



Article

## The Drawing Bureau: An overview with notes toward an event

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The pages in this document are from a set of 39 drawings that were made by the artist, and throughout conversations with audiences, for a complex project called *Drawing Bureau*. The following text is an overview of the project followed by notes.

### OVERVIEW:

*Drawing Bureau* was a project presented at the exhibition *Centre of Gravity*, which took place between October 2<sup>nd</sup> and November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, at the former Gardiner Haskins building, now *The Soapworks*, in Bristol.

The exhibition aimed to address Bristol as a 'point of focus'.<sup>1</sup> This point was not only that of a community local to inhabitants but to others beyond. *Drawing Bureau* was presented as a kind of ongoing event. It was an event that *addressed* Bristol throughout a space constructed to reflect something between office cubicle and studio. Not merely as a specific site or place, Bristol was addressed as, to extend the exhibition's idiom, a *point* where life, work, and creativity is focused upon daily.

The drawings were 'performed' live, made in front of audiences, as well as outside the exhibition.<sup>2</sup> The drawings might be approached as a *complicated* process. The drawings were complicated by the process of making as much as the materials. Not to mention that the drawings complicated the attempt to conceptualise the work as a logic.

1 - See <https://www.centreofgravity.uk/about>.

2 - On days whilst the exhibition was closed, Mondays and Tuesdays, the artist continued to make more drawings for this project. The drawings continued to be produced also on days absent from the exhibition, days involving teaching work, other exhibitions in which he participated, and illness too.

The materials were 'found' initially on the Web. These were published documents and reports publicly available in online archives about Bristol's properties, land regulations, planning permissions, as well as mobility, homes and homelessness, and other relevant information. These digital pages were printed onto A4 sheets of paper. The 'blank' side of the paper was specifically used for (continuing) the drawing--and was a key element as to how the drawing appeared. That is to say, the side of the print that appeared by reversing the paper around. This reversal exposed the information as absent--while still being present, showing faint marks from the ink seeping through the paper. To add to this reversal, of folding outside information into a surface inside-out, an unused and actually blank sheet of paper was glued onto the side showing the printed graphics. In this way the papers appeared reversed, inside-out, 'blank' on both sides.

About the act of drawing. By using graphite pencils, rubbing stubs and erasers, the 'drawings' were added to these papers. Using masking tape, the supposedly completed drawings were mounted onto two walls surrounding a long table. Upon the table, the blank papers were laid out in a row of four stacks; each day, during the exhibition, the artist either sat or stood around this table, using these papers to produce the drawings. As a way of playing with references to office work, or more specifically bureaucracy, the drawings were subject to a

further process of 'management'. That is in managing the order and combination of each page/drawing, mounting and unmounting each one, organizing and reorganizing into multiple sets; the act of drawing meant also curating in ways that played with, what one might say is, a process of un-working. Audiences were able to see the artist doing this work, which meant also conversing with him and one another; if inclined by his (verbal) invitation, audiences were able to further engage in an event continued by conversations that, in effect, worked through the drawings.

Unlike the physical drawings, where marks appeared on paper, the conversations were not marked; the social interactions were left unrecorded. The objective being to use the conversations in giving time and care to the event as something to be continued, nurtured, to go on with-- rather than mark and consume and nostalgically go back to.

Overall, Drawing Bureau posed an event that took place daily, materially and conversationally addressing art, work and life.

#### NOTES TOWARD AN EVENT:

The event of drawing daily. What does the event in the drawing mean? The event had something to do with questioning process, rethinking performance and performativity in light of an economy focused on labour, management and bureaucracy--Today, are not artists struggling alongside labourers and professionals in (performatively) doing paperwork, from applications to project proposals? Are these rather mundane, administrative activities the very processes that constitute the competitive, flexible, and smoothly operating 'creative economy'? What does work, not just labour but *truth*, mean in light of material and immaterial labour, where information--and dis-information, as in confabulations of 'post-truth'-- complicate (performative) making and doing?

The truth posed by such questions might be seen as subjective (What's true to me is my 'personal opinion'). This misses the point. In terms of the act of working/ labouring daily, the event is guided by something of a point

of focus, objective. Truth is a matter of universality. The symbol of a 'blank' or 'open' page is the clue to this point of universality. The open page, the untouched horizon: truths are dangerous if they start that way. It's the cliché of something starting from nothing. It's like Chaplin playing Hinkle, impersonating a dictator, who takes the Earth as symbolized by a giant, inflated globe, bouncing it up in the air... as if the world is his oyster, wide open, a blank slate (that just needs to be systematically and violently purified). To draw by making and thinking in fidelity to something that is open... but not as openly vertiginous or untouched as the 'open page'. This is arguably the hardest thing to do. For the artist--and this he tried sharing in conversations with audiences--the page may seem open and yet it is discretely loaded with preconceptions, stained with illusions. Illusions are sometimes devils appearing in the details of the drawings (e.g. rowers exercising on the river Avon, while reflected below is a figure on medallions representing antislavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> C). Either in the details or as pages viewed from a distance, the drawings appear not as they are but as they seem: stained yet blankly open. Truths appear in this seeming, or as Alain Badiou says, a 'description without place' (2011). This is the philosophical framework that conditioned the drawings. Virtually reflecting a description without place, where anything seems possible, only that the event seems rare, if not impossible (to open up the imagination, truly create something exceptional). So the truth of making the work what it is (universally) is essentially how it continues to become something more.

