

Angela Dawes  
University of South Australia

### **Acts of Observation: Drawing time from nature**

Keywords: Observation, Temporality, Drawing, Nature Study, Research

#### **Introduction**

In my visual art research project I am using observation to gain an understanding of non-measurable quality of time, that of continuous change, by studying a site in the natural world. In this outline of the project, I will discuss issues of observation as awareness and as documentation, note an entanglement of photography and drawing and examine the possible findings regarding the question: is our sense of what time is, connected in any way to our place in the natural world?

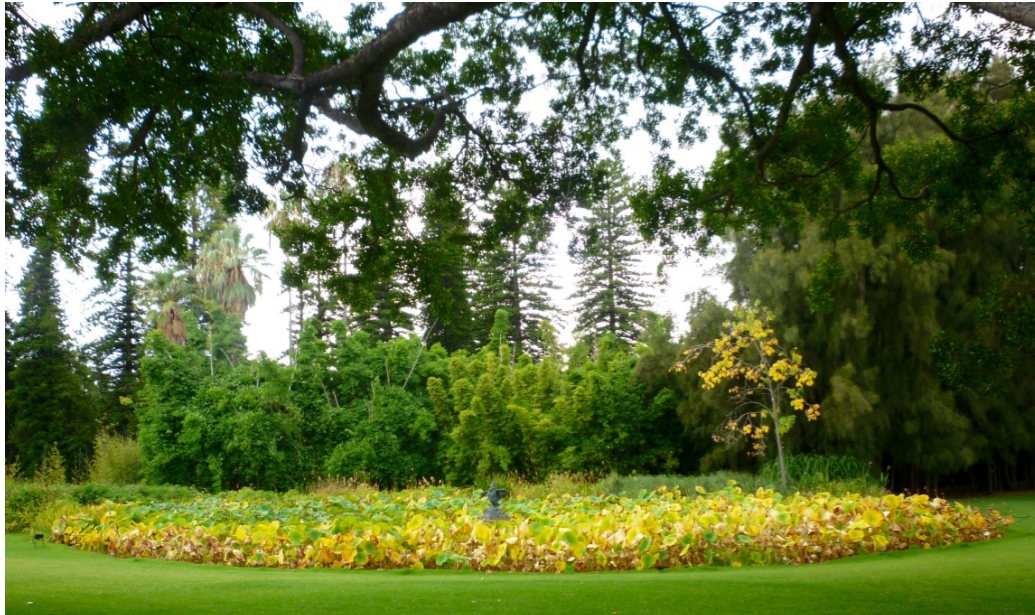


Figure 1 *Lotus Pond, Adelaide Botanical Gardens (ABG), 2014*

The site I am observing is the lotus pond in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens (Figure1). My observations at the pond are focused on the interactions of line and light made by the lotus plants, water and mud forming what I see as found drawings. At this stage I have spent a year documenting weekly observations by taking photographs, making sketches and writing notes. I expanded my investigations during a two-week field trip to Kyoto, Japan where I observed a variety of lotus ponds and the expressions of time in the gardens of Zen temples.

My practice is based on drawing with a particular focus on line. I seek to express the innate quality of materials and concepts, and use various processes, images and objects to do so. For this practice-led research, the end result will be an installation of works based on line, light and surface referencing the traditional materials of nature study: ink, watercolour, paper and photography.

Observing the natural world often leads to documentation that is mimetic but in searching for evidence of the intangible qualities of continuity and flows of time, I am seeking to find another mimesis: time as continuous change. I am working from the presumption that, in some way, that lines of material change can be documented then transformed in the studio as further expressions of time's meaning. Observation is a method of discovery, an act of paying attention to phenomena and is the traditional method used in the study of nature. Therefore each week as I spend time at the pond, close to the edge on a camping stool, at a distance on a garden bench or walking around it I am seeking to engage and find meaning within the shapes and spaces of this small example of the natural world.

The research framework for this paper is informed by an understanding of time taken from readings in physics and philosophy, principally from philosopher Henri Bergson, Zen priest Eihei Dogen, and physicist Lee Smolin. The project is a work of hermeneutic phenomenology, where I am seeking an understanding of how we engage and find meaning in the world around us.

