

Sketchbooks: An Obsession
Elisa Alalusua
Drawing Projects UK



Still from *sketchbooks of Eileen Hogan*.

Sketchbooks: An Obsession
by Elisa Alaluusua
at *Drawing Projects UK*
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Sketchbooks: An Obsession exhibition at the *Drawing Projects UK* explores and presents sketchbooks used by contemporary artists. The exhibition is a video installation exposing sketchbook pages on screens and projections. The stories of the interviewed artists blend into one another as their voices are heard talking about their sketchbook practices. The installation draws the viewer into the compelling world of sketchbooks.

Sketchbooks are multipurpose tools and spaces for recording. They can be seen as books about life. For their keeper, sketchbooks often are a constant companion and a greatly valued travelling companion. It has been said, that sketchbooks reveal the artist's thinking on the pages. A sketchbook can act as a repository of feelings. Perhaps sketchbooks cover an obsession. In many cases artists identify sketchbooks as an aid to memory, a storage space, and a communication tool. Artists, and other creative people, develop a personal approach with sketchbooks in a manner most useful for themselves. Their way of using sketchbooks is practical and purposeful even if sometimes sketchbooks are used as a space for doing 'nothing' in them. It can also be a space for 'not knowing' and as such it serves a purpose identified as important by many of the artists interviewed for this exhibition.

This body of work was created during an artistic practice-based research project conducted between 2009-2016 mainly in London and in Helsinki, Finland. Contemporary artists and sketchbook experts were interviewed about their sketchbook practises and during this engagement a discovery was made that allowed access to sketchbooks in a new, revealing way. The fact that the interviews were conducted by another practicing artist and a fellow sketchbook keeper, rather than a crew of people with extra lights and fancy equipment, allowed a dialogue to develop between the artists and, perhaps more importantly, a dialogue developed between the sketchbook keeper and their sketchbooks. This reflective talk was captured in video recordings and later turned into pieces of work included in the current installation. The artists interviewed opened up their sketchbook pages and shared their thoughts about sketchbooks.

This is a touring exhibition and it has already been seen in London and Helsinki in 2016. It is a site-specific installation and always constructed according to the space available. This means that every *Sketchbooks* exhibition is unique and as such portrays an ever-changing insight into sketchbooks kept by contemporary artists. The artists included in *Sketchbooks: An Obsession* are Stephen Farthing, Dennis Gilbert, Nigel Hall, Eileen Hogan, Anne Howeson, Michel Sandle and Naomi Shaw. DPUK's focus on research and development of drawing and contemporary art directed also the focus of the exhibition to drawing



Thirteen Narratives by Thirteen Artists About Their Sketchbooks, London 2016. Sketchbooks (L-R) by Naomi Shaw, Eileen Hogan and Michael Sandle.

found on the pages of sketchbooks. Drawing is often described as open-ended or with an element of unfinishedness¹. Regularly drawing is referred to as a form of thinking². Deanna Petherbridge's (2010: 152) definition of *drawing strategies* could be applied to sketchbooks too. She describes:

"Drawing strategies can encompass a single manoeuvre, or a number of slightly different tactics, and can be very simple or extremely complex. They develop from learned situations, either pedagogically promoted or auto-generated, and become internalised through constant use, so as to seem unconscious or natural to practicing artists. Strategies are sometimes devised as the result of a personal struggle, at a critical stage in an artist's development, or seem to be spontaneously invented, and [...] reinvented."

