



Article

## Flying Pig Drawings: the social is political

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### Abstract

This series reportage drawings of a Cambridge pub was commissioned by The Guardian newspaper. The drawings document and celebrate a Victorian pub under threat which has since closed to make way for office development. The short accompanying essay discusses the social and political dimensions of these drawings.

### Introduction

These ink drawings and accompanying text were commissioned in 2019 by The Guardian as part of *The Illustrated City* series. The series ran for about a year, from late 2018 to early 2020, and artists from different cities across the world contributed pieces about their home city. *The Illustrated City* was production editor Tash Reith-Banks' brain-child. She explained to me that her idea was to tell the story of cities in a different way for an international audience, with a focus on more personal and intimate takes on different cities and fewer words than in a conventional article to make it more accessible to both readers and different types of contributors.

My contribution was a piece on The Flying Pig, a hugely popular pub facing demolition in Cambridge. With the drawings and accompanying text I wanted to give an eye-witness report about what is worth enjoying in a pub, the community it brings together and therefore what is lost when a pub closes. I hoped that this would raise awareness locally and nationally of this and other campaigns to save pubs and other parts of the social realm.

### Thoughts on the social and political dimensions of reportage drawing

There are various social dimensions to this project. The public house is space dedicated to social interaction. These drawings celebrate that space and the community which interacts within it. The act of making drawings in a pub is social at a basic, personal level. As an art stu-

dent I remember being hugely impressed by Paul Hogarth's drawings of Dublin pubs which I first encountered in *Brendan Behan's Island: An Irish Sketchbook*. In his book *Creative Pencil Drawing*, Hogarth talks about how "[I]n this informal atmosphere, the artist will be accepted enough to blunt the oddness of a drawing being made, instead of a camera being clicked." (Hogarth, 1981, p.90). This oddness attracts attention. A drawing takes considerable time so it is inevitable that the artist will be noticed, the drawing in progress considered and, in the convivial atmosphere of a pub, commented on. A pint of stout appearing on my table indicated approval. Of course, the conversations went in various directions, not least the future of the pub and the campaign to save it. I made brief notes of the conversations, and these formed the basis of the text which accompanied the drawings.

While these drawings perhaps act as a cultural affirmation of the pub and its community, at what point do they acquire a political dimension? In an essay on Paul Hogarth's drawings, first published in 1956, John Berger writes about the impact of drawings and between documentary photographs. Photographs, he contends "present us with the facts: Hogarth presents us with the conscience of a witness" (Berger, 1989, p.5)

What Berger is arguing here is that when looking drawings, the viewer cannot be unaware of the artist's thinking process in the act of bearing witness. In his book of fieldwork drawings "I Swear I Saw This" anthropologist

Michael Taussig discusses bearing witness. He relates this to anthropologist's fieldwork where one engages in "close observation, complicated or improved by what is called 'participant observation' seeing from the inside as well as from the outside and translating between. Yet to 'bear witness' goes beyond this, suggesting observation with an edge, participation of another order." (Taussig, 2011, p.133).

Because the drawings would be published in a national newspaper it was important to discuss their potential impact with the pub's landlady, Justine, who had fully supported my project and who herself featured in some drawings. At that time she had an agreement with the property's owners not to campaign to save the pub. With that in mind, I wanted to present an honest, affectionate portrait of the place and hope they achieve something of what Berger felt about the Hogarth drawings:

"As one looks at these drawings by Paul Hogarth one not only becomes interested in the people and places they describe; one also becomes *involved* with them. The drawings themselves are points of departure for our commitment to the subjects they represent." (Berger, 1989, p.6).

As a footnote, The Flying Pig survived the first and second lockdowns, helped by £20,000 crowdfunded by the local community. Sadly, the property developers terminated the tenants' lease and the pub has sat empty and boarded up for the last year.

## References

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