

# An Alphabet of 15 Letters: The Drawing Biennial 2017 from A to Y

by Tom Morton

**A** is for **A4**, a paper size that was formulated in 1786 by the German scientist and philosopher Georg Christoph Lichtenberg. Following its early adoption by the French Revolutionary tax authorities, A4 spread gradually across the globe, and in 1975 became the subject of a ruling by the International Organization for Standardization, which oversees our planet's common measures and weights. According to this Geneva-based NGO, a true sheet of A4 must be 210 mm wide x 297 mm long, and (as with all paper sizes in the elegantly matryoshka doll-like 'A' series) possess an aspect ratio of  $\sqrt{2}$ , allowing it to be folded into an A5 pamphlet with a single, horizontal crease.

A4 is used for bank statements and gallery press releases, missing cat posters and parliamentary bills. It is also the size of each of the 250-odd works in the *Drawing Biennial 2017*. Given that the only restriction imposed on participating artists is that their 'drawings' (a term understood here in the most expansive of senses) employ a 210 x 297 mm support, it follows that while the exhibition will have a necessary dimensional unity, this might not be matched by unities of material, motif, or theme. A), then, might also stand for the happy ACCIDENTS that take place when the show's curators unwrap artists' submissions, and find that, against all the odds, one work speaks to another.

How to point to such conversations? One solution is suggested by Timo Nasser's drawing *He who counts the stars - Ibu Mugla's missing letters*

(2016), which features in the *Biennial*. Beneath an image of a night sky in negative, formed from black ink speckles on a white ground, the artist writes of an unnamed man, who gazes up into the heavens, and sees an alphabet of 15 letters forming between the far-flung celestial lights - a connecting of the dots. If we wish to experience the *Biennial* as more than simply one work after another, then we need a filter, however arbitrary. Why not, then, let Nasser's stargazer (and his oddly truncated alphabet) be our guide?

**C**, then, is for **CATEGORY MISTAKES**, of the kind performed by Juliette Blightman's *Drawing* (2016). To make this work, the artist typed out its title 288 times, with no spaces or punctuation, and then effaced the resulting word grid with a single brushstroke of fleshy gouache. Given its foregrounding of text and paint, we might ask if *Drawing* is really a drawing at all, or rather an act of authorial fiat.

C) is also for COURIER, the typeface favoured by both Blightman and her fellow *Biennial* artist Pavel Büchler. In his ironically titled *Equivalent* (1997-2016) - a text work, like Blightman's, that veers close to concrete poetry - he meditates on the words 'more' and 'less', using the former 'like gold dust' (10 times) and the latter 'like salt' (18 times). We might think, here, of Büchler's chosen title, and what other imbalances - social, economic, political - it suggests.

**D** is for **DONALD**. Yes, *that* Donald. Predictably, President Trump is the public figure that casts the longest shadow over the works in the *Biennial*. He appears as a naked, woefully-endowed imp in Simon Periton's *Defence Against the Dark Art* (2017), pursued by a trio of Art Nouveau vamps, who splash him with the contents of a chamber pot, and fart in his face, as if meting out nominative justice. While this scatological scene evokes recent reports of the 'kompromat' held on the aggressively misogynistic former *Apprentice* star by the Russian Federal Security Service, it also riffs on a plate from Aubrey Beardsley's 1896 illustrations based on Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411 BC), a play in which the women of Athens go on a sex strike to persuade the city's menfolk to end their war with Sparta.

More grimly humorous is John Smith's *Funny Old World* (2016), in which Trump's election victory is the punch-line to a lame Christmas cracker joke, and Ronald Cornelissen's *national harpoons animal house* (2016), a vision of priapic, *seig heil*-ing bald eagles roosting on a building that appears to be part frat house, part corporate HQ. Perhaps it's the sheer, unrelenting awfulness of the President's first weeks in office, but I'm beginning to see him everywhere. Is he the subject of Laurence Owen's neo-cubist portrait of a scowling, Shredded Wheat-haired patriarch? Might Karl Holmqvist be channeling Trump's divisive rhetoric in his placard-like text piece, which reads 'JUST US NO THEM', only to subvert it through the introduction of an alien diacritical mark, curling beside the letter 'O'?

See also: **DOGS JUXTAPOSED WITH ITEMS OF STATIONERY**, which appear – surprisingly enough – in three otherwise dissimilar works by Katarina Burin, Pedro Cabrita Reis, and Berry Patten.

**F** is for **FOOTWEAR**, which at the *Drawing Biennial* ranges from the kitten heels in Margarita Gluzberg's *Moscow Dior Legs (small)* (2016), to the ballet pumps in Donna Huddleston's *Untitled* (2017). A pair of what are labeled 'bathing shoes' appear in Rose Wylie's *Film Notes: Swimwear of the Stars (30s sheet)* (2016), a page of annotated sketches that seems to have been made while watching old Rita Hayworth and Ginger Rogers films. (Brad Pitt also makes an anachronistic cameo in this work, sporting the slicked-back pompadour he wore in the 1991 female buddy movie *Thelma and Louise*). Rogers, of course, was best known as Fred Astaire's dance partner in films such as *Swing Time* (1936), where as the actress famously commented, she 'did everything [Astaire] did', only 'backwards and in high heels'.

See also: **FACIAL HAIR** (Ryan Mosely; Julian Opie), **FINGERS** (Louise Hopkins; Emma Talbot), **FOLDS** (Angela de la Cruz; Leo Fitzmaurice; Anne-Marie James; Julie Verhoeven), and **FROTTAGE** (Mona Hatoum, Celia Hempton).

**G** is for **GRIDS, REGULAR** – forms that proliferate in the 2017 *Biennial*. In some cases, they are mere details - a passage of brick work peeping out from behind a ripped poster in Mick Peter's *Torn Drawing for Drawing Room* (2016), or a pattern on a shirt in Adam Chodzko's portrait of the computer scientist Margaret Hamilton. In others, they are the main event - both Rana Begum's *DS7* (2017) and Ana Rojas Vega's *The Edge of a Thing* (2017) might have us reaching for Rosalind Krauss' seminal essay *Grids* (1979), and debating whether the 'mythic power' that the art historian detected in such forms still pertains, now that we're a long way past Modernism's high-noon. Whatever our answer, here at the *Biennial* the grid structures everything from museum floor plans (Andrew Bick), to bookkeepers' ledgers (Alison Turnbull) to what appear to be insectoid satellites (Aleksandra Mir). In Susan Hefuna's example, the boundaries created by all those crisscrossing lines are broken apart by language. At the ragged hole at the centre of her grid are the words 'BE ONE'.

See also: **GRIDS, IRREGULAR** (*Frank Ammerlaan; Alice Anderson; Antony Gormley et al.*).

**I** is for the **IONIC COLUMN** in Dexter Dalwood's pencil drawing. Toppled from its (weirdly provisional) podium, its marble snapped in two, it recalls similar motifs in the work of, among others, Giorgione, Albrecht Dürer, and Giorgio de Chirico, the last of whom seems, here, to have leant Dalwood his signature atmosphere of vaguely ominous calm. Since the Biblical era, a broken column has signified the crumbling of the old political order, and it's tempting to read Dalwood's work as a nod towards the twin eruptions of Britain's knife-edge vote for Brexit and (sorry, but I'm going to keep on mentioning this) Donald Trump's presidency.

More ionic columns appear in Milano Chow's *Door with Peephole* (2017), forming an elaborate frame for an act of voyeurism. However, unlike, say,

the beckoning crack in the woodwork of Marcel Duchamp's installation *Étant donnés* (1946-66), Chow's penciled aperture belongs to the flatland of drawing, and as such cannot give us visual access to anything but itself. Other I's suggested by *Door with Peephole* might include the INTEGRITY OF INFORMATION, and IT IS WHAT IT IS.

