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Collective Fantasy

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Skin

An image, a picture, a pattern emerges from its support – or rather, what lies beneath the support. The ground rises up, takes control over the coming-into-being of the image. Asserting its presence, the paper is another kind of skin: a membrane between above and below, inside and outside.

Within a strand of works submitted to 2019's *Drawing Biennial*, a varied set of techniques – from rubbing, frottage and transfer, to paper weaving, collage and cut-out – together suggest that paper enables a distinctive category of artistic practice to emerge, at once preliminary and resolved; grounded and unbounded. In philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's text *The Ground of the Image*, we begin with the image and from there uncover the abyssal underside of its ground, which is both connected to and isolated from the image's distinct imprint. Nancy's definition of an image is that which 'is set aside, removed, cut off ... immobile, calm, and flat ... the image – neither world nor language – clear and distinct, is something obvious and evident.'¹ To talk about drawings is to talk about images but also to go beyond the image. The potential of drawing is both to contain and to exceed the image; it can circumvent its distinction or subsume it.

Alice Channer's *Landscape* (2018) uses coloured pencils in a frottage technique on paper to create five horizontal green bands of what looks like different snakeskins and leathers, rising up from below. Each band

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Image – The Distinct,' in *The Ground of the Image*, New York, 2005, p.1, 10–12.

has a staccato rhythm of ragged pencil marks, a push-and-pull of up and down movement, a messy sense of only partial containment. The paper is a landscape that is also animal. A landscape that is also skin. This drawing grounded in abstraction escapes that category at every turn. Here, the movement of drawing is escape.

Mona Hatoum's *DR* (2018) 'is made using a frottage technique with a perforated metal sheet.'² Using wax crayon, graphite, pastel and pencil on paper, and that hidden – now removed – metal sheet, two distinct registers of visual information emerge. There is the regular pattern of the perforated metal, straight lines of perfect circles (doubly absent, in a way), and the asteroid-like starbursts of scribbled energy, in which the frottage is contained, or perhaps revealed. Together they are the ground and its image at once. Hatoum's *DR* asks us to think about the appendices to and apparatuses for drawing. Everything that surrounds drawing, that makes it such a contested, pedagogic, romanticised, and ultimately slippery to define activity, category or medium. Everything that hides behind the blank sheet of paper, that is obscured by its apparent simplicity and primacy: these are the very supporting structures necessary for drawing to occur.

As the architectural historian Mark Wigley reminds us: "Technically, paper is just the "support" of a drawing, and the material added to it the "medium." But paper is a special kind of support. It is a lightweight membrane whose own materiality (colour, thickness, weight, texture, opacity) is usually ignored – even if it is crucial to the person who drew on it."³ This simultaneous presence and absence of paper lends it an intriguing status relative to what is often prioritised: the lines or marks of drawing. Such a status is heightened by the standardised format and unframed presentation of this *Drawing Biennial*, in which drawing's ground is afforded a power and prominence it is rarely granted.

Wigley also strikes a note of caution regarding the common desire to align drawing with thought:

While the only material that can be officially used for drawing is a layer of compressed and dried wood pulp or fragmented linen, the desirable characteristic of that material is precisely that it can be overlooked. Paper is treated as if it is not really there, as if it occupies a liminal space between material and idea. Drawings are seen as a unique form of access to the thoughts of the people that make them. Indeed, they are simply treated as thoughts. [...] A certain way of looking at paper, or rather a certain blindness to it, allows physical marks to assume the status of immaterial ideas.⁴

² Mona Hatoum, information sheet submitted for *Drawing Biennial 2019*. All direct quotations from this year's exhibiting artists that follow are taken from the contextual information that accompanied their donated drawing.

³ Mark Wigley, 'Paper, Scissors, Blur,' in *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architecture from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond*, eds. Catherine de Zegher and Mark Wigley (exh. cat., Drawing Center), New York, 2001, p.28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.29.