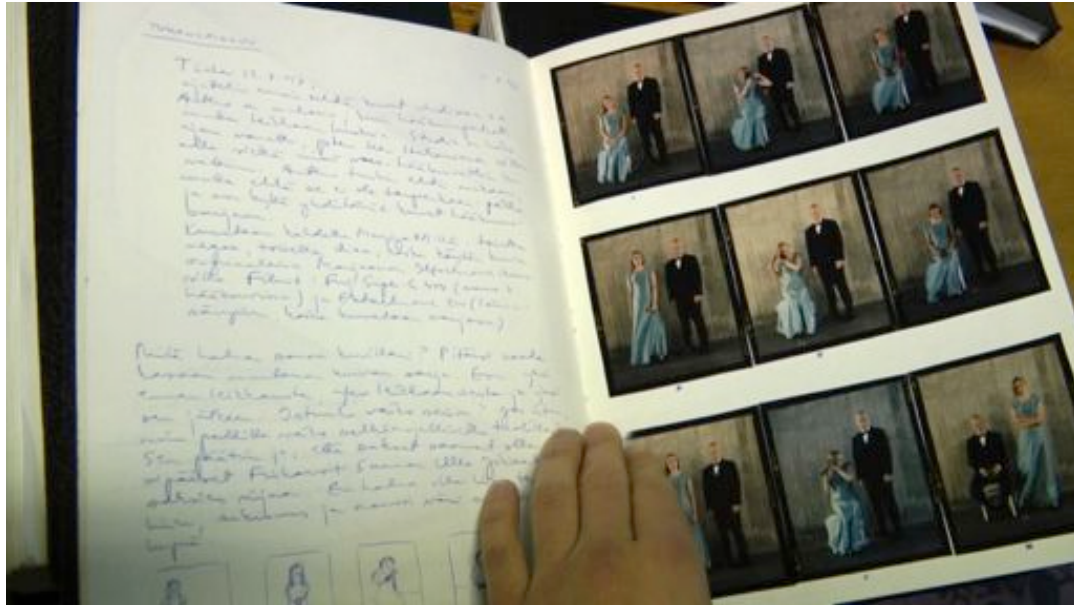
Drawing and sketchbook practices are very closely linked; sometimes they are perhaps unanimous. Taking the lead from Petherbridge's *drawing strategies*, sketchbook practices could be described as simple or complex, learned in a pedagogical context or self-developed. Some artists are able to articulate and analyse their sketchbook usage while others use sketchbooks more intuitively.

An attempt to define drawing has become ineffectual and instead we find ourselves renegotiating what could be seen as drawing. Even as a word 'drawing' has wonderful complexity and an ability to encompass, to *draw* together, ingredients, fragments and whole concepts. Anita Taylor has described drawing as something between the two words at the root of '*drawing*': the old English word '*dragan*' – which is about dragging something across the surface – and [the Italian] '*disegno*'³ with its more complex meaning including the relationship to the internal or conceptual aspects of a work of design (Petherbridge 2010: 18). The annual *Jerwood Drawing Prize* headed by Taylor (2016: 6) together with *Jerwood Charitable Foundation* continues to provide a forum to "test, evaluate and disseminate current drawing practice" and each year the selection panel collectively establishes a criteria and considers the nature and boundaries of

drawing as a field⁴. It is exciting to bring *Sketchbooks: An Obsession* to the creative hub of DPUK and hopefully initiate further debate and practice around sketchbooks in an environment where boundaries are constantly tested and renegotiated. Presenting *Sketchbooks* here is not only an opportunity to think about contemporary sketchbook practices but also an invitation to work in one's own sketchbook and consider what *keeping a sketchbook* means for us.

The aim of the *Sketchbooks* exhibition is to engage in a dialogue with others interested in sketchbooks – there are no final conclusions. This could be an opportunity – borrowing from Taylor's description of the *Jerwood Drawing Prize* – to test, evaluate and disseminate current sketchbook practices. The audience plays an active part in making sense of sketchbooks and sketchbook practices here; following the tradition that has been growing since 1990s when the relationship between the artist and the viewer, the audience, started to shift towards dialogue, interaction and even collaboration⁵. This particular exhibition could be considered from three different viewpoints. Those who keep sketchbooks themselves will probably find the presented sketchbook pages fascinating and also the artists' descriptions of their practices intriguing. Others might know artists presented in the installation and want to learn more about their working practices. The drawing research community may well consider whether this exhibition is successful in its attempt to disseminate research findings and bring them to the wider audience. Research conducted in sketchbooks, the analysis made and discoveries arrived at are put into a visual form for others to consider, challenge and negotiate with.

