



Article

A coast with teeth and eyes: Drawing the seaside from the inside out

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The ongoing research/book project provisionally titled *A Coast of Teeth*, is an exploration of English seaside towns through drawing and writing. As the title of this paper suggests, the addition of eyes refers to the role of seeing and observing and the wider function of the reportage artist to bear witness visually. The title *A Coast of Teeth*, is intended to capture the deprivation and hard lives lived in seaside towns and allude to a visual image of faces wincing in the wind with teeth exposed. Additionally, the title references the physical geography of cliffs and military outposts which look like teeth providing a protective barrier between land and sea. The project came about when discussing with a previous publisher the possibility of a writer (collaborator Tom Sykes) and an artist (myself) going to seaside towns and documenting them. Artists and writers have a long tradition of collaboration but often producing work separately. We aimed to write and draw together while experiencing the same things. A notable comparison would be the work of Hunter S. Thompson and Ralph Steadman who famously drew the Kentucky Derby in less than sober conditions. This resulted in a fusion of text and

image (eventually being coined Gonzo journalism) which added a visceral and sensorial dimension to the reporting. This was certainly of interest to us.

Our hypothesis was that seaside towns would offer a compelling glimpse of English life post Brexit and during a pandemic. We already knew that English seaside towns had worse health outcomes and, overall, were economically deprived and 'overlooked' by successive governments. (Coughlan, 2021) We also wondered how their renewed attention due to enforced 'staycations' would impact tourism and ultimately benefit these communities. While 'staycations' did in fact improve the tourist trade, the overreliance on tourism makes these towns economically vulnerable and in places like Torbay, (Torquay) 25% of children are living in poverty. (Dan, 2019) A 2008 government report on seaside towns noted 'On most individual domains within the Indices of Deprivation, with the notable exception of crime, a majority of seaside towns have above-average deprivation.' (Beatty et al., 2008) Every location we visited was included in the report and all but one was identified as meeting deprivation on the fol-

lowing indices: income, employment, health and disability, education and training, barriers to housing and access to services, crime, and living environment. The only notable exception was Bournemouth which, in every indices, was on the opposite end of the spectrum and overall, shares more in common with prosperous seaside destinations such as Brighton, Sidmouth, Whitstable and Exmouth. (Beatty et al., 2008)

We wanted our work to be granular and engage with these communities through walking, talking and drawing. We endeavoured to tell a human story and a story that is viscerally 'true' by virtue of an unmediated approach to reporting/documenting. What we found in our journeys was that seaside towns were not only peripheral in their geography, but were zones of forgotten people, fringe politics, conspiracy theories and aging demographics. The drawings evocatively capture these textures and relay encounters with an England balanced between past and present and experiencing a stasis, not unlike nostalgia itself.

Coast of Teeth in both its written and drawn forms relies on walking and observing with little planned or prescribed. In this sense, our methodology reflects the 'derive' of the psychogeographer. Multiple efforts have been made to clarify the aims of this movement, but Guy Debord put it succinctly as 'psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.' (Coverley, 2010, p.88,89) Our methodology requires a lot of walking and seeing how landscapes change along the coast. This is measured in changes to the geography, architecture and people. We equally move inland, exploring how these towns operate the further you get away from leisure centres. We find in both areas that people are wearing the burden of life on their faces and bodies, and towns bear the marks of neglect in closed stores and, social ills in corner stores called 'News and Booze' that sell 'over proof' alcohol. Something neither myself nor Tom ever heard of. It is a landscape of beauty and desperation. These are lives lived in the cracks between past and present and capitalisms violent and careless swings.

My own role as a reportage artist is to respond to what I see and document it in-situ. What we have found on our travels to Torquay, Paignton, Bournemouth, Clacton-on-Sea, Jaywick and Weston Super Mare are landscapes which are reflective of the socio-economic realities on the ground and a people who bare the physio-psycho trauma of such conditions in their behaviours and physicality. Internal conflict manifests itself in physical conditions such as obvious physical disability, anti-social behaviour, obesity and malnutrition from drug use. Although seaside towns are connected by a shared history of holiday parks, leisure centres and tourism, they differ dramatically in their geography, demographic make-up and economies. We started our project in Torquay and noted an older resident and tourist population. The lack of a pier was significant as this didn't attract children and young people and the inner harbour area was largely free of tacky amusement faire (the bread and butter of every other destination we visited). What we did find was a conspiracy theory museum and a town museum that celebrated local heroes such as Agatha Christie and Percy Fawcett (the explorer they based the character Indiana Jones on). In Torquay like other towns we visited, there was a sense of a persistent identity crisis, caused in part by a conflict between a rich past as a tourist destination and a modern resort with less overall trade. The people in these towns, like the relics of amusements past, feel worn and rusted, beaten by limited opportunity and lack of investment. People become totemic, like the rusting landscape, of wider social ills and economic desperation. It is something the drawings powerfully suggest and as a collective, they communicate something fractured and disjointed.

