

The pedagogic practice of natural drawing in pandemic times

La práctica pedagógica del dibujo del natural en tiempos de pandemia

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Abstract: This article proposes a brief review of some ideas, approaches, and strategies used in teaching Natural Drawing courses. These artistic, practical courses of a long tradition in the Faculty of Art and Design of the PUCP have been affected by the complex situation produced by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and the virtualization of many courses of the faculty. The main purpose is to situate and reflect on the pertinence of courses of this nature that apparently does not seem to have a space or relevance in a virtual education; more contemporary teaching proposals of visual arts are also considered. The article reports on the debates and difficulties to which this practice is subjected and tries to shed light on possible future scenarios and their place in the current context.

Keywords: Drawing, pandemic, drawing education, education

Resumen: El artículo propone una breve revisión de algunas ideas, planteamientos y estrategias que se emplean en la enseñanza de los cursos de Dibujo del Natural. Estos cursos prácticos artísticos de larga tradición en la Facultad de Arte y Diseño de la PUCP se han visto afectados debido a la compleja coyuntura producida por la pandemia de la COVID-19 del 2020 y la virtualización de muchos cursos de la Facultad. El propósito principal es situar y reflexionar acerca de la pertinencia de cursos de esta naturaleza que en apariencia parecieran no tener un espacio o relevancia en una educación virtual; también se consideran propuestas de enseñanza más contemporáneas de las artes visuales. El artículo da cuenta de los debates y dificultades a los que esta práctica se encuentra sometida e intenta dar luces sobre posibles escenarios futuros y su lugar en el contexto actual.

Palabras clave: Dibujo del natural, pandemia, enseñanza del dibujo, educación

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which became a national public health problem in 2020, our teaching practice entered a period of deep reflection and search for strategies and reasoning that would allow us to continue our educational work in a different and particularly challenging context. The question of whether the pedagogical model we were following would be viable for online education generated debates and discussions to find the foundations of the practices we were previously using in our on-campus classes and to

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see their viability in the new educational context. This essay tries to show the challenges, strategies, and developments that were specifically used in some courses of Natural Drawing in the Faculty of Art and Design of the PUCP in 2020. The main focus of these courses is the study of the human figure and its environment. Their intention is that this information can contribute to the debate on its place in artistic education. Throughout this essay, we will define some ideas about the nature of these courses, their current practice, and their relevance in the context of change. Course approaches and exercises are used, as well as student work that will help to explain discussions and debates surrounding the issues mentioned here.²

To put this practice into context and the adaptations implemented throughout the year, I will begin by defining what Natural Drawing is. It is defined as an artistic practice carried out through direct observation of a model, whether they are people, objects, or landscapes (Birch, 2017). This makes us think that this practice would be based on a specific capacity to repeat or imitate what we observe. This idea could be rooted in the fact that its exercise originates mainly from centuries-old artistic traditions, which focused on drawings of remarkable realism. However, in this essay, I propose to rescue the idea that its practice suggests for recovering basic and formative knowledge to develop a visual language through observation and analysis. Thus, reconfigure what is observed and incorporate it into a critical and reflective work. As we will see later, these ways of representing what we perceive are not aimed at faithfully reproducing reality but rather at combining a series of knowledge, techniques, and learning that the student must handle with some degree of solvency. Learning to draw what surrounds us is one of the most direct ways to link ideas and reflections on what we observe and the personal and intimate questions we encounter along the way.

The Natural Drawing courses are developed between the fifth and eighth levels of the curriculum for students who belong to the art majors of the Faculty of Art and Design (FAD): Painting, Sculpture, Engraving, and Art Education, and are elective courses in the major of Graphic Design. These four courses form a block in which we work on understanding the body and its environment, both in its anatomical structure and in its potential for meaning mediated by the techniques and practices of drawing. It is necessary to mention that, regardless of the present context that constantly challenges us, the traditional approach of the Natural Drawing courses at the FAD has been questioned for a long time because students perceived that the exercises repeated in the four courses without a definition of clear teaching and learning plans and perhaps the exercises were limited to observations of a formal and academic nature. The other reason is that there was little coordination, order, and correspondence between these courses, which are at a second level in developing the PUCP and FAD competencies. The learning outcomes were intuited but not clearly allocated programmed. Thus, the context of the online classes accelerated the need to implement pedagogical strategies and effective working methods to develop the sensitivity to express each student by strengthening and motivating discussion and

2 I thank the students of the Natural Drawing courses, as well as the group of professors with whom I shared spaces for exchanging ideas during these times that would undoubtedly be much more difficult without their constant dedication and openness. I would also like to express my gratitude to Marcia, Stéfano, Alejandra and Kosta for their kindness in allowing me to use their drawings in this article.

reflection about their practice. We can see, then, that the questions were previous and that the pandemic stimulated decision-making and the necessary rethinking.

