

Encountering drawing

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ABSTRACT

This article divides into two roughly equal parts, both of which aim to address the *act* rather than the *art* of drawing. The second part focuses on a theoretical discussion of drawing. The first bears on a number of themes including the role of drawing in colonial history, drawing and data collection, and drawing and memory. It begins by describing an episode that unfolded as an encounter between two worlds, and two ages—an episode whose meaning and effects are still controversial today.

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A paper landscape

Between 1824 and 1842, individuals with pen and notebook, and teams of uniformed men dragging steel chains and measuring instruments, tramped the length and breadth of Ireland. In their co-ordinated movement, they traced a series of lines from north to south, from Lough Foyle to Hungry Hill and from Mount Brandon to the Hill of Howth, ‘transfixing Ireland in the crisscrossing webs of a futuristic science’ (Ó Cadhla, 2007, p. 20). That science was cartography and its subjacent disciplines; the individuals were civilian fieldworkers and translators; the teams were officers of the British Royal Engineers and Royal Artillery, leading three companies of Miners and Sappers. Together they created a ‘paper landscape’—the extraordinary series of maps, statistical surveys and encyclopaedic *memoirs* which made up the Ordnance Survey of Ireland.¹

The ostensible purpose of the survey, for which it gained parliamentary approval and finance, was to enable more precise valuation of land and property—for reasons of taxation. Ireland had been mapped before, each time in a context of war, dispossession, plantation and confiscation of land. The 1824 map- ping, however, was presented as more civil and utilitarian than military. It was to be ‘a great national work’ motivated by a spirit of enlightenment. That spirit was embodied in its innovative technologies, its rigorous methodologies and its quest for scientific precision. It was triumphantly demonstrated in its cartographic achievement—the maps. At the same time, however, it was also inflected, or infected, by a colonial ideology of ‘improvement’. Ireland was considered to be very much in want of reform—or, in the language of the time, in need of civilising.

The range of disciplines applied to this purpose, and their collections of statistical data, is hugely impressive: Surveys were geological, mineral, botanical and zoological, social, religious, economic, industrial, agricultural, historical, archaeological, cultural, linguistic and orthographical. At one point, over two thousand men were engaged on this work. Their reports reveal the excessive zeal and detail of their enquiries, amassing more data than it was reasonable to process (Andrews, 2002, p. 154).

Drawing (acts of graphic representation) lay at the heart of the survey; it played an essential, founding and organising, role. As did *lines* of different sorts. Three examples, among many, may provide a brief indication.

Lines of segregation, ownership and language

Lines of segregation and classification

A recent critique of the survey has emphasised how its multiple disciplines were marshalled by the new discourse of ethnography (the study of peoples), which was itself informed by a particularly British version of evolutionary discourse (Ó Cadhla, p. 120). Investigations were founded ‘on the premise that there were two races in Ireland, natives and settlers, which co-existed, but at different stages of development’. The native Irish were classified as a degenerate people, an inferior racial type. In contrast, English and Scottish settlers ‘established industries, improved agricultural practices, and brought prosperity and stability’ (Doherty, 2004, pp. 45, 53).

In this duality, the natives or aborigines were cast as ‘other’. They were to be observed (from without), translated, rendered knowable according to their categories and tractable to the process of reform. Conversely, England represented the very axis of civilisation: The end-point to be attained, the measure of improvement and the line to be followed—a whole geometry of progress, prescribed in advance (Ó Cadhla, p. 67).

In this regard, the survey itself experienced an internal mutation, or purposive drift. It moved subtly but emphatically from a scientific ‘ethos’ of observation and recording to practices of ‘reformist’ or expedient intervention—the outcomes of which were engraved into the maps. Salient examples are the standardisation of townlands and the Anglicisation of placenames—inscribed lines of ownership and language.

