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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	McGuirk, Tom
Citation	McGuirk, T. (2026). Drawing: Fissure and strife. In M. Bratchie & M. Velez (Eds.), <i>The Experiential in Artistic Research. Proceedings of the Nordic Summer University Symposia, 2022–2025</i> (pp. 23-31). Nordic Summer University.
Publisher	Nordic Summer University
Download date	2026-06-13 18:13:36
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Link to Item	https://chesterrep.openrepository.com/handle/10034/629966

Drawing: Fissure and Strife

Tom McGuirk

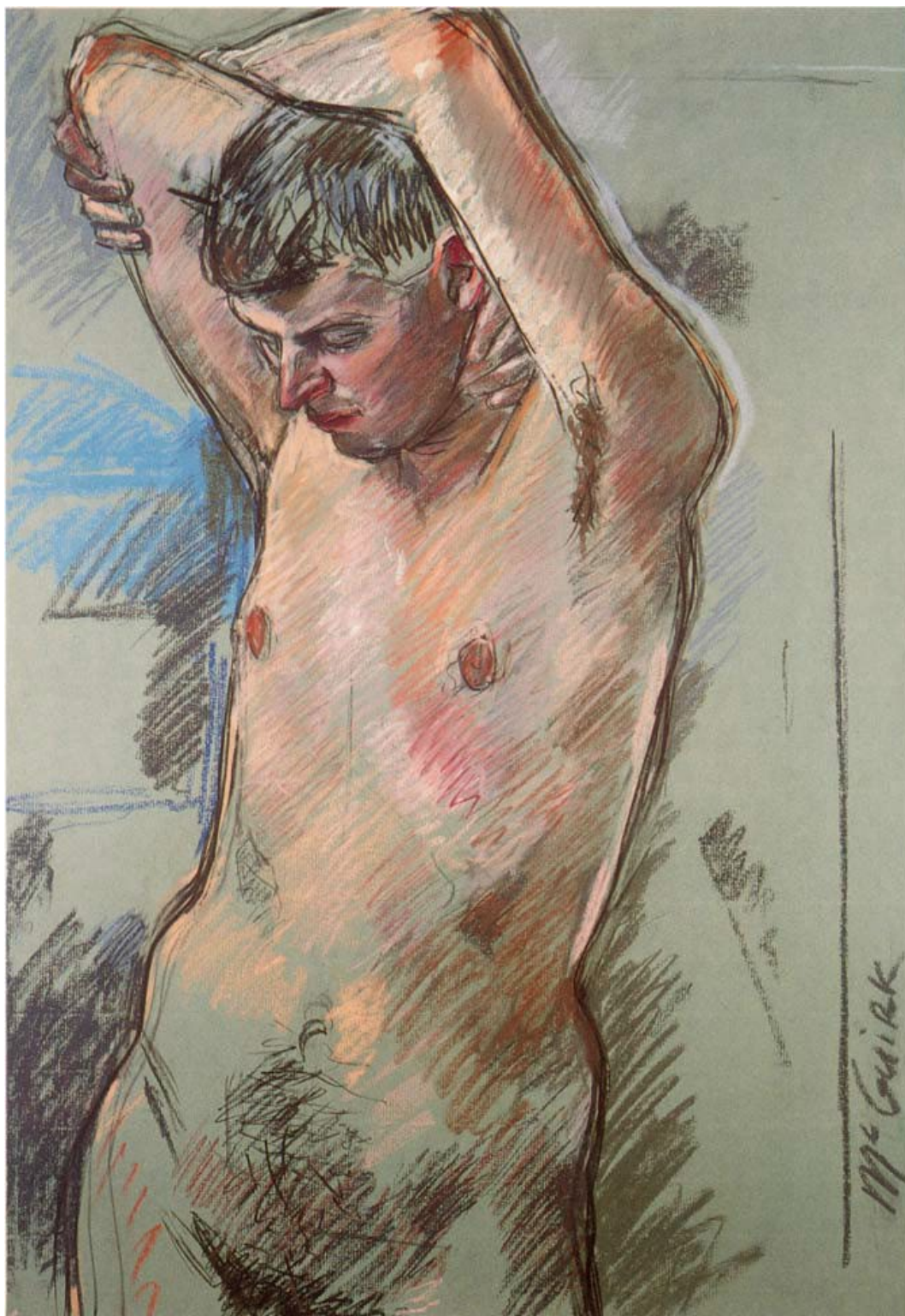
As a naïve undergraduate student of fine art, I found it curious that none of my teachers ever wished to address something that I was fascinated by: the mystery, as I saw it, surrounding that moment of creativity when one stepped back, surprised, with little understanding of how one had made what one had. I sensed, however, that any reference to mystery might not be well received by those educating me – to them it appeared that art was a rational activity – and the zeitgeist demanded that even references to talent and skill were frowned upon. What mattered was the intellect, the concept. I now see this attitude as a phase in the long swing of a pendulum away from the Romantics' attachment to mystery, inherent in the notion of the sublime.