Now, what is meant by 'bureau' in *Drawing Bureau*? The reference to bureaucracies is intentional. Notoriously complicated, bureaucracies are tied up with (authoritarian) ideologies (e.g. The Soviet Politburo). Criticised for producing piles of paperwork, labyrinthine systems and needless rules, abstract committees and hierarchies--and structural violence. And this predicament of administrative work is indeed happening in so-called liberal democracies today. It is a perversely obscene enjoyment. One of the most dangerous side-effects of the enjoyment in by liberal ideologies today are, as the late anthropologist David Graeber rightly claims:

*how structural violence creates lopsided structures of the imagination and how bureaucracy becomes a way of managing such situations--and the forms of structural blindness and stupidity they inevitably entail. Even at their best, bureaucratic procedures are ways to turn stupidity, as it were, against itself (Graeber 2016: 84).*

The *jouissance* of bureaucracy implicates daily life still now, in times where work pervades everything we do-- from jobs, to duties, to self-improvement, to targets of (inachievable) growth, to conduct, and so; all that messy stuff of a Life that makes up the civic fabric of daily life.

Did this bureaucratic enjoyment feed into a broader performance? Yes, that would seem obvious. When the performance became that of doing a bunch of drawings with the connotation of mindless paperwork, what then? What was being done? How creative, spontaneous, and productive was the process of obsessively trying to achieve the managerial target of a drawing a day? And also having to 'discuss' the drawings, use one's hands and legs to walk, draw, talk and see the entire process? Was this some performance drawing? What happened throughout the daily act of drawing was a process that exposed a complication in the logic, in the underlying workings in which the project took place. This logic needs some unpacking.

The complication has to do with how the drawing is performed by conducting oneself. The conduct of sincerely and authentically *doing* the work (to draw, to shuffle papers, to talk and work through it all). Because the artist is performing himself in being-there, there in the drawings that in effect appear hazy, blank, almost nothing. This might say it all. Because in effect the issue becomes that of *unworking* the drawing. That is unworking by exposing and suspending the economic logic underlying the drawing. Dangling sheets of seemingly blank papers in the air. Something like that. Here work deals with a complication of the logic of an economy that demands--and exploits-- creativity. The bureau in Drawing Bureau thus became the act of performatively doing, overdoing, and doing until, what eventually became 39 drawings that, when viewed as a whole, virtually disappear. Unworking the bureau in its logic: that was the attempt at least. Failing well. How

many times the artist got asked 'are you done yet?' or 'that's enough isn't it?' when he was just halfway through the self-imposed quota of drawing daily. The *aporia* is tragic as it is comic: of doing more and less at once.

Here is one way of putting this into a proposition: to draw by un-working the logic, the underlying sense, rules of engagement, codes of conduct. In other words, to effectively *undo* a performative act that is conditioned by the creative economy.

Towards the end of doing the 39 drawings (there could've been more), these papers appeared more as they started out: stained by ink yet blank, hazily empty. Obviously, some audiences were frustrated by this hazy blankness, while others stayed and stood there, intrigued enough-- 'What is this all about?' offset by 'I can't really see what you're doing?' Questions such as these were indeed welcomed and integral to making Drawing Bureau as open to possibilities and impossibilities too. The haziness of the drawings metaphorically suspended the conceptual condition (the idea is this, it means that, makes you think such and such). A *para-conceptual haze*, if one might call it that (in some theoretically terse bureaucratic double speak). The haze was echoed by the air saturating the space of the bureau. (The air during that October was of course heightened with cautions of spreading Covid 19.)

The drawings disclose many details. One may or may not wish to look closely. The details suggest playthings of the imagination: people, animals, roads, neighbourhoods, forests and trees, fields, debris, and so on. The saying 'what you see is what you get' might in this case be reworded to 'what you see may *seem* what you get.' The question of what seems more than what's seen is a matter of how one's eyes take in these details. Stepping back and, in effect, withdrawing. Letting the event take place as it seems...

#### References:

- Badiou, A. (2006) 'Drawing', *Lacanian Ink*, vol. 28, pp. 42-49.
- Graeber, D. (2019), *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureacracy*. London: Melville House.