Lines of ownership

The scale chosen for the survey, 6” to the mile, was sufficiently large to exhibit the boundaries of town- lands. But the Old English notion of townland was not universal in Ireland, where a variety of vernacular divisions of territory had existed since ancient times (Hamer, 1989, p. 192). These pre-existing lines or acts of spatialisation were considered anarchic, non-organised, empty and devoid of recognisable qualities (Ó Cadhla, pp. 230–232). As such, they were subsumed under the new administrative category. In the process, land was reduced to uniform units of estate management and taxation. In nineteenth-century Ireland, political power was rooted in the ownership of land, and this was faithfully reflected—and legitimised—in the drafting of the maps. Indeed, the manorial class were authorised to define the boundaries (or delimiting *lines*) of their own estates, duly recorded by the surveyors (Hamer, p. 197).

Lines of language

Throughout the duration of the survey, the etymology and orthography of Gaelic placenames—that is, Irish language placenames—proved to be particularly controversial. Variation of pronunciation and spelling was the norm in a land without a standardised language, but regarded as an impediment to the survey’s classificatory aims. The processes of transliteration (of the Gaelic) and subsequent ‘Anglicisation’ rendered many long-standing names obtuse, even grotesque (p. 194). The overriding concern was that all names should conform to the ear and tongue of the British surveyor—notwithstanding the claims of history, local usage and transparent etymological sense. Once again, landowners were granted authority over the naming of their estates.

In the process of plotting these and other lines, the survey became a ‘massive intellectual campaign to transform a land of incomprehensible spectacle into an empire of knowledge’ (Doherty, p. 35). A great web, then—epistemological and discursive—was spun out of the seemingly innocuous act of tracing lines across a landscape before diligently transferring them to paper.

Acts of inscription

That work of inscription included the use of paper, pen, pencil, quill, pigment and sealing wax in the production of drawn lines. It was a veritable sub-industry of the survey. Quite apart from the published maps, the Royal Irish Academy has preserved a collection of over 1000 sketches, drawings and water-colours, held in 12 volumes.

Officers of the Ordnance were trained, at military academies in England, in the arts of surveying. Their education emphasised the importance of cartography for society, science and state, and taught them to ‘appreciate the landscape from a military perspective’ (p. 34). Indeed, the topographical tradition of drawing landscape had its origin in mapmaking and military draughtsmanship (Ó Cadhla, p. 17). A particular skill was hill-sketching. To draw the contour of a hill—or a shoreline—required not just accurate point-to-point measurement but the connective sweep of the draughtsman’s hand to trace and fix an (in)visible line. This process has been ‘naturalised’ as the neutral inscription of observable reality. But, in fact, it is a construction in a highly charged representational code, one that requires a specific form of literacy. The ability to produce and read such inscriptions permits them to serve as both vehicle, and graphical index, of a body of newly constituted and powerful knowledge.

The system of triangulation

In Ireland, the mapping began with a trigonometrical survey: The work of triangulation. This network of primary lines established a single totalising framework—a set of co-ordinates—within which site and place (and inhabitants), in all their particulars, could be captured and subjected to processes of standardisation, ordering, measuring, regulating, purifying, translating and so on. The entire work of the survey was founded upon these lines. Just as, upon its conclusion, the series of published maps acted as a single, manageable representation or portable index of all the data produced by the survey.

The system began with the external triangulation of Ireland, requiring the erection of poles on mountains in the north of the island. As soon as two of these stations had been observed from each of two stations in Britain, it became possible to compute an Irish trigonometrical distance. Further Irish triangles could be built on to it, and every Irish distance could be calculated from it (Andrews, p. 40).

An impressive technology lay behind this work. It included a state-of-the-art theodolite, the invention of limelight to increase visibility over distance (of up to 66 miles), and the use of heliostats to deflect sunlight. Point-to-point observations were plotted as lines, referred to as ‘rays’ (p. 40). This naturalising gesture, this putative ‘physics’ of the line, disguises the fact that each line was the outcome of an occasion constructed in the field, and informed by a colonial agenda. The survey’s wider context was the Act of Union of 1800 by which Ireland was incorporated (politically) into the United Kingdom and (territorially) into the imperial British Empire.

