Drawing History Painting

Artist's statement

The work in the exhibition was made in response to an historical event: the destruction of the refugee camp in Calais in October 2016, and the identification and dispersal of around 2000 unaccompanied minors (children under 18) discovered amongst the 10,000 people displaced from the site. It was initially prompted by a request for funding by the film-maker Sue Clayton, whose previous work on the deportation of Afghan refugee children from the UK I knew. Clayton was documenting events at Calais, concentrating on the unaccompanied children present in the camp**,** and her footage was being used by national news agencies. Crucially, her work had been instrumental in securing the *pro bono* involvement of the legal agencies capable of establishing individual identities and legal rights, and in challenging the action of government administration embarrassed by media coverage of a situation that was both a shambles and a public scandal. In the wake of the Brexit referendum**,** immigration had become a toxic issue. The helpless had become untouchables, and in the absence of any viable solution to the scale of the problem of refugee migration, or to the ethics of UK polity regarding its representation, the unattended minors who had become starkly visible during the destruction of the camp had to be made to disappear. This was duly paid for by the UK government and carried out by French authorities.

I could not directly fund Sue Clayton's work, but could make artwork that might. My idea was to take the colours from flags of origin of the refugees in the camp and throw them together to make a new 'flag' that represented their current territory and identity. At that time the numbers and identities of refugees were uncertain, so this couldn't be done with any precision, but by mixing lines of primary colours in a random order, many different hues were created, some like those of real flags, some new. This, to me, represented what was actually happening on the ground, where Afghans lived among Eritreans, Syrians alongside Somalis. The making of this work ended with the destruction of the camp: the centre of the drawing was torn into fragments. Entitled *Calais Flags*, it was shown alongside the first edits of Clayton's footage at Goldsmiths during the Being Human festival in November 2016.

I knew that Clayton's film would take time to resolve as she followed refugees to the dispersal camps spread around France, and decided how to edit her footage in relation to the unfolding situation. Having myself become involved, for the first time, with work that engaged a specific event in the world, I had my own questions to ask and resolve. The works made in the year since *Calais Flags* and presented in this exhibition are the result. I describe that process below.

I make work that is neither figurative nor abstract**,** in the sense in which these terms are usually understood. It is procedural. It undertakes a task of 'replication', which is central to figuration. Its primary subject matter is bounded by the constraints and expression of its own iteration. In this sense, its criteria resemble those of abstraction. The work takes the minimal defining conditions of both genres as its basis. In one way it is very simple work: do something, then do it again and again, and during this process try to observe and understand what is being done. In another way it is very difficult, because

at a certain level of detail it is impossible to do the same thing twice. And you could also say that it is impossible to be the same person doing anything twice. This is not a new idea, it goes back as far as Heraclitus in our culture, in others, further. But what are its implicatios?

I accept that whatever I am trying to do includes impingements that are beyond my control. Whereas most purposeful human activity is organised to minimise such effects**,** I embrace them, and as an artist try to produce work that expresses reality as I experience it. I can say that the work takes place at a boundary of control and uncontrollability, of intention and actual delivery, and that on this account it deconstructs subjectivity. I can say the work is porous to the material effects of changes in temperature, humidity, light level and quality, to my own changing levels of energy and ability to concentrate from moment to moment, to my mood and emotional state. All of these impingements lead the line to being drawn to differ from the last. The work is a record of this process of change through time, marked by the trace of ink flowing from the moving tip of a pen. This tells you nothing about the work's aesthetics unless you accept a linkage between ethics and aesthetics, and**,** in Wittgenstein's phrase, that art is working with and on oneself**:** a requirement that tends to preclude the current common comfort of irony.

The explanation above looks inward, at the process of making drawings on paper in the privacy of a studio. How can this perspective be reversed, its minimal focus turned outwards towards the maximal scale of events in the world of which it is a part, and towards which art as a cultural activity has some kind of responsibility? The particular subject matter adopted in this work, concerning the camp, the treatment of refugees, the activity of government towards them and the foreign policy which is an implicit factor of the wider refugee crisis, coupled with the question of the nature of art's linkage and responsibility to its present, prompted me towards a reading of Adorno as my Virgil. I do not offer his thought as a justificatory armature for the work I undertook (I was also reading Wolfgang Streek on European polity, David Graeber on the sociology of debt, and TJ Clark on Poussin as an unintentional History Painter), but the pages of the *Aesthetic Theory*, discussed with friends over the course of the year, did yield some remarkable concordances with my own work's parataxis.