One of the fundamentals of natural drawing is observation, understood as a way of analyzing the environment through exercises that allow us to reflect and draw conclusions about what we observe and what surrounds us. So, in the context of virtual education and COVID-19, the following question arose: is it viable to offer a series of courses that for a long time were centered on the live drawing of models posing in class, traditionally, when it seems that the subject represented fades away together with the classroom? To answer this question, I propose a couple of ideas that contextualize the answer that I will try to give. (*Fig.1*)

To begin with, I should point out that one of the main ideas in natural drawing is that students should build their work based on the exercises proposed in class to develop drawing skills and resources and value the processes used to put what they have learned into practice. In academic and artistic spaces, a dilemma arises in the practice of drawing, which is the product of debates and discussions about its relevance and place: the apparent confrontation between the primacy of skill versus the importance of handling concepts and the ability to generate reflections about them, the latter seen as something outside of natural drawing. Due to this apparent conflict of approaches, this practice is usually placed on the side of the technical tradition, which would consist of developing a set of conceptual and motor skills focused on the “know-how” (Díaz Padilla, 2017, p. 60). Traditionally, in FAD, a repetitive approach was handled, its central objective mainly consisted of reproducing coherently and skillfully the study of the human body and reproducing the body and the specific context proposed in the classroom or occasionally outdoors, which was considered no longer valid and the field of action of this type of drawing was definitely limited.

However, it is necessary to go back to basics and point out that both, the development of technical skill and reflective ability, are truly integrated into the training process of our students. We are aware that many times these two will not develop together. Still, they do occur, so the dichotomy between technique and representation versus reflective inquiry would not exist as such. In natural drawing, knowledge is built up and is verified in the work of representation; that is to say, the procedural aspect goes hand in hand with the intellectual aspect, understanding this as the capacity to integrate the means used with one’s own experience. John Ruskin, in his book *Técnicas de dibujo* (Drawing Techniques), states:

In all that we are going to do from now on, direct imitation will prove more or less impossible. You must aim at imitation as far as possible. When you have time and occasion, some portions of a landscape, as your skill increases, you will be able to represent them with an approximation that will almost be that of a mirror image. However, even if you gain many skills, you will always need good judgment to choose and the quickness to grasp certain fundamental or fugitive things. You will have to strive more and more to observe characteristic points and get hold of straightforward methods. (2012, p. 94)

