Although it sounds unlikely, the motivation for this project began in 1824. This is because from the very first day that the National Gallery opened its doors to visitors, it was intended as a resource for artists. Over time, however, this role became less significant. By the mid-twentieth century, the history of art had become a serious academic discipline, and the Gallery began to emphasise notions of scholarship and research. Furthermore, the acquisition and display of various iconic paintings, from Leonardo to Van Gogh, now become a tourist attraction, with visitors ticking off those works they felt obliged to see, if only for a moment.

However, in 1980 those principles behind the original foundation of the Gallery started to re-emerge. The Artist in Residence programme began, which developed into the current Rootstein Hopkins Associate Artist scheme. Living artists, from Paula Rego to Michael Landy, were invited to work from the collection and to make new work in response to what they found there. In 2000, the Gallery invited 24 contemporary artists to make their own personal responses to individual works in the Gallery. The resulting work, by artists such as Bill Viola, Louise Bourgeois and Anselm Kiefer, was exhibited in the memorable exhibition —Encounters—. And today’s students have facilities especially put aside for them, a dedicated space with stools and drawing boards that can be taken into the gallery spaces and used to draw from the pictures.

This specific project, Flight: Drawing Interpretations, has drawn from the collection in an especially imaginative and enjoyable way. Its theme carries notions of the human body in motion, reminding us that the study of the human figure is one of the foundation stones of western art. All the participants have taken part in different activities in the picture galleries, involving discussion, drawing, the exchange of ideas and I am both delighted and amazed at the range of responses. The original founders of the National Gallery would indeed have been more than happy to see this great collection of wonderful paintings continuing to be used in such creative ways.

One must be receptive, receptive to the image at the moment it appears...
—Gaston Bachelard, 1994 : xv

The aim of the research project Flight: Drawing Interpretations is to bring together a group of practice-led researchers from a range of subject disciplines and levels of experience at London College of Fashion (LCF) to consider the theme of Flight, within the context of the National Gallery. Over a period of a year, a number of informal ‘show and tell’ meetings took place both at the National Gallery, in front of the paintings, and at LCF, in order to see what new propositions and creative practice might emerge. The sharing of working methodologies, in which drawing formed a key aspect, was central to the research.

The exchange of knowledge gained through this process confirmed, I believe, the continuing relevance of reflective research. My initial fear that the theme might prove too simplistic was quickly dispelled as the researchers responded in individual and surprising ways to the proposition. It served as a rich stimulus for intellectual and creative journeys, evidence of which is represented both in the artworks and in the curatorial practice.

The project outcomes are displayed online alongside a Friday Late showcase of performances and temporary installations at the National Gallery (14 June 2013), preceded by a special symposium at LCF (24 May 2013).

Preface
—Colin Wiggins
Special Projects Curator
National Gallery London
&
—Charlotte Hodes
Professor in Fine Art
London College of Fashion
Flight

Flight: Drawing Interpretations is a collaborative project drawing together artists and researchers from the London College of Fashion and the National Gallery. Over the past year, practice-led researchers from the College have explored drawing as a methodological creative process in their responses to artworks at the Gallery. A theme was chosen, flight, which offered multiple perspectives within the box created by the perception of movement: “The perspective defines the movement, but this is not a physical movement. Rather a movement based on the senses, on our perception”. Colling’s Unfolding the box resonates with Methfeltes’ photo-anthology of perception and Derrida’s theory of the fold. Her process of ‘deconstructing the box’ lends the particular motif of a finished piece of work, starting from the absence of the body, and ending with the intersection of body and space, with a performance/installation, a ‘constitutive space’, an inviolable room.

