

Research Field Station #3
The Etiquette of the Arms Trade



by Jill Gibbon

**"Empires collapse. Gang leaders
Are strutting about like statesmen.
The peoples
Can no longer be seen under all
those armaments."**

Bertolt Brechtⁱ

**"The world is over-armed
and peace is under-funded ...
More weapons are being
produced. They are flooding
markets around the world.
They are destabilizing societies.
They feed the flames of civil
wars and terror."**

Ban Ki-moonⁱⁱ



The world is awash with weapons. The wars of the twentieth century have skewed manufacturing in the US, Russia, France, Germany, China, and the UK towards military production. At the end of the Cold War there was a brief opportunity to diversify into other areas; instead arms companies merged into multinationals and started selling to almost anyone who would buy. Arms fairs were established in the 1990s to provide international venues for these deals.

The world's largest arms fair DSEI (the Defence Security Exhibition International) takes place every two years in London. There are similar fairs in other cities – Eurosatory in Paris, IDEX in Abu Dhabi, and ADEX in Seoul. Here, a bomb 'steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent.'ⁱⁱⁱ Missiles glint under spotlights. Ammunition shells are arranged in ascending order. Mannequins show off the latest batons, pepper gel, and tear gas. Tanks and helicopters are open for viewing. And between the jets and bombs, tables are laid with white cloths, beer, and pretzels, while hostesses hover with trays of champagne.

Buyers include repressive regimes, unstable states, and countries involved in aggressive wars. Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, and Saudi Arabia are regular guests at DSEI.^{iv} The Middle East has become a key focus for arms sales since the repression of pro-democracy movements, and subsequent civil wars in the region. Bahrain used UK-made tear gas and armoured vehicles to suppress protests in 2011, and Saudi Arabia is currently using UK and US-made bombs in Yemen where a humanitarian crisis is unfolding with the destruction of homes, hospitals and infrastructure.^v

Sometimes, clients become opponents. The UK and US sold military equipment to Saddam Hussein a decade before the Gulf War, and to President Gaddafi before intervening against him in the Libyan civil war.^{vi} When regimes topple, their weapons fall into the hands of non-state groups. 'Islamic State' is using machine guns, anti-tank missiles, mortars, and artillery that the UK, US and other producers sold to Iraq.^{vii} This trade is not illicit, but actively promoted by the UK and US governments. How is it validated?

This exhibition explores the etiquette of the arms trade through drawings and artifacts from DSEI, Eurosatory and IDEX.

The performance

“All satire and irony lead back to naivety.”^{viii}

Hugo Ball

I visit arms fairs by dressing up as an arms trader with a suit, heels, paste pearls, and a sham business. The security guards have seen through my cover twice, but I have changed my name, invented a new company, and visited again.

In *Museum Highlights* (1989) the artist Andrea Fraser performs as a museum docent (gallery guide) by adopting the fictional name of Jane Castleton, wearing the institutional uniform, and taking unsuspecting visitors on a mock tour of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Using phrases and quotes from catalogues, art reviews, and other sources she described architectural details of the gallery such as the toilet, the fire extinguisher, the cloak room, and light fittings, to draw attention to the institutional context that confers status and value on art.^{ix}

“The docent played by Fraser in her gallery talks, Jane Castleton, is as much a site of institutional discourse as a gallery wall, a display case, or a public relations pamphlet: each produces the spectator’s expectations, and experience of, the museum.”^x

Museum Highlights has become a key example of ‘institutional critique,’ work that consciously chooses to politically engage with the art institution.

The Etiquette of the Arms Trade shifts the critique from the art world to the military industrial complex.

My parody is intended to draw attention to arms trading as a ‘dramatized public life performance’^{xi}, highlighting the rituals of dress, language, and deportment that give the industry a civilised veneer. The arms multinational, BAE Systems, claims that what matters is not the products it makes, or where they are sold, but how this is done.

“Our culture focuses not on what we do, but how we do it. If we focus on the how, the future that we wish to attain will follow. We have a culture of total performance.”^{xii}

The paste pearls provide a metaphor for a wider performance of respectability in the arms industry. Here, to an extent, everyone is acting a part.