### **Lotus pond**

The tear-shaped pond (named the Nelumbo Pond) was constructed in 1859 in a prominent site, set in a depression alongside a small creek and near a main walkway. Its edges are blurred by plantings, with a low chain around the lawn boundary. In the pond there is a tall statue of a cherub on a swan that once operated as a fountain. The lotus plant grows from a rhizome, with individual stems for each leaf and flower holding them high above the water (up to two metres for the flowers). The plant greens up in spring, then flowers and sets seed heads in summer, and by the end of winter almost all that remains are desiccated stems. The extent and height of the plant growth varies each year and at its peak in mid-summer can almost completely fill the pond, hiding the base of the statue.

While I am not observing the lotus pond as a study in ethnobotany, some context is of interest. The lotus, *Nelumbo nucifera* (or sacred lotus) is a perennial aquatic plant that evolved from a land plant. Its closest relatives are plane trees and proteas (Kew Royal Botanic Gardens 2014). To give an indication of its age, recent DNA studies show one major gene shift occurrence 65 million years ago, and that the plant has evolved very slowly (Ming, Li, Shen-Miller 2013). The lotus prefers to grow in shallow lagoons and is endemic to the wet tropics including northern Australia where the

stems are traditionally used for drinking straws and the seeds for food. The plant has a long history of being cultivated for food, medicine and decoration in other countries, and also has cultural meanings in various religions (Griffiths 2009).

## **Time**

I am intrigued with time as it is reflected and embedded in the flow of continuous change. I wonder about the process of continuous change itself, and what time really is. While the measured actions and moments of time are always present in the repeated shifts from day to night and season to season, what intrigues me are time's unmeasured qualities. For me, the multiple and simultaneous shifts in materiality, intrinsic to the physical world, are expressions of time as continuous change. It is to these shifts that I am paying attention. Given that we experience nature through the physical or material world, I am concentrating my observations for this short term project on a contained site where the mass of plants dramatically alter in appearance throughout the year - thus intensifying their material expression in the natural world.

I began this project with a simple framework of several forms of time, measured duration 'Astronomer Royal time' and individual senses of time 'time consciousness' (Eddington 1928, 36). To the latter I have added a key Buddhist axiom of impermanence (noting the consequent axiom of emptiness) that assumes all phenomena are in a continual process of change and none are independent (Gyatso 2005, 93). I acknowledge artist Lindy Lee's observation that emptiness is time, and that we 'can never step outside time' (Lee 2014).

Smolin argues that it is crucial to have an understanding of what time is; a flow and the 'only aspect of our everyday existence that is [sic] fundamental...It is the best clue we have to fundamental reality' (2013, xxxi). This is a reality, where nature evolves within time (Smolin, 241). I can surmise our creation of the Anthropocene might be causing discontinuities in the flows of time with its disruptions to the natural world, which also inspires my motivation to use the natural world as source material. From physics I understand that time is irreversible, and is relative to space, light and gravity as expounded by physicist Albert Einstein (De Wolf 2007; Greene 2004, 39-76). Time slows as gravity increases, and as the standard speed of light is measured in a vacuum, light (and therefore time) moves slightly slower in air and slower again in water. For example, taking the speed of light as measured in a vacuum as the standard, that is 1 unit, in air light moves at 1.0003, in water 1.33 and in lead, 2.65. (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute 1999).

I speculate that the surface of the water in the pond equates to a place where time makes a subtle shift. Lotus stems move through shifts in time as they break the water's surface into the air. The surface of the leaves repels water, causing it to form rounded containers of time slithering off like balls of mercury. The reflections on the

water take over the site as the lotus dies back and the full expanse of the pond's surface is revealed, implying worlds where time might be multidirectional and spatial. The natural world, for me, is where space and time and phenomena are very evident.

### **Observation: awareness**

I have observed the lotus pond for some time having lived near the Adelaide Botanic Gardens for many years. My fascination with the lotus plants and curiosity about what happens in their distinctive seasonal growth has continued as I have passed them on my walks. So I came to this project with a familiarity and awareness of my object of observation. Given this pattern of familiarity and therefore of expectation, there is a risk that I could seek to observe what I expect to find and to find confirmation in what is familiar. I could passively watch and wait (Dwyer 2009, Tan 2009), yet with a clear motivation of what was to be observed, I began this project by perceiving observation as an activity demanding attentive awareness, both voluntary and involuntary. This form of sensing is defined by Erwin Straus as deeper than perception and feeling, continuously in transition and incomplete as it moves between the critical and the constructive (Barbaras 2004). My work processes also encompassed a level of mind described in Buddhist thought as 'conviction mind' that is full of doubt; a mind that is certain but not closed (Rinpochoy 1980).