Bournemouth was a notable exception in terms of footfall and vibrant multiculturalism, reflecting urban Britain demographically and in food and cultural offerings. The beach was heaving on what was the hottest day of the year in mid-July 2021. The make-up of beach dwellers was racially diverse and music that punctuated the hot air ranged from reggaeton, to Indian dance and hip hop. Unlike any other seaside towns that we visited, Bournemouth felt like a destination. It was a place where people wanted to be and because of this, its pockets of deprivation were more typical of urban centres at large. Although Bournemouth might seem like a model for other seaside towns

to follow, its proximity to London, university, and industry, make it a more self-sustaining economy, therefore significantly advantaged over the more geographically isolated destinations like Clacton, Torquay and Weston Super Mare. Overall, while Bournemouth was a standout among the other destinations, each town was anomalous in some way and helped paint a picture of greater diversity of experience among inhabitants in seaside towns.

The writing and drawing speak to different perspectives of shared experiences. On the page together, they enable a double text of sorts. For one, the images compliment the text and occasionally illustrate directly reported experiences. In this case the dynamic between text and image is correlative and the drawing amplifies the content of the writing. Other times, the drawings orient the viewer to the artists vision which, although sharing the local focus of the writing, is outside of the content. In these cases, the drawing can be seen as another text that offers a second vision. Inevitably this creates a desire by the reader/viewer to make connections between the written word and the drawings. This breaks the drawings out of a purely illustrative function and can benefit a 'reading' of the drawing as an artist's sole experience. In these cases which are often true in this book/project, the drawings offer a valuable parallel experience to the text and as a total experience, enable the reader/viewer to add to the rich contextualisation in the text a ground level experience of the destination. The drawing can be individually seen as both a recorded experience and, as Berger has noted, the 'simultaneity of a multitude of moments.' (here he is referencing the process of drawing as well as the experience of the subject) (Berger, 2008, p.71) There is a balance that I am striking in the drawing between stylistic and satirical indulgence and direct reporting from what I have seen. In almost all cases, the seen and drawn are both real and observed subjects and emblematic characters and places. They are chosen to become subjects for drawing because they say something about the place and human geography. While this skews a total understanding of place by virtue of highlighting certain subjects, they are not fanciful imaginings and direct the viewer to a reality often overlooked. A key and sustaining interest in my reportage drawing has been the poetic and melancholy in everyday people who are often on the fringes of society. In seaside towns in par-

ticular, these people tend to be more numerous, and the challenge has been to not be exploitative and rather anchor the drawings in the seen. In a self-managing way, the truth, validity and integrity of the images comes from a conscious fidelity to the observed. This has enabled a kind of confidence in the images and a security that although the images are exploring distinct subjects, they are based on real people in real contexts. I also believe that drawings are never singular in their meaning. They are containers of a range of experiences in the making of the drawing and the engagement with the subject. As such, the reading of the images is always more expansive and unfixed. Political satirist and avid street sketcher George Grosz noted about drawing 'maybe my pictures outwardly seem like baskets; that there is, naturally, something inside those baskets is something else again. I believe drawing may have originated in man's inborn sense of braiding and weaving.' (Grosz, 1998, p.34)

The implications for reportage drawing in a large-scale project such as this are significant. For one, this extended work exhibits how both drawing singularly and as a collective can create an impression of place. That sense of place is clearly polluted by not only the perspective of the artist but by his or her creative, aesthetic and thematic interests. It is still valuable to see drawing functioning as an alternative to photography and encouraging a broader, less fixed and subjective sense of people and places. A project such as this also takes the practice of reportage out of online dissemination and formalises it in the format of a book. Because the practice of reportage drawing has largely lost its prominence in print media, projects such as this assert the power and value of drawing as a vehicle for meditating on the textures of human experience. While the contemporary practice of reportage drawing is expansive and popular (see urban sketchers movement), its visibility in mainstream media does not reflect this and besides courtroom sketch artists, we rarely see and engage with drawing as mediated vision. A notable contemporary example of reportage in book form is Victoria Lomasko's *Other Russias*. She called her own work 'graphic reportage' noting an affinity to graphic novels but preferring a singular approach to subjects which is more in the tradition of reportage drawing. She eloquently states her interest in reportage saying 'I felt the need to complete my draw-

ings on the spot, to serve as a conductor for the energy generated by events as they happened. I refused to make drawings from photos and videos.' She further says, 'what I was trying to do, above all, was to break through to a more direct grasp and reflection of the reality around me.' (Lomasko & Campbell, 2017, p.8) This last point is particularly relevant to the wider question 'why reportage drawing.' It is this direct engagement with experience and witnessing that is so critical. The drawings accumulate interest and complexity when we know they are real people and equally, in the construction of the drawing, we see vision being wrestled into coherence. The vision and the struggle is a defiantly human one and a critical understanding for the potential of reportage drawing as a media form.

