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Part Three

Why Art Practice?





Figure 13.1 Jill Gibbon, Eurosatory, Paris, 2018, ink on paper, 140 mm × 192 mm.

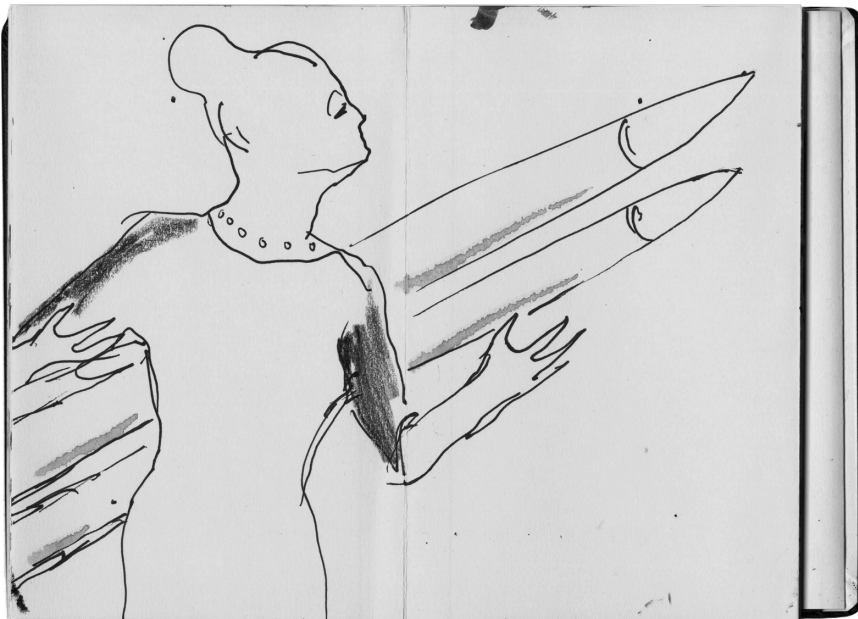
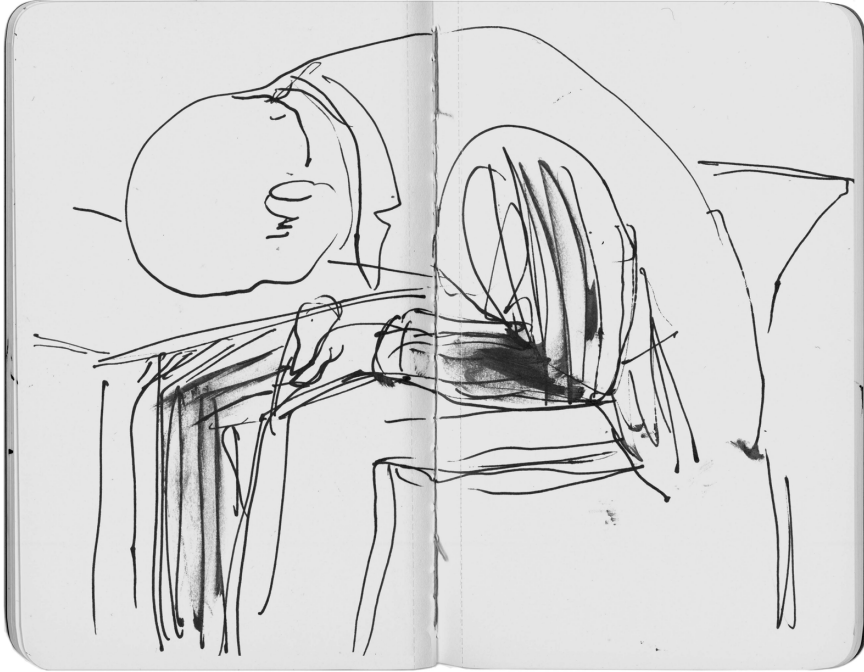


Figure 13.2 Jill Gibbon, DSEI, London, 2017, ink on paper, 140 mm × 192 mm.