**L** is for **LINES**, which are pretty much inescapable in a drawing show. Those in Bob & Roberta Smith's *34 Lines of Nihilism* (2016), however, are of the kind given by a teacher to a naughty child. In this work, the sentence 'There is still art there is still hope' is copied out 33 times, one less than the titular 34. Smith, of course, is an adult, and not subject to the discipline of schoolmasters. Is the artist punishing himself with these lines, and if so, for what?

Much more carefree is Yelena Popova's submission to the *Biennial*. Here, she uses a wobbly pencil line to imitate guilloché engraving, a mechanical process famed for its intricacy and precision. Conceding defeat, she signs off with the words 'I'm only human'. Like Smith's work, Popova's falls short of its stated intention. These are lines that do not reach their own ends.

**M** is for **MAPS**, beginning with Layla Curtis' *World Political (Europe)* (2017), which sees her drag and drop new nations – among them Turkey, Pakistan and Cameroon – into the EU, while relocating Germany to North Africa, where it now neighbours Guyana and Uzbekistan. Notably, the United Kingdom remains unmoved. Sonia Boyce's submission to the *Biennial* also performs a type of mapping. In the centre of the image are the words 'I'M WITH HER', from which hundreds of arrows fly out in all directions. It might be an aerial shot of a protest (perhaps the Women's March on Washington of the 21st of January, 2017). It might also be the notation of joyful, communal dance.

**N** is for **NOCTURNAL TERRORS**, which are described in Tim Etchells' text work *To Loose Sleep* (2017). Here, the couplet 'SOMETHING TO LOSE SLEEP OVER / NOTHING TO LOSE SLEEP OVER' establishes a tick tock rhythm, which is disrupted when the words 'SOMETHING TO LOSE SLEEP OVER' are repeated twice in a row, as though the artist's brain has experienced a sudden glitch, or he's become caught in the grip of some terrible, fear-fuelled insomnia.

If Etchells can't drift off, then Heather Phillipson appears to be experiencing the opposite problem: a dream from which she cannot awake. Her submission to the *Biennial* depicts a line of identical male Cyclopes, seated on a long banquette. They are engaged in a listless bout of mutual masturbation, apparently unperturbed that their genitals are not flesh-and-blood organs, but rather fashioned from bulbous, unshelled peanuts. Above and below these creatures, the work's title, *It would be weirder not to be having nightmares right now* (2017), is scrawled in thick, frantic capitals. Phillipson's image might be read as a nod towards the narrowing of the Western political imagination, not least as a result of social media - a space where prejudices are reinforced through 'circle-jerks' between like-minded users, and falsehoods are echoed so often that they might be mistaken for truths. To compare a man's penis to a peanut is, of course, to say that it is tiny. We might remember that during the 2016 Republican primaries, Donald Trump felt moved to reassure voters that he had 'no problems' on this front. Listening to him utter those words, I pinched myself to check I wasn't dreaming. Now, like much of the planet, I'm kept up at night by the new President's tweets.

Two more works in the *Biennial* touch on sleep. The ground for William Kentridge's delicate, brushed-ink image of a dozing young woman is a spread from a 19th Century textbook, featuring diagrams of sailing ships and early telephones. Looking at her closed lids, we might wonder what distances she travels, and whom she might be talking to, in her private realm of dreams.

Does Ciprian Muresan's drawing of Vladimir Lenin's embalmed corpse count as an image of a sleeper? The figures that surround the Soviet leader certainly suggest so. Tears streaking their cartoon beards, they are, unmistakably, the seven dwarves from Walt Disney's *Snow White* (1937). Perhaps Muresan's work isn't a single sketch at all, but rather a cell from an animation. If so, we can only guess at what strange prince might awaken Lenin with a kiss.

**O** is for **ONLINE**, like the boy in Markus Vater's *Untitled* (2016), who prods at his smartphone, unaware (or perhaps simply unimpressed) that a great bird is bearing him away on its back, like Zeus abducting the handsome Ganymede. Clearly, he's not got the message broadcast by Suzanne Treister's text piece, which proclaims the *Death Of The Internet* (2016) in determinedly analogue pencil strokes. Neither, for that matter, has the man checking his social media stream in Sophie von Hellermann's *Facebook* (2016), whose whole world seems to have been dyed a deep, Zuckerberg blue.

