Black Book:
Drawing and Sketching
BBDS Scientific Journal

Vol.3 , Issue 1, Social Dimensions, 2022

Article

Drawing Repression in Corporate Capitalism

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Abstract

This article discusses the challenges and potential of drawing as a method of political reportage. Using my experiences drawing at the arms fair Eurosatory 2022 as an example, I focus on a growing industry in 'less lethal' weaponry, equipment for repression. This industry is difficult to document because it is so discrete, with tear gas packaged in neat canisters, riot gear worn by calm-faced mannequins, and sales staff politely welcoming repressive regimes. The problems are compounded by my own participation in the polite performance in order to stay in the event. I explore the potential of drawing to disrupt the marketing.

Keywords

drawing, marketing, reportage, repression, sketchbook

I am given a branded carrier bag as soon as I arrive. On one side is the logo of an arms company; on the other, a picture of an armoured vehicle with a gun turret on the roof. A sales rep tells me it is 'suitable for war zones and city streets' then adds, 'there is a lot of overlap between the military and police now'. Walking past missiles and tanks, I am offered biscuits stamped with arms company names, pens, stress balls in the shape of brains, grenades, and camouflage ducks. I accept them all, and put them in the bag. This is Eurosatory 2022, an international arms fair held every two years in Paris.

I sit in a corner and draw dealers, sales reps, exhibition hosts, and clients. My suit and pearls seem to make me invisible. At the next table, two men drink coffee and bottles of lager. They wear immaculate white shirts, dark ties, and dark jackets. With each bottle, they grow louder and sink lower over the table. Dominating the conversation, is a man from an American company that makes parts to release bombs from fighter jets. Their main client is Lockheed Martin, he says. Across the table, a Saudi buyer asks questions about specifications.

A little later I see them again, heading towards the 'Less Lethal' section of the fair where equipment for crowd control, surveillance and border security is displayed. Once a minor part of the fair, the Less Lethal section expanded during the violent repression of the Arab Spring, and continues to grow. Mannequins run, jump, take aim, parachute, abseil and fly wearing the latest armour, gas-masks, helmets, and boots; holding grenades, riot shields, guns, batons, rifles; and posing alongside military vehicles, helicopters, and drones. Tear gas canisters and rubber bullets are lined up like pharmaceutical products. Metal glints under spotlights.

Tear gas is entangled with the history of colonialism. When chemical weapons were banned for use in war after WW1, the US manufacturer the Chemical Warfare Service (CWS) began a PR campaign to rebrand chemical gases as a 'harmless' weapon for policing. The UK became a major producer, and although the UK government was reluctant to use tear gas at home, it agreed to its use in the colonies as an alternative to shooting anti-colonial protestors (Feigenbaum, 2017). Tear gas is still predominantly used against black people, for instance in Black Lives Mat-

ter protests across the US in 2020, and against migrants and their children at the US/Mexican border in 2018 (Amnesty International, 2021; Nicholson and McKay, 2018).

Tear gas is made up of CS (2-chlorobenzylidene malonitrile), CN (chloroacetophenone), and CR (dibenzoxapine). It causes blurred vision, tears, burning of the nostrils and mouth, difficulty swallowing, drooling, chest tightness, coughing, choking, wheezing, skin burns, rashes, nausea and vomiting (Feigenbaum, 2017). The manufacturers claim the effects are temporary but there is increasing evidence that it can cause serious injury and death when used in large quantities, over a long period of time, or in enclosed spaces. The canisters can blind and kill when fired in the face. Amnesty International (2021) has documented hundreds of illegal uses of tear gas and rubber since 2020 leading to deaths and injuries of peaceful protestors in France, Guatemala, India, Mali, Nigeria, Peru, Serbia, US and Tunisia. This violent potential is not evident in the clinical canisters lined up in shining cabinets.

One of the largest displays in the Less Lethal section is TAR Ideal Concepts, an Israeli company that sells policing equipment around the world. Clients include Myanmar where security forces have recently killed peaceful pro-democracy protestors. Towering over the stand is a metal figure with a cavernous mouth resembling the creature in Predator; an imaginary other to justify the products on display. Alongside this, mannequins stand in heroic poses in armoured uniforms. A sales rep holds a tear gas canister as if it were a piece of homeware. Another adjusts his suit. I mirror him, straightening my jacket as I approach. Like everyone else, I have to take part in a performance of respectability if I am to stay there. How to draw repression when it is presented as an 'ideal concept'? How to show what lies behind polite veneer, particularly when taking part in it?