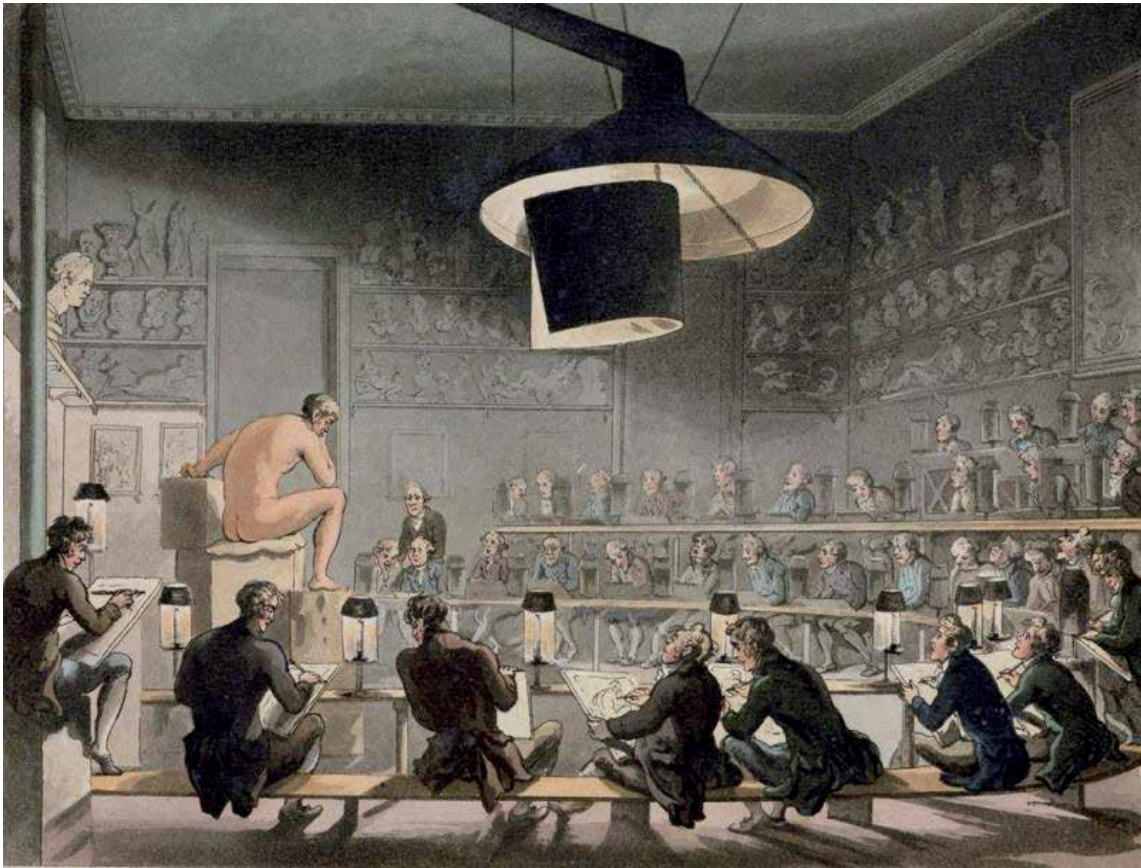


Figure 1. Thomas Rowlandson. Drawing from Life at the Royal Academy, 1808-1810

Therefore, it is not only a matter of developing technical aspects or the ability for mimetic reproduction but transforming what is collected into the action of observing, doing, and reflecting. This implies a difference between seeing, looking, and observing³, which leaves the copy out of the reflexive scope.

One of the basic issues of natural drawing is the possibility of motivating personal reflections, as a set of learning in constant development within the personal process of each student, and the most important means to achieve this through drawing is the critical observation of the environment. Through observation, the student acquires certain visual knowledge, such as analyzing, linking, and decoding data from what is observed, whether it is from reality or from an image in front of him/her. This ability, which is taught from the beginning of artistic training, is not limited to observation. It is there where drawing intervenes as a discipline capable of interpreting the information received to materialize learning processes through reasoning and arguments that decode the data perceived from reality. Thus, representing reality is understood as a way of re-presenting it, so that drawing becomes a new reality based on the hierarchical interrelationships of the elements of the composition and systematized in visual categories. We see then that it is imperative to displace some common senses to understand that learning in natural drawing and its practice does not necessarily originate from the live model, a photograph, or a video, but in developing observation and reflection beyond the explicit form. Therefore, the teacher's task is to motivate the students to combine these instances so that learning goes hand in hand with their motivations and personal practice. This reflection is the trigger for the redesign and approach of new perspectives for these courses, considering the questions described above and reaffirming the commitment to learning and thinking in the practice of drawing.

Having presented the practice of natural drawing and the current situation with COVID-19, I will describe the plans developed that show the changes made. I will focus on the student's environment to contextualize and recontextualize the body as a strategy and respond to the quarantine and its little or no mobility. This implied abandoning passive observation and trying to propose points of view, angles, and frames to apprehend the body and its space from different perspectives. Beyond the possible themes and positions regarding natural drawing, we consider it important to propose a turning point that questions the practices and concepts of drawing itself and creates a space to participate and propose to establish connections with the techniques developed in the students' careers.

A central axis was to recover the idea of the portrait and self-portrait as a vehicle for recognition in this complex and introspective era of new social practices. Berger pointed out with certainty that drawing is an act of discovery, of dissection, in order to reconstruct again with the imagination "until it finds the content of its own storage of past observations" (2005, p. 6). Following this idea, this type of drawing is like an autobiographical document. Portrait drawing was approached as an instrument that would show our young student artists' own needs. I would also say that the practice and theme of self-portrait are

3 Following some definitions of the RAE dictionary (2020), in Spanish, the verb *to see* means 'to perceive with the eyes through the action of light'. In the case of the verb *to look*, it appears as: 'to direct the sight to an object'. And, the verb *to observe*, on the other hand, appears as 'to examine attentively'. Thus, we can say that seeing is more related to the physical capacity, looking alludes to the deliberate act; while observing implies a greater involvement of the senses.