Manners

“Manners are of more importance than laws. Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in.”^{xiii}

Edmund Burke

DSEI, IDEX and Eurosatory are international events with clients and exhibitors from over sixty countries.^{xiv} Yet the guests share the language and manners of global capitalism. Conversation is of deals and purchases, there are handshakes, backslaps, bonhomie, and corporate hospitality. Clients roam the trade halls with “the distracted observation and the dreamlike reverie that is characteristic of the flaneur.”^{xv} An arms fair is, after all, a kind of shopping arcade. A string quartet plays Handel alongside a tank, while a new range of ammunition is promoted with pinot noir and sauvignon blanc.

Manners are sensuous, enacted rather than reasoned. Perhaps, for this reason, they have been largely overlooked by social science research into war and the arms trade. As Terry Eagleton puts it,

“How can reason, that most immaterial of faculties grasp the grossly sensuous?”^{xvi}

Here, art can perhaps contribute.

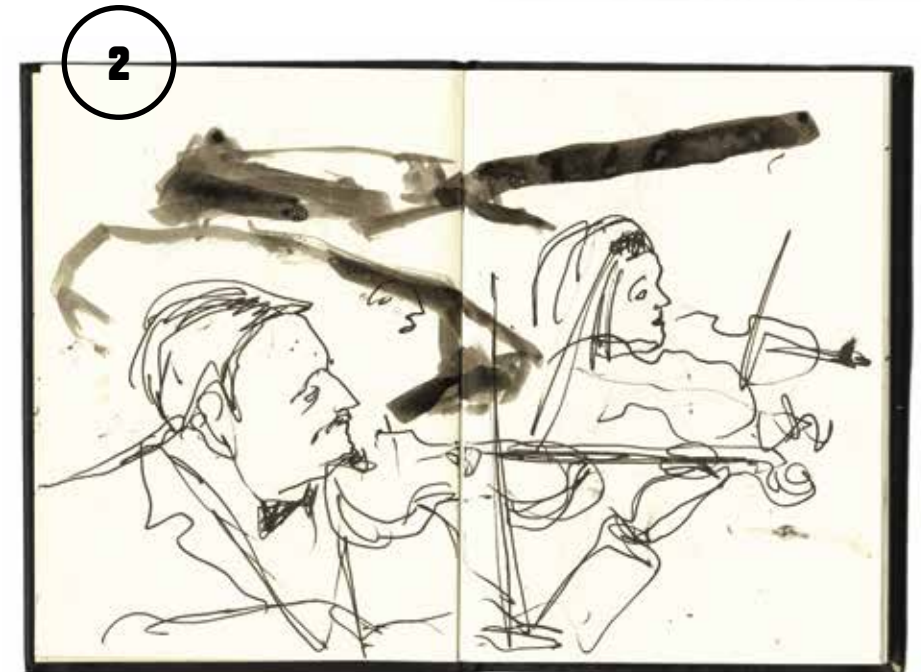
I research the etiquette of the arms trade by drawing and taking part in it. When I visit an arms fair I browse the catalogues, gaze at weapons, nod, smile, and keep walking. I adopt an expression that implies that everything I see is quite normal. The performance informs the drawing. Drawing is a physical process. Berger says,

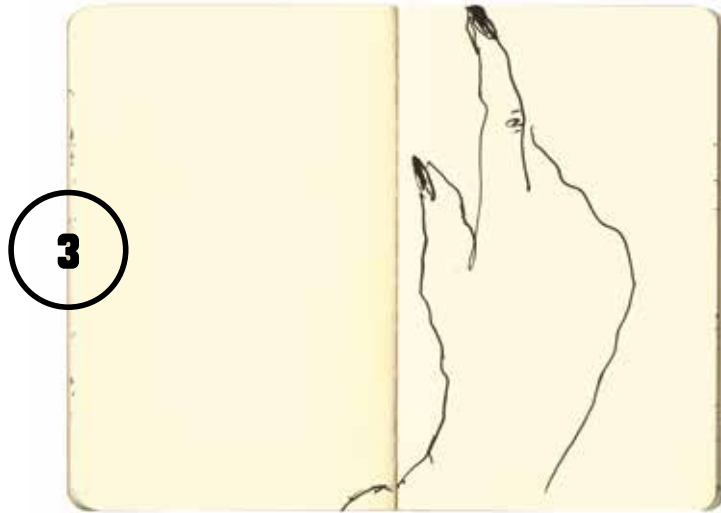
“When I’m drawing, and here drawing is very different from writing or reasoning – I have the impression at certain moments of participating in something like a visceral function.”^{xvii}

When we draw an expression, often we mimic it. When we draw a pose, we adopt a similar stance. So, as well as drawing from observation, the images are influenced by my attempts to pass myself off as an arms trader.