**Figure 13.3** Jill Gibbon, Milipol, Paris, 2019, ink on paper, 140 mm × 180 mm.



**Figure 13.4** Jill Gibbon, DSEI, London, 2017, ink on paper, 140 mm × 180 mm.

## Mute Communication: Drawing the Military-Industrial Complex

Jill Gibbon

*We buried them the same day because they had turned into severed limbs. There were no corpses left to examine. The flesh of this person was mixed with that person. They were wrapped up [with blankets] and taken away.*

—A relative of the al-Kindi family<sup>1</sup>

*You are informed that human beings endowed with language were placed in a situation such that none of them is now able to tell about it. Most of them disappeared then, and the survivors rarely speak about it. When they do speak about it, their testimony bears only upon a minute part of this situation. How can you know that the situation itself existed?*

—Lyotard, *The Differend* §1<sup>2</sup>

It is a warm September morning in London, Docklands. I am wearing a suit, pearls, paint peeling off in places, heels, and a lanyard bearing a fake company name. I am sweating, whether from fear or the heat I am not sure. The badge allows me into DSEI, the Defence Security **Equipment** International, the world's largest arms fair. In the distance, on the other side of the railway lines, someone is shouting about Saudi airstrikes on Yemen but they are held back by police barricades. A line of security guards bow as I arrive. DSEI is a polite event.

DSEI takes place every two years, offering an international meeting place for the globalized military-industrial complex. Inside are ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, air to surface missiles, surface to air missiles, guided bombs, unguided bombs, bombers, fighter jets, attack helicopters, stealth helicopters, pistols, assault rifles, sniper weapons, machine guns, submachine guns, bullets, tanks, tank ammunition, anti-tank ammunition, rocket launchers, armored personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles, surveillance cameras, surveillance drones, attack drones, grenades, grenade launchers, tear gas, gas masks, pepper spray, batons, boots, gloves, helmets, daggers, and more. All of the multinational arms corporations are here—BAE Systems, Boeing, General Dynamics, L3 Harris Technologies, Leonardo, Lockheed Martin, MBDA, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, and Thales—each taking up a vast section of the event. There are

also multinationals not known for arms production like Rolls Royce, Land Rover, and Du Pont who produce components of weapons—engines, gears, fabrics, nuts, bolts, computers, and cameras. And there are smaller companies with their own ranges of guns and tear gas. Here, sales staff mingle with government ministers, contractors, brokers, dictators, and despots.

President Eisenhower coined the phrase “military-industrial complex” in 1961 to describe a network of alliances between the arms industry, military, and state with a vested interest in weapons production, and growing influence over government policy. Since then the military-industrial complex has grown as part of wider processes of globalization becoming “more varied, more internationally linked and less visible.”<sup>3</sup> Arms companies have merged into multinationals, diversified into security, and focused on international sales often to repressive regimes, undermining Western justifications for arms production as defending abstract values of freedom, justice, and democracy. BAE Systems, Raytheon, and MBDA have sold bombs, missiles, and fighter jets to Saudi Arabia which have been used in the war in Yemen where thousands of civilians have been killed in Saudi airstrikes.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile UK-made tear gas, pepper spray, and surveillance equipment has been used around the world to suppress pro-democracy movements.<sup>5</sup> Instead of containing the global expansion of the arms industry, the UK and US governments have facilitated it, brokering international deals, encouraging permissive use of export regulations, and protecting arms companies from legal scrutiny.<sup>6</sup> John Berger summed up the role of the state in this new setting:

National states in general have been politically downsized and reduced to the role of vassals serving the new world economic order. The visionary political vocabulary of three centuries has been garbaged. In short, the economic and military global tyranny of today has been established.<sup>7</sup>

I started visiting DSEI to draw the military-industrial complex, in an attempt to make visible the “economic and military global tyranny” that Berger describes.<sup>8</sup> I soon realized this was impossible: the military-industrial complex may meet at DSEI, but it is hidden behind a polite corporate façade. The word corporation stems from *corpus*, the Latin for body. With a lanyard around their necks and logo glowing overhead, arms company executives, supervisors, managers, and sales reps speak, act, and dress as part of the body of the corporation. Biological bodies are coiffured, sculpted, powdered, and choreographed. They wear immaculate suits, point to weapons with manicured hands, adopt amenable expressions, and speak phrases from the sales catalog.

