

COLLECTION

04

Paroles & Dessins: Thoughts on a Collaborative Drawing Project using Skype

Chloe Briggs and Véronique Devoldère

Article reprint - Collection #04 - spring 2012

ART+DESIGN \ EDUCATION





chloe.briggs@paris.edu
veronique.devoldere@paris.edu

Paroles et Dessins Thoughts on a Collaborative Drawing Project using Skype

Abstract

Students from two geographical locations were paired up and interacted through Skype. One student (the "instructor") gave verbal cues to guide the other student (the "instructed") in drawing an object that the instructor could not name. The drawing being created was projected on the computer screen, for both participants to see. When the task was completed the two students switched roles.

The following text is to be read as a collection of thoughts on a pedagogical exercise: a process of reflection that has enabled us to identify aspects of the project that we want to develop.

CHLOE BRIGGS AND
VÉRONIQUE DEVOLDÈRE

Photographies taken by faculty and students from Paris College of Art participating in the event. Illustrations by students of Paris College of Art.

Paroles et Dessins Thoughts on a Collaborative Drawing Project using Skype

CHLOE BRIGGS
AND VÉRONIQUE DEVOLDÈRE

LONDON/PARIS/NEW YORK Paroles et Dessins

A live, experimental drawing event

Art students in London, Paris and New York combine in a unique drawing experiment. Working across time zones each group will in turn be the "hand" and the "eye" of the other. Instructions given via skype will enable students in one city to draw "remotely" in another.

Friday 4th December

- London Local Time: 10am

- New York Local Time: 10am

Students from Wimbledon at Matts Gallery

- Paris Local Time: 11am

Students from Paris College of Art at 104

Saturday 5th December

- New York Local Time: 10am

Students from Parsons the New School on site

- Paris Local Time: 4pm

Students from Paris College of Art at 104

Instructions:

Date: Friday 4th December 2009

Set up Time: London 10am Paris 11am

Start Time: London 10.45am Paris 11.45am

Set up Instructions London:

- Make sure that skype is working
- Set image to full-screen
- Adjust your lap-top screen so that it does not default to black
- Get at least 2 sheets of paper prepared on table
- Organise all drawing materials so that they are easily accessible
- Set up camera so that it focuses on drawing paper

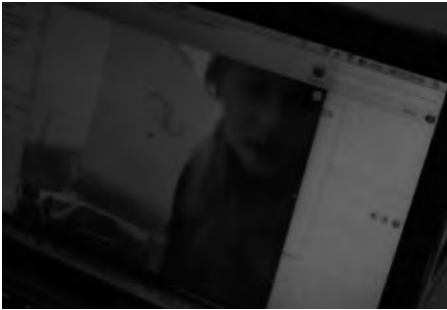
Set up Instructions Paris:

- 11.45am Paris dials up London

Short presentation of project Chloe Briggs and Véronique Devoldère

- Paris (the "brain") describe the object that you want London (the "hands") to draw by giving precise instructions about:
 - What materials to use
 - Where to place the drawing tool
 - How to move the drawing tool: what angle, for how long, at what pressure etc...
- Do not name the object or give any literal description – guide the hand of your partner through verbal direction
- The drawing is finished when the person drawing recognizes the object
- Swap roles





Skype as a Tool for Making Images

Skype allows communication in real-time via a web-cam; a way of interacting that is both at the forefront of communication technology and yet strangely rudimentary at the same time.

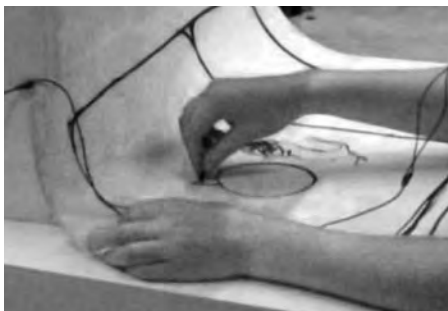
The technology is free and enables people to communicate aurally and visually with each other from almost anywhere in the world.

Visually, Skype in some ways feels like analogue media... like Polaroids with their muted colours and blurred edges. The web-cam sometimes gets stuck like super 8 film in a projector and one is left eerily suspended in time for a moment with the frozen image. This oscillation between movement and the static freeze-frame mirrors the act of drawing. The introduction of Skype as a tool to 'draw' with is relatively unexplored territory.