A willingness to pay proper attention to the ‘overlooked’ paper – the support, the ground from which the images, messages, surfaces and shapes in this collection of drawings emerge – offers a route away from the repeatedly declared notion of drawing’s equivalency to thought. Notation, sketching in preparation for unrealised works, diagramming, drawing as writing: these are all importantly useful concepts, naturally, and yet their rhetoric of ideation and planning doesn’t prevent the chance to envisage drawing as a space before or beneath the pre-meditation of organised thought.

In Jean-Luc Nancy’s later volume *The Pleasure of Drawing*, he suggests that ‘drawing unfolds a novel sense that does not conform to a pre-formed project. [...] Its pleasure is the sensual pleasure [*jouissance*] of this unfolding...’⁵ Later, delving further into this notion of discovery without destination, Nancy claims: ‘The pleasure of drawing is the pleasure of those who do not acknowledge any given form.’⁶ This text invites us to consider drawing as pleasure (rather than as labour or skill); as a state of haptic sensation and sensual potential that refuses to coalesce into fixed form. This enabling of agency is certainly visible in those *Biennial* works that use frottage, transfer or other methods of manipulating the paper as an active site for their drawing.

Howard Dyke’s drawing includes ‘the textures of painting marks and different material weaves.’ He notes that he was ‘able through a kind of brass rubbing method [to] pick up these patterns and apply them to the drawing, building it up in layers to form an abstract version of the image,’ which was originally a painting of Fidel Castro. Here the frottage enables a transition from figuration to abstraction, something like a return to inchoateness. Richard Deacon’s *30.12.2018* employs a different technique but retains this interest in grains, textures and patterns: the surfaces and supports of drawing. Deacon ‘found a nice piece of wood in the street with quite a strong parallel grain, and I thought that it would make a good template for beginning a drawing, which then became more like a pile.’ Again, the flatness of drawing is challenged into assuming mass.

Nicola Durvasula’s *Red 3* (2018) offers no drawn articulation of line, mark or shape: her drawing is expressed as pure colour, its density relative to and dependant on the handmade Indian paper she has selected. The ground of drawing is not necessarily inert, as also witnessed in the reassembling of laser-cut paper segments in Rhys Coren’s *The Duck with No Name* (2018), the cut-outs and stencilling of surfaces

⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing* (2009), English trans. Philip Armstrong, Fordham University Press, New York, 2013, p.22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.32.

relative to architectural plans and elevations in Laura Gannon's drawing *Jean Desert* (2018), and the transfer processes of Anna Barriball's *Untitled (pressed glass)* (2019). Connected to this category is the weaving of paper: the creation of an entirely new surface from the paper's malleable ground, as seen in Alison Wilding's *And another thing...* (2018). The crumpled paper of Nicky Hirst's *Monkey See, Monkey Do* (2018) submits to its 'fragility and tipping points ... one more crumple and it would break down and tear,' while Leo Fitzmaurice's perforated *sham chamois* (2018) is one of 'a series of folded drawings based on domestic cloths.' The artist likes 'to see these drawings as shallow sculptures.' This opening onto the realm of shallow sculpture leads us to Cornelia Parker's *Untitled (Double Negative)* (2018), which is, as she explains, a 'collage made out of punched out paper from the Poppy Factory in Richmond. The negative spaces left by the absent poppies create a moiré, a fragment of a never-ending line of production.' This sense of setting in motion a space of ceaseless movement and making without end is a reminder that drawing's porous membrane allows it passage between finality and the perpetually unfinished.

Across these various manifestations of cutting, crumpling, punching, shaping and soaking we feel the persistent presence of the paper, unwilling to disappear into blank nothingness. The tonality, volume and 'thingness' that is let loose from thin sheets of wood pulp unfold via a broad spectrum of textures, all available within a realm of flatness. Paper, of course, possesses both a front and back, double-sided even while identifying as a thing of utter one-dimensionality. Many of the strategies listed above activate the back of the paper as equally as its front, or confuse the two altogether.