It is a risky strategy. Inevitably, I become part of the polite veneer. However, we are all implicated in the arms trade to an extent through the taxes, pension schemes and subsidies that prop up the industry. There is no ‘us’ and ‘them’. And, perhaps it is possible to disrupt the veneer while taking part in it.

A veneer offers an illusion of authenticity and normality, covering something that is not meant to be seen. It is two-dimensional but pretends to be three-dimensional. Like tricks of perspective, the illusion only works if a viewer looks beyond the technique. To draw attention to the fabric of a veneer is to undermine its pretence, to reveal its superficiality.





Gestus

A finger presents a missile as a beautiful object to behold. A rep stands, hands on hips, open for business. Another swings out an arm to show the features of a tank shell. Each movement speaks of sales and civility.

Brecht used the Latin word *gestus* to describe a pose or attitude that expresses a social role, condition, or position.^{xviii} Walter Benjamin argued that Brecht's epic theatre made social conditions seem strange by freezing these gestures and thereby interrupting their function. He summarized this approach as

"making gestures quotable"^{xix}.

Perhaps it is possible to quote gestures by drawing them.

Drawing is often used to convey gestures in performance art, however this work usually derives from a formalist idea of performance. MOMA held an exhibition *'Performance into Drawing'* in 2007 including action paintings by Jackson Pollock, body prints by David Hammons, and handprints by Gabriel Orozco. The press release explained that the exhibition explored the ways that drawing has been used "to map and prepare actions, record actions, and as an action in itself"^{xx}. The repetition of the word 'action', and non-representational emphasis of the work implies an idea of performance as a raw physical act. This is also evident in 'drawing-performance' artist, Ram Socha's description of gesture:

"Mark making in drawing performance is often a result of powerful physical gesture and body movement that connects elements of line, movement, space and time."^{xxi}

The political and social are notably absent from Socha's list of elements of drawing-performance.

The Etiquette of the Arms Trade shares the idea that drawing is an effective way to map and record gestures, but replaces the formalist sense of gesture as 'action' with the Brechtian idea of *gestus* as a socially constructed stance or attitude.

Dress

“They are impeccably dressed and their tailoring is reassuring, like the silhouette of high-security delivery vans. Armor Mobile Security.”

John Berger ^{xxii}

A sign at the entrance to DSEI asks guests to wear formal dress. The halls are filled with pinstriped suits, white shirts, and neat ties. There are also thobes and keffiyehs, and delegations in military dress. Shoes are oxfords, or brogues. Women wear fitted jackets, pencil skirts, and heels. Some hostesses seem to be exempt from the formal dress code but they are employed to be part of the displays. They stand next to tanks, missiles, and tear gas wearing outfits and adopting poses that signify objectification, as signs of commodification, indicating how the weapons are to be viewed.

How to draw this? There is a long tradition of drawing in situ in war zones - Muirhead Bone in the Western Front in WW1, Linda Kitson in the Falklands War in 1982, Arabella Dorman in Basra in the Iraq War in 2006, and George Butler in Azaz, Syria in 2012. This work tends to use academic, observational methods - figures are drawn according to renaissance conventions, perspective is stable, outlines carefully delineated. The implication is that a faithful transcription of surfaces conveys some sort of truth. But what if appearances deceive?

The Dada artist, George Grosz addressed this problem documenting Berlin between the wars. Grosz argued that academic drawing was unable to convey the corruption of the Weimar Republic, so he developed a different approach. Instead of copying ‘old masters’, the academic method of learning to draw, he said he

“copied folkloric drawings in urinals, because these seemed to me to be the most concise expression of strong feelings.” ^{xxiii}

Grosz drew from observation, but interpreted what he saw with expressive lines, exaggeration, and juxtaposition.

