

## Flags Works and Grease Works

### THE FLAGS DRAWINGS AND GREASE WORKS

#### (1) The Flags Drawings

The Flags Drawings were made in 1990. At that time the union between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom was under serious attack from a number of dissident Irish Republican groups such as the IRA, the aim of which groups was the achievement of a united Ireland. But also in 1990 a less violent political confrontation was starting to emerge in Scotland in the form of what is now called the Scottish National Party (SNP). Thus, at that time when I made the Flags Drawings, I had a suspicion that the established post WW2 British identity was showing clear signs of strain; both in Scotland and more especially in the case of a British apartheid mini-state in Northern Ireland. This latter was undergoing sustained violent assault not only in Northern Ireland itself but throughout the British mainland.

A flag is, in one fairly obvious sense, an aesthetic statement of a nationalist or group aspiration. The graphic resources I used in the Flags Drawings, I suppose in an equally obvious sense, is an attempt to represent the historical/political strain that I perceived the idea of a comfortable (and comforting) British identity was coming under. In 1990 Irish Catholicism and its historical reflex had been exhibiting a dissenting and frequently violent set of actions for three centuries. But the Scottish form of dissent in 1990 from post WW2 British parliamentary rule also started to publicly emerge as an explicit alternative to the accepted post-1945 relation between England and Scotland. It was this latter political form of dissent as well as the more violent Irish Republican form that informed my hunch that the supposed settled form of British identity was being exposed to a new set of pressures.

Since 2016 and the Brexit vote for Britain to leave the EU, then the Flags Drawings have accrued a new kind of foreground. With hindsight these drawings have acquired a kind of prescience. The Brexit vote has not only exacerbated relations in the British union, both Northern Ireland and Scotland had majorities in favour of staying in the EU, but the near sixty million English constituency has been ruptured by the majority vote to leave the EU. Not least the Irish northern border with Northern Ireland has emerged as one of the most intractable factors in the ongoing and tortuous negotiations within Britain's attempt to gain an agreeable to both sides withdrawal from the EU. So against this European piece of political theatre the Flags Drawings, for better or worse, find themselves hauled into and embedded in a new aesthetic and political setting. The change of colours and insertion of symbols into the motif of the Union flag (the Union Jack) were my attempt to visually represent my hunch that British identity was undergoing a noticeable revision. In 1990 I had no intuition or perception that Britain might leave the EU and, in this sense, the Flags Drawings have, so to write, taken on a kind of "cognitive" life of their own.. But back there in 1990, I did have some suspicion that the triumphalist and alleged contented surface of post-WW2 British identity was hiding a panoply of discontents and upcoming shifts.

#### (2) The Grease Works

There are a lot of unrealised Grease Works, they remain as drawings made in the late eighties. Among the realised works are a number of sculptures in the form of the Union Jack. They are made up of troughs filled with grease (one, for example, is in the collection of MUMOK in Vienna). One reason that I used

grease was as a kind of metaphor for slippage, not least a slippage of identity, both nationalist and personal. In the context of the above text on the Flags Drawings the slippage of British national identity is perhaps a fairly obvious one. But the second strand of the idea of the Grease Works is that of personal identity, more particularly, the identity of the artist as maker of the work. The grease as software set in troughs of wood and alongside other hard material surfaces (the hardware) is an attempt to make work that continues to make and remake itself once it is out of the artist's working environment. This latter point I took to be not only a sign of the intrusion of the digital into the art work but also a sign of its challenge to the identity of the idea of the artist.

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