Indeed, Andrews’ scholarly history of the survey suggests that the selection of the six-inch scale was ‘a cartographic expression of the union of the two Kingdoms ... for extending statute measure to Ireland’ (Andrews, p. 24). The system of triangulation can thus be seen as an extension of the state’s epistemological power to enframe and reconfigure the Irish landscape, with the plotting of

lines performing a function of statecraft. A more politicised view holds that the survey contributed to the exploitation of the land and the subjugation of its people by facilitating a system of British administration, governance and control. In 1883, Lord Salisbury (who was soon to be Prime Minister of the UK) remarked: 'The most disagreeable part of the three kingdoms is Ireland, and therefore Ireland has a splendid map' (Andrews, opening epigram). In a related context, the historian Simon Schama has written of the 'peculiar alliance between drawing and subjugation' (Schama, 1995, p. 466).

Mapping and meaning

Today, cartography is no longer regarded as a neutral transfer of external information, providing a transparent window onto the world. The paradigm of map-making now acknowledges its opacity as a signifying system by which meaning is mapped *into* a world. Mapping is an authored and interested production. Through the characteristic operations of framing, scale, coding and selection, maps create sites of meaning and act as agents of intervention and change; they construct both meanings and relations—of knowledge and power (Hamer, p. 184). The imperial act of mapping contains an implicitly totalising impulse to visualise and authorise a new order, and to secure its legality (Cosgrove, 1999, p. 16).

Erasure and erased

In summary, the mapping of Ireland can be seen as the instrument and graphical index of a colonial process through which data were selectively produced, objectified, legitimised and inscribed into collective memory. A great deal was also omitted or excluded from the survey. The first part of this article concludes with a consideration of what fell outside the survey's framework of understanding and was effectively erased from, and by, the maps.

The surveyors were concerned to produce a rational history of Ireland, divested of all fable and error. Even as they recorded local stories (often annexed to mythical figures operating across diffuse time frames) they confirmed them as tokens of superstition and ignorance. The informants were generally regarded as incapable of representing themselves; local traditions and beliefs were reduced to objects of study, available only through the survey apparatus; and vernacular forms of expression were seen as impediments to progress rather than a living system of culture. In consequence, the identity of the colonised was systematically (if unintentionally) eclipsed: 'Centuries of the social, cultural, and linguistic life of a people ... large swathes of [their] cognitive, aesthetic and affective experience' were rendered invisible (Ó Cadhla, p. 3).

It is instructive to cite just one instance of this process. The fieldworker O'Donovan prefaces his account of a placename by declaring that legends attached to it 'are in themselves of no value' other than to illustrate the 'credulous simplicity of the people'. He then relates the story of an ancient holy well, whose pure waters were profaned when a woman washed her dirty clothes there. He continues:

[A] calf which was underground sallied forth at the insult, and ran north west in a serpentine direction, and ... was followed by a river which, when it arrived at a deep valley formed itself into a lake now called *Loch Gamhna* or the Lake of the Calf.

O'Donovan reflects that this mythical account will be erased by the survey's recording of the placename as Erne-Head Lake—the title established by the local landowner 'in spite of the calf' (Ó Cadhla, pp. 248, 249).

This simple tale may be considered an example of *Dinnseanchas*. A modern Irish dictionary (Ó.Dónaill, 1977) translates that word as 'topography' (the science of place), but its etymology is quite revealing. The term originally referred to an ancient genre of mythological geography which

gave a metrical account of placenames (Ó Cadhla, p. 152). *Dinn* means place (an eminent site or locale); *sean* means old, and is strongly associated with the figure of the *seanchaí* or local storyteller, the keeper of lore and memory; and *cas* means to twist, as in the twisting of an ankle, but also of a rope. Poetically, the word suggests the twisting together of strands of collective memory of place. Perhaps forming a single narrative core, or (in a more visual idiom) a tapestry weaving together place and people, memory and experience, history and present desire. It was this tradition, this mnemonic and cognitive practice, that was being extinguished.