Theories of the sublime, from Longinus to Lyotard, share the idea that fine art emerges not from any rule-based method, but through an essentially revelatory process. Earlier, still-influential accounts dispute this, as we shall see. All, however, contribute to a dualism that distinguishes and separates technical mastery from something else: an 'x' factor. Such conflicts remain at the centre of discourse regarding creativity, a discourse still informed by the Greek conception of a dichotomy that pitches technique, framed as *technē*, against that mysterious factor: that 'something else'. This text will examine this dualism and will present Heidegger's discussion (1993) of the *Riss* as a key to unravelling the conundrum.

Mystery

This mystery regarding how the artist brings new works of art into the world, and how making produces new knowledge, has lingered in my research and practice. It sits at the heart of various core interests, which include theories of art education and questions regarding the epistemic status of artistic practices like drawing.

In academia, an uneasiness persists regarding the validity of practice as a route to knowledge. Practice has been associated with emotion rather than intellect, with knack rather than knowledge. Such ideas have a long pedigree.



McGuirk, T. 1989. *St. Sebastian*.

Pastel on card. 70 x 48 cm.

Plato spoke disparagingly of the genre of tragedy within Athenian theatre. He criticised it for employing the cheap tricks of rhetoric to win over the audience (Janaway, 1995, pp. 50–53). Janaway gives two reasons for Plato’s distrust of this rhapsodic dimension and his consequent refusal to grant the genre the high status of *technē*. The first reason, of little interest here, is that it did not focus on the production of the ‘good’ but rather on swaying emotions; it was mere entertainment. Of greater interest to us, however, is the second reason. This was founded on a view that such art represents ‘an *alogon pragma*, a thing without an account, a business without a rational principle’ (Janaway, 1995, p. 51). The idea here is that truth and knowledge must inevitably be grounded in rationality. In order for any practice to attain the high status of *technē*, the practitioner must be able to give an account of how they make what they make. Janaway helpfully explains:

Poets, composers, actors, singers, instrumentalists may produce fine works, but it is not from knowledge that they do so ... They ... have enough experience to have picked up the ‘knack’ of getting things right nearly all the time (since practice makes perfect). But they cannot point to general principles which link their actions with the right outcome. (p. 51)

Outlined here is a plain disparagement of the epistemic worth of practice, a presumption that practice and knowledge are distinct, indeed incompatible, particularly with regard to the making of art. By setting *technē* in opposition to the unaccountable, the inexplicable, Plato laid down a conceptual framework for the education of artists that had considerable appeal and still has traction today. Its continued popularity is aided by the fact that the framework accommodates the possibility of observable learning and teaching. What is more worrying, however, is that aspects of the making of art that rely on tacit, embodied and experiential knowledge can be written off as mere ‘knack’, of little or no epistemic worth. By contrast, later accounts, Kant’s for instance, present the fine arts as arts of genius, that cannot be explained rationally and therefore, rather inconveniently, cannot be taught.

Shargel suggests that this ‘separation of *epistēmē* and *technē*’ in Plato initiated ‘a historical debate starting with describing a hierarchy, or at least a dichotomy, with knowledge of pure theory, or the immutable, placed above building or making, that is, dealing with changeable stuff’ (1995, p. 186).

Janaway remarks that here ‘we may see the beginnings of a separating out of the “artistic” from knowledge-based activities such as medicine ...’ (1995, p. 16). All of this, even today, contributes to the problematic status of both fine art practice and artistic research within the academy, characterised by Elkins as the ‘incommensurability of studio art production and university life’ (2009, p. 128).

As Dewey (1916) recognised, some of these precepts are so culturally embedded within our thinking about knowledge and education as to have become invisible, routinely taken for granted.

Heidegger and *technē*

Skill, knack or 'know how', conceived of as mere technique, were disparaged in my education. I wanted to learn to draw and conceived of that process as an embodied mastery of technique; this was at that time regarded as a shallow ambition. I can see now that such attitudes ignored the value of tacit knowledge and the epistemic significance of the embodied sensory motor skills inherent in drawing processes. Far from being radical, I now understand these attitudes as regressive, dualistic, and having deep roots in the kind of hidebound and limiting attitudes outlined above.

By contrast, Heidegger proffers an alternative, holistic approach, one that recognises the epistemic value of practices of art-making. According to Clark (2011), Heidegger suggests that early on the Greeks had conceived of *technē* as a form of 'knowledge', the kind 'implicit in making something, both in art and technology'; only later do these two ways of knowing come to be regarded as 'distinct and even antagonistic' (p. 77). Heidegger objects to this separation of the intellectual and the practical, pointing out that from the earliest times, *technē* was associated with *epistēmē*: as he puts it, 'both words are names for knowing in the widest sense' (Heidegger, 1977, p. 13).