The organic body is a *body-politic*, in the sense of the term within political economy. It is endowed with limits which circumscribe the *propriety* of its own body; it is affected by a *regime* or a *ruling (régie)* which is its constitutional system. Every investment of a zone of this body that does not conform to this rule is registered as a rebellion, a sickness, as anarchy and threatens the death of the whole. The interest of the whole serves to authorise its repression. In fact, the organic body is the incessant product (a product which must be constantly produced) of operations,

manipulations, excisions, separations and conflation, grafts, occlusions and derivations, running across the labyrinthine libidinal band.<sup>9</sup>

Ideals previously used to justify imperialist wars are used here as attributes of brands, available to any regime who is a client. MBDA has a string of slogans running around its stand promising progress and mastery: “turning innovation into reality,” “mastering technology,” “championing customer sovereignty.”<sup>10</sup> These values are also conveyed through the design of the stand, with missiles presented like sculpture—dramatically lit against white walls and standing on plush carpet. A bomb is split open to show a perfectly crafted interior. There are white orchids on the reception desk, and waiting staff offering trays of avocado, prosciutto, and brie on small slices of artisan bread.

Aesthetics is the mode taken by a civilization that has been deserted by its ideals. It cultivates the pleasure of representing them. And so it calls itself culture.<sup>11</sup>

On a neighboring stand, a Paveway laser-guided bomb is suspended beneath a red Raytheon sign, the logo the same color as the tip of the bomb. A video screen shows the skylines of London and San Francisco at sunset. A rep explains that the Paveway project is the result of UK and US cooperation: it has “revolutionised tactical air-to-ground warfare, converting ‘dumb’ bombs into precision-guided munitions.” He opens a catalog showing a bomb dropping through a pure blue sky. There are no images of what happens next when the bomb hits homes and flesh.

We have many words to gloss the aestheticization inherent to culture: staging, spectacularization, mediatization, simulation, hegemony of artifacts, generalized mimesis, hedonism, narcissism, self-referentialism, auto-affection, auto-construction, and others. They all speak to the loss of objects and the ascendancy of the imaginary over reality. You can take an inventory of this gentle deception in every field of activity and thought: the “human sciences” can speak forever on this subject.<sup>12</sup>

Three months earlier a 500-pound Raytheon Paveway II bomb was used in a Saudi Arabian airstrike on Warzan, a village in Yemen, killing six members of the al-Kindi family. The testimony which opened this chapter was given by a relative of these victims. The attack killed Abdelqawi Abdu Ahmed al-Kindi (aged 62), his wife Hayat Abdu Seif Mohamed (50), their two children—Ahmed Abdelqawi Abdu Ahmed al-Kindi (28) and Hussein Abdelqawi Abdu Ahmed al-Kindi (12), and their grandchildren—Hamza Abdelqawi Abdu Ahmed al-Kindi (9) and Ayman Ali Abdelqawi Abdu Ahmed al-Kindi (6). Abdelqawi and his son Ahmed had worked as construction contractors; according to neighbors, the family had no military involvement.<sup>13</sup> But this cannot be spoken of here. At DSEI, a bomb is a clean, new product, its eventual use irrelevant. Even so, the marketing does not quite disguise the material properties of the weapons. The missiles loom over the aisles, throwing the carpets, flowers, and napkins into shadow. Guns are available to lift, aim, and to try for weight and size. Tank tracks tower overhead. Weapons may be presented as products, but the power to stalk, aim, hit, crush, and annihilate is everywhere.



It is as difficult to draw the weapons as it is to draw the military-industrial complex. How to draw a bulldozer with a shovel so large it can demolish a house, a drone so small it resembles an insect? How to convey the destructive power of a missile, or a bullet? It is not possible, but I keep coming back. There is something seductive about this place, on the clean side of weapons, courted with wine and avocado. Yet it is my body that gives away the conflict—I smile when I am offered a drink, but feel too nauseous to finish it. I have no reason to be here: my suit and business are a sham. My hands shake when a security guard approaches. I draw to appear busy and as I draw, I notice similar reactions around me. Sales staff may be employed to act as the body of the corporation, but their own bodies rebel. The corporate choreography is undercut by gestures conveying unease, duplicity, despair. A rep slumps his head on a desk. A manager staggers, anesthetized with wine. At times there is something stronger—an undercurrent of violence stirred and validated by the weapons. A client surveys waiting staff like merchandise. They flinch as he advances.