Drawing and Skype

In this exercise, the jarred moments, the watercolour-like palette of the computer screen, and the unfolding before one's eyes on that screen of an image that one is simply speaking are digital processes/qualities that charge the act of drawing with new possibilities. As drawing teachers we are always looking for meaningful ways to integrate analogue media with new technologies and we want our students to become dextrous in both domains. Just as we

encourage students to explore the qualities and test the limits of the physical materials they are working with, so should we expect this approach in the digital realm. The excitement in this project came when students discovered that collaborative drawing and Skype could really work together: coloured washes and lines transformed by the palette of the Skype screen, the real hand working and its ghostly after-image, words spoken into a computer direct a charcoal line in another time and space. When drawing from observation there is always a 'blind gap'¹ between what is seen and what is being translated on paper. The 'Paroles et Dessins' project extends this 'gap' between the eyes/brain and hand even further.



¹ See Helen Barff's essay, 'Why Draw?' http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/sota/tracey/widf/images/Helen_Barff.pdf.





Communicating and Learning across Distances

A typical student at Paris College of Art is used to travelling and communicating across great distances. The 'Paroles et Dessins' project is an attempt at integrating this reality into an educational project: to discover the possibilities of creative collaboration through Skype and to exploit its potential as an image-making tool. What stayed with us from this first four-way class – London, Paris, Manchester and New York – is the potential for student collaborations on a larger and more complex global scale. With these means, we will be able to move outside of the classroom and have students from more radically different backgrounds work creatively together without the high travel costs that usually make such initiatives difficult.

The emphasis on drawing is important: each partner has the opportunity to create a physical image in real space and time and to see how such an image can be aesthetically transformed via Skype on their screen. The 'virtual classroom' or advances in programs for 'distance learning' in art and design must inspire and find ways to maintain the tactile and sensual pleasures of making things.



The Language of Instruction

Words alone were used to direct the drawings; instructions guiding the hand of the partner as it made the marks needed to create an image of the object. Not allowed to name the object being drawn, students were forced to find the words that best suited the purely visual qualities and characteristics of what they were drawing – they had to create a vocabulary in order to describe how to draw it. For both the student instructing and the student drawing new ways to make marks and gestures were added to their repertoire.

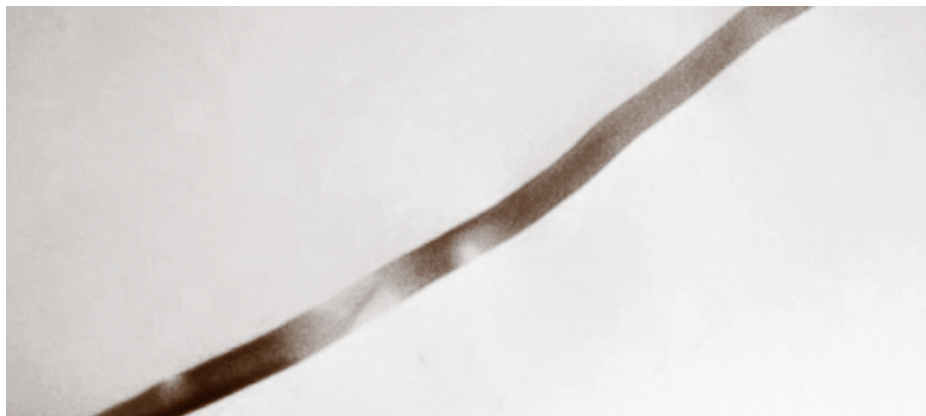
The 'Paroles et Dessins' exercise reveals a lot about the limits of verbal language and our ability to communicate the complexity of visual forms. It is these limits that we are confronted with on a daily basis when teaching art and design. Being in the role both of student and of teacher in this project, participants became aware of the patience and focus required to motivate their partner to work. The mistranslations and miscommunications manifest immediately in the drawn image, which becomes the unedited trace of the collaboration.

Our fifteen workstations completely filled the room; fifteen collaborative drawings working themselves out at the same time. The cacophony of instructions being called out in different languages became the soundtrack of the drawings revealing themselves on-screen.



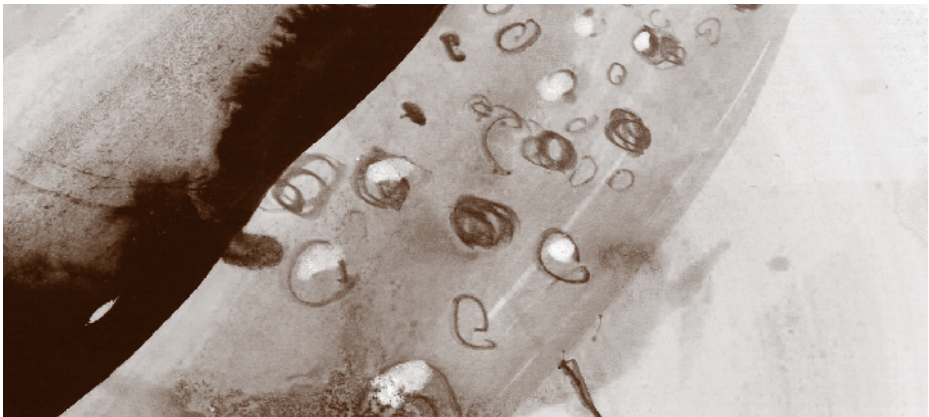


...make a light ink wash and use a large brush and just do a half circle from left to right, change tools, use a thin black ink pen and draw a line, very loose, go to right, up a little, lift pencil to finish line.