The serpentine line

One remarkable feature of O'Donovan's account is his choice of the adjective *serpentine* to describe the calf's line of flight. This immediately invokes not only Ireland's *Book of Kells* (a ninth century illuminated manuscript featuring mythical animals and sinuous interlacing lines), but also important moments in the theory of drawing. In fact, there is a long history of the serpentine line. It was first thematised by the Renaissance architect Alberti. And when it recurs in the contemporary architectural drawings of Frank Gehry, it is recognised as 'part of a chain of efforts, stretching far into the past, to obtain a single pictorial formula for movements in nature and in thought' (Bredekamp, 2004, p. 15).² Two moments in that chain are of note. The first is Klee's concept of the line as a momentum or independent force: 'An active line on a walk, moving freely without goal' ... in which 'the mobility agent is a point, shifting its position forward'. Klee illustrates this concept with a series of lines that twist and curve (Rosand, 2002, pp. 9–12). And secondly, the calf's flight invokes Ravaisson's flexuous line of immanence.

Félix Ravaisson was a French philosopher and pedagogue who, in 1882, wrote two articles on drawing; his basic idea was that drawing is a kind of 'figured' metaphysics. For him, the serpentine or animal line affirms the identity of being and movement; it 'expresses ... the movement itself of Being in its act of manifestation' (Mullarkey, 2006, pp. 153–156, p. 227; fn. 96). In a similar vein, Klee looked to art to express the sense of nature *naturing*; that is, nature as force and energy in the process of constructing a world (Bogue, 2003, p. 114).

These serpentine lines are no longer the rectilinear (or straight) lines of the survey. They do not fulfil a pre-assigned function. They do not run from point to point within a pre-established structure, or impose a web of triangulation. Nor do they serve to enclose and totalise, to fix identities, delimit properties or mark out imperial territories. And they are not at all circular. The circular line seeks to ground everything and refer everything back to its ideal of reason. One such survey line departs from, only to return to, the idea of civilisation. All along its path, it judges every encounter and maps every object within the regime of the same. In distinction from all such lines, the serpentine line has no pre-ordained starting point or end-point. It starts somewhere, anywhere, and begins in an act of self-decentring; it 'differentiates itself immediately and manifests itself immediately', creating difference as it goes (Mullarkey, pp. 154, 155).

So—to return to the calf—whatever it is, the calf's line of flight is not the mapped course of a river (real or imaginary). Unlike the survey lines, it does not chart and support an infrastructure of water transport and communications, or the economics of lake-land estates. It has no place in such a world. Instead, it is a line of imagination whose meaning escapes us, part of a lost system of mythical meta-physics or (more prosaically) of cognitive mapping. But it does seem to have something in common with *the act of drawing a line—of art*. The calf rises up from underground, as an immanent force. As it sallies forth, it blazes a trail of becoming. It carries the force of the river with or within it, traversing and reconfiguring the landscape as it goes. It brings the lake into visible existence, and opens a lake-world around it. And finally, it disappears as a force, settling behind or within the contours of that newly formed, newly visible, world. In short, the calf's line of flight is an analogue or allegory of pure drawing. It resembles the pencil-point that displaces itself across the

page in what has been called ‘the inaugural moment’ or the ‘primal scene’ of drawing (Bryson, 2003, p. 150).

Insulting the page

That moment has been variously theorised. And Jean-Luc Nancy has also provided an impressive meditation on the first moment of painting (Nancy, 1996, pp. 69–79). But to pursue the calf analogy just a little further, it is noteworthy that the calf’s flight begins with an insult: A woman inadvertently offers the great insult of inserting her dirty clothing into the well’s sacred waters. The Latin root of the word ‘insult’ reveals that its meaning is ‘to leap in’. The woman’s act of insertion, or leaping in, is akin to the artist’s act of placing the pencil—somewhere, anywhere, wherever—upon the page. The pencil insults the page by leaping it, inserting itself, sullyng the pristine whiteness of the surface with the dirty deposit of the pencil-point.