In this work, as Ben Shahn noted 'form is formulation... form is as varied as the accidental meetings of nature. Form in art is as varied as idea itself.' (Shahn, 1957, p.53) For Shahn, form is content, and content is form and in *Coast of Teeth*, the reportage drawing provides another text from which to see and understand the realities on the ground through the topographies of drawn lines. People and places inhabit each other, and neglect is not just a concept, it becomes physical and material in drawing. As Yi-Fu Tuan notes, 'when we look outward we look at the present or future; when we look inward (that is, introspect) we are likely to reminisce the past.' (Tuan, 1977, p.126) A reportage drawing contains both of these properties and speaks to a lived/observed moment and an incapsulated past, one that feels more universal than say the photograph, stretching beyond conventional time towards a cataloguing of things seen and experienced. Gombrich called this the artist's schema or developing strategy to rendering form. The mystery lies in what the artist is ultimately capturing and how closely it approximates reality. Gombrich noted, 'these artists went out into nature to look for material for a picture and their artistic wisdom led them to organise the elements of the landscape into works of art of marvellous complexity that bear as much relationship to a surveyor's record as a poem bears to a police report.' (Gombrich, 1972, p.66)

The subject of reportage drawing is firstly always about drawing. It is unavoidable. The qualities of the drawing assert themselves because they are the code that we must break to understand the image. Because reportage drawings, in particular, are done in-situ and quickly, they look and feel like sketches and therefore their very formation reflects the immediacy of vision. This is not always true as drawings are done with residual memory and not always from direct observation. However, the spirit of the drawing reflects something observed. The drawing is then, like Shahn notes above, a rendered idea, a construction. Reportage drawing happens in moments but it reflects the merger of thought, action and feeling. Ernst Kris notes about inspiration 'inspiration designates, as we said, the sudden arising of visions or thoughts, and in this sense, inspiration may be called almost the everyday version of the creative process...a flash of thought.' (Kris, 1964, p.296) The flash of thought is often the impetuous for getting out the graphite stick and doing a drawing. It reflects something in the person, place or thing that is compelling and possibly symbolic. A passing thought or 'flash' becomes an immediate scrawl with purpose. This is highly subjective and may pollute drawings with overt subjectivity. However, the drawings are responsive to something seen. They would not exist if they were not 'inspired' by the real. They are designed to counter 'over-thinking' and relish the battle to wrestle vision into form. Through this immediacy, reportage artists attempt to purge their drawings of artifice. The sketch does not hide its formation, it embraces the trace of creation.

In text and image, *Coast of Teeth* is aiming to do something different or at least something that hasn't been done in sometime. The notable collaborations between writer and artist such as those between Hunter S. Thompson and Ralph Steadman revealed that text and image can have a 'charging' effect on one another. Neither merely complement the other, they propel shared textures of experience. This is what we intend although a much soberer effort. Baudrillard is a writer who for me, manages to capture in writing what the image often does when seen as a text. In particular, his exploration of America (a place I know well) is evocative like a Basquiat painting, letting ideas merge with effortless ease, seemingly chaotic but urgent and dead eyed. In his wide-ranging meditation on Amer-

ica called *America*, he generates a slogan for the pacified masses as 'you can't have your money and spend it too! You can't have your cake and eat it too! You can't eat your wife and fuck it too! You can't live and have your living too!' (Baudrillard, 1988, p.111) All drawings function as provocations. They proclaim to be something of 'reality', but they are just dirt marks and scrawls. When assembled in the mind, they, like a piece of poetry, cobble the realms of the real and imagined making something new. Something that approximates not life, but the experience of life. Something the psychogeographers perhaps desired. Michael Taussig writes of the struggle to capture essential impressions and how they get dogged by re-visitation. He notes, 'what happens when notes are "written up" is that what I call "afterthoughts" kick in. By afterthoughts I mean secondary elaborations that arise on top of the original notes, photographs, and drawings. Through stops, starts, and sudden swerves, the original is pulled into a wider and wilder landscape.' (Taussig, 2015, p.76) Taussig sees the inevitability of this but laments this loss. Reportage drawings avoid this revision and often retain the momentary insights that are so often lost in the construction of writing. Still, this desire to wrestle the observed and felt in the drawing is ever present and many contemporary reportage artists strive for the quickest, most effective and most crystallising method for relaying vision and experience in the quick marks of the pencil.