“Feeling is a phrase. I call it the affect-phrase. It is distinct in that it is *unarticulated*.”<sup>14</sup> Impolite feelings cannot be spoken at DSEI but they are communicated, mutely. The body sweats, blushes, sickens, it shudders, swells, and shrinks. “This mute communication is made up of non-discrete inspirations and expirations of air: growlings, pantings, sighs. It spreads over the face and it spreads through the whole body which thus ‘signals’ like a face.”<sup>15</sup> Such expressions of feeling disrupt the polite veneer of the event: “within the order of discourse the affect-phrase is inopportune, unseemly, and even disquieting.”<sup>16</sup> What is repressed here—the brute violence of the weapons, the horror of their effects—haunts the bodies of the attendees. A sales rep tenses his jaw and shuts his eyes, as if to banish an unwelcome thought. An arms trader bows to a client, but his expression is deadened. Can drawing convey symptoms of repression, before they are also repressed? Drawing is itself a form of mute communication. It is gestural, visceral, guided by the hand, guts, eye, and pen as much as the mind. When I despair at the impossibility of drawing at DSEI, the lines seem to take over the process of drawing themselves, tracking the movements of people around me. The drawings also record my own unease; they are smudged, awkward, and interrupted. Produced by the body, drawing hovers on the border between the cultural and animal. Like the gestures they record, the marks are both learned and spontaneous. As Lyotard writes of the act of drawing, in a section of *Postmodern Fables* under the title “Crypts”:

By drawing the line of a threshold, art distinguishes itself from symptom. The eye that paints by the sooty torchlight in Lascaux removes the colors from the bright daylight in which they give themselves straightforwardly. He banishes them and calls on them to return transmuted. This refractive gesture traces a bordering.<sup>17</sup>

Both drawing and the military-industrial complex are based on observation, but of very different kinds. Modern weapons use cameras, telescopic sight systems, video, infrared optical sensors, radar, laser gyroscopes, and GPS to see with scientific precision. Raytheon promises “Technologies that see further, process data faster and precisely guide interceptors to targets.”<sup>18</sup> A military drone hovers like the invisible eye of God,

seeing everything below it, while remaining itself unseen.<sup>19</sup> Drawing is much more rudimentary, constrained by the limits of the human body. Whereas a weaponized drone records everything, a drawing begins with a blank page, the hand picking out fragments of a scene. The process of editing is sensed rather than reasoned. Whereas a weaponized drone focuses outside itself, identifying targets (in the ultimate act of othering), a drawing is entangled with what is drawn. It is a “refractive gesture,” interpreted and performed by the body.<sup>20</sup> A drawing is always tentative, a sketchbook drawing particularly so, a fleeting record, with earlier drawings from previous pages dimly showing through. “What is played out is the mutation of sight into vision and appearance into apparition. Apparition is appearance stamped with the seal of its disappearance. Art puts death’s insignia on the sensible.”<sup>21</sup>

The corporate façade is soon restored. The rep rearranges his tie; the manager regains her balance. I accept a catalog, wince at my complicity, and walk on.

*You can’t make a political “program” with it, but you can bear witness to it.*

—Lyotard, *The Differend* §264.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Quoted in Amnesty International (2019), Press Release, September 26, 2019. Available online: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/yemen-entire-family-killed-us-supplied-bomb-new-findings> (accessed September 15, 2020).
- 2 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, tr. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, [1983] 1988), 3. Copyright 1988 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota. Originally published in *Le Différend*. Copyright 1983 by Les Éditions de Minuit.
- 3 J. Paul Dunne, and Elisabeth Sköns, “The Military Industrial Complex,” in Andrew T. H. Tan (ed.), *The Global Arms Trade Handbook* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 291.
- 4 See Rob Evans, “BAE Systems Secretly Sold Mass Surveillance Technology to Repressive Regimes,” *The Guardian*, June 5, 2017. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/jun/15/bae-mass-surveillance-technology-repressive-regimes> (accessed September 15, 2020); Dan Sabbagh, “BAE Systems Sold £15 Billion Worth of Arms to Saudis During Yemen Assault,” *The Guardian*, April 14, 2020. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/apr/14/bae-systems-sold-15bn-arms-to-saudis-during-yemen-assault> (accessed September 15, 2020); Ruhan Nagra and Brynne O’Neal, “Day of Judgement: The Role of the US and Europe in Civilian Death, Destruction, and Trauma in Yemen,” ed. James L. Cavallaro (Mwatana for Human Rights, University Network for Human Rights, and Pax for Peace, 2019). Available online: <https://mwatana.org/en/day-of-judgment/> (accessed December 10, 2020).
- 5 See Lloyd Russell-Moyle, “Our Government’s sale of powerful surveillance equipment to repressive regimes jeopardises more than human rights” *The Guardian*, March 7, 2018. Available online: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/uk-government-surveillance-equipment-repressive-saudi-arabia-bahrain-egypt-a8240981.html> (accessed September 15, 2020); Jon Stone, “UK supplies human rights abusers with