It could be argued that the photo-transfer technique seen elsewhere in the *Biennial* (such as Nidhal Chamekh's drawing) is as much an act of abrasion, both caress and friction, a willing-into-being of the image via its ground. Moving from photo-transfer to photo-mimesis, David Haines' *About Love, Boyz Party Moscow, February 2018. Three Halls, Two DJs and Two Hundred Guys From All Over Russia*, a new work from his on-going 'Still Life with Flyer' series, envisages the three-dimensional character of paper's everyday lives through an astonishing trompe l'oeil precision. The flyers, according to Haines, 'have developed their own entropic singularities, developing skins – folded and creased, found in some forgotten back pocket.' He describes this work of greyscale softness and political urgency as 'a drawing within a drawing within a drawing.' In articulating this recursive feedback loop, Haines's work suggests that perhaps pleasure can be found between the skin and structure of drawing, that in-between sliver that is overlooked, marginalised, but alive to possible alternative freedoms.

Structure

Everyone is given only a little bit of room. At certain times we press against our confines; at other moments we obey them unwaveringly, unquestioningly. The format is standardised, repetitive, rigid, and yet endlessly variable. Little else could bring so many artists together in a single room. The format superficially erases differences of biography, career history, trendiness and market value (which is conversely foregrounded by the auction framework itself). Everyone gets the same space. An arena in which to act, or withdraw, or do something else entirely.

This *Biennial*, as an exhibition, has so much structure and also an absence of it. Rigorous confines and rule-based rigidity collide with content that is impossible to predict in advance, a looseness that comes from the perhaps welcome absence of pre-determined thematic direction or curatorial shaping. And yet, as Mark Wigley points out: ‘To exhibit any group of drawings side by side is already to construct an idealised world of collective fantasy.’⁷ Here, the fantasy is shaped by the arrangement of these disparate papers, ordered alphabetically by artist’s surname. This collective fantasy itself shapes a sequence of mutations within pre-set parameters. Karl Haendel’s description of his drawing *Double Ampersand* (2018) reads: ‘In addition to and, as well as many more.’ This tempo of repetition and variation is the beat of the *Biennial*. The world it constructs is not so much idealised as it is willing to engage momentarily in collective individuality, tightly packed side-by-side and yet with the necessary breathing space.

A sheet of A4 paper is one of the most disposable, perfunctory items in global circulation. It is easy to transport and incredibly cheap (although these particular sheets of paper are good quality cartridge paper, more of a luxury item). On its own, isolated and stripped of context, what’s submitted on this A4 sheet can only hint at an artist’s wider body of work. It is a tiny portal to another world you might discover for the first time.

The A4 stipulation plays a role as the *Biennial*’s ground of freedom and restriction. Some artists find the A4 limitation liberating, while others have felt it stress-inducing, reductive, and something that they wish to flout. Others still take the ISO 216 international standard paper sizes (that includes A4) as their conceptual starting point: Josephine Baker’s work *intl. waters (4)* ‘is part of an ongoing series of drawings and sculptures that relates formal conventions of standardisation to the symbolism of “internationalism” and “geopolitical

⁷ Wigley 2001, op. cit., p.29.

unity.” By riffing on the Russian doll-like progression of the ISO sequencing, Baker forges an equivalency with bodies of water and flags – stand-ins for national identities that feel more unsettled than ever.

If the proffered sheet of off-white A4 is rejected by some, then what is donated in its place are irregular and hand-cut sheaves of alternative supports, from Japanese and Wasli paper, telephone message notes and recycled book pages, to inkjet and Giclée prints, lithographs, coloured glass; even cashmere and wool blends. The course of these dissonant choices swerves away from the methodical confines of international weights and measures. With structure comes restriction and constriction. Subverting or breaking the *Biennial's* ‘rules’ points to other means of expression; a politics of choice.

Drawings can, of course, be realised at any scale: embracing the *Biennial's* size limitation is perhaps also an invitation to enter a place of privacy, bodily closeness, hunched contact and skin pressure. Returning to our theme of pleasure, we might conjure up Marie Jacotey’s invocation of intimacy, a private bedroom and half-naked reflection in *A Morning Amongst Millions* (2018). The intimacy of drawing is susceptible to this posture of exposure. While drawing is made in and associated with the private realm of the artist’s studio, it moves into the public arena with ease. It is the thing in an artist’s practice that can shift most easily between these two states, on the understanding of its potential as a tool of communication.