I have drawn the rep so he resembles a used car salesman. He leans back, hands on hips, smoking, ready to do a deal. The angles of his arms are exaggerated so they mirror the angles of the stealth bomber he is selling. However, the details of his stance - the arch of the back and weight of his legs are observed from life, to assert,

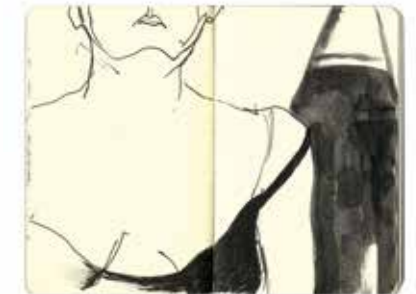
“I saw it”^{xxiv}.

Some drawings parody academic conventions – an uplifted head reminiscent of a renaissance angel to imply the way ‘high culture’ is used to validate arms sales. Sometimes, it is sufficient to crop an image to imply the violence implicit in the trade.

Linda Kitson was criticized for exhibiting the raw drawings she made in the Falklands, instead of developing them into paintings. According to Laura Brandon,

“The result of her commission in the form of sketches on paper seemed slight for a major campaign that had resulted in a significant loss of life.”^{xxv}

Oil and canvas, the traditional medium of fine art, transforms war into ‘high culture’. Like Kitson, I show sketchbooks and notebooks. The misdrawn lines, smudges, and lines bleeding through from the previous page present the project as a process, rather than a set of revered cultural artefacts.



Gifts

Many stalls offer corporate gifts as a variation on a business card. There are sweets, pens, and stress-balls in the shape of bombs, tanks, and grenades. A manufacturer of gas masks gives away condoms with the slogan 'the ultimate protection'.

The bomb shaped stress-ball sums up the status of a weapon in an arms fair. Marx suggested that,

"when commodities are exchanged, their exchange value manifests as something totally independent of their use value".^{xxvi}

Here, a bomb is presented as a soft, malleable object of exchange.



Mute communication

I may be wearing a suit, but I know I am a fake. On the first day of an arms fair, I am gripped by fear. Drawing while nauseous, I realize I am not alone; there is often a disjuncture between the respectable dress around me, and the uneasy figures within. There are hunched shoulders, contorted expressions, tense movements. As Judith Butler suggests,

“the body carries its own signs, its own signifiers in a way that remains largely unconscious”.^{xxvii}

The performance of respectability is inevitably incomplete. Expressions of despair, rage, and fear break through the veneer. Such feelings are not spoken. They cannot be - they fall outside permitted discourse. But they are conveyed, nevertheless, in a head in the hands, a groan, a snarl or snort, another drink. Lyotard describes such expressions as mute communication:

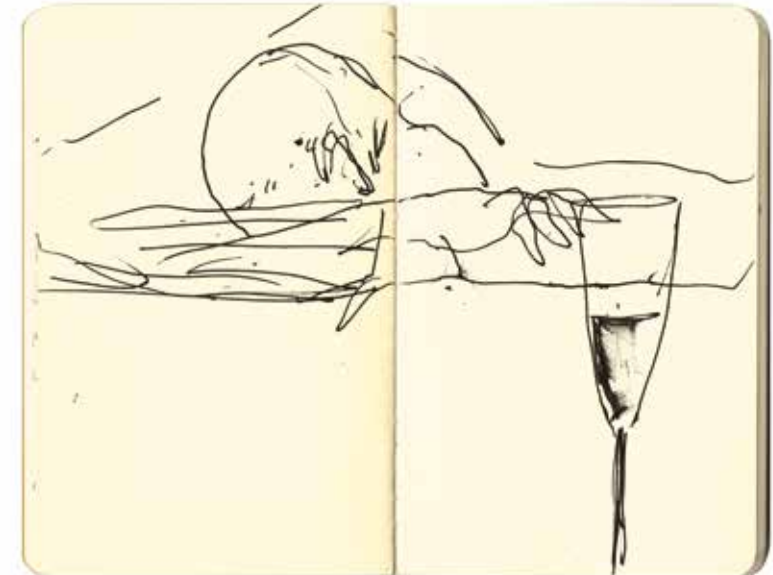
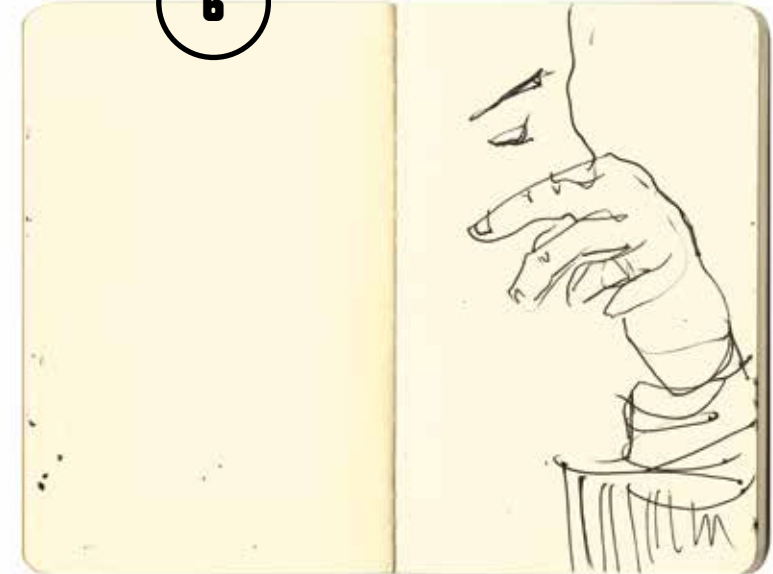
“This mute communication is made up of non-discrete inspirations and expirations of air: growlings, pantings, sighs. It spreads over the face and it spreads through the whole body”.^{xxviii}

Queuing to get in to DSEI, I overheard an arms trader say,

“You can’t do deals in this business unless you are drunk”.



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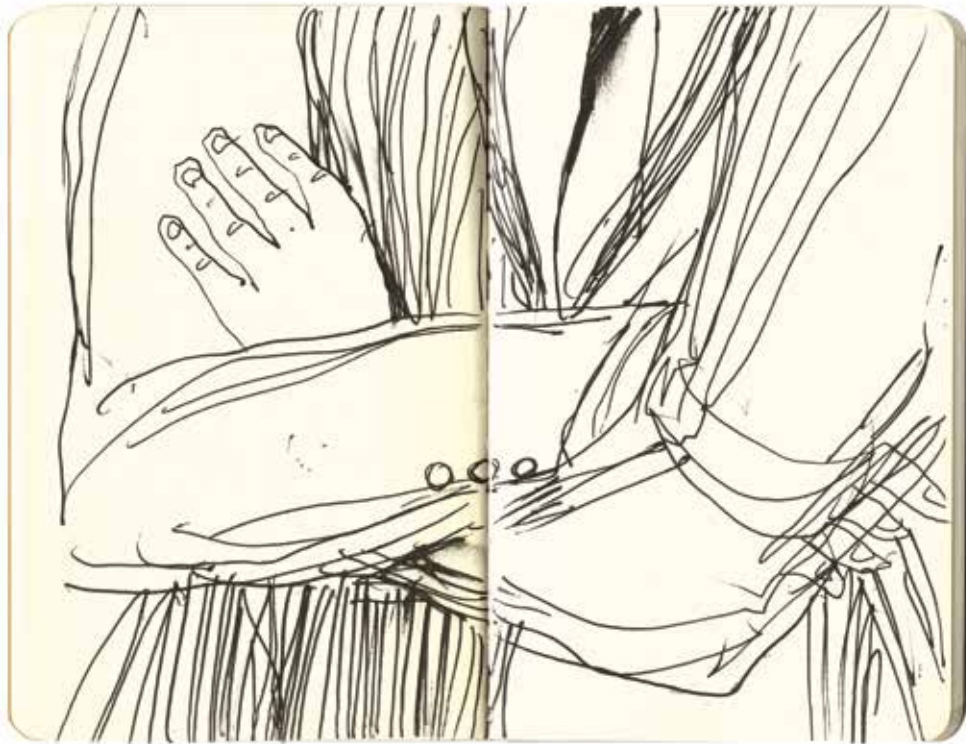