Bergson brings time and observation together in talking of simultaneity, where duration is made up of flows - of the continuities of our inner life, what is on our mind and our spatial movement - making time and our inner lives identical (2014, 253). It is these flows and attentive awareness that define observation for me. Bergson expands on continuity as being indivisible (not segmented moments) and that real time lies within this continuity (1946, 175-6).

In his writings of the natural world of northern Nepal, Peter Matthiessen (1978, 122) reinforces Bergson's sense of simultaneity when he comments: 'I understand much better now Einstein's remark that the only real time is that of the observer, who carries with him his own time and space.' Eddington also brings it back to the viewpoint of the observer, commenting that while 'now' is commonly located, we all reach that point in time and space from our own perspective (1928, 45). From the haiku travelogue by Basho (1966) the poet is an observer bringing time and place together - in the haiku tradition, the natural world must be directly commented on and related to a specific season and place (Hass, 1994).

My use of attentive awareness shifted according to the place. For example while observing lotus ponds and the use of temporality in temple gardens in Japan, I needed to be highly attentive to figure things out due to my minimal language skills and cultural knowledge. The ponds were not always obviously designed as attractions; in the Kyoto Botanical Gardens the pond near a shrine was left in a natural state of dishevelment (a guide told me it was as an act of respect), giving me

the impression of multiple and simultaneous flows of continuity. Another was tidied up and had decking built through it to encourage much closer interaction, a more orderly arrangement which made me less aware of continual flows of time within the pond. In other places the lotus plants were lined up in individual pots, planted as specimens for close inspection, an ordering which restricted the sense of flow even further. Whereas the temple gardens with their considered placements of stone, gravel and plants were often as Richard Serra commented, designed so the observer is 'perceiving space and time, solid and void, as one' (White 2011, 208).

From Eihei Dogen's thirteenth century essay on time and Ruth Ozeki's recent novel, I became aware of humans (and all other phenomena) as 'time beings' (Dogen 2007, Ozeki 2013). With this in consideration, I began observing with an awareness of being within time's flows, and by being a container of time. Dogen states time is continuous and that 'everything whatsoever that exists in the whole universe is a series of instances of time' (Dogen, 112). Ozeki centres her work on this text and brings an awareness of observing and comprehending evidence as characters unravel the continuity of their stories and their places in time.

Through my increased awareness over the past year the lotus pond has become a very active site, full of evidentiary expressions of time. I began with the concept of it being a 'changescape' (Gibson 2005) where change happens at the boundaries and inside and outside of a system, and this concept still holds. It relates to the situation of the lotus pond being a container in the landscape, where there's no obvious inflow or outflow of water. The pond is formed by what appear to be unchanged boundaries of lawn and plants where their less visible seasonal changes throw the spectacle of the lotus plant into high relief, the abutting areas are changing but in their own scales of time. Perhaps as a changescape, the pond is an intricate multiplicity of continuous timescapes.

### **Observation: documentation**

There is a contradiction in documenting observations, as awareness and perception are diverted to the realities of the documenting, thus momentarily freezing the flow of the observation process. For example, while making notebook drawings that are simple gestural sketches seeking the lines of the plants, my awareness shifts to the paper and hand and moves into the flow of making, noting drawing in public can be performative as bystanders stop to talk while they watch me draw. Likewise, the act of writing shifts awareness and takes the mind away through perception, contemplation and memory.



Figure 2 *Lotus Pond 18/12, ABG, 2014*    Figure 3 *Lotus Pond 25/6, ABG, 2015*

I began this project intending to use simple techniques to document observations of temporality, aiming to use them as a source for work in the studio, and the mass of recordings gathered over the year certainly became an archive of evidentiary data to be managed. I noted that while I was using the camera to record lines and shapes as found drawings at the start of the field study (as in Figure 2), when I was using the camera to reveal details of shifts of time at the surface of the water, the resulting minimal images appeared more consciously as drawings (as in Figure 3).