Adorno didn't say: How can there be art after Auschwitz? - but almost the opposite. The real import of his remark (originally made about *lyric* poetry) is: what is the responsibility of artwork in a culture that is also capable of manifesting such horror as the camps? The answer he gives is not by comment or reproduction, but by preserving the distance necessary to the integrity of its own process: "By crystallising in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful'. - Its contribution to society is not communication with it, but rather something extremely mediated. It is a resistance in which, by virtue of inner aesthetic development, social development is reproduced without being imitated." (*Aesthetic Theory* 1997. pp 225-6) The distance claimed by such a critical stance is essential to my own practice. The question at issue was not how 'to represent' the Calais camp, but how to pass the knowledge of events that I had been exposed to by Sue Clayton's work, and my reaction to it, through my own work. I've described my working process**;** it is non-discursive, and posits a very attenuated idea of subjectivity. It finds this reflection in the *Aesthetic Theory*: "It is as labour, and not as communication that the subject in

art comes into its own…. The intervening individual subject is scarcely more than a limiting value, something minimal required by the artwork for its crystallisation." – Adorno's footprints on my sand. The process of mediation I used was to adopt qualities of materials (like colour), and techniques (like overdrawing) which didn't alter the method of my work**,** but enabled it to carry an additional weight of information, allowing it to function allegorically. I unpack the allegory, as it developed, below.

Refuge 1

Some background. In October 2016 no-one actually knew how many unattended minors were living in the Calais camp. They had made incredibly dangerous journeys from places that were bad enough to warrant that risk, via the extra-legal economies of migration networks, to the further side of the moat that establishes the English border at Calais. Some were as young as 9, the majority were teenagers, a significant proportion were girls. All, without exception, were traumatised, and most of them were keeping their heads down. As the deadline for the camp's destruction approached, Local Councils were writing to the Home Office about placing refugees in the accommodation they had provided. Chelsea Football Club was on the verge of sending its away-match coach fleet to the rescue. The passing of the Dubs Amendment had blown a hole in the Brexit**-** aligned resistance to EU admissions protocols set out in the Dublin 3 legislation, and the situation, which had become highly visible in news media was, from an administrative perspective, looking close to culpably out of control. As the identities, histories and even the number of child refugees were unknown, the scale of fall-out from adherence to any criteria whatsoever for entry was unpredictable. Consequently, legal principles were shelved in exchange for an arbitrary limit of numbers. In respect of the 80,000 unaccompanied child refugees then estimated to be at large in Europe, the Government first proposed to admit 350, precipitating a High Court case against itself that was successfully defended by increasing the number to 450.

The four drawings of *Refuge* each contain a unique aleatory colour sequence of around 500 lines (some 2000 in all), a figure equivalent to the number of unaccompanied minors finally estimated to have been present at the time of the destruction of the camp. In *Refuge 1 (numbers game)* 350 lines retain their original colour identity. The remainder, together with all the lines of subsequent drawings, have been overdrawn, in *Refuge 1* and *2* as if censored, in *Refuge 3* and *4* as if subdued or suppressed.

Refuge 2

During the last days of the Calais camp the majority of unattended minors were gathered together in a fenced area containing portacabins. Children corralled there were under the expectation that assessment of their UK admissions claims would then begin. Conditions of overcrowding, food and sanitation were dire, and also highly visible as media attention ramped up both nationally and internationally. Negative public perception rapidly became a significant liability, and after a stand-off between English and French Governments, all minors within the enclosure were bussed out to 'the security' of remote dispersal

facilities around France. The problem of child refugees had been made to disappear, and with it, the question of their identities. With regard to UK entry assessment, cursory identification was undertaken by Home Office officials between the camp enclosure and the visual limits of media present. Once out of shot, personnel disembarked to repeat the procedure on subsequent buses. The disparity between this exercise and proper process suggests that its most likely purpose was to collect data to assess the liability that the establishment of entry criteria might precipitate. Entry criteria have subsequently been changed eight times. By December 9th 2016, when the transfer of children from the dispersal centres to the UK under the Dubs Ammendment was terminated, refugee agencies estimated that around a thousand children with claims for UK entry had been, in effect, excluded.

The drawing *Refuge 2 (untitle)* contains two superimposed sequences of coloured lines, a thousand in all, overdrawn in black.