Drawing allows us a human lens from which to see. Drawings which capture the experience of seeing and witnessing. A drawing is an empathetic dialogue with the viewer. It invites participation and re-creation. In these drawings we can easily understand the singular vision, but they work best as a collection. A psychic portrait of a locale. They are rooted in observation, but they are deliberate constructions, made at the point when seeing becomes looking and looking becomes feeling.

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Jaywick, Essex 'Happy Club', Louis Netter



Clacton-on-Sea, 'Gameshow', Louis Netter



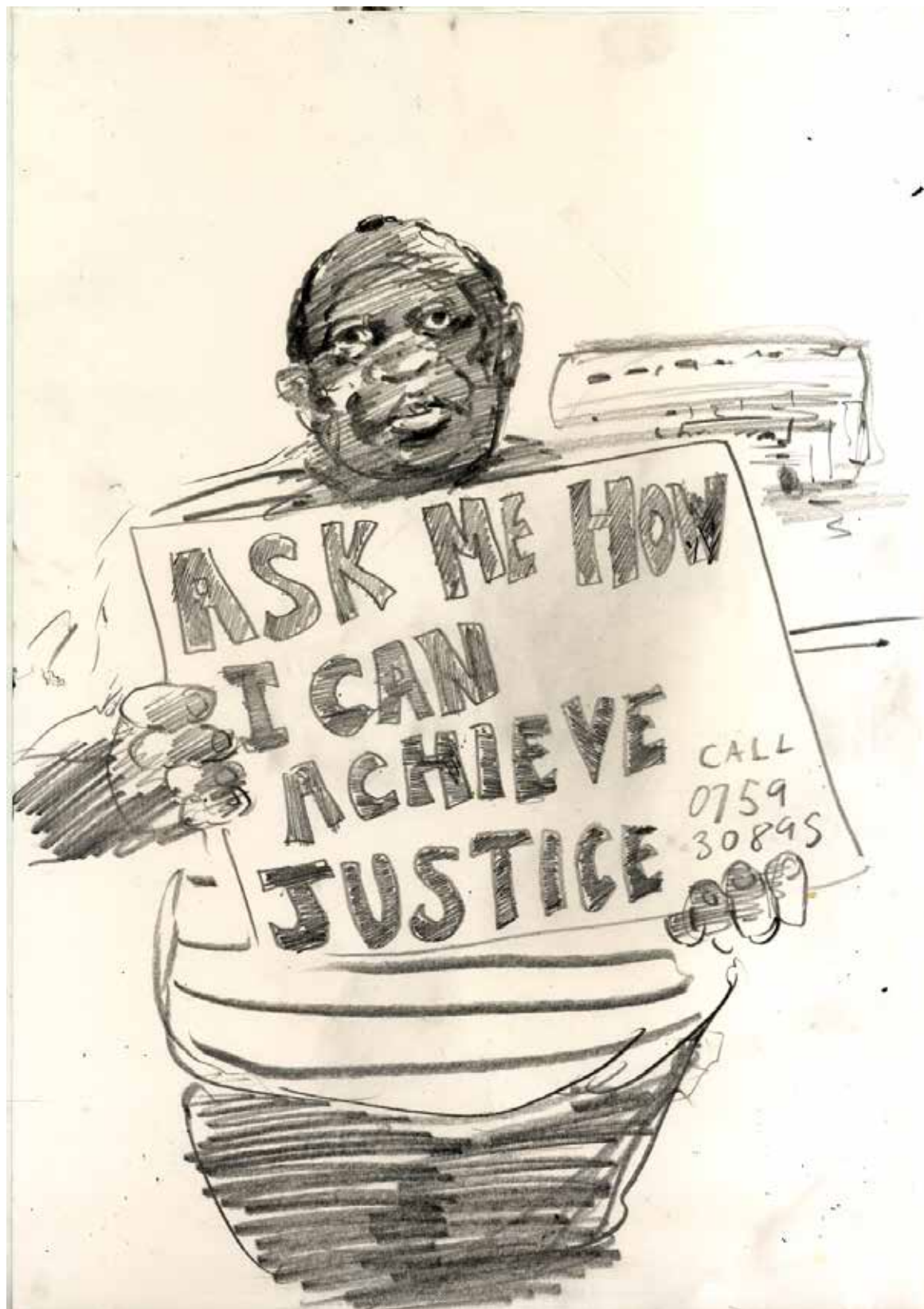
Bournemouth 'Inflatable Swan', Louis Netter



Bournemouth, 'Ice cream and snacks', Louis Netter



Clacton-on-Sea, 'Drinking on the lawn', Louis Netter



Bournemouth, 'Call for justice', Louis Netter



Torquay, 'Mediterranean vistas', Louis Netter



Jaywick, Essex, 'Desperation landscape', Louis Netter



Bournemouth, 'Beach huts', Louis Netter



Clacton-on-Sea, 'Older couple', Louis Netter