**P** is for **PAPERS**, of the kind we're asked to produce when we approach a border. In Amalia Pica's *Colour in Paperwork #1* (2016), the artist creates a sprightly composition using bureaucratic stamps, many of them bearing the word 'PAID'. This piece has elements of personal biography (not so long ago, the artist completed the arduous process of applying for UK citizenship), but it also hints at broader issues of freedom and belonging, and we might think of the global millions whose fate turns on a piece of paper, and a few square centimetres of ink. There's something excessive, almost Kafka-esque, about the number of stamps that crowd Pica's modest sheet of A4. Frighteningly, even these might prove insufficient, in our new age of travel bans and looming border walls.

See also: **PALIMPSEST** (Emma Douglas; Franziska Furter; Peter Matthews; and for that matter Amalia Pica, too) and **PORSTMANN**, the title of the work submitted to the Biennial by Knut Henrik Henriksen. The artist is nodding, here, towards the German engineer Walter Porstmann, the 20th Century's foremost exponent of the A4 paper size.

**S** is for **SELF-PORTRAITURE**. In his submission to the Biennial, Grayson Perry presents himself in his studio, surrounded by the familiar props of his persona (among them high heels, a motorbike, and a cheerful red teapot), while Michael Landy, Britain's poet laureate of rubbish disposal, offers up an image of himself stuffed head-first into a bin. Mark Wallinger's *Verso Recto* (2017) is considerably more oblique. Here, two black acrylic handprints form what looks like a Rorschach blot, of the kind used by psychologists to probe their subjects' interior lives. Is a Rorschach blot what this is? Wallinger's image, after all, might also be of use to a palmist, or a police forensics specialist, each of whom would find within it quite different information. What we see, it seems, depends upon what we're looking for. An aside: I've categorized *Verso Recto* as self-portraiture, but I've no idea if these handprints actually belong to Wallinger. All I'm sure of is that they're too big to be President Trump's.

**T** is for **THAUMATURGY**, which is a fancy name for magic. At the Biennial, we encounter both stage TRICKERY (Jonathan Allen's handkerchief illusion, Paul Noble's black and white wand) and divination (Lubaina Himid's TAROT card). Magic, or at least magical thinking, is also present in Steven Claydon's *Witch Doctor* (2017), in which he overlays his A4 ground with a green, semi-transparent prescription medicine pouch, bearing his own name. Peek through the plastic, though, and we might just make out the image of a masked shaman, or some ancient, woodland god.

See also: **TREES**, which aside from grids seem to be the most prevalent motif in the show, appearing in the work of, among others: Hurvin Anderson; Catherine Anyango Grünewald; Kate Atkin; Peter Liversidge; Rupert Norfolk; Corin Sworn; and Charlotte Verity.

**U** is for the **UNIVERSE**, something that has a beginning (David Batchelor's big bang) and an end (Sam Messenger's black hole). U) also stands for the UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECT in Emma Stibbon's work *Awakening* (2017). Across an overcast sky, a circular form hurtles towards a lonely farmhouse. An old world is about to end, and a new one is about to be born.

**Y** is for **YOUTHS**, like those in Grace O'Connor's *Open Secret* (2016). Wearing only sensible knickers, five teenaged girls link hands in an unknown ritual, which appears to have summoned up a number of glowing spheres. Standing just outside this circle is a sixth girl - the only one wearing a bra - who regards the others with a blank, inscrutable gaze. She might be their leader, or their new, untested recruit, or perhaps even their sacrifice. Whoever she is, and whatever magic these girls are performing, politics is taking place, here, with all its usual asymmetries.

I wanted to end this alphabet on a positive note, but positivity feels hard these days. Looking at George Shaw's pencil portrait of an adolescent neo-Nazi, it would be comforting to think of him as a figure from the past, belonging to a lost world of football firms, racist sitcoms, and National Front marches. But then we read Shaw's title, *The Making of the British Landscape* (2017), and we can't help but glimpse something contemporary in this youth's dull eyes, and his horribly sensuous sneer.