An uneasy gaze

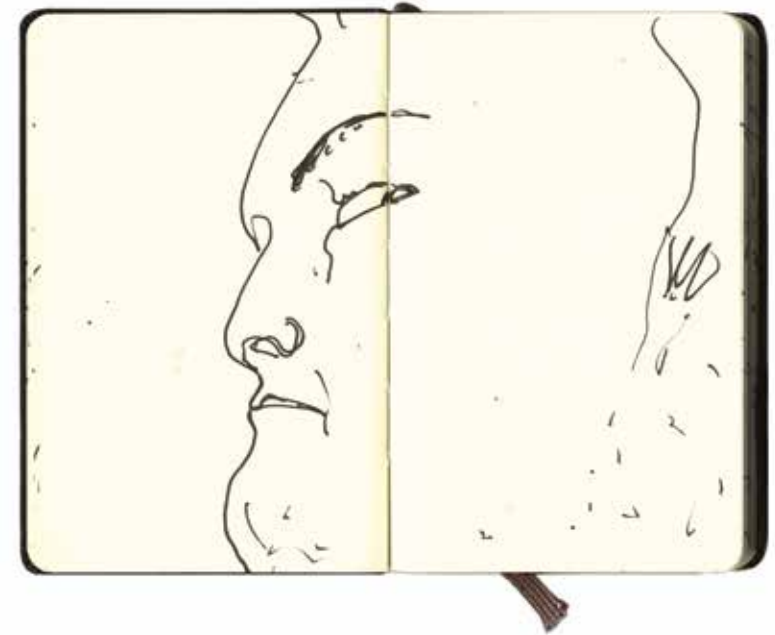
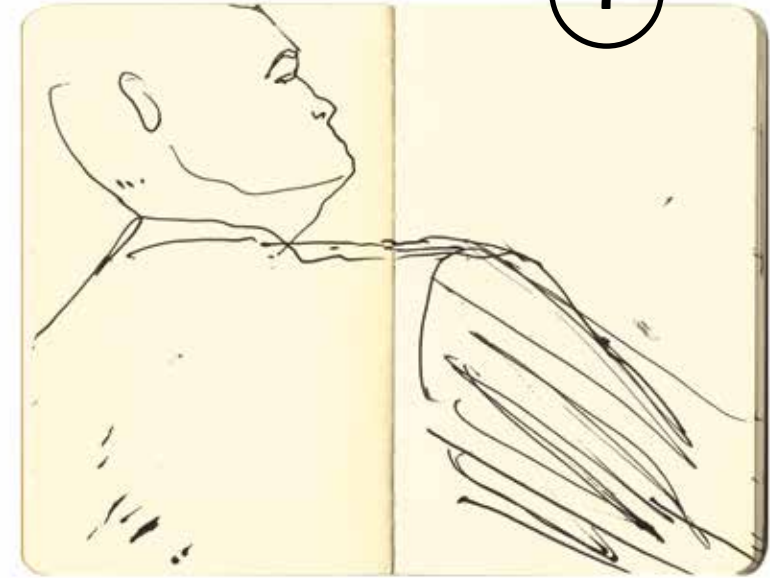
**"I'm no longer observing them;
they are observing me."**

John Berger^{xxix}

There is a particular hierarchy of vision in an arms fair. Arms traders, usually male, gaze at weapons and hostesses. They do not look for long at each other. There is also the constant surveillance of the crowd by cameras and security guards. Drawing requires an oddly intense stare that does not fit within this regime. Before long, a security guard notices, and approaches.



7



An arms fair is a civilized event. Here, there is no war or conflict, only stalls offering 'defence' and hospitality. A bomb is a product, a tyrant a client. Guns are lined up like a fairground game to aim at imaginary targets. Soldiers are mannequins with calm, classical faces. Explosions take place on video screens, caught at that moment when earth, light, and air somersault, repeated in an endless loop.

The impact of such explosions on lives and communities is not shown or spoken. It cannot be. The language of pain and loss does not exist in a world where exchanges are always polite, and weapons forever new. The testimonies of the people who have been bombed are too 'inopportune, disquieting and unseemly'^{xxx} for this context.

"There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

Walter Benjamin^{xxxi}