Heidegger's argument hangs on his particular conception of truth. For him, truth is not about measurement against some set, pre-established, unquestionable standard – truth as correspondence, as he terms it. Rather, it is something far more primordial, epitomised by the Greek term *alētheia*, 'unconcealment'. His account accords full epistemic status to making as a way of revealing, uncovering truth. As he explains, '*technē*, as knowledge ... is a bringing forth ... it *brings forth* what is present ... *out* of concealment and specifically *into* the unconcealment of its appearance; *technē* never signifies [merely] the action of making' (1993, p. 184).

And Heidegger points to another crucial dimension: the 'poietic'. The artist for Heidegger is undeniably 'also a craftsman' (1993, p. 184), but that is not essentially why she is *technitēs*, as he explains:

We must observe two things ... One is that *technē* is the name not only of the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of mind and the fine arts. *Technē* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis*; it is something poietic. (1977, pp. 12–13)

This is key to Heidegger's understanding of art-making. *Technē* is a way of knowing and the arts and crafts share this epistemic status with other ways of uncovering truth – science, for instance. However, the fine arts have a dimension that separates them from the crafts and the sciences. That dimension is the poietic.

In 1674, the French writer and critic Nicolas Boileau (1636–1711) translated Longinus' *On the Sublime*, a text that highlights the idea that there can be no set of rules that guarantee sublime expression. Lyotard (1984) suggests that in Boileau's interpretation a 'break' is made with the idea that sublime art, indeed fine art, can be achieved through a rule-based conception of *technē*:

The sublime ... cannot be taught, and ... is not linked to rules that can be determined ... beauty demands more than just a respect for rules, that it requires a further '*je ne sais quoi*' ... something 'incomprehensible and inexplicable,' ... a fundamentally 'hidden' phenomenon ... (Lyotard, 1984, p. 38)

It is interesting that where Plato sees in rhetoric something untrustworthy, Longinus and Lyotard see something else: the poietic. That 'hidden phenomenon' is another way of talking about the mystery at the heart of the creative act.

As we shall see, Heidegger's discussion of the *Riss*, in the context of the act of drawing, casts light on this 'hidden phenomenon', rendering it both comprehensible and explicable.

The *Riss*

Heidegger's seminal essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1993) addresses this '*je ne sais quoi*'. It does so by witnessing the inherent struggle, the strife in all creative acts. Describing creativity in terms of struggle is hardly novel; however, Heidegger's conception is, as we shall see, far more profound and nuanced than any clichéd reference to the hard-won image.

In this text, Heidegger initially appeals to the authority of his great compatriot, the artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), as someone 'bound to know what he was talking about' (Heidegger, 1993, p. 195). Dürer, he points out, held that 'art lies hidden within nature; he who can wrest it from her, has it' (Heidegger, 1993, p. 195). However, Heidegger hears something conventional and problematic in this account, an echo of attitudes to knowledge to which he profoundly objects. In *Being and Time* he had rejected conceptions of knowledge within western epistemology that frame knowledge in terms of dominion and conquest. This is the idea that to know something is to seize it and possess it, an attitude that Heidegger suggests is a legacy of Roman imperialism. He sees this stance as profoundly mistaken:

...the perceiving of what is known is not a process of returning with one's booty to the 'cabinet' of consciousness after one has gone out and *grasped* it ... (Heidegger, 1962, p. 89, my emphasis)

He proposes an alternative epistemology: an approach to knowing that emphasises participation, application, action and above all care, something he characterises as circumspection. As he explains, circumspection, 'the kind of care that manipulates things and puts them to use ... has its own kind of knowledge' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 95).

This understanding supports developing models of knowledge generation within the field of artistic research. Bolt points to Heidegger's insight in discussing how creativity works: 'it is through circumspection that the "new" emerges. In this way artists gain access to the world, in ... an original and an originary way' (Bolt in Barrett and Bolt, 2010, p. 30). For Heidegger, practice and making represent a route to uncovering new, original insight and/or knowledge. Art, in this view, is the 'becoming and happening of truth' (Heidegger, 1993, p. 196). Truth here is once again understood in terms of *alethēia*, 'unconcealment'.

Heidegger, moreover, objects to what he terms the theoretical attitude, which he saw as dominating western metaphysics, whereby art is understood, disastrously, solely as a matter of aesthetics and is thereby deprived of its epistemic function. As Young (2001) points out, for Heidegger, this represents 'the imperialism of reason, the triumph of the view that science (including in the German tradition the *Geisteswissenschaften*), and science alone, has access to truth' (p. 14).