Many kinds of drawings can be found on the pages revealed in these videos. There are drawings made with pens and pencils; drawings that can be described as diagrams. There are quick sketches and elaborately detailed compositions. Line drawings are juxtaposed with drawings completed with oil paints. Sketchbooks contain drawings made from observation, from memory and imagination. There are also sketchbooks containing endless pages of writing and others full of collected items stuck down. Can the extensive writing by photographer



Still from *sketchbooks of Elina Brotherus*.

Elina Brotherus be seen as drawing? How about small A6 sketchbooks filled with name cards, tickets and other collected memorabilia by another lens-based artist, Chris Wainwright – can they be considered in the context of drawing? My take on drawing is broad and while conducting research on sketchbooks I came to understand writing used by Brotherus in her sketchbooks as a form of drawing due to *the way* she uses writing. Her text outlines ideas for potential photographs, lists poses and locations to be considered, possible titles, lighting conditions and so forth. Her “words paint a picture” of the planned photograph. The combination of photographs stuck on the pages with the handwritten notes enabled me to visualise Brotherus’s ideas in a way similar to how I was able to see sculpture ideas developed in, for example, Nigel Hall’s sketchbooks. What seemed to link the drawn and written marks in sketchbooks was their ability to capture a sense of *potential development and unfinished thoughts*.

Avis Newman (2003: 78) describes a drawing as an act of reclamation and explains that from the depth of the mind things can be seen and retrieved into existence: “Torn pages or bits and pieces signify they existed only as reminders, without the dignity of a coherent intention. Such acts lay bare the many indecisions and marks worked over and over, which sometimes get no further: the abandoned

efforts of gestures. We understand such scraps not as works but as evidence of the effort of the mind to externalize vague thoughts.” Newman’s abandoned efforts on scraps of paper resonate in my mind not just with the process of drawing but also with the process of keeping sketchbooks.

This broad take on drawing is reflected in my own art practice. I draw either on paper, a surface, or in a less tactile way in a form of video. Both approaches are time-based activities and transformative processes where an idea or an experience is recorded into a new format. During the process the viewpoint, horizon, often shifts as every mark alters the surface and has an effect on the whole – this is applicable to drawing on paper as well as on video artworks.

This video installation presents pages from contemporary artists’ sketchbooks. Those are spaces often seen as ‘revealing’ and ‘private’. The notion of sketchbooks’ capacity to reveal the inner vision or offer an insight into the mind of the artist is repeated throughout literature on sketchbooks. According to Liza Kirwin sketchbooks “afford an intimate view of an artist’s visual thinking and *reveal* a private world and creative process”⁶. Wilkinson writes that JMW Turner’s “sketches *reveal* the artist as himself [...] and show his ideas as they were conceived and not as they were modified, frozen, dressed up and presented (still outrageous enough) to the

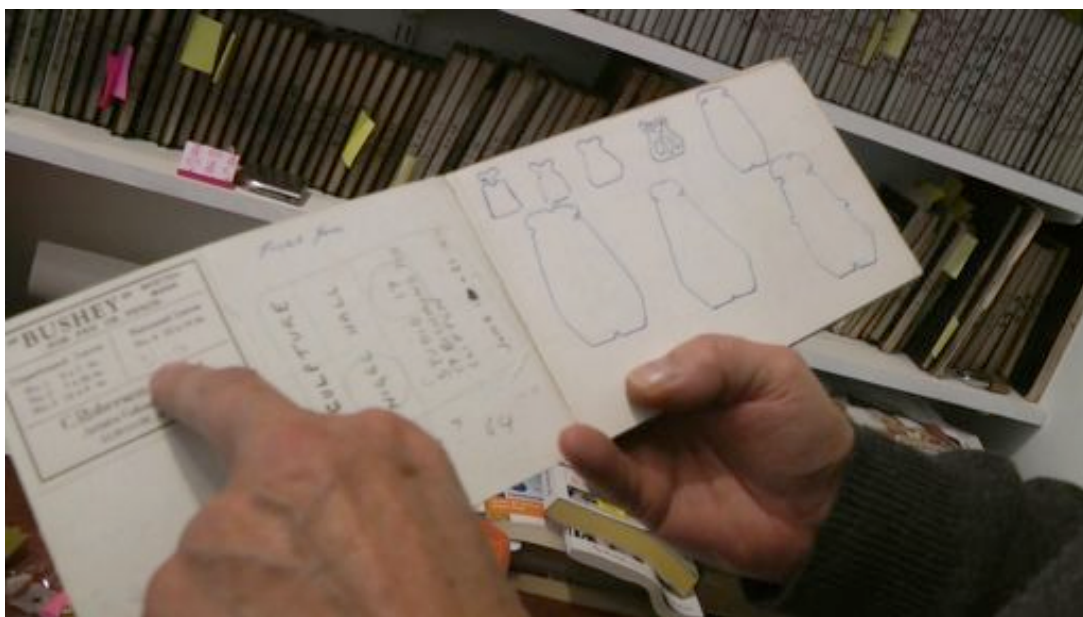
public”⁷. Through the research conducted I started to question how ‘revealing’ artists’ sketchbooks actually were. I came to understand sketchbooks as ‘private’ but with a further ‘public’ dimension to them because many of the artists interviewed were aware of the possible future interest in their sketchbooks. Some of them, like Michael Sandle, were acutely aware of others “looking over his shoulder” as access to sketchbooks is described by Johannes van der Wolk (1987: 7) who studied Vincent van Gogh’s sketchbooks and tried to “catch” van Gogh at work in his sketchbooks.