- tear gas, rubber bullets and riot gear” *The Independent*, June 21, 2020. Available online: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/uk-rubber-bullets-tear-gas-protests-saudi-arabia-uae-a9574091.html> (accessed September 15, 2020).
- 6 Sam Perlo-Freeman, “The United Kingdom arms industry in a globalized world,” in Andrew T. H. Tan (ed.), *The Global Arms Trade Handbook* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 261.
  - 7 John Berger, *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 1.
  - 8 Ibid.
  - 9 Jean-François Lyotard, “A Short Libidinal Economy of a Narrative Set-up: The Renault Corporation Relates the Death of Pierre Overney” [1973], tr. Keith Crome and Mark Sinclair in James Williams and Keith Crome (eds), *The Lyotard Reader and Guide* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2006), 205–6.
  - 10 MBDA. (2020), *About Us*, [online] <https://www.mbda-systems.com/about-us/> (accessed September 15, 2020).
  - 11 Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, tr. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, [1993] 1997), 235.
  - 12 Ibid., 236.
  - 13 Amnesty International (2019), Press Release, September 26, 2019
  - 14 Jean-François Lyotard, “The Affect-phrase” in this volume, \_\_.[104]
  - 15 Ibid, \_\_. [108]
  - 16 Ibid, \_\_. [106]
  - 17 Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 246–7.
  - 18 Raytheon, “Missile Defense.” Available online: <https://www.raytheonmissilesanddefense.com>
  - 19 See Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory*, tr. Janet Lloyd (London: Penguin, 2015).
  - 20 Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 247.
  - 21 Ibid., 246.
  - 22 Lyotard, *The Differend*, 181.