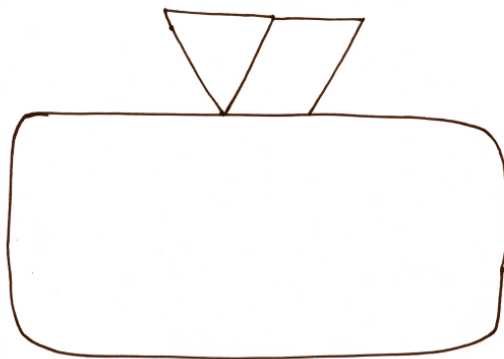
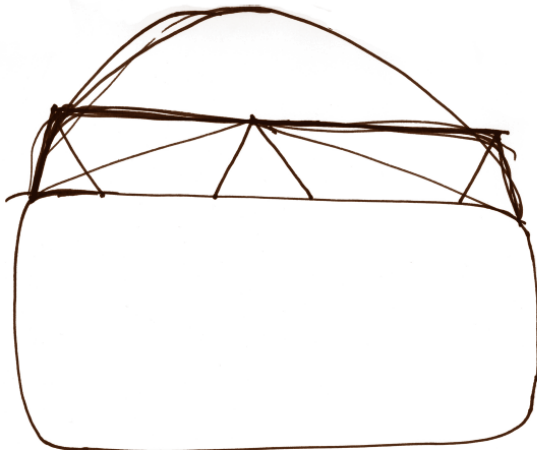
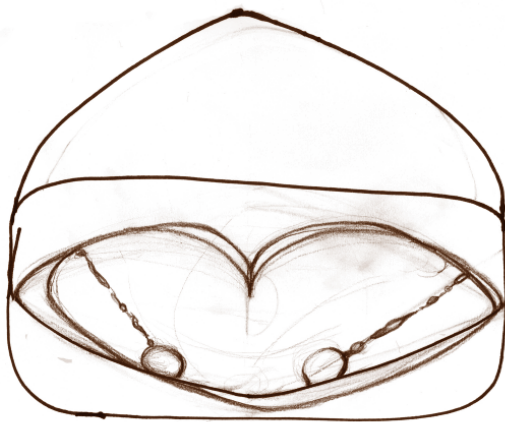


... make a light ink wash, use a medium brush and draw a diagonal from right to left, stop, stop you went to far.

... use a bambou and black ink, draw a zigzag in a diagonal from top to bottom, but keep it uneven, use a pencil and water to extend the lines and add more zigzag scribbles, to- wards the border of the shape... yes just like that.



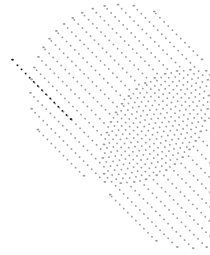
... use a pencil and draw uneven circles, scribbely and all different in size, you can insist in some of them and get darker.



The Drawings

The drawings express a strange tension— a tension between the marks made by an adult hand and the awkward, child-like quality of the finished image. What was made clear by bringing verbal and visual language together in order to make this collaborative work was how extremely difficult it is to articulate in words, the marks and gestures involved in the act of drawing. The two are distinct languages in their own right and it is this distinction that becomes apparent in this exercise – the odd drawings are the result of this struggle with their differences.

We have had many discussions with students about who is the principle author of the images: the eye – ‘Instructor’ or the hand – ‘the Instructed’? Or is it possible that it is both? In what proportion? Arguably, what is most interesting is that a drawing was created in two cities at the same time and holds within it two very different experiences.



REFERENCES

- Frayling, C.** (2011), *On Craftsmanship: Towards a new Bauhaus*, Oberon Masters, UK.
- de Duve, T.** (1994), “When Form has Become Attitude- And Beyond”, in *The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context*, eds., Nicholas de Ville and Stephen Foster, John Hansard Gallery, UK.
- Horowitz, F. A. and Danilowitz, B.** (2009), *Josef Albers: to Open Eyes*, Phaidon, UK.
- Maslen, M. and Southern, J.** (2011), *Drawing Projects: and exploration of the language of drawing*, Black Dog, London.