deeply linked to drawing, as both share a private character, and their process and nature allows them to be presented in a more “open” way compared to portrait in other disciplines. (Fig.2)

As we know, the portrait is one of the most used themes in art, not only because of the desire to perpetuate through time the subject of the portrait but also because of the need to analyze and interpret the image of the portrayed subject, his or her face, gestures and structural particularities that reflect his or her personality. Through this practice, the students confront themselves with their own identity, with what questions them deeply, as Díaz Padilla affirms:

The self-portrait raises the question of the “I” and its “double,” overlaying, in a certain way, the mythical meaning of Narcissus: the desire to catch the reflected image, to retain it and materialize it is a representation; to capture and see his double, his other self, which is the mirror image that returns numerous questions; the pretension of representing oneself, stopping time in a timeless instant as a means of proclaiming and attesting to his own existence (2007, p. 216)

Thus, they worked with their own bodies and faces and represented themselves in their daily spaces, trying to place themselves in a new context that forces them to stay at home but does not diminish their eagerness to explore new resorts or ways of being, reaffirming and questioning their own methods of execution.

This also implied studying the body and its context as a strategy to rethink a reality modified by the FAD courses’ online modality. To achieve this, a variety of visual references were used to help think and formulate the space/composition in a bolder way. Stills from films and videos were used, as well as other media that could motivate this exploration. The possibility of working with their bodies or bodies of family members contextualized in new points of view beyond the traditional pictorial planes helped to create works with a more intimate and reflective character.

I will make a brief parenthesis to make an observation about the on-campus classes. It has been noticed that although there is respect for those who worked as classroom models, many times the view of the subject of study in the courses used to establish a hierarchy between models and teachers/students, that could go beyond the labor relationship because we are facing the construction of the representation of someone else from a point of view that should be conscious by those who participate in such activities. I think that these situations, if not considered, could generate non-ideal circumstances in the educational environment. I do not mean to say that directly drawing naked subjects is contrary to ethics, but that these discussions have been observed more frequently when students have had to be their own models more and more frequently due to a context of long-distance education. The fact that they are now active subjects of representation has revealed in them a series of ideas and questionings that have been elaborated in classes, which brought conversations about subordinating and the status of the body in current representation. This has allowed those who have participated in the classes to understand that the construction of the subject’s identity does not start from a natural epistemic center, but that it is shaped in relation to another being, and that the fixed identity idea is disarticulated as soon as it is contrasted with different angles or points of view. Consequently, the image that is constructed becomes a position relative to the structures that shape it (Hall, 2010, p. 420). In other words, these represented identities are configurations of diverse articulations, not



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Figure 2. Marcia Tello, student of Natural Drawing 3, 2020-1. *Autorretrato*, 2020

Figure 3. Stéfano Campodónico, student of Natural Drawing 3, 2020-1. *Espacio y profundidad*, 2020

Figure 4. Alessandra Escribens, student of Natural Drawing 3, 2020-1. *Escenas desde un vano*, 2020

only technical but also ethical and reflexive, which are a product of positions that weave and form them in every sense of the word.(Fig. 3)

In some exercises, the students would register themselves within already formulated narratives, that is, in previously constructed spaces, such as old photographs from their childhood or previous ones, but with the idea of proposing new points of view of that fixed reality and varying angles, imagining new register points, creating compositions that would investigate the possibility of constructing narratives that would represent the forced lockdown and what it meant to them.

As I have mentioned, the proposal in the redesign of these courses was to continue studying the body and its possibilities to transform the space it inhabits. In this thematic line, it was decided to work on the spaces and landscapes inhabited and remembered by the students as a recognizable source rather than resorting to spaces outside their individual experiences. It was important to focus attention on those fragments of coexistence that, in their apparent triviality, carried forms of compositional organization and personal order. As we can see in the examples proposed in this article, the sight is directed towards making the environment a subject in itself, although these fragments and spaces are only a key factor because they were chosen by their authors. This choice was made based on what those spaces awakened, mediating both perception and the sensorial or affective aspects that flowed through them. This exercise of reflection of space, however, implied an ordering and constructive look with systems of compositional organization to capture the experience of its perception. In this process, the proposed space was materialized in lines and structures that were embodied in the drawing design and proposed a hierarchical organizational order using drawing concepts.(Fig. 4)

The proposal that was used for natural drawing did not consist of prioritizing perceptions or emotions that could distort reality but rather to continue developing a reason to represent a series of strategically chosen orders, which are governed or regulated by the visual concepts of two-dimensional representation. We can say that this expressive experience is transferred to the drawing because it is understood not only for what it represents graphically but for what it is in itself: a set of strokes, relationships, hierarchies, and forms that are represented in it.