Being aware of the possible ‘public’ dimension of sketchbooks makes one consider more carefully the conditions the sketchbooks were made in and the process behind them. Sketchbooks are created over a period of time which makes them intriguing documents, but they may have been created with the audience in mind, or they could have been constructed as a false document altogether. I propose that we, the viewer, should question whether sketchbooks are any more revealing than other artworks might be. Sketchbooks can be a site of revelation but also a place for privacy being constructed and performed. They can be a site for self-confession – truthful or falsified.

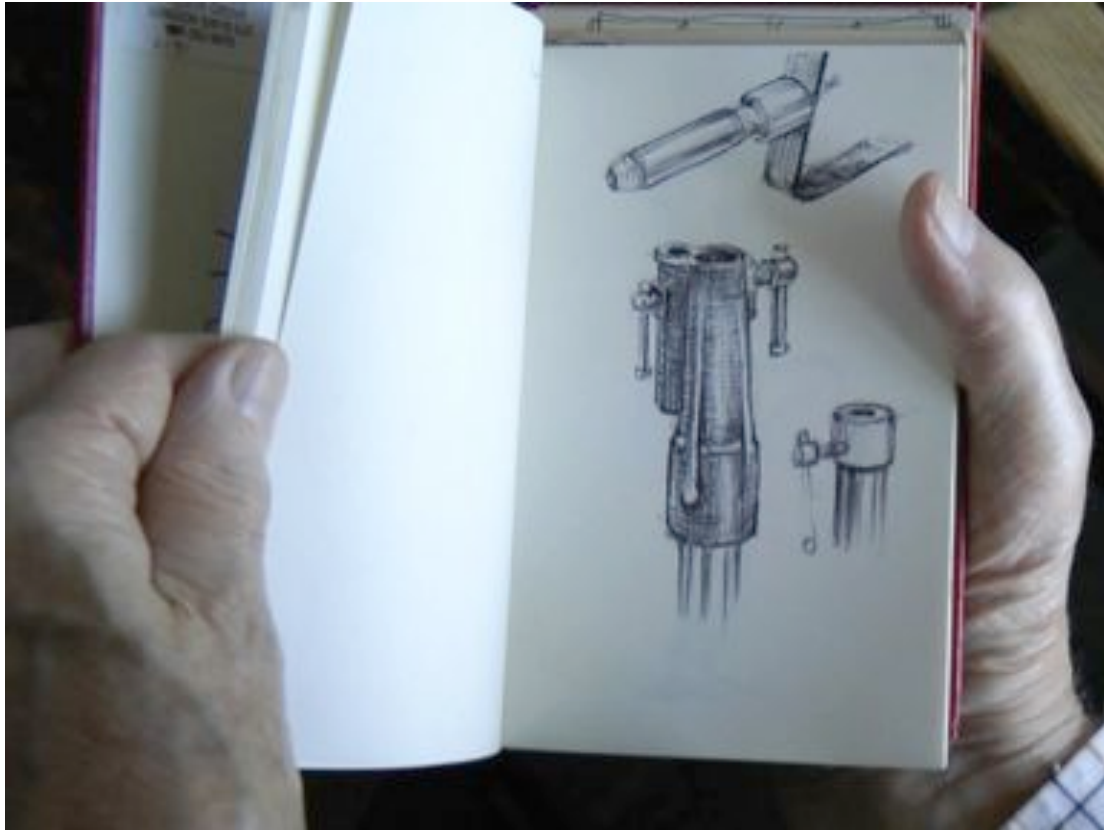
Through close analysis and investigation I came to understand sketchbooks as very practical tools. They are immediately accessible and easy to take around. Artists

