, so I looked at photographs, then tried to get the feel of it by drawing a haptic. What emerged seemed to focus on the feel and pattern of the feathers. I did not try to capture the actual shape of the bird, though, or even the beak and eyes; it’s the feathers that emerged, and a sense of motion, of almost-flight. It also reminded me of a feathered cloak or headdress, something a shaman might wear.
Haptic drawn from visual memory. Twig charcoal on newsprint.
Try drawing to visual stimuli such as water (lake water or ocean waves), birds, trees and flowers, the naked or clothed body of a loved one, the sunlight penetrating your closed eyelids, the movements of a frisky dog, or the shifting movement of cars passing on the street. Allow the line to do what it wants; you may find that your response to sunlight or shadows looks nothing like sunlight or shadows. So what?

Take notes afterwards. Consider the extent to which your sense of visual discernment and judgement may have influenced your drawing (or not). You may find that when you respond to the sight of something, you are actually responding to and even mimicking patterns and movements, or tactile sensations.
Taking it Further
Haptic Painting, “Nobody Waits.” Acrylics on canvas.
You can take the haptic experience in any number of directions. Treat your drawings as unfinished or finished pieces. Apply paint to them. Cut them up and turn them into collages. While I have focused on the importance of the body in haptic drawing, there’s nothing stopping you from experimenting with your haptics digitally, too.


You can also use the process to explore, philosophically, the nature of the line. What *is* a line? What is behind the impetus to make a mark (a point) and extend it into line? What is its relationship to other arts, such as music notation, weaving, or basketry? How does the line shape us, contain us, or free us? What do lines tell us about ourselves, our identities, and the journeys that we take? A good starting point might be Tim Ingold’s excellent anthropological study, *Lines: A Brief History* (2007).
You might use your haptic drawings to explore your own psyche. This is where notes can be especially useful. What thoughts and visions come to mind as you draw? What emotional response occurs as you listen to sounds and draw at the same time? I’m not a psychoanalyst, so I can’t recommend how you would go about this. Art, however, is often used in therapeutic contexts, and there are many books and articles on art therapy, and many practicing art therapists.

You can also use your haptics as “sketches” or “studies” for paintings, or even large installation pieces. Artist and poet Stephen Vincent creates haptics in beautiful accordion-fold books, bound with silk thread. You can see them in his website: http://www.stephenavincen.com/galleries/Novel/

You’ll find your own way with this process. Personally, I find haptics to be a wonderful, meditative practice. The process focuses my attention and can potentially promote a deep calmness and sense of discovery.
VI

A Reading and Viewing List


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