As for the work on space and environment, another idea was to work on the mnemonic memory of our students. The exercises were designed to recover personal and spatial memories lost during quarantine and lockdown. The exercise was conceived as a sort of “archive” that could collect ideas, thoughts, sensations, and motivations through the act of drawing, and the practice of drawing was proposed as a vehicle to produce and build memory. The basis was simple; on the one hand, they had to focus on the memory of recognizable spaces and their evocative ability and, on the other, they had to transfer the data obtained from technological resources, such as Google Earth, to the chosen format and focus attention on particular or general aspects of the proposed space in a constant back and forth between the formal data and the capacity for selective recall, beyond the transposition of the digital image.(Fig.5)

In conclusion, I would like to point out that the present context of pandemic and health crisis allows us to rethink our teaching and artistic practices. In this sense, it encourages us to abandon common places, such as natural drawing, as a practice dedicated simply to the mimetic representation of what is observed. This new context is still a learning space,



Figure 5. Kosta Mendoza, student of Natural Drawing 4, 2020-2. *Estudio de tinta: espacio y profundidad*, 2020

which considers the modality of online classes as part of a reality that is not static or immutable and full of pre-established rules but rather provided with challenges, learning, and opportunities to reconfigure academic views. As pointed out by some authors reviewed for this article, the knowledge of our environment is in constant change because our view is constantly evolving, as our experience, our senses and the construction of our knowledge transform our perception of reality, as well as the way we capture it (Díaz Padilla, 2017; Berger, 2005). By opening the field of representation to these new logics, it is possible to re-shape a sensitive view that helps modify our environment, rethink it critically, and set out a position about it.

Drawing should continue to be valued as a tool for thought, as a means that allows and encourages the exploration of the interior and exterior, that will enable us to express endless sensations and ideas, and that promotes the development of the creative and reflective capacities of those who participate in the course. As Fernández Alva says:

Drawing is an act of thought that is translated into language; the relationship between thoughts and drawing is a fact; it is a process, as linguists have shown when referring to speech. When an idea becomes drawing it undergoes many changes, it is not a mere representation of what it contemplates; in the drawing, on the contrary, it finds its reality and its form, a good drawing goes beyond brief information, the interaction that drawing has between thought and the act of drawing itself makes it possible for the image to allow us to participate in all its meaning. (1979, p. 12)

Even under the present conditions of quarantine and restrictions of the current situation, I am able to affirm that natural drawing allows for the manifestation of diverse creative strategies. And these strategies make it necessary to overcome the idea of academic and conventional drawing, which reduces its practice to mere mimetic representation and whose main objective would be a faithful reproduction of reality. In this article, I have tried to show that the practice of drawing is not elusive to creative inquiry since it undoubtedly requires a student committed to its environment. Drawing as a manifestation and discipline should be thought of as a practice that finds consonance with the individual motivations of those who practice it, perhaps more intimately than any other process of representation. In the study of nature, we observe a constellation of elements that have different ways of being arranged and solved. These solutions are learning in itself since the student, through reflection, deploys strategies that allow him to understand, interpret and account for the sense with which he builds his points of view.

Before the pandemic, there were already intense debates about the place of drawing in the Faculty of Art and Design. In practice, the diversity of drawing seems to overflow the most traditional ideas, which implies the challenge of adapting to new needs, for example, in the accreditation processes or those of contemporary art and design with the incorporation of new tools and media, such as digital drawing and the creation of video animations, always at the service of the commitment to rediscover, redefine and reflect on our place of enunciation.

Perhaps the health crisis and the new modality of online classes should be addressed as part of the constant movement to which the history of art and education are subjected. As Díaz Padilla points out, what takes on the character of certainty is the need to rethink artistic training, not as a mere apprenticeship, but to approach it as manual training (2017, p. 68). The demands for the artistic creation of our students are in constant evolution and

variation. Therefore, they must be contemplated as part of a preparation that responds to new challenges.

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