interviewed also presented their approaches to sketchbooks as very purposeful – they had their reasons for using sketchbooks. Some of the reasons were obvious. Sketchbooks were carried around so that things observed, imagined or remembered were easily captured on their pages. Also less evident reasons were revealed; for example sketchbooks were used as a space for self-reflection or a therapeutic tool. Furthermore, I propose that sketchbooks are highly personal to their keepers meaning that each artist using sketchbooks has developed their own individual ways of using them. Sometimes these sketchbook strategies are so deeply internalised that the artist in question can forget that everybody else does not use sketchbooks in the same way they do.

While studying sketchbooks considering what drawing is and how sketchbooks are characterized has been a constant challenge but also an entertaining occupation. Contemplating their relationship to time and movement has been continual. Understanding the importance of sketchbooks’ sequential nature has been central to making sense of them. They are time-based objects, they need to be held and handled, hence they are in constant motion. Seeing individual sketchbook pages is interesting but seeing their sequence and seeing sketchbooks in motion is more informative. That can be experienced in this exhibition. Stephen Farthing (2012: 28) writes that for something to become a



Still from *sketchbooks of Nigel Hall*.



Still from *sketchbooks of Dennis Gilbert*.

drawing it must be frozen as a two-dimensional image within both time and space. In this video installation time and space is captured, but not frozen, on two-dimensional surfaces. This allows us to see more and get a better insight into the subject matter. The sculptor Nigel Hall noted in his interview that compared to exhibiting one notebook page in an exhibition recording sketchbooks on video exposed more: "What you are doing with notebooks is far more revealing to show them turning and changing because that's how they live. They become alive like that."⁸ For me seeing sketchbook pages turned on these videos is still mesmerizing, after so many years of working with this material. The videos present the sketchbooks and no 'talking-heads'. We see the hands holding the books and the pages revealing drawings, notes, memorabilia stuck in. We hear the artist's monologue describing their sketchbook practices; their words draw us in. Everything is in motion: the hands, the pages turning, the artists' thoughts and ideas find a visual form. We see, in our mind's eye, their life unfold and their

thought processes flow in and out of themes, places, ideas of which some we can recognize and identify with and others just float by.

I owe huge thanks to the artists who engaged in a dialogue with me and with their former self through their own sketchbooks during this process. The artists who were included in the original video installation are Elina Brotherus, Stephen Farthing, Dennis Gilbert, Nigel Hall, Eileen Hogan, Anne Howeson, Dale Inglis, Seppo Lagom, William Raban, Michael Sandle, Stephen Scrivener, Naomi Shaw and Chris Wainwright – many of them are present in *Drawing Projects UK* too. Amongst these artists are painters, sculptors, lens-based artists and one architect – many of them are internationally renowned and familiar to DPUK visitors. The story of sketchbooks could be told in many different ways. These video artworks were produced in an artistic research context and they are part of my drawing practice. I hope to enter in a dialogue with the DPUK visitors and perhaps even promote sketchbook practice.

The exhibition encourages visitors to spend some quiet time in the space and deliberate what sketchbooks can be, how these artist use sketchbooks, and how sketchbooks might be useful for us all. Sketchbooks can give us a space for contemplation and they can help with managing our time, emotions and whatever it might be that we need to reflect on to be able to live a happy life.