The oppositional terms ‘absence’ and ‘presence’ are central motifs in questioning and rethinking the traditional duality of body and soul. As per Teplin’s performance Body and Soul, inspired by Quaytman’s Dual Cleve Mounted by Two Angels (1467-1468), looks at contemporary artists Antoni Gormley and Ron Mueck as further and crucial references. In dialogue with Gormley’s wire sculptures and Mueck’s Dead Dad (1996-1997), Teplin’s performance explores loss and transformation. Not only does transcendence characterize Teplin’s work in thematic terms, but it also defines its methodology. Body and Soul-installation extends beyond the dimension of the painting, translating in three-dimensional form the drawings created in response to it. The theme of loss, the liminal moment between life and death are similarly at the centre of Paul Bevan’s Unfolding the box, which outlines through the medium of photography a response to An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump by Joseph Wright ‘of Derby’. Imbued with references to flight, or lack of it, forces, gravity, and resistance, Bevan’s piece enact a sense in time suspended between state and movement, frozen in a barely perceptible transition. The tension between movement, space, suspension and gravity, transparency and immateriality, runs across several works commissioned for Flight. In particular, Charlotte Holmes, through her collage and paper cuts, emphasizes the opposition between materiality and immateriality, physicality and weightlessness. Drawing on Perugino’s The Virgin and Child with an Angel (1496-1500), Raphael’s The Moral Compassion (1502-23), Sandro Botticelli’s St Francis of Assisi with Angels (ca. 1475-80) and Simon Maris’s The Soul of St Barnabas Carried up to God (1459), the responses to the paintings of the National Gallery collection, the artist progressively yielded layers of meaning and further readings. For instance Caroline Rickholt, in the installation Samson’s ‘soul’, explores the Biblical story of Samson, as depicted by Rubens in Samson and Delilah (ca. 1609-1610). She embraces the psycho-epistemological manipulation that address Samson’s inner conflict resulting from the danger threatened by the erotic involvement with a woman. In exploring a painting of choice within the National Gallery, each artist can unravel the multiple meanings and interpretations it triggers, while other meanings might ultimately escape disclosure.

The removal of the physical body within the artwork is necessary to this illusion. As Caroline Collinge explains, the multiple perspectives within the box create the perception of movement: “The perspective defines the movement, but this is not a physical movement. Rather a movement based on the senses, on our perception”. Colling’s Unfolding the box resonates with Methfeltes’ photo-anthology of perception and Derrida’s theory of the fold. Her process of ‘deconstructing the box’ lends the particular motif of a finished piece of work, starting from the absence of the body, and ending with the intersection of body and space, with a performance/installation, a ‘constitutive space’, an inviolable room.

Notes on Flight

Dr. Flavia Loscialpo & Ben Whyman

Flight: Drawing Interpretations

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In this sense, Yuliya Krylova reviews the psychoanalytical readjustments of Freud, Rank and Kristeva, and draws from Michelangelo’s Leda and the Swan (after 1530) the image of the phallic mother. The resulting performance piece Leda’s Womb, reminiscent of the practice of artists such as Cy Twombly, Joseph Beuys, Helkuist and Rebecca Horn, culminates in an original choreographic and costume developed through drawing. The performance medium defines several artistic responses elaborated within Flight. Among them, in particular, Josie Bug’s Embroidery design and communication is characterised by the centrality of the body. Starting from A Detail from The Tempest (ca. 1862) by Peter Bulke, Bug’s collaboration with Janet Bulke Takaez organically generates, through the body, a performative clothing design, with the body becoming a design tool.

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The participants’ responses to Flight address the centrality of drawing within the artistic practice: drawing is the point of departure, the process, and often the outcome of the work, where it might even become a three-dimensional object. For instance, Stitch in the Air by Natalie Brown explores the representation of Punto in Aria ('stitch in the air') and the seventeenth century neckwear as seen in Portrait of Phillip Lassoo (1617) and Portrait of Achilles Claudio (1618) by Rembrandt. Brown’s initial drawings, made in response to these portraits, are laser cut, manipulated by hand, and then translated into three-dimensional structural surfaces to be worn.

A sketch becomes wearable, and a structure embodies an initial linear reaction to the painting.

The narrative responses to the National Gallery paintings hold particular centrality within Andrew Kenyon’s Ode to Colin Wiggins, dedicated to the Gallery’s Special Projects Curator. Inspired by Portrait of a Woman (ca. 1525) by Lucas Cranach the Elder and An Nymph by a Stream (1869-70) by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Kenyon’s embroidery brings together drawings based on a series of interviews conducted by the artist, and investigates the relationship between drawing and storytelling. A stitch holds them together, marking their ineluctable proximity.

Drawing is often a point of departure for the artist’s journey, and accompanied it to its next destination. Xiaoxu Cao’s Enclosure’s Weaving Nest moves towards the notions of stasis and migration, decontextualising an arbitrary mix of marks in A Wall in Naples (1782) by Thomas Jones. These are interpreted as geographical coordinates and connected by the artist in an unexpected pattern, mapping a new narrative.

In drawing together the artistic responses created for Flight, what emerges is then, beyond the obvious thematic associations, the real ‘flight’ in the end is the trajectory of the artist’s layered journey punctuated by turns and manifestations, where drawing is an essential component disclosing unexpected possibilities. As stated by Simon Thorogood, the element of chance is fundamental within the artistic work, where spontaneous combinations open up: “This process of construction nurtures and nourishes my understanding of drawing, as a method of travelling, of being familiar and unfamiliar with something or somewhere.”

