

LEAF TO LEOPARD

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO JOHN RUSKIN'S
The Elements of Drawing



written and drawn in

2007

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PUBLISHED BY
The University of Auckland, New Zealand

INTRODUCTION

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PROFESSOR SHARMAN PRETTY
Dean, National Institute of Creative Arts and Industries,
The University of Auckland

IN

1857

the year that Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*,
Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* and
the Christmas song 'Jingle Bells'
were published, the Victorian art critic

JOHN RUSKIN

completed and published,

THE ELEMENTS OF
DRAWING

Leaf to Leopard: an abstract of natural facts

When I think about drawing I think of John Ruskin.

'I want the room now occupied by the town classes for a grammar-school of Art. I wish to make it thoroughly interesting even to very young children, to fill it with prints by great masters for the general public, and with cases containing books, seals, casts of coins, etc.'

Fourteen years after publishing *The Elements of Drawing*, John Ruskin founded his model art school within The University of Oxford's art gallery. Alexander Macdonald was appointed as the drawing master, and using a collection of fine examples amassed by Ruskin, he went about teaching the ladies and gentlemen of Oxford to draw. Since 1871 there have been nine drawing masters. Alexander McDonald was the first; I was the eighth.

This essay is the record of my experiences trying to follow John Ruskin's course. The aim was for me, a person who has been trained to draw, to follow his designed-for-beginners course and test it to destruction. In order to decide whether it was of any value as a teaching tool today and, if it wasn't, to identify any parts worth salvaging.

LETTER I, EXERCISE X

Put on a wash of colour, prepared very pale... then another wash.



THE ELEMENTS OF DRAWING

In the preface Ruskin writes, 'I believe that the sight is a more important thing than the drawing; and I would rather teach drawing that my pupils would learn to love Nature, than teach looking at Nature that they may learn to draw.' Then he immediately positions his statement: 'It is surely also a more important thing, for young people and unprofessional students, to know how to appreciate the art of others, than to gain much power in art themselves,' making it clear that he wasn't in the business of producing a how-to-do book.

As you work your way through the exercises, what becomes clear is the importance Ruskin places on an extraordinarily high benchmark of quality, quite clearly measured against the achievements of JMW Turner.

With such an exalted level of performance for his students to aspire to, it is clear from the start that there is a basic contradiction – a drawing course aimed at committed amateurs, where standards are pegged against those of one of the greatest landscape painters.

Ruskin's 'elements' were not, as the title might suggest, a systematic breakdown of the component parts of drawing, but a strange blend of technical tips and moral philosophy geared not towards the training of an elite, but rather the enlightenment of the masses – a goal totally in keeping with the patronising rhetoric of Victorian England.

Towards the end of the Preface, he tells us that, the human figure will not be discussed because it is too difficult for amateurs to deal with. After the introduction comes the contents page which is the window on Ruskin's warm, patronising approach. Rather than chapters, we are told there will be three letters that together are 'The Elements':

LETTER I

EXERCISE I teaches us to shade and cross hatch with a pen to gradually build degrees of darkness, then to scratch away with a penknife to find light.

EXERCISE II deals with accuracy. We are asked to copy a drawing of the outline of a leaf, then by laying a tracing of the original over it, establish our mistakes and correct them by eye. The goal? – to build up a 'lightness of hand and keenness of sight.'



LETTER I, EXERCISE X
CONTINUED,
ELEGANT LEAF
pen and ink,
14 x 11 ins, 2007

'And some leaves seen
with the edge turned
towards you.'

From this point we
move to drawing whole
trees. By the end of the
Letter I, if you have
followed the exercises
and practiced
sufficiently, you should
be able to neatly fill in
gradated tone between
outlines and draw a
leaf from a number of
different angles.

EXERCISE III The seamless blending of tone, a refinement of the first exercise; ‘When your eye gets keen and true, you will see the gradation on everything in nature.’

EXERCISE IV is a repeat of Exercise III, but with a pencil and India rubber.

EXERCISE V Is a hand/eye co-ordination exercise that culminates with Ruskin telling us Vasari’s story of Giotto drawing his perfect circle.

EXERCISE VI ‘Choose any tree,’ he says, one ‘that you think is pretty, which is nearly bare of its leaves.’ He then poetically asks us to think of the boughs as dark rivers against the light sky. He concludes by telling us: ‘You cannot do too many of these studies.’

LETTER I, EXERCISE X,
RIVER TREE
brush and wash,
14 x 11 ins, 2007

‘The perfect way of drawing is with shade without line.’



Then, as if he’s given up wanting to be our teacher, he asks us to try and find someone to teach us how to lay down watercolour tints.

At this point, Ruskin drifts away from drawing as an essentially dry activity and focuses on watercolour.

EXERCISE VII starts with the assumption that none of us has found a watercolour teacher. He explains how to float watercolour into drawn squares, and encourages us to practise getting different tonal densities while developing accuracy working within the parameters of a drawn shape.

EXERCISE VIII takes us back into drawing with a dry medium, with a stone as our subject. ‘Go into the garden, or the road and pick up the first round or oval stone you can find.’

EXERCISES IX and X, Ruskin first takes us back to technical school to further develop our skill with watercolour.

At the start of his second letter, Ruskin summarises what his first ‘letter’ aimed to teach us.

‘...to draw with fair success either rounded and simple masses, or complicated arrangements of form, like those of leaves; provided only these masses, or complexities will stay quiet for you to copy and do not extend into quantity so great as to baffle your patience.’

EXERCISE VI (cont.)



In the second letter.
talking about how you
can tell a tree's history
by its shape.

— how troublesome trees
have come in its way, and
pushed it aside, and tried
to strangle or starve it;
where and when kind trees
have sheltered it, what
boughs of it behave
best and have the
best fruit; and so on.

"you cannot do
too many of these
studies"

12

Shel F. L.
Jun '07

LETTER II

sketching from nature

From the start of his second letter, the problems of dealing with nature are made clear. 'The clouds will not wait while we copy their heaps and clefts, the shadows will escape from us as we try to shape them.'

Writing like an explorer from another world, Ruskin encourages us to look for structure not surface pattern. He then proposes an exercise that is more or less a repeat of one in the first letter; the difference is the level of passion he encourages.

'Now, I want you in these first sketches from nature to aim exclusively at understanding and representing these vital facts of form, saying to yourself before you lay on a single touch 'that leaf is the main one, that bough is the guiding one'.

Once this is said, Ruskin surprisingly turns his back on nature and directs us towards art, advocating making copies of JMW Turner's *Liber Studiorum*, and photographs of the landscape. The importance of Turner in the equation cannot be underestimated. Ruskin saw Turner as the living bridge between art and nature.

In the first part of this second letter, Ruskin is haunted by the lack of time we may have to carry out our exercises. Towards the middle of the letter, he is writing like a lonely man working too late at night, clearly missing the structure he created with the exercises in the first letter, his lesson plan begins to crumble.

LETTER II, 108,
A TREE LIKE A RIVER
brush and wash,
14 x 11 ins, 2007

'That leaf is the main one, that bough is the guiding one.'

In Letter II, Ruskin asks us, without reference to the seasons, to draw the branches of a tree 'with just a few leaves on', whilst we are out there looking at nature. It was winter and there were no leaves. I could, however, see the pruned apple tree's branches and trunk quite clearly. He asks us to think of the branches as tributaries flowing into a larger river.

LETTER II, 127,
TREE IN ROME
pen and ink,
14 x 11 ins, 2002

'You may think we have
said enough about the
tree already.'

Near the beginning of
the second letter Ruskin
asks us to step outside
and draw a tree in leaf,
paying close attention
to its detail. Working in
the winter months it was
pointless sitting in a snow
covered orchard looking
at trees with no leaves. I
include a drawing that
I made in the Borghesi
Gardens in Rome by way
of circumnavigating the
problem that the seasons
presented me with.



LETTER I, EXERCISE VIII

'If you can draw a stone
you can draw anything.'

'Never by choice draw anything polished,
avoid all brass rods and curtain ornaments,
chandeliers, plate glass, and fine steel. Avoid
all very neat things. They are exceedingly
difficult to draw and very ugly when drawn.
Avoid as far as possible, country divided by
hedges.'

Having ranted in the dark for a while, daylight breaks
through, as he puts himself in his students' shoes,
and worries about his students responding to written
instructions at home, alone.

1 'If you can draw
a stone ~~EXERCISE VIII~~ you can draw anything!'

4. go out to your garden, or into the
road, and pick up the first round or oval
stone you can find, not very white or
very dark.



develop your power to draw Roundness

John Ruskin



LETTER II, 142,
DUCK NO. 2
brush and Ink,
14 x 11 ins, 2007

'Ripple from a wild
duck's breast'.

A wash drawing
(without pencil guide
lines) that puts to work
the tonal exercises
learned in Letter I,
applying it to advice
aired by Ruskin in the
second letter relating
to drawing water
— '...watch carefully
the lines of disturbance
when a bird swims.'

vegetation, water and skies

Clearly obsessed by trees and foliage, Ruskin launches into another 'trees are good for you' tirade. Very near the end of this he offers a few general words on water, where he stresses the need to spend time working on reflections, suggesting placing an object on a mirror if you want to better understand these. He then talks a little about colour and stones at the bottom of a river.

'The reflection of a black gondola, for example in Venice, is never black but pure dark green.'

Finally in the last page or two of this second letter he gets on to clouds. He really doesn't have much useful advice for his students. For Ruskin, it is just a matter of getting out there and watching them and finding a personal shorthand for recording their passing.

LETTER I, EXERCISE X

'Put on a wash of
colour, prepared very
pale ... then another
wash'.

PAINTING
'because the brush is often more convenient
for laying on masses of tints of shade'

with a
Brush.

EXERCISE VI

(continued)



If you can by any means get acquainted
with any ordinary skillfull water colour
painter and prevail on him to show you
how to lay on tints with a brush

10
9.

John F. ...
Jan '07

LETTER III

on colour

In the first few lines of this final letter, Ruskin concedes that working in various shades of grey does not bring with it as much pleasure as full colour, but reminds us how much more difficult colour is to work with. Clearly informed by his passion for Turner's watercolour sketches, Ruskin goes on to explain how colour is often more powerful than form. But then he warns:

'If the colour is wrong, everything is wrong: just as if you are singing and sing false notes ... Never mind though your houses are all tumbling down, – though your clouds are mere blots, and your trees mere knobs and your sun and moon like crooked sixpences, – so only that trees, clouds, houses, and sun or moon are of the right colours.'

As a text designed to enable students to teach themselves, the pages on colour are probably, at best, confusing. This said, he seems to be making three basic points:

GOOD COLOUR is when the colour in your 'drawing' matches nature.

NATURE is not made up of flat colour, but of gradated colour.

TRANSPARENCY is not, by definition, superior to opacity, and there is a place for both.

LETTER I, EXERCISE VI
CONTINUED

'The brush is often more convenient for laying on masses of tints of shade.'

The lesson plan has more or less vapourised by this point in the book and the systematic exercises have practically fallen away. What the student gets instead are a number of Ruskin's 'observations' and a general sense of his passion for Turner and the modern painting of his day.

Ruskin's curriculum starts as if it has come straight out of the Academies in Florence and Rome. Then with no real warning it dives into the 19th century, raw nature and virtually theory-free modern painting.

composition

Ruskin starts by explaining composition.

'Composition means, literally and simply, putting several things together, so as to make *one* thing out of them.'

He illustrates his point by comparing the organisational side of picture-making to both music and poetry, then goes on to set out a method that is based on a general principle of editing nature. Ruskin concludes his introduction with a convenient get-out clause.

'The essence of composition lies precisely in the fact of it being unteachable.'

With his back covered and his student suitably humbled, he proceeds to lay down the law.

THE LAWS

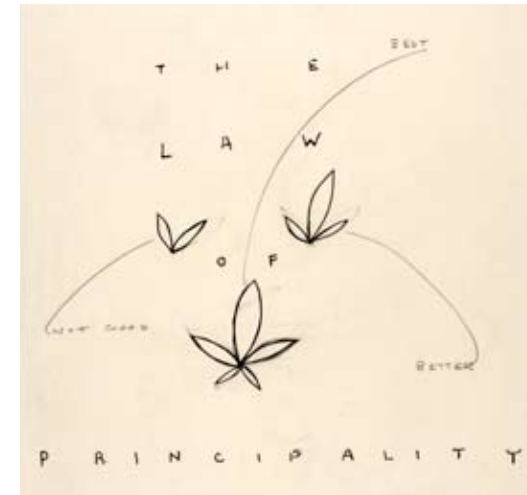
THE LAW OF PRINCIPALITY requires the picture to have a focal point.

'One light on the cottage wall, or one blue cloud in the sky, which may attract the eye as leading light, or leading gloom above all other.'

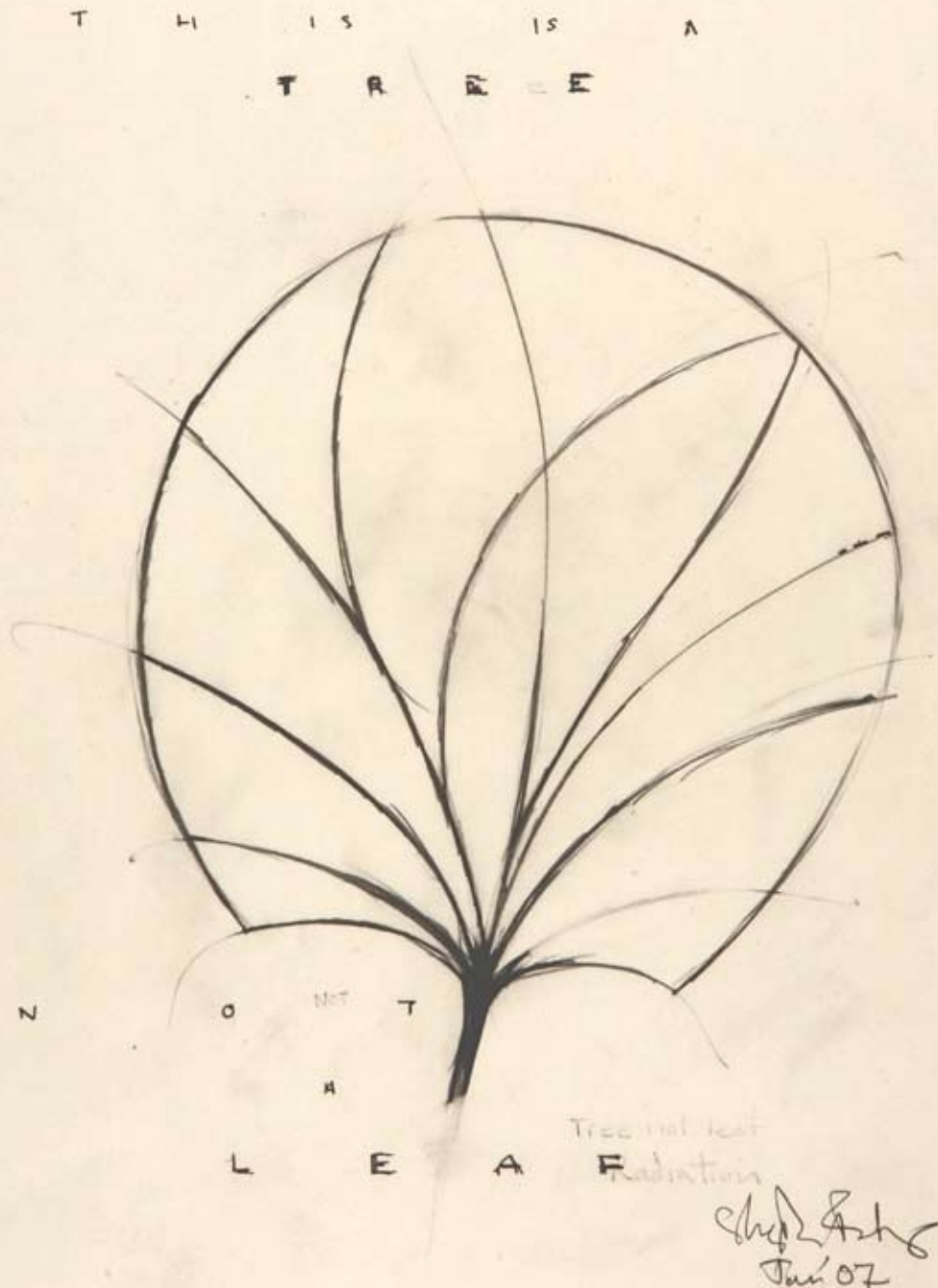
THE LAW OF REPETITION encourages the reflection and echoing of shapes, tones and colours.

'Turner sometimes takes to echo an important passage of colour.'

THE LAW OF CONTINUITY encourages progression with unity. 'Another important and pleasurable way of expressing unity, is by giving some orderly succession to a number of objects more or less similar.'



LETTER III, 210
THE LAW OF
PRINCIPALITY



THE LAW OF CURVATURE states that curves are more beautiful than straight lines.

THE LAW OF RADIATION extols the beauty of lines that move into or out from a point. 'An essential part of the beauty of all vegetable form is in this radiation; it is seen most simply in a single flower or leaf, as in a convolvulus bell, or chestnut leaf; but more beautifully in the complicated arrangements of large boughs and sprays.'

THE LAW OF CONTRAST states that the character of everything is best manifested by contrast. 'Perhaps the most exquisite piece of subtle contrast in the world of painting is the arrow point, laid sharp against the white side and among the flowing hair of Correggio's Antiope.'

THE LAW OF INTERCHANGE appears to be mostly tied up within the relationship between shadows and lights in nature. 'Closely related with the law of contrast is a law which enforces the unity of opposite things, by giving to each a portion of the character of the other.'

THE LAW OF CONSISTENCY demands a unity of character. 'While contrast exhibits the *characters* of things, it very often neutralises or paralyses their *power*. A number of white things may be shown to be clearly white by opposition of a black thing, but if we want the full power of their gathered light, the black thing may be seriously in our way.'

THE LAW OF HARMONY requires the artist to be at one with life and the elements of the picture at one with each other.

LETTER II, 108,
NOT A TREE BUT A LEAF
graphite,
14 x 11 ins, 2007

'The idea and main purpose in every branch is to carry all its child branches well out to the air and light.'

In the final letter Ruskin explains the Law of Radiation and shows how the primary branches of a tree grow.

AFTER THE LAWS

Apparently forgetting that he set out to write about drawing, and possibly lost as to how to finish this final letter, Ruskin starts to ramble around the intangible, the aspects of art, as he sees it, that cannot be pinned down within laws.

'The best part of every great work of art is always inexplicable; it is good because it is good.'

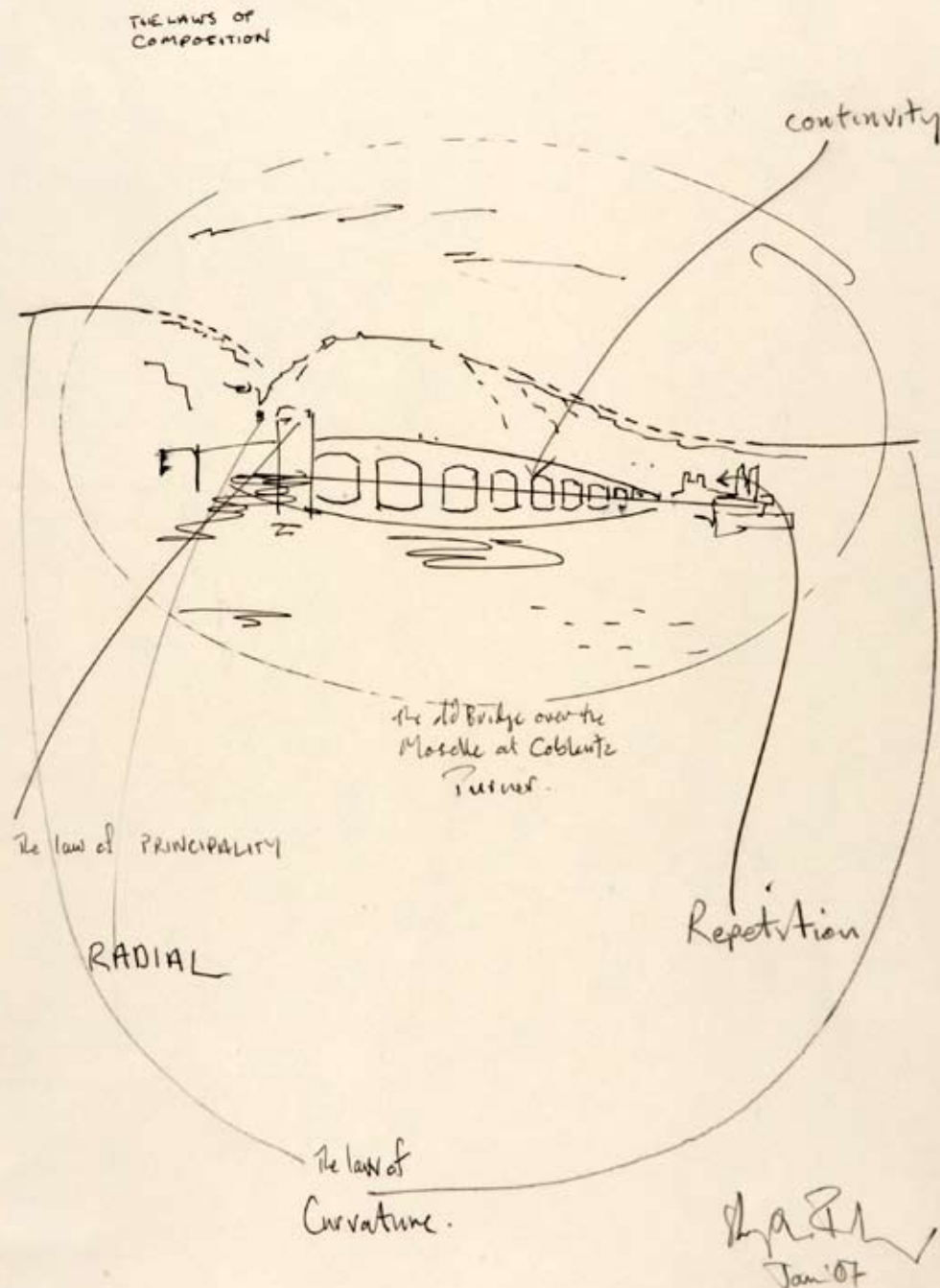
In the last few pages of the final letter, possibly realising that things aren't going too well, and possibly just running out of steam, he turns his hand to a painstaking description of an engraving made after a Turner painting.

Before signing off, in a Levi Strauss rather than Donatella Versace moment he offers a final word of advice:

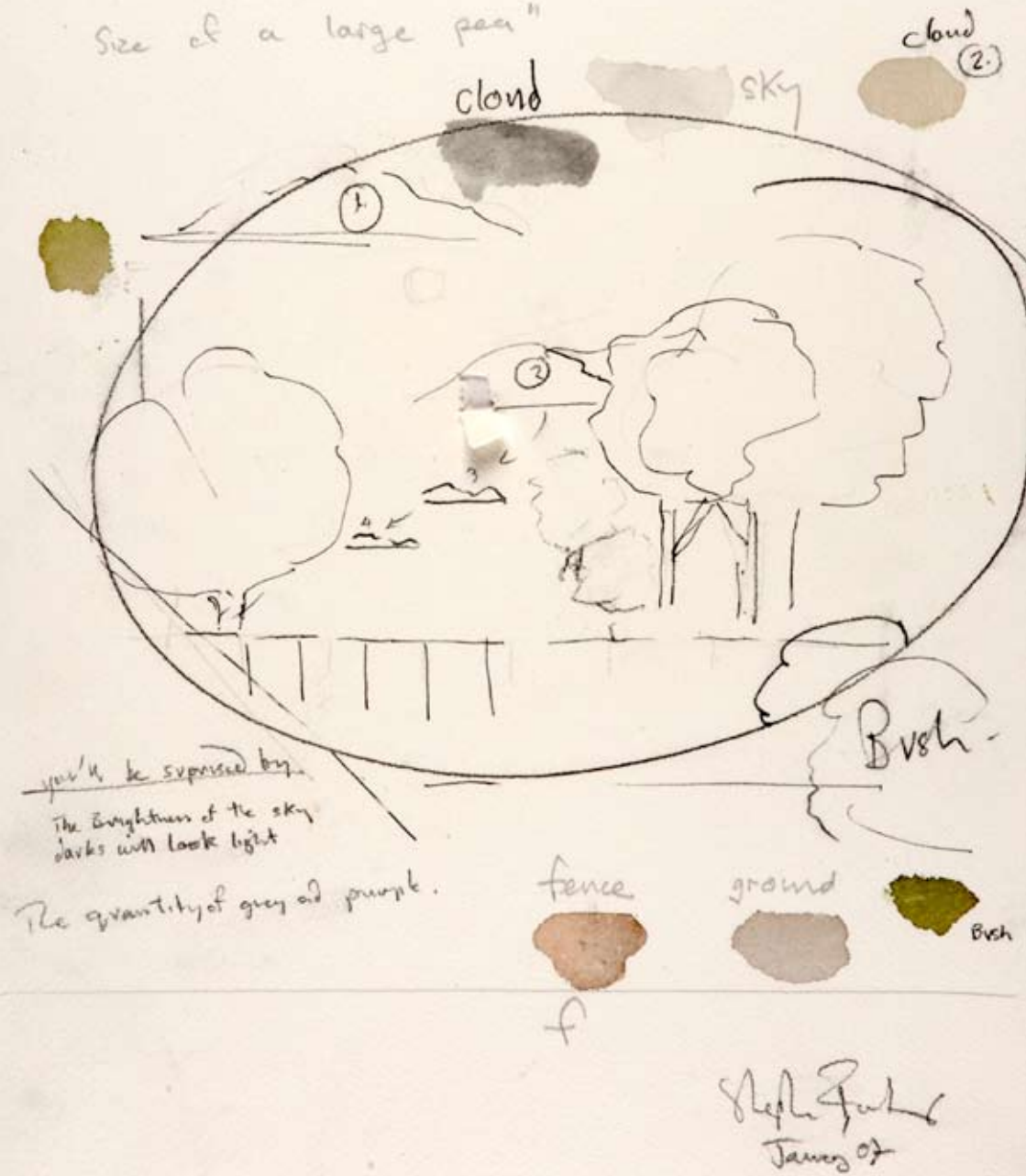
'Simplicity of life will make you sensitive to the refinement and modesty of scenery, just as inordinate excitement and pomp of daily life will make you enjoy coarse colours and affected forms.'

A NUMBER OF LAWS
OF COMPOSITION
graphite,
14 x 11 ins, 2007

A number of Turner's
Laws of Composition
from the last letter,
applied to Turner's
engraving of The Old
Bridge over the Moselle
at Coblenz.



1) take a piece of white card
cut a hole in it about the
size of a large pea"



CONCLUSION

About 20,000 copies of *The Elements* found their way into the hands of students and libraries during the first 50 years of its life. Whether it ever achieved its goal as a successful distance learning package will remain, I suspect, unproven.

In today's visual arts culture there is little evidence of Ruskin's book having any direct impact on the teaching of drawing. There is, however, evidence that at least some of the underpinning principles still have currency.

Post-Picasso, post-Expressionism, post-Pollock, Ruskin's *The Elements* continues to feed the imaginations of at least some commentators on art. It is however, not Ruskin's curriculum that catches their eye, but bigger structural issues – concepts like – 'The Innocence of the Eye'.

'The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye; that is to say, a sort of childish perception of ... flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify, — as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight.'

His deeper thoughts, not the technical exercises, form the part of the book that has staying power.

The front end of a website aimed at helping young people to understand drawing sets the scene with an updated version of Ruskin's innocent eye argument:

SPY HOLE
graphite and wash,
14 x 11 ins, 2007

Ruskin suggests making a hole in the centre of a piece of paper, then looking at individual points of colour and copying them exactly onto your paper before trying to paint the view.

'Drawing is about forgetting what you think you know, and believing what you see. Never assume you know what the thing you are going to draw looks like.'

Apparently founded on two contradictory arguments. *The Elements* starts with the assumption that drawing is first about looking at, then learning to record the appearance of nature. The second that the draughtsman is, just as Jackson Pollock saw himself, nature itself, and by implication not a servant of, but central to, the subject matter. But what becomes clear as you follow this trail is that in Ruskin's mind there is no contradiction, and the latter is simply a more intense version of the former.

Today the exercises in the first letter still seem to have currency. Halfway through the course, I found it difficult to stay with the plot. The lessons were less well structured, the writing more romantic and difficult to act on. As a result I started to make drawings that no longer responded to the exercises; I drew beyond the curriculum.

I was aware throughout that the course that the level of technical proficiency Ruskin expected was realistic, but that it would have taken a complete amateur a long time to achieve. The short philosophical, ethical and art historical threads that Ruskin used to stitch his course together would light up dull exercises for bright people.

What I have taken away from the exercise are Ruskin's thoughts on 'The Innocence of the Eye.'

The early classes: where we learned to make convincing illusions of three dimensional things in two, and finally Ruskin's thoughts on the freshness of watercolour when it is first floated onto the paper.

Some 60 years after Ruskin published *The Elements of Drawing*, Walter Benjamin understood the aesthetic of a mark surrounded by untouched

paper, and wrestled with the difference between a painting and a drawing. When he finally hit on 'the ground' as the determining factor, he argued that paintings had no ground, and a drawing became painting when all the paper was totally covered.

So I suspect, if we are to accept watercolour painting as part of drawing, it will be with a little help from Walter Benjamin, not simply because Ruskin devotes so much energy to it in *The Elements of Drawing*.

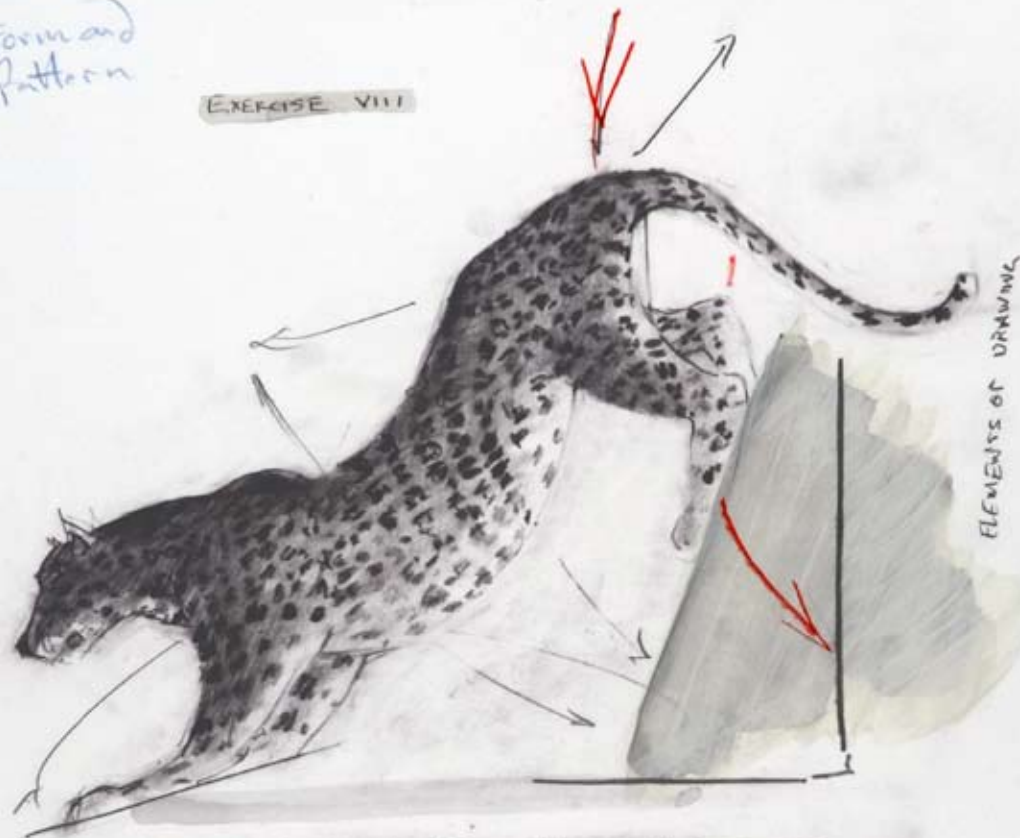
STEPHEN FARTHING

March 2007

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| 1. John Ruskin, <i>The Elements of Drawing</i> , Dover 1971, <i>The Law of Harmony</i> , p.200 | 15. Ibid, p.161 |
| 2. Ruskin to Acland, 14 March 1871: John Ruskin, <i>The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition</i> , edited by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols, London (George Allen): 1903-12, 21:xx | 16. Ibid, p.164 |
| 3. John Ruskin, <i>The Elements of Drawing</i> , Dover 1971, p.13 | 17. Ibid, p.165 |
| 4. Ibid, pp.31-33 | 18. Ibid, p.168 |
| 5. Ibid, pp.33-35 | 19. Ibid, p.170 |
| 6. Giorgio Vasari, <i>Lives of the Artists</i> | 20. Ibid, p.180 |
| 7. John Ruskin, <i>The Elements of Drawing</i> , Dover 1971, pp.39-42 | 21. Ibid, p.193 |
| 8. Ibid, p.48 | 22. Ibid, p.196 |
| 9. Ibid, p.90 | 23. Ibid, p.198 |
| 10. Ibid, p.90 | 24. Ibid, p.211 |
| 11. Ibid, pp.96-97 | 25. Ibid, footnote p.27 |
| 12. Ibid, pp.108-109 | 26. Accessart, DRAW! What Is Drawing p.2 http://www.accessart.org.uk/drawing/index.htm |
| 13. Ibid, p.127 | 27. Jackson Pollock's response to Hans Hofmann, when he suggested he might paint from nature was 'I am Nature' Kirk Varnadoe, 'Comet: Jackson Pollock's Life and Work' Jackson Pollock (exhibition catalog). New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998. p.42. |
| 14. Ibid, p.135 | |

Form and
Pattern

EXERCISE VIII



61 When you can draw the spots which
follow the folds of the skin of a leopard,
you will have some chance of

Following the spots which fall into the
folds of the skin of a leopard as he leaps.

8th Feb
Tanner '07

Drawing from Ruskin

Constraint, Freedom
and Deleuzian lines
of flight

In constraining to follow Ruskin's exercises in the art of drawing (set down in 1857), Stephen Farthing soon found himself ... wandering. His drawings betray, in various ways, a tension between fidelity to Ruskin's regime and a longing to escape it. One sketch, of a tree/leaf, resorts to an unlicensed playfulness; there is both a visual pun and an echo of Magritte's language games. Another takes flight altogether; the leopard – of Farthing's exhibition title – leaps to freedom on the pretext of a passing reference to spots.¹ Such acts of boldness² suggest a certain impatience but their true source may lie elsewhere, in the nature of drawing itself. Once underway, drawing will tend to assert its autonomy. It can call upon resources from the *whole of its history* to derail or distract you like a repressed desire or an unspoken promise of freedom. Refuse to acknowledge this condition, and you may end up with a straightened, or an overdetermined, work. Yield to it, and you risk errance, extravagance and strange intrusion (as when *Rembrandt's Elephant* trespasses upon your dutifully drawn tree). And what is happening in that other tree (*So that the moment a touch is monotonous...*) if not a conspiracy to escape, along what Deleuze would call a narrative 'line of flight'?

If Ruskin's tutelage proves, for us today, to be technically overbearing and gripped by Victorian moralism, then Deleuze promises delivery from all such 'apparatuses of capture'. His (and Guattari's) book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) famously opens with a short passage from a graphic piano score by Sylvano

LETTER I, EXERCISE VIII

'Following the spots which fall into the folds of the skin.'

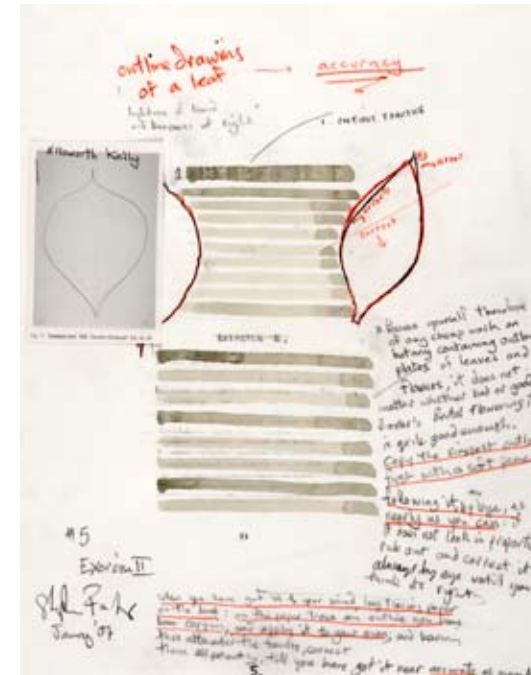
Busotti – a type of explosive musical drawing that propels the performer into a leap of faith, a struggle to *release* rather than *reproduce* what s/he encounters on the page. The drawn score is more than just open to negotiation, according to mood and context of performance; the whole point is to make possible ever-new departures ... to destinations (effects and affects) unknown.

There are analogous uses of graphic notation, or graphic script, also in the discipline of dance. The aim is to define alignments of the body and the speeds, directions and intensities of bodily movements. Yet, the more the method tends to the looseness (or quickness) of drawing, the more it embraces, and internalises, a dimension of 'drift'. This is especially so where the choreographer wishes to express an abstract idea or mood. The performer has to intentionally honour the breach between what the notation succeeds in conveying and what it can never completely fix, and so is caught in a sort of Sartrean compulsion to freedom.

For some theorists, this tension between constraint (of form) and freedom (of expression) is a fundamental condition of creation.³ Deleuze, like Derrida, acknowledges the tension, and the possibilities attendant upon its release, but refuses the binary thinking. He is more interested in departures and differences that are not *automatically* channeled down the path of *opposition*, but take off elsewhere – a truly *anywhere-nowhere* elsewhere – through unexpected connection, encounter, experiment, line of flight. Hence his preference for the quirks and flights of the gothic line over the resolution and return of the classical. We can appreciate this if we take some further examples of drawing, this time from architecture – and from Picasso.

In 1920, Picasso produced a sketch of a *Horse*

and *Trainer* from a single unbroken line.⁴ Whatever else this is, it is not an example of Renaissance *disegno* (design or drawing) capturing in essence the eternal forms of horse and man. It is an exercise or *performance* of drawing. At all turns (and they are many, and exquisite) the line threatens to get out of control. It is reined in only by dint of extraordinary technical virtuosity. Yet Picasso does not *conform* to received forms, he *performs* or *re-performs* them; his focus is all upon his own mastery. What would Ruskin have made of this? Ruskin compares the controlled line of the master to a well-managed natural

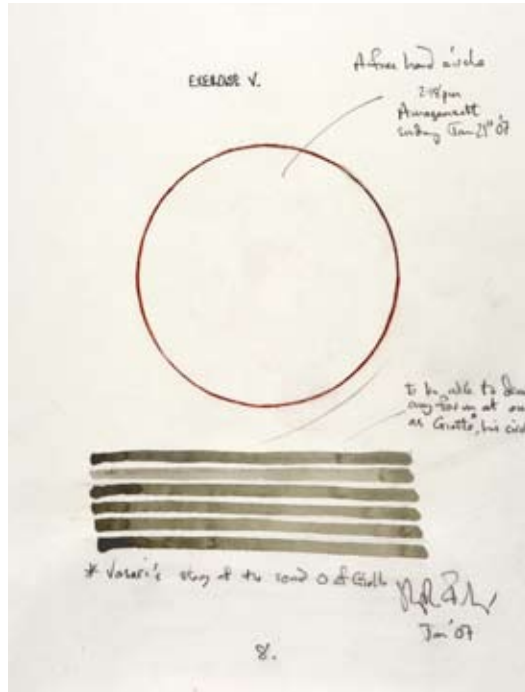


LETTER I, EXERCISE II

'The pen should, as it were, walk slowly over the ground.'

(therefore moral) power, but would almost certainly have baulked at the exhibitory boldness of Picasso. The artist yoked together freedom and control not to deploy them so much as exhibit their conquest. In such works, Picasso seems to probe the limits of figuration only to stop short of abstraction; was this a judicious professional decision, or fear to abandon demonstrable technique for a flight into the unknown?

A similar question may have troubled the architect Frank Gehry. Gehry's impressive line drawings have been the subject of a recent film, and a book in which



LETTER I, EXERCISE V

'To be able to draw any form at once.'

it is claimed that they "embody the conflict between constraint and freedom".⁵ The sketches acknowledge constraint in remaining tied to construction (they must be *realisable as buildings*) and in accepting that contractual 'circumstances' must affect the drawn form. In contrast, the apparent freedom of the drawings lies in the refusal to fix a locatable ground, the urge to overcome the limits of central perspective (folding top and side views into a complex visibility), and the energy of the lines as they swarm or coil to conjure a continuous imaginable space. The sketches are not simple points of departure, they remain key points of *reference* at all stages of the design process. But this does not mean that Gehry settles for an art of constrained shapes; in his sketches he "pushes into regions devoid of articulated ideas" where the dynamics of the drawing hand may happen to outrun both the optical and the cognitive imagination.⁶

As a result, we can never quite pin down these drawings – not completely – they seem to remain in play even after the phase of construction. And yet, they can also appear 'mannered', too comfortably settled into their own allure, caught up in an aura of ease and power they share with the buildings-clients-statements they sustain and which, in turn, sustain them. To see this, we need to turn, finally, to the Deleuzian line of flight, as embodied in gothic architecture.⁷

For Deleuze, the gothic line is made possible by the liberation of the hand from the eye.⁸ It issues as a restless energy of expression that threatens to exceed the human will. At any given point, the line will throw off deforming images of man, plant or animal; spasmodically launch into new directions and complications; render figure and ground indiscernible; loop back upon itself, or erupt in a riotous geometry of jagged lines, only to dissipate and dissolve unseen.

If classical art aspires to the ideal of harmony and formal perfection, then the gothic rejects that ideal as mechanistic, standardised and ... constraining.

This is emphatically not a question of aesthetic judgement. What is important for Deleuze is the restless 'becoming-other' of the gothic line, not the lineaments – the relative stabilities or shared constants – of an identifiable style. That underlying restlessness is the productive energy of being itself, being as generative, *being as creation*. Each created *thing*, by contrast, seeks to constrain that creative energy, to capture it in a fixed form that best serves its own interests. Viewed in these terms, the gothic would tend to side with (divine/natural) creation rather than (worldly) interest.⁹

Which may explain why Ruskin, in a remarkable text of 1853, also champions the gothic. He praises its defining characteristics of changefulness, savagery, naturalism, grotesqueness, and even the 'disturbed imagination' of the builder.¹⁰ In contrast to the solitary practice (and individualising pedagogy) of his drawing exercises, Ruskin's idea of gothic architecture is decidedly communitarian. It is organic and inclusive. It is equally tolerant of freedom of expression and roughness of execution, common tastes and lowly art forms, the sublime of the soaring spire and the absurdity of the gargoyle. This inclusiveness is an ideal that has perhaps resurfaced in multi-culturalism and the embrace of popular culture (ordinariness) by 'high brow' art. And there is a growing tendency for today's global artists to seek engagement with actual or virtual communities, in search of emergent 'democratic' relations.

But these similarities only disguise a deep-lying difference. If art appears inclusive right now it's because we no longer care for a single dominant aesthetic. We suspect that old habits of thought and

FROM THE PREFACE

'That my pupils may learn to love nature.'

Why draw?

that his pupils
"may learn to love nature"



It may perhaps be thought, that in prefacing a manual of drawing, I ought to expatiate on the reasons why drawing should be learned; but those reasons appear to me so many and so weighty, that I cannot quickly state or enforce them. With the readers permission, as this volume is too large already I will waive all discussion respecting the importance of the subject, and touch only on those points which may appear questionable in the method of its treatment.

this said on page 13 he writes

8) --- I believe that sight is a more important thing than drawing; and I would rather teach drawing that my pupils may learn to love nature, than teach the looking at Nature that they may learn to draw.

#2

The Preface.
January '07

Steph Fuchs

perception no longer quite serve, and that the proper business of art might be to forsake 'the solace of good forms' (as Lyotard put it) and fly off somewhere ... anywhere ... to an open encounter, a transformative 'event'. Ruskin would not have approved. His admiration of the gothic is, at bottom, quite consistent with the moralising constraint of his drawing regime. He insists throughout on the goal of seeing and meaning 'rightly', drawing from Nature to express the truth lodged therein. He would have seen little value (and much vanity) in the idea that art might sustain itself in flight.

Is it ironic, then, or entirely appropriate, that Ruskin's 'truth of drawing' should provoke a response like Stephen Farthing's? Despite their Ruskinian starting point, drawings like *That my pupils may learn to love nature* or *The pen should, as it were, walk slowly over the ground* have the appearance of the most contemporary *simulacrum*.¹¹ In those dumb stacked lines, truth has truly drawn a blank; in those furtive scratchings and codings, truth has worried itself to exhaustion ... that's how it *looks*. The place of truth has been taken by a *performance* of drawing that wants to leave/cannot leave the rules behind ... and is obliged to circle within that condition, to draw it out in frustration or in play, always anticipating an angle of flight. Such drawings are apt to make us nostalgic for right method, powerful arts and grounded truths, whilst also refusing them – as all too untimely and unattainable. Like moral self-certainty, like teaching a 'proper' way to draw.

Stephen Farthing's project has the considerable merit of staging these questions for us, with an extraordinary precision of line and an acute feel for the materiality of the medium. For that, we are all in his debt.

NUALA GREGORY

March 2007

1. John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, London, George Allen & Sons 1913, p.63. "For when you can draw the spots which follow the folds of a printed stuff, you will have some chance of following the spots which fall into the folds of a leopard as he leaps; but if you cannot draw the manufacture, assuredly you will never be able to draw the creature."

2. Ibid, p.21 and 48. Ruskin particularly railed against 'boldness' and 'profitless vanity' in his students. "Bold, in the sense of being undaunted, yes; but bold in the sense of being careless, confident, or exhibitory, – no, – no, and a thousand times, no; ... And if Nature is not bold at her work, do you think you ought to be at yours?" "True boldness and power are only to be gained by care".

3. Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston, *The Creation of Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp.235-256

4. The sketch is reproduced in: Rosalind Krauss, *The Picasso Papers*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1998, p. 148

5. The documentary film is *Sketches of Frank Gehry* (2005) directed by Sydney Pollack. The book is: Mark Rappolt and Robert Violette, *Gehry draws*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press in association with Violette Editions, 2004. The quote is from page 13 of the essay by Horst Bredekamp. I derive my summary of Gehry's constraints from this essay.

6. Ibid, page 23.

7. In rather simplified terms, a 'line of flight' is an escape from a state or structure to an 'outside'; an indeterminate leaping across boundaries; a 'freedom-from' which is also often an inchoate conversion, becoming, or mapping into/onto something other. See Mark Bonta and John Protevi, *Deleuze and Geophilosophy*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, pp106-107. Claire Colebrook writes: "In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari refer to life's production of 'lines of flight', where mutations and differences produce not just the progression of history but disruptions, breaks, new beginnings, and 'monstrous' births." Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, London, Routledge, 2002, p.57

8. Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting and the Arts*, New York, Routledge, 2003, pp.131-160.

9. Peter Hallward, *Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation*, London, Verso, 2006, p2 and pp.55-78.

10. John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, edited and introduced by Jan Morris, London, Faber and Faber, 1981, pp.118-139.

11. A simulacrum is an appearance that cannot be traced back to an underlying reality or *truth* that would explain it or account for its form. This 'lack of depth' of the simulacrum is often thematised in the visual arts: what you see is what you get is all there is.

Acknowledgements to come

ISBN: 0-9582817-1-8