On reflection, it seems that photographs minimise any halts in the observation process. The act of documenting was quick, driven by looking, moving the camera into position and with one click it was done. With my camera, I sought moments of the plant's interactions with water and light; finding lines and marks on and within surfaces that express continuous change, and in doing so, the lotus pond became a studio, a site of production (Buren 2004). The printed photographs were often a surprise to me as they revealed to me what I did not see at the time, an extended frame of vision of what can be seen and what I am unseeing. The photographs could be described as 'making strange' (Rugg 2010, 142) and twisting expectations of the aesthetics of the natural world. Through the camera's resolution and the lens recording finer detail, I can see the transformation of three dimensions into two.

Making the documentations to record observations always relies on my point of view, and requires my body to be still. In a sense, I halt my forward movement, a strategy in handling temporality noted by Christine Ross (2014). Simon Starling uses documentary observation to play with this expectation in his 2006 slide installation, *Autoxyloprocycloborus*. Here, a small wooden steamboat is fed to itself as it sails



around a loch, then is supposedly rebuilt as the slides replay in reverse order. The resulting slapstick is using the irreversibility quality of time to comment on the storage of nuclear arms at the loch. Daniel Crooks uses digital technology to slice the time within a moving image, interrupting the forward movement and emphasising multiple continuities. His speculation that there is 'an ultimate frame rate, at the bottom of things' (Samstag 2013, 30) brings the movement and sight of time back into the human context - alluding to time being viewable. At the pond, exact moments are seen when the grey heron, after intense stillness, darts forward to impale a creature with its beak. Yet these moments, in their highlighted halting of time, only emphasise the continuous flows of time.

Given my purpose in documenting observations is to find expressions of temporality through my practice in drawing, this comment by Henri Michaux is of interest: 'I want to draw the consciousness of existing and the flow of time. As one takes one's pulse.' (Michaux 1957, 7). The pulse of the lotus pond as an entity, and the many pulses within each plant are for me to be found by observation and by documentation. Perhaps it is the capturing capacity of the photograph and the camera's function as 'an observation station' (Sontag 1979, 12) that assists in making the observation personal and active.

Whether my photographs with their concentration on line are not drawings is a matter for me to resolve. They seem to be drawings of speculation and discovery, about what the lotus plants are doing as they move through shifts in time. Craigie Horsfield (2004) in his discussion of early Victorian representations of nature including the camera-free mimetic cyanotypes states: 'The new photogenic drawing could be imagined as the phenomenal world drawing itself.' (Horsfield, 188). I am using expressions of line and watermarking to transform and perhaps mimic time's qualities, a different mimesis that possibly is an altruistic observation.

## **Conclusions**

At this stage in the project, my working findings are that the lotus pond has become a studio where items of observational documentation have become works, and that drawings can be made by a camera. I do feel a stronger connection to the natural world. Through an increased understanding of the interplay of continuous change and time gained from the regular study of this small contained site, I have come to realise that the commonality of continuous and simultaneous time blurs the distinction between the human and the natural worlds. Whether being aware of existing within continuous time can shift our sense of our place in the natural world does seem possible and is worthy of further study.

## References

- BARBARAS, Renaud 2004, 'Affectivity and movement: the sense of sensing in Erwin Straus', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 3 2004, 215-228.
- BASHO, Matsuo 1966, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Stories*, translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa, Penguin Books, London.
- BERGSON, Henri 2014, 'Concerning the nature of time', Chapter Three of *Duration and Simultaneity* translated by L Jacobson and M Lewis, 1922, in Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey (eds) 2014, *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 253-268.
- BERGSON, Henri 1946, 'The perception of change', *Creative Mind*, translated by Mabelle L Andison, Philosophical Library, New York, 153-186.
- BUREN, Daniel 2004, 'The function of the studio' Claire Doherty (ed) *Contemporary Art: from studio to situation*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 15-23.
- DE WOLF, Eddi 2007, 'Space and Time', Alex Vervoordt and Mattijs Visser (eds) *Artempo: where art becomes time*, Axel Vervoordt in association with Mer. Paper Kunsthalle, Ghent, 35-49.
- DOGEN, Eihei 2007, 'Uji: On "Just for the time being, just for a while, for the whole of time is the whole of existence"' , *Shobogenzo: the treasure house of the eye of the true teaching*, translated by Rev Hubert Norman, Shasta Abbey Press, California, 106-118. Note, this collection of texts was written between 1231 and 1253.
- DOHERTY, Claire (ed) 2004, *Contemporary Art: from studio to situation*, Black Dog Publishing, London.
- DWYER, Peter D 2009, 'Worlds of waiting', Ghassan Hage (ed), *Waiting*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 15-26.
- EDDINGTON, Arthur Stanley 1928, *The Nature of the Physical World*, The Macmillan Company and Cambridge University Press, New York and Cambridge.
- GIBSON, Ross 2005, 'Changescapes' in IDEA Journal 2005 at <http://idea-edu.com/journal/2005-idea-journal/> np.
- GREENE, Brian 2004, *The Fabric of the Cosmos: space, time and the texture of reality*, Penguin Books, London.
- GRIFFITHS, Mark, *The Lotus Quest* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009).
- GYATSO, Tenzin 2005, *Essence of the Heart Sutra, the Dalai Lama's Heart of Wisdom*, translated and edited by Geshe Thupten Jinpa, Wisdom Publications, Boston.
- HASS, Robert (ed) 1994, *The Essential Haiku: visions of Basho, Buson, and Issa*, Harper Collins, New York.
- HORSFIELD, Craigie 2004, 'World and word', Catherine de Zegher (ed) 2004, *Ocean*