There is something about drawing that disrupts polite pretensions. It is partly the simplicity of materials. As J.F Lyotard put it, 'A simple scrawl of a pencil on a sheet of paper makes for one of the poorest forms of art' (2020:80).[1] This poverty is particularly evident in an arms fair in contrast to the sophisticated surveillance technology in the aisles. And yet, drawing is more than a form of surveillance; it goes beyond what is immediately visible. Lyotard continues, 'A simple mark with a pencil and the sheet of paper splits apart, and something is as though directed somewhere else. What you have there is both the completest form of power and, at one and the same time, the completest form of *dispossession*' (2020:80). John Berger made a similar point, 'We who draw do so not only to make something observed visible to others, but to accompany something invisible to its incalculable destination' (2011:11). The ethnographer Michael Taussig also describes the potential of drawing to suggest something beyond the visible. He warns of the limits of realism, of scientific writing that 'obliterates reality, pushing it further and further out of reach' (2011:19). In contrast, he suggests drawings 'butt against realism' (2011:13). 'In pointing away from the real, they capture something invisible and auratic that makes the thing depicted worth depicting' (2011:13).

What gives drawing this capacity to convey 'something invisible'? Berger described drawing as visceral, 'When I'm drawing, and here drawing is very different from writing or reasoning – I have the impression at certain moments of participating in something like a visceral function' (2011:149). A drawing is sensed as much as planned; made by the body as much as the mind or eye. Drawing conveys bodily gestures for which there are no words, particularly when we take part in those gestures ourselves. The process of drawing is also serendipitous, influenced by materials, circumstances and chance. This is unnerving; it means we are never fully in control of what we draw. As Lyotard writes, 'the person who is doing it doesn't at all know what he's doing' (2020:80).

The process of drawing undermines presuppositions. When, I first started drawing inside an arms fair in 2007, I was intent on showing the inhumanity of arms dealers. But, over the years the drawings have shown something else - compliant sales staff performing corporate gestures. A rep stands alert, gazing into the hall to signal availability. Another holds a palm outstretched to present a weapon as a product. There is a deadened obedience in many of these poses. Arms fairs are dominated by multinationals with stalls staffed by sale reps and agency hosts, who stand, act and speak on behalf of the company. They are a contemporary version of Foucault's soldier, 'a calculated

1 - I am indebted to Kiff Bamford for directing me to this passage where Lyotard discusses drawing.

constraint runs through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit' (Foucault, 1977: 135). This corporate moulding of the body represents a kind of repression, more subtle than the violence inflicted by weapons, but a form of discipline nevertheless. However, something undercuts it. After hours standing, bodies rebel. They convey boredom, unease, illness, addiction. A host grits her teeth as a client grasps her hand. A rep finishes his client's wine, then staggers against a display. The only figures that maintain the poses are the mannequins. And, they are not inhumane, so much as unhuman. With perfect physiques, and calm, classical faces, they are the ideal citizens of militarised corporate capitalism, tranquil even when dismembered.

The sketchbooks echo the tenuous circumstances in which the drawings were made. Flicking through the pages, images appear and disappear, with a similar to serendipity to encounters in the fair. Taussig made this point in relation to ethnography notebooks, 'A fieldwork diary is like a scrapbook that you read and reread in different ways, finding unexpected meanings and pairings as well as blind alleys and dead ends' (2011: 47). Like the carrier bag I was given at the door, a sketchbook offers a receptacle for collecting paraphernalia. In 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' Ursula Le Guin uses the metaphor of a carrier bag to propose an alternative form of fiction to the usual stories of heroes and weapons. 'We've heard it, we've all heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained' (Le Guin, 2019: 29). Heroic stories generally have a unilinear structure, tracking an individual triumph. In contrast, a carrier bag has an unpredictable, open structure. We don't know what we will see when we look inside. Le Guin suggests this disrupts heroic pretensions, 'it's clear that the Hero does not look well in this bag. He needs a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle. You put him in a bag, and he looks like a rabbit, like a potato' (2019: 35). So too a reportage sketchbook. Mannequins, sales staff, weapons, and wine arrange and rearrange themselves in various states of presentability. Smudges and misdrawn lines contribute to the sense of chaos.

A shadow falls across my page. A business man stands over me, suit dishevelled. I fear he has seen me drawing, but realise he is too drunk to notice anything. He pushes past me to the Gents.

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