And what can be said of the whiteness of the page? It is not just an emptiness, or a vacuum. Norman Bryson has characterised it as a ‘reserve’, an area without qualities, that is activated by the pencil as it moves, as the line unfolds and an image takes shape. The first visible mark transforms the material surface of the paper into a virtual space, an open background, even as the mark itself assumes the foreground (Bryson, p. 151).

Bryson goes on to contrast drawing with painting. And we may also include cartography. Both painting and cartography tend to an aesthetic of finality and closure. The image is given in its final arrested state, as an overall design, in the completed past. In contrast, through its apparent incompleteness or its open structure, drawing offers the ongoing present of its coming into form. ‘If painting presents Being, the drawn line presents Becoming’ (p. 150).

Commenting on Klee, Bryson refers to this temporal dimension of drawing:

The drawn line in a sense always exists in the present tense, in the time of its own unfolding, the ongoing time of a present that constantly presses forward ... Line gives you the image *together with* the whole history of its becoming-image. (pp. 149, 150)

It is this becoming—the bringing of a new idea or image into existence—that is first intended by the expression *the act of pure drawing*.

Drawing as immanent act

If pure drawing is a ‘leaping in’, then that *in-sult* immediately invokes or invites a *re-sult* (a ‘leaping back or out’). The sallying forth of the calf from underground is the unleashing of an immanent force of nature. The insertion of the pencil-point disturbs and awakens what calligraphers have long known as the ‘generative charge’ of the paper—its potential to both bring forth and participate in the image (Rosand, pp. 1, 2). Foreground and background arise and separate, and from out of that opening, that inchoate space, an image or idea begins to take shape. In each case, there is an emergence from within, an immanence, rather than the imposition of a pattern from above or from outside. The serpentine line is an active participant in its own creation, asserting its own ‘desire’.³ As it elaborates and unfolds itself, it precedes any concept of what it might be or what it may come to mean. There is no existing place where it cares to belong, no ready-made form that it cares to assume. And that makes it difficult for us to include it within any recognisable category, any available knowledge, or any familiar world.

The philosopher Alain Badiou takes up these themes in a 2006 essay. Employing his own distinctive idiom, he refers to drawing as an act of description. In a school geometry lesson, one may be instructed to ‘describe an arc’, that is, to make a visible arc with compass and pencil on paper. Badiou introduces an important difference:

The work of art is a description which has no immediate relationship with a real that would be outside the description ... [A] contemporary drawing is not the realisation of an external motive. It is much more completely immanent to its proper act. (Badiou, 2006, p. 45)

This immanent act, this work of description, is the sensible presentation of something not previously existent. Badiou explains this in relation to mark, surface and paper:

In one sense, the paper exists, as a material support ... But in an other and more crucial sense, the paper as a back-ground does not exist, because it is created as such, as an open surface, by the marks. It is that sort of movable reciprocity between existence and inexistence which constitutes the very essence of drawing. (p. 44)

And it is this same reciprocity between mark and surface, in-sult and re-sult, or between *in*-existence and *bringing into* existence by means of drawing, that will be explored in the remainder of this article. One way to do that is to take the example of an actual drawing. In this case, a drawing by a contemporary Irish artist. One which, in keeping with the themes of this article, looks very much like a map.

Kathy Prendergast's city drawings

In her series of *City Drawings*, begun in 1992, Kathy Prendergast used a soft pencil, a B grade, on sketching paper (Prendergast, 1999). The soft graphite allowed her to deposit a very fine line, a light trace that is barely discernible in places. Her project was to complete 180 such drawings, each of which is an image of one of the world's capital cities, obviously copied from a cartographically exact street map.⁴ However, Prendergast chose to manipulate the scale of the maps so as to produce drawings of a standard size, determined by the dimensions of the page (24 cm × 32 cm). And the image was obtained through an *act of drawing* that was by no means faithfully mimetic, an operation that may be construed in at least two distinct ways.