- Flowers: impressions from nature*, The Drawing Center, New York, 181-207.
- KEW Royal Botanic Gardens, 2014 'Nelumbo nucifera' at <http://www.kew.org/science-conservation/plants-fungi/nelumbo-nucifera-sacred-lotus>
- LEE, Lindy 2014, 'Artist' choice: Ad Reinhardt', *ARTAND Australia* 52.1 2014, 202.
- MATTHIESSEN, Peter 2003, *The Snow Leopard*, Vintage, London.
- MICHAUX, Henri 1957, 'To draw the flow of time', translated by Richard Fineberg, *Quadrum* No.3, 1957, Brussels and reprinted in Catherine de Zegher (ed) 2004, *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, The Drawing Center, New York, 7-9.
- MING, Ray, Li, Shaohua and Shen-Miller, Jane 2013, 'Genome of the long-living sacred lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn)', *Genome Biology*, 14:R41 2013 accessed at <http://genomebiology.com/2013/14/5/R41>
- OZEKI, Ruth 2013, *A Tale for the Time Being*, Text Publishing, Melbourne.
- RENSSELAER Polytechnic Institute 1999, <http://www.rpi.edu/dept/phys/Dept2/APPhys1/optics/optics/node4.html> viewed April 2014.
- RINPOCHAY, Lati 1980, *Mind in Tibetan Buddhism*, translated by Elizabeth Napper, Snow Lion Publications, New York.
- ROSE, Bernice, White, Michelle and Garrels, Gary 2011, *Richard Serra Drawing: a retrospective*, The Merrill Collection, Houston.
- ROSS, Christine 2014, *The Past is the Present: it's the Future too: the temporal turn in contemporary art*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York.
- RUGG, Judith 2010, *Exploring Site-Specific Art: issues of space and internationalism*, I B Tauris, London.
- SAMSTAG Museum of Art 2013, 'A conversation with Melbourne video artist Daniel Crooks and Lawrence Weschler', *Daniel Crooks*, Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide, 12-43.
- SMOLIN, Lee 2013, *Time Reborn: from the crisis of physics to the future of the universe*, Allen Lane, London.
- SONTAG, Susan 1979, *On Photography*, Penguin, London.
- TAN, Gillian G 2009, 'Senses of waiting among Tibetan nomads', Ghassan Hage (ed), *Waiting*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 66-75.
- VERVOORDT, Alex and Visser, Mattijs (eds) 2007, *Artempo: where art becomes time*, Axel Vervoordt in association with Mer. Paper Kunsthalle, Ghent.
- WHITE, Michelle 2011, 'A drawing chronology', Bernice Rose, Michelle White and Gary Garrels, *Richard Serra Drawing: a retrospective*, The Merrill Collection, Houston, 206-215.

de ZEGHER, Catherine (ed) 2000, *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux*, The Drawing Center, New York.

de ZEGHER, Catherine (ed) 2004, *Ocean Flowers: impressions from nature*, The Drawing Center, New York.

**List of Illustrations**

All photographs by the author.

Figure 1 *Lotus Pond, Adelaide Botanical Gardens (ABG), 2014*

Figure 2 *Lotus Pond 18/12, ABG, 2014*

Figure 3 *Lotus Pond 25/6, ABG, 2015*