In a significant number of works, we observe the A4 sheet deployed as manifesto. The use of text thrives: slogans, statements, messages, assertions, invocations and instructions. The written word and the drawn image meet, or replace one another, often to express sentiments that are ambiguous or uneasy. Sonia Boyce’s work expresses a disturbing recent shift in public life; a return to historic forms of blatant racism and unspeakable verbal violence that many hoped had been pushed to near-extinction in the UK. She notes that: ‘The drawing, titled *2018*, derives from a recent incident and speaks of the tensions of our contemporary moment, post the referendum vote.’ The spectre of the United Kingdom’s impending (or not) exit from the European Union clearly haunts this year’s *Biennial*. Michael Landy’s *Brexshit* (2018) doesn’t really require any more words attached to it. Across many works we feel ourselves to be strangely suspended between optimism and pessimism, trying to articulate ‘the possible future of mankind,’ as contributing artist Mahal de Man puts it.

When drawing is used as an instrument of recording, of notation, of dates and diaries, we see this groping towards acts of speech. As Inci Eviner states: ‘Drawing is a way for me to understand what is going on in my mind.’ In some sense, drawing can be understood as a means of escape, even from an artist’s own practice. In certain circumstances, it is as if a drawing enables a flight away from easy summations of what an artist’s work is about. It subverts attempts at consistency, by making it so easy to break any self-imposed rules of practice. Artists’ drawings exist in a more liminal place; they appear as fragments, to open up new categories of thought, of experimentation and problem solving.

It may be that drawing’s essentially humble and accessible nature allows it to speak easily on topics like class and inequality, funding cuts, the housing crisis, migration, the rise of the far right and populist political parties, border walls and fake news. Its potential for economy of line and quickness of expression opens the door to caricature and social commentary. Penny Goring’s *Over and Over* (2018) is summarised by the artist as ‘a drawing about the violence of Austerity.’ There are several moments in this *Biennial* that do not shy away from confronting this prevailing sense of collective trauma – of something that has been contorted out of shape, leaving huge empty gaps in essential public services and shattering the cohesion of communities. Several works signal the uneasy illusion of control, and that nagging feeling that no one is in charge of the country right now. This feeling of powerlessness is addressed by, among others, Kelly Chorpening’s *An Accident* (2018). Her work references the material condition in which events, actions and inevitable entropic decay can overwhelm us. Such oblique political commentaries point towards a bodily acknowledgement of the absence of consensus and leadership that is being felt on a visceral level. Of her drawing *The Dance of Death* (c.1980), American artist Eleanor Antin explains that: ‘It’s pencil on paper and amusing and it feels right to send it to another country. After all, if you’ve read the papers recently, we don’t have a government or a country anymore.’

Writing in his 1957 account of caricature throughout Western art history, Werner Hoffman offered up the devastating assessment that ‘our picture of man has suffered a deep split affecting our whole existence: immoderate and grotesque elements have seized it and are threatening us. [...] the way from the beautiful to the terrifying leads through the comic.’⁸ Numerous *Biennial* artists grasp the exaggerated provocations and dark humour made possible by caricature and cartooning.

⁸ Werner Hoffman, *Caricature from Leonardo to Picasso*, London, 1957, p.56, 57.

Here, in this moment of collective fantasy, one finds temporal suppleness (drawing unfolding as a document of the past, a vision of the present, and a prediction of the future); narrative bleakness and cruelty; abstract vistas of unknown scale; and small, sharp perspectives on hope and joy. Jerome Zonder describes the mechanism behind his work as ‘an atlas of feelings transcribed to a drawing.’ The *Biennial* – defined if anything by being wholly of this present moment – attempts to survey the vast terrain marshalled by drawing; its almost inconceivably complex and fluid geography.

We might say that drawing is a non-place – everywhere and nowhere, a utopia of sorts – and that it can be both polluted and precise, its specificity perpetually at risk of thrilling dissolution.