Refuge 3

Throughout the final period of high media profile the Calais refugees were represented and dealt with not as individuals, but as an aggregate problem. News coverage in the UK was sensational, concentrating on conflict between refugees and police, and the 'need' to put measures in place to prevent entry by stow-aways. Much of the volatile activity did involve youth, which in turn confirmed 'Project Fear' and fed the appeal to latent racism implicit on the right of the popular Brexit agenda. The whole process was bruising: to viewers of media perceptive enough to sustain a critique in the absence of an adequate scope of information, and to all agencies present on the ground; even the duty periods of French police forces seconded to the site were curtailed to maintain discipline and prevent emotional over-exposure. The periodic arrival of media crews from all over Europe, whilst accelerating the solution to the childrens' crisis, itself exacerbated tensions in the camp and provided a spectacle of the deployment of massive technical expenditure, which together with the costs of containment, policing and dispersal forwarded from UK to French administrations, begged many questions about the ethics of resource allocation in the face of such a situation. But amongst the bruised, the refugees were bruised the hardest.

Refuge 3 (bruise) consists of three superimposed colour sequences, and looks just like what it says on the can. The tertiary colours of the overlay are those of bruised skin.

Refuge 4

I met Sue Clayton during the summer of 2017 between her filming of conditions at dispersal centers in France, and beginning editing in London. We talked about the situation of the children she was following; about the small and hidden camps that were springing up again as refugees continue to gravitate towards Calais; about the inevitable collapse of the court cases against the British government; and about all the work that is consumed and buried by successive events, under the white noise of news. During our conversation she said: "You

know, the most shocking thing is that people have already forgotten about this."

Refuge 4 (amnesia) completes the structural procedure that runs through the work. Four colour sequences are superimposed. Each line has then been overdrawn with white four times. 2000 lines, 2000 obliterations. It is the work of forgetting. As in this sequence of drawings, it actually consumes more time and effort than everything else. White ink, like white noise, obscures detail, flattens contours. With each successive iteration the original raw signal of the line is slowly displaced, buried, and finally lost.

Refuge 1-4 Coda

Notwithstanding the allegory, these drawings are not 'about Calais'. They are about being able to continue to make art in the knowledge of that situation, and reserving the right to make it beautiful. The process of the work itself is the 'refuge' of its title, the place where the impacts of knowledge are not escaped, but endured and grounded – and also transformed. Sue Clayton's work, to which these drawings are dedicated, made its own necessary negotiations in the editing suite. We tend to forget that documentary film is also art. The power of her film *Calais Children: A Case to Answer*, lies in the beauty of the vision and technique that carries its message.

10,000 Signata

Before each act of drawing, and especially when changing pens, I use a separate sheet of paper to balance the ink flow from the pen - otherwise it can blot. The resultant marks can be short lines or scribbles. They have no intentional pattern, but often seem as if they might. Occasionally, I've been tempted to keep these blot sheets, as in principle, everything is the work. Whilst making of the *Refuge* drawings I adopted this ancillary mark-making as a sign for 'signature', something between a graphic gesture and the writing of a name or its initials. There were 10,000 people at the Calais camp before its destruction. No-one outside own networks really knew who most of them were. No government wanted to know. I drew a 'signature' for each of them. With the destruction of the camp their interim society was dismantled, and with it, the relationships that constituted their social identity. For the drawing, I needed another's hand to do that work, to overdraw their 'signata' colour by colour, mark by mark. Two different matrixes of drawing are superimposed, one of free gesture and another of its painstaking eradication, replacing an ad hoc multicoloured structure with a differently purposed monochrome one. In the scheme of work this overdrawing functions as a defining interpretation. The artist who undertook that task was Name Surname. His work, like the work of forgetting, was the hardest. Neither of us knew what the drawing would eventually look like, but both of us trust this process - of following irrational thoughts logically and absolutely - implicitly.

Reclaiming Black

My work is a process that has a visible result. That process leads and the result follows, in its detail unpredictably, unalterably. Things often look like other things, but understanding the importance and scope of process is more difficult. Things have beauty. The world is full of them, all undergoing a process of change. Process is close to the integrity of beauty. Sometimes, as here, I close the gap between lines, half a step towards overdrawing. It reduces the impulse to lose this thing in its resemblance to something else. This work reflects itself, like a black mirror. Black has been claimed by others in the history of the refugee crisis. I've used it for over thirty years. Here I reclaim it.

David Connearn January 2018