From a curatorial perspective, drawing is, for many curators or exhibition makers, a core process of developing thoughts, unpicking issues and creating a space to think through ideas. For Judith Clark, exhibition maker, author and Professor of Art History at the University of California, los Angeles, “This process of coruscation nurtures and nourishes my understanding of drawing, as a method of ‘travelling’, of being familiar and unfamiliar with something or somewhere”.
Even the institution of the museum is likely to be subject to transformation. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, curator and author, argues that museums could be more than homogeneous spaces. The museum should be ‘a site that forwards a diversity of conditions so that, let’s say, the white cube, a laboratory and a space for intimate conversation can coexist’ (Obrist, Rubbing and Boeri, 2003: 150). The conversations regularly held at the Gallery were a fundamental component of Flight, a privileged opportunity to share initial steps and progress through the project. These symposia, documented on the blog, put emphasis on the transitional nature of the project, on the inherent element of ‘journey’ within it.

The traditional museum exhibition and display, according to Obrist, can move beyond traditional notions of order and structure, and allow for transversal, transitional, monotonous responses and interpretations (Obrist, Rubbing and Boeri, 2003: 150). Flexuation, instability, unpredictability, inconsistencies could intentionally be invited into the museological space. Even the display itself is a fluctuating one, and just one possibility among many alternative arrangements. Instead of continua, the exhibition expresses connective possibilities (Obrist, Rubbing and Boeri, 2003: 150-1).

With Flight, the intention is to recompose how we perceive objects in a museum/gallery space, and how we interact objects in the online space, the hyper-real place of 2-D still and moving image. Flight: Drawing Interpretations aims to experiment with display, presenting ideas and objects in four different contexts: an online exhibition (the Flight online exhibition held at LCF; an online blog documenting the process, and an event at the National Gallery, where the artists’ responses are exhibited within a performative framework; a symposium as an opportunity to share initial steps and progress through the project. These symposia, documented on the blog, put emphasis on the transitional nature of the project, on the inherent element of ‘journey’ within it.

The hypermodern era is characterised by constant ‘movement, fluidity, and flexibility’ (Lipovetsky, 2005: 11). Within the hyper-temporalised age, it is possible to experience a broadening of the contours of memory: ‘we have moved from the veil of the flimsy to the invisible, from the limited to the ubiquitous, from memory to the hypermemory’ (Lipovetsky, 2003: 101). These changes have significant implications for the display of artifacts within and, even more (Lipovetsky, 2005: 58). These changes have significant implications for the display of artifacts within and, even more (Lipovetsky, 2005: 58). These changes have significant implications for the display of artifacts within and, even more (Lipovetsky, 2005: 58). These changes have significant implications for the display of artifacts within and, even more (Lipovetsky, 2005: 58).

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The online space is where not only information and research outcomes are archived, but where audiences can return, re-investigate, reconsider – and even redefine – their relationship with the project. Having a space to ‘remember remembering’, re-engage with, and debate these outcomes is essential for critical thinking. As philosopher Gaston Bachelard describes it, the space is an integration of ‘thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind’ (1994: 6).

And yet, we should note that the power of museum display might be lost on a snarky, Mary Anne Staniszewski refers to the act of viewing a virtual exhibition almost as a dissolution from the self – the physical interaction with an object is absent, we are only given visual clues to the shape, dimensions and colour of that object. Future technological advances may reduce this ‘digital transcendence of the body’ (2000: 15), but for now the act of viewing is removed from the real object, in a way that echoes Plato’s allegory of the shadows reflecting reality on the walls of the cave (The Republic).

Sociologist Mike Featherstone highlights the increasing demand for and volume of information uploaded onto websites, to the point that ‘life increasingly becomes lived in the shadow of the archive’ (2006: 591). We are aware that using this project online is creating, in effect, an archive for posterity and this comes with responsibilities. In respect to archiving data online, Staniszewski notes ‘Our current “age of information” – with our so-called “new technologies revolution” and its most dramatic manifestations, the internet – can also be seen, in a contradictory way, as an “age of the archive”.’ We hope the enhancement of both ends of the spectrum for “information conditions”. There is an increased invisibility, fluidity and ephemeral nature and volume of information uploaded onto websites as an “age of the archive”.

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This invisibility, fluidity and ephemeral nature of particular interest to this project. In the process of an ongoing investigations, we invite chance, openness to other opportunities, and pitfalls, urging the audience to consider and question what has been formed, in whatever form. The responsibility of creating hiatus, offering a platform for criticism of and engagement with future research, we believe, is a healthy, invigorating opportunity.
...my step is heavy
but I can fly like an angel
and so like a hawk am I now
my elbows flap like wings