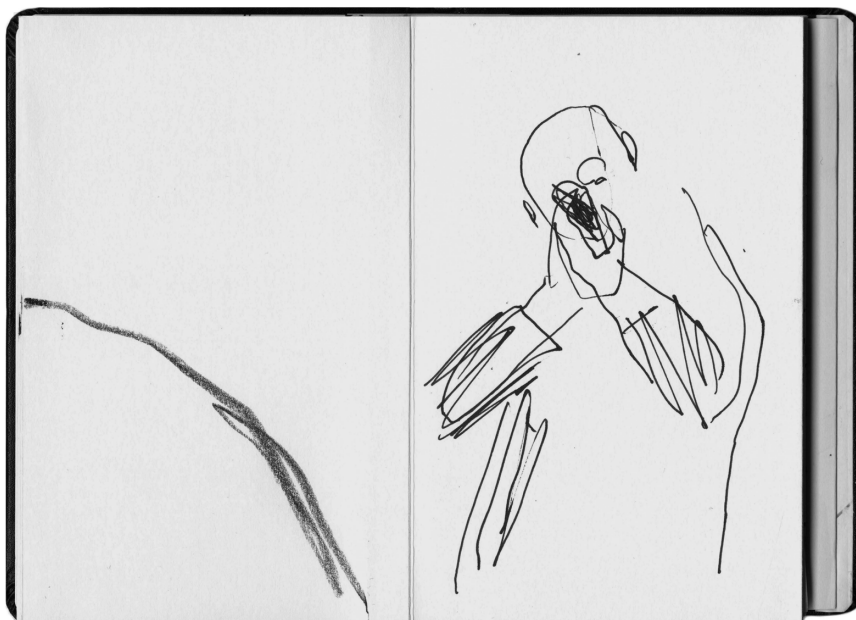


Figure 13.5 Jill Gibbon, Eurosatory, Paris, 2018, ink on paper, 140 mm × 192 mm

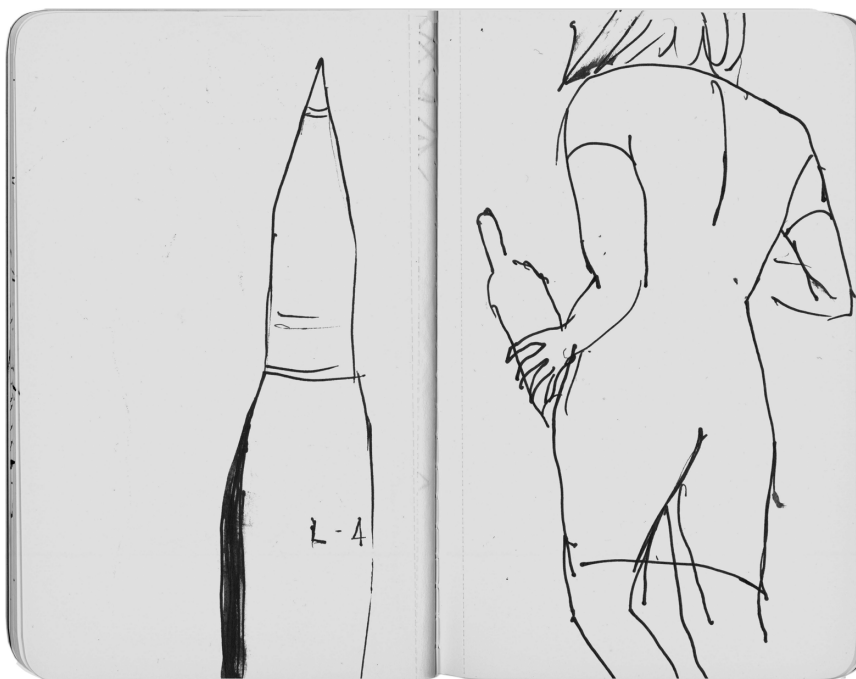
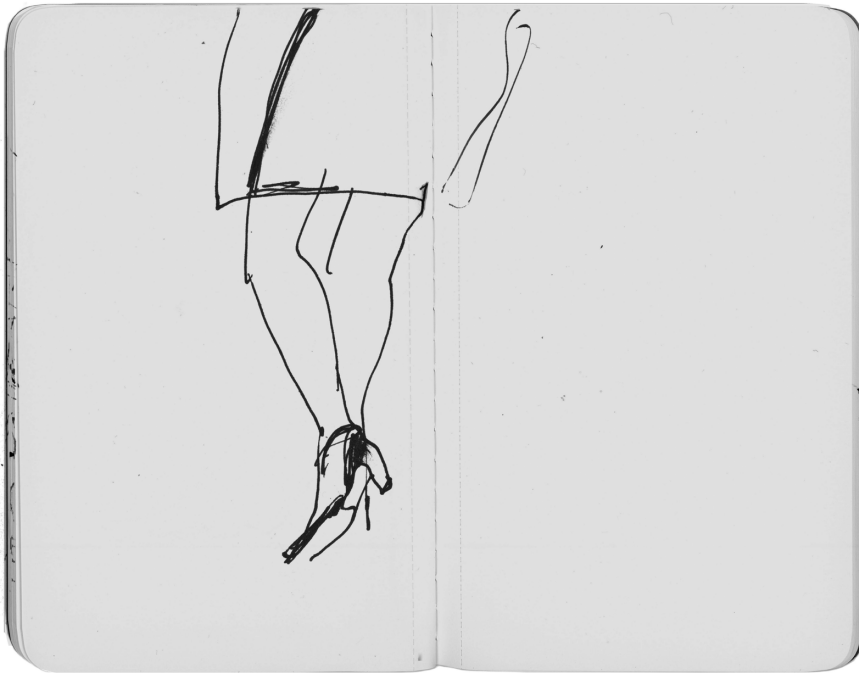


Figure 13.6 Jill Gibbon, Eurosatory, Paris, 2018, ink on paper, 140 mm × 180 mm



**Figure 13.7** Jill Gibbon, Milipol, Paris, 2019, ink on paper, 140 mm × 180 mm.



**Figure 13.8** Jill Gibbon, Milipol, Paris, 2019, ink on paper, 140 mm × 180 mm.