In opposing that view, Heidegger regards the practical engagement, represented by *technē*, with matter and with things as a more primordial knowing than that allowed for by the 'theoretical attitude'. There is, he tells us, a 'deficiency' in knowledge when it is at a remove from the world, when it 'holds back' from 'producing and manipulating and the like'. If we look at 'the Things' merely theoretically, we adopt, he tells us, an impoverished way of being in the world (Heidegger, 1962, p. 88).

As Bolt explains:

Heidegger argues that we do not come to 'know' the world theoretically through contemplative knowledge in the first instance. Rather, we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling. Thus the new can be seen to emerge in the involvement with materials, methods, tools and ideas of practice. (Barrett and Bolt, 2010, p. 30)

Practice, the *work* of art, is thereby inexorably engaged with the unconcealment of truth, *alethēia*. The argument presented here affirms its role in the production, or more accurately uncovering, of knowledge.

Fissure

In 'The Origin of the Work of Art', Heidegger (1993) contemplates the German word *Riss*, which can paradoxically mean both to sketch and to tear. Heidegger (1993) points to a number of other connotations relating to the act of drawing. To 'wrest' [*Reissen*] he explains, means to 'draw out the rift [*Riss*] and to draw the design [*Riss*] with the drawing-pen [*Reissfeder*] on the drawing-board [*Reissbrett*]' (p.195). He also references a number of German compound words of which *Riss* is a component: floor plan (*Grundriss*), elevation (*Aufriss*), section (*Durchriss*) and outline (*Umriss*) (p.195). His argument proceeds to outline other more destructive, even violent connotations, such as 'tear', 'cleft' and 'breach'.

Heidegger teases out a deep-seated ambiguity embodied in the notion of the *Riss*, incorporating into it the complexity of the concomitant destructive and constructive nature of the act of drawing.

Robertson (1984) draws a useful comparison between the complexity of the term *Riss* and the duality of meaning within the English word *cleave*, which can mean both to 'split' (to 'sever' or 'separate "with violence"'), but also, paradoxically, to 'adhere' or 'bring together' (p. 241). Moi (2006) makes a particularly apt comparison between the word *Riss* and the English words *rend* ('to tear'), and to *render*, apt because render also means 'to draw' (pp. 14–15). Heidegger conflates all of these meanings in his analysis of the creative/destructive nature of drawing. The *Riss* both severs and unites.

Moreover, Fried and Polt make note of Heidegger's use of the word *Riss* to describe 'a strife between "earth and world", a strife that is set to work in artworks' (Heidegger, 2000, pp. 171–172). The work of making a drawing is portrayed as a struggle between the perpetually conflicting elements of 'earth and world': the 'earth' here is the ground/page, whereas the 'world' element represents the line breaking the page's surface. Referencing Gestalt theory, Heidegger suggests that the line here is the figure element, set against the ground, whereby the line/mark creates the rift or fissure that separates while paradoxically uniting. As Allen (2007) explains: 'The sketch and the tear are two sides of the same line' (p. 72).

Drawing is therefore a drawing out of the figure, sometimes violently, from the ground, while simultaneously pulling figure and ground together, establishing a gestalt, or organised whole. Bakken Pedersen (2016) outlines this process:

There is a constant struggle where neither earth nor world gets the upper hand ... Even though the artwork is the origin of the strife, that does not mean that the struggle will be settled by the work as well; rather, the artwork ensures that the strife remains a strife. (p. 27)

Noteworthy too is that this insight accounts for the vitality of all true works of art: it explains their propensity to remain vital and their potential to reward repeated encounters with them.

Drawing

In the act of drawing, every 'first mark' on the unsullied page contains a violence which is indispensable to the creative process. Every drawn line both divides and conjoins. Heidegger frames this in ontological terms. The work of art, which is the 'happening of truth', can only come about as the result of such a primal strife between concealment and breaking open. Heidegger tells us that 'the work is the instigation of a strife in which the unconcealment of beings ... or truth is won' (1993, p. 180). In that struggle the figure is wrested from the ground/earth, while the ground in turn strives to regain and subsume it – a perpetual strife.

For me, this presents a convincing account of how art-making and particularly creative actions such as drawing occur. Samuel Beckett suggests this in his 1967 poem *For Avigdor Arikha*, which describes the actions of Arikha, his artist friend, in the act of drawing:

Back and forth the gaze beating against unseeable and unmakeable. Truce
for a space and the marks of what it is to be and be in face of. Those deep
marks to show.

(Samuel Beckett in Thomson, 1994, p. 62)

Beckett's 'deep marks' are the fissures that the artist opens in order 'to show' the artwork, which Heidegger conceives of as 'the happening of truth'. Drawing is therefore a model for how knowledge is brought forth out of concealment – from earth, that mysterious dark region.

Drawing has a particular claim to being considered *technē*, in its reaching, breaking and opening up of a space. By this unconcealment, a mere line of chalk or charcoal on a page can summon up and reveal a world.

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