First: The faintness of the line, on its errant path, suggests that the city may be still in progress, or incomplete. It seems to be emerging into appearance and into being, into weak visibility—from out of an indiscernible background. It is possible to think of each line as an enquiry, or a way sought across a landscape without known features, only flows and contours elaborated en route. Despite their origin as copies, then, there is a strange swerve away from mimesis in these images, so that we could be forgiven for considering them as examples of something like *pure drawing* ...

A second approach focuses on the fact that the lines never seek or meet the edges of the paper. There is no connection to a hinterland, no sense of global positioning or relative standing within a geopolitical structure. Instead, identity gives way to a highly formalised image. The drawings show no points of orientation, no public buildings, no sites of power and no names of ownership. There is no game of counting in or out of significance—just lines and spatialisations. Described in this way, the *City Drawings* conform to an extraordinary degree to Badiou's definition of abstract art—which is the evacuation not of content, but of particularity (Badiou, 2004).⁵ To varying degrees, each map or city has been deprived, or purified, of specific qualities. A series of images in combination produces the effect of a single abstract figure—a generic city.

From pure drawing to purification of drawing

For Badiou, the operation of purification displaces the idea of pure drawing. And indeed, there is a stubbornly mimetic dimension to the *City Drawings* which seems to bear this out. For example, a number of the images contain traces of a transcendent pattern: The regular grid structure of the new world city. This marks the imposition from above of a rational plan, an ideal of order going back to at least Plato. In respecting this structural feature, Prendergast's work seems to signal that pure drawing may not be altogether possible; that it can remain, at best, an ideal operation.

It may be that drawing is compelled to acknowledge the necessity of the mimetic or referential trace, however slight—the irreducible ‘as if’ of all drawn appearance. Behind every *act* of drawing lies the *art* of drawing, its history and conventions, both enabling and constraining. Perhaps this forms part of what is meant by immanence in drawing: The inherent powers and potentialities of drawing’s materials and processes, the ways of seeing and thinking that they alone enable. What Petherbridge (2007) has called the ‘systemic’ dimension of drawing is *always already in place* before the pencil-point touches the page. Deleuze (2005) is also well aware of this, but in its more negative aspect. He writes of the clichés, the inherited images and figurative ‘givens’ of art, that pre-occupy the supposedly empty canvas (p. 62). The artist is tasked to reject them (p. 65) in order to attain what Deleuze calls the plane of composition, where the work of painting or drawing may finally begin.

It seems that, not only is drawing obliged to begin with insult and imperfection, but even the page is not so white after all. Perhaps it is better not to speak so much of *pure drawing*, then. Instead, with Badiou, one may wish to speak of the *act of purification*: ‘Every art develops from an impure form, and the progressive purification of this impurity shapes the history of both a particular artistic truth and of its exhaustion’ (Badiou, 2004, thesis 5). For Badiou, there is always an impurity of the artistic act which mixes in aspects of the ideology and the ‘non art’ of its time. This assigns a task to the artist: To seek out the contemporary operations of drawing—that is, its contemporary forms of purification.

In an essay on cinema, Badiou provides an indication of this work of purification. If Modernism consisted in purifying artistic materials of ‘everything which binds them to the domination of representation, identification and realism’, then the contemporary challenge is to extend this treatment to everything which binds those materials to ‘the pure formal consumption of images and sounds’. That is, their consumption via forms of art, ‘whose privileged operators today are pornographic nudity, the cataclysmic special effect, the intimacy of the couple, social melodrama, and pathological cruelty’ (Badiou, 2003, p. 114). Only a purifying operation, claims Badiou, will enable the emergence of a new artistic idea, a new abstract formalisation of a generic truth that has not previously been affirmed.

In the case of drawing, Badiou’s purification might address, for example, the type of animated drawings denounced by Petherbridge, and certain varieties of ‘bedroom art’ discussed in the drawing anthology, *Vitamin D* (Dexter, 2005). To purify such art has nothing to do with censoring it. Instead, it would mean to recognise its present necessity while subjecting it to formal operations capable of extracting from it a generic truth—of sexuality, sociality or spectacle. A truth that is extracted locally but applicable universally.

Description without place

In Badiou’s later work, a third term emerges to add to this vocabulary of pure drawing and purification of drawing. In some rather enigmatic statements, he speaks of *subtraction* rather than purification. But this can be approached via the more familiar idea of drawing as ‘description’.

[T]o say that a Drawing is a work of art has a precise meaning. It is a description without place which creates a sort of artificial world ... In this world ... there is no difference ... between ‘to be’ and ‘to seem,’ to ‘appear’. (Badiou, 2006, p. 48)

In other words, this artificial world is subtracted from all ties to any existing reality (any specific structure or set of representations). There is no pre-existing framework of belonging or exclusion, no fixing of meaning according to place and identity. A line or mark is free to appear precisely as it is: Visibly emerging from inexistence into existence, with no discernible difference between what it is, what it presents, and what it seems. The build up of lines traces an inchoate form, forever separating from its background into a world of minimal difference. Badiou now speaks openly of the possibility of his version of pure drawing—as subtraction:

This is precisely the goal of the pure Drawing: To institute a new world, not by the strength of means ... but by the minimalism of some marks and lines, very close to the inexistence of any place. Drawing is the perfect example of an intensity of weakness. (p. 49)

What Badiou calls a description without place does not locate its content in historical space and time. Rather, it creates—or brings into being—an in-existent space of its own, which serves as background to the phenomena shown. Commenting on Badiou's essay, Žižek (2008, p. 6) explains that what appears in that virtual space is not sustained by a depth of supposed reality behind it, nor is it a sign for something 'outside its form'. Rather, it is a 'decontextualised appearance, an appearance which fully coincides with real being'. Such an artistic description 'extracts from the confused reality its own inner form', in the same way that Schoenberg's music extracted the inner form of totalitarian terror. It evoked the way that terror affects subjectivity.

Towards a subtractive drawing

The article will conclude with a brief discussion of examples of artworks that may give an indication of this work of *subtraction*.

When an artform has exhausted (or saturated) its possibilities, Badiou suggests that the work of purification can neither reduce nor extend it further. It will be necessary for each artist to start again from a kind of degree zero of practice. In other words, build from below to focus on something that has not previously been formalised in drawing. Peter Hallward suggests that Malevich achieved this subtractive goal in his *White Square on White Ground* of 1914: He extracted pure form from colour, via a geometric allusion, leaving the indication of a minimal difference between form and background, and between white and white (Hallward, 2003, p. 162). In the case of drawing, the work of subtraction would seem to involve marks or lines that allow us to explore minimal visible differences between mark and place, surface and space, line and gesture, and between all of these and the unactivated page, so that drawing can build again from there. It may help to consider examples.

In the performance drawings of Morgan O'Hara, there is nothing visible other than traces of embodied movement. She records, in real time, the lines of movement of hands engaged in various acts—delivering a baby; preparing a meal; playing a musical instrument.⁶ This appears to be less a work of purification of a previous history of drawing, than an effort to 'extract a form' from an overlooked and unacknowledged aspect of what is generically and equally human: The sweep of the hand back and forth. As Badiou expresses it, such art is 'the impersonal production of a truth that is addressed to everyone' (Badiou, 2004, thesis 2).

There is no fixing in place, or memorialisation, of particular identity. Instead, there is a local presentation of generic possibility—an impersonal subjectivity working itself out. Meaning in these works is not readily apparent; there is only a minimal world (of hands); there are only lines of minimal difference activating the 'reserved' space of the page. Viewing these lines, all we can say is that something has taken place, something indiscernible, and we must enquire into its possible consequences—as Badiou would say—right up to the elaboration of a new world, or a new situation, of drawing.

For Badiou, this is the (re-stated) task of contemporary drawing—as subtraction (Hallward, 2003).⁷ All such drawing will be a performance not a competence, and it will share the following features: It will be contingent in its emergence; immanent to, but also interruptive of, the contemporary situation of drawing; egalitarian in its address; and self-supporting in its elaboration, that is, it will bear its reason within itself, depending on no external logic or goal (Clemens, 2006).⁸

This immanent logic is very different from the instrumental logic of the lines produced by the Ordnance Survey of Ireland. In the survey, cartographic knowledge was constructed in the field and represented upon the paper. In tracing a shoreline or the contour of a hill, the sweep of the draughts-

man's hand was neither free nor gestural but epistemological in intent: It isolated and depicted what was *to-be-known* about the land in the interests of possession, management and control. The act of drawing was constrained to instrumental service on behalf of a colonial and reformist agenda: A matter of applied technique.

In one sense, the art of drawing is the history of associated such techniques—consolidated into a distinct practice. It consists in the authored production of drawn objects and statements about them: The body of knowledge of material processes that constitutes drawing as a transmissible, functional or aesthetic, discipline. All of that surrounds and supports but is unable to prescribe or contain the *subtractive act* of drawing, as Badiou sees it. For Badiou, the act of drawing is a free gesture which traces the incipience or coming-to-presence of form in its essential incompleteness. To be 'understood', the line must be retraced by the viewer who senses its singular emergence from (and into) infinite possibility. In this way, drawing realises itself *as art*, departing from the previous history of its forms, exceeding all technical capacity, to open up to unprecedented encounter. Is Badiou's 'description without place' what it now means, or what it now requires, for an artist to encounter drawing ... to struggle free from the mimetic imperative, and all reductive frameworks of understanding, in order to bring something new into existence?

Notes

1. The Ordnance Survey of Ireland was the first complete survey of any national territory at the scale of 6" to the mile. The term *memoir* comes from the French *aide-mémoire* and was commonly applied to encyclopaedic local surveys undertaken in the nineteenth century (Ó Cadhla, p. 102).
2. See pp. 16, 17: 'Albrecht Dürer asserted that the serpentine line perfectly embodied the dual purpose of drawing— both pointing back to nature and revealing the mind—because it could be pulled back and forth 'according to one's wishes' ... William Hogarth fixed the serpentine 'variety' [of line] ... as the symbol of the summa of all forms of movement and depiction ... Paul Klee assigned the serpentine line in particular to the highest rank of motoric energy for subsidiary lines, hatching, and self-twisting ... Gilles Deleuze characterised the folds of the baroque and Klee's serpentine lines as the essence of creative thought ...'
3. Rosand, p. 12: 'The options available to the [drawing] hand may lie anywhere between enforcing representational responsibility upon its own course and yielding to the momentum of the line itself. "One must always search for the desire of the line", Matisse taught, "where it wishes to enter or where to die away".'
4. To view the *City Drawings*, see Prendergast (1999) or go to <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/art-now-kathy-prendergast-city-drawings>, <https://www.gomaps.co.uk/blogs/new-s/maps-and-art-kathy-prendergast>
5. 'Thesis 10: Non-imperial art is necessarily abstract art, in this sense: It abstracts itself from all particularity, and formalises this gesture of abstraction.'
6. To view the drawings go to <http://morganohara.com/d1.html>
7. Hallward (p. 196) explains subtractive art as follows:

Badiou groups the great art events of *our* time ... as formal variants on the general project of generic subtraction. Rather than set out to destroy the very category of the work or image, a subtractive art seeks instead the 'minimal image,' the simplest imaginary trait, a vanishing work, an art of 'rarefaction' achieved 'not through an aggressive posture with respect to inherited forms, but through mechanisms that arrange these forms at the edge of the void, in a network of cuts and disappearances,' on the model of Webern's music or Mallarmé's poetry.
8. Clemens' list of features (p. 286) applies to *all* genres of truth (or truth procedures) as defined by Badiou.

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Notes on contributor

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