The final questions to be asked are: How can one start a sketchbook? What would be a 'good' sketchbook? The latter question I ask with full awareness that considering what is a 'good' sketchbook is as contentious as asking what is a 'good' drawing. Sometimes that *is* a good question though as it provokes thinking and debate. In *The Good Drawing*⁹ book this is explored thoughtfully: For Stephen Farthing (p. 31) the very best drawings are the evidence of good intentions and good deliberations. Mary Clare Foá (p. 74) agrees that it is the practitioner's intentions that matter. For Simon Betts (p. 87) a good drawing resides in the multiplicity of uses, functions and purposes of drawing. Anita Taylor (p. 82) finds multiple ways of describing a good drawing and finishes with the thought that a good drawing is an imprint of the imagination, it enables discovery. The question of what is a good drawing, or what is a good sketchbook, should be asked keeping in mind that there are many possible answers. This exhibition illustrates many approaches to sketchbooks and, through those, ideas for how a sketchbook could be started. But answers to the question of how to keep a *good* sketchbook must be found by each of us individually. When we know our own reasons for keeping sketchbooks they become purposeful. I believe that a good sketchbook, or indeed all of them, are practical. One's sketchbooks find their shape and become personal, a space of our own, through prolonged commitment. For many, that has become an obsession.

Elisa Alaluusua originates from Finnish Lapland and has been exhibiting internationally since the beginning of 1990s. Her first degree was in drawing (1991), since then she has completed two MAs, one in UK (Environmental Art, 1995) and one in Finland (Art Education, 1999), and practice-based PhD at the *University of the Arts London* (2016). In 2015 she won the second prize in the prestigious *Jerwood Drawing Prize* with her video/drawing *Unconditional Line*. She is a drawing artist and works on paper as well as in the form of video exploring the idea of home and everyday. Alaluusua lives and works in London and regularly visits the reindeer farm where she grew up in Lapland.

ENDNOTES

¹ See for example Stephen Farthing (2005: 27-28) *Dirtying the Paper Delicately*, London: UAL; Avis Newman (2003: 168) *Conversation: Avis Newman/Catherine de Zegher* in De Zegher, C. & Newman, A. *The stage of drawing – gesture and act*. NY: The Drawing Centre & Tate Publishing, pp. 67-82, 165-174, 231-237; Deanna Petherbridge (2010: 26) *The Primacy of Drawing*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

² See for example Newman (2003: 72-73 – as above); Anita Taylor (2008: 10) *Foreword – Re: Positioning Drawing* in Garner, S. (ed.) *Writing on Drawing – Essays on Drawing Practice and Research*. Bristol & Chicago: Intellect. Pp. 9-11; *Drawing: The Network* – publication 2007 by Farthing, S., Taylor, A., Newman, A., Stackhouse, A., Sawden, P., Adams, E., Bingham, J., Garner, S. & Chorpening, K.; Thinking Through Drawing network website. Also artists state this regarding their own practice; for example Charles Avery in Maslen, M. & Southern (2011: 114) *Drawing Projects: An Exploration of the Language of Drawing*. London: Black Dog Publishing Ltd.; Dryden Goodwin (*ibid.*: 180) and William Kentridge (*ibid.*: 200).

³ Anita Taylor, track 02 on CD2 of *Connecting Lines: Artists Talk About Drawing*, Artists' Lives. 2010. National Life Stories in partnership with the British Library. "The old English word 'dragan' – which is about dragging something across the surface – which is at the root of [the word] 'drawing' as much as is 'disegno'."

⁴ See also Taylor 2012: 81.

⁵ See for example Grant H. Kester (2004) *Conversation Pieces – Community + Communication in Modern Art*. Berkley, LA & London: University of California Press; and Claire Bishop (2012) *Artificial Hells – Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London & New York: Verso.

⁶ Kirwin 1987: 21 (my italics).

⁷ Wilkinson in Turner/Wilkinson 1972: 14 (my italics).

⁸ Nigel Hall in an interview with Elisa Alaluusua; 3 December 2011, London.

⁹ Farthing, S., Chorpening, K. & Wiggins, C. (eds.) *The Good Drawing*. Bright Series 7. CCW Graduate School; UAL.

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