

Drawing in the Collective

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For ten weeks in the summer of 2010, Project Space Leeds (PSL) contained a black shed. At that time PSL occupied the spacious ground floor lobby area of a city centre apartment block next to the river Aire. The shed was a modest addition, situated in one corner of the sprawling gallery/artspace, and, apart from its covering of blackboard paint, appeared little different to something that might be found at the end of the garden or on an allotment. In fact it had been purpose-built as an instigation for artistic experiment. Almost more of an absence than a presence, it functioned as a dark space to draw in ideas, or a three-dimensional chalkboard for testing new formulae. The Drawing Shed made its first public appearance in the turbine hall of Tate Modern before moving to PSL where ten artists were given a week to make it their own.

Public events were an important aspect of The Drawing Shed project. Each artist's event was in keeping with the themes of their residency. For example, as part of World Listening day, sound artist Phill Harding led three sound walks around Leeds, in conjunction with his audio installation inside the shed. Helen Entwisle organised a doodle party to go with her Western-themed transformation of the shed into a cactus-covered saloon bar. The changeover of artists brought in new audiences throughout the ten-week period. Visitors to the shed were encouraged to return to view subsequent developments or to follow the blog.¹ In some cases attendees of the public events were friends and associates of the individual artists (this was certainly the case in the drawing workshop I organised) ensuring a new public each week. However, the particular, idiosyncratic slant of each residency, and the profile of many of the artists was no doubt a further attraction. The events were intended to be suitable for all ages, as befits a summer holiday programme, but it would be interesting to know whether the participatory nature of the activities deterred those members of the art public who prefer a more predictable glass of wine from the safety of a private view. Sipping and looking are forms of engagement requiring minimal exposure, whereas group walks and doodle parties challenge participants to share responses and make creative contributions, risking ink-stained hands or sore feet.

As the sixth artist in The Drawing Shed's Leeds series, and working with a horticultural theme, I set out to produce perspective drawings of imagined gardens on the exterior of the shed while filling the interior with illuminated plants.² Projected visions of gardens, receding into dark, dreamlike spaces on the walls of the shed were contrasted with the bright, living presence of foliage inside.³ The familiar notion of the shed as workroom or tool store located within the garden was subject to an inversion, as the garden (both imaginary and actual) was, here, contained by the shed. When planning my drawings, I had in mind the use of perspective by Renaissance artists and architects as a technique to envisage geometrically precise gardens. For example, Hans Vredeman de Vries' Design for an ornamental garden (1576) depicts avenues of hedges, carefully clipped shrubs and beautifully arranged fountains.⁴ I was unable, however, to resist the insertion of distant oil rigs and sewage pipes in my imagined gardens, as contaminations to such idealised views of managed nature.

In developing a public workshop to accompany the residency, I chose to conflate drawing and gardening by converting garden tools into rudimentary drawing implements. Long sheets of paper were laid out on the floor next to the shed, as plots to be tended and scraped. Here the emphasis was on group action. Bringing drawing down to ground level, this mode of production referred to recent participatory movements in art and neighbourliness, such as allotment art, guerrilla gardening and community digs. The 'clumsiness' of the tools enabled everyone to join

Notes

1. Project Space Leeds (PSL), The Drawing Shed (2010): http://www.projectspsaceleeds.org.uk/the_drawing_shed_unidF854_page.aspx
2. The other nine artists or groups of artists who occupied the shed were as follows in order of appearance: Phill Harding; Pippa Hale; Helen Entwisle; Lesley Halliwell; Emily Speed; Kelly Cumberland; Bronwen Buckeridge, Michiko Sumi and Alan Worn; Clare Charnley and Patricia Azevedo; Hondartza Fraga.
3. The project was sponsored by Hydroponica, Wakefield.
4. Vredeman de Vries, H. Design for an ornamental garden (1576). Pen, light-brown ink and blue wash, on paper, 246 x 313 mm. Image available at: www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

in, on an equal basis, regardless of individual skill. Participants were also invited to add to the drawings on the walls of the shed, making the most of the temporary and provisional nature of the artwork. The workshop functioned as an invitation to produce marks in multiples and to generate collective drawings. By taking the forms of horticulture as a starting point, it aimed to nurture tentative acts of artistic participation and make space for mutual cultivation.

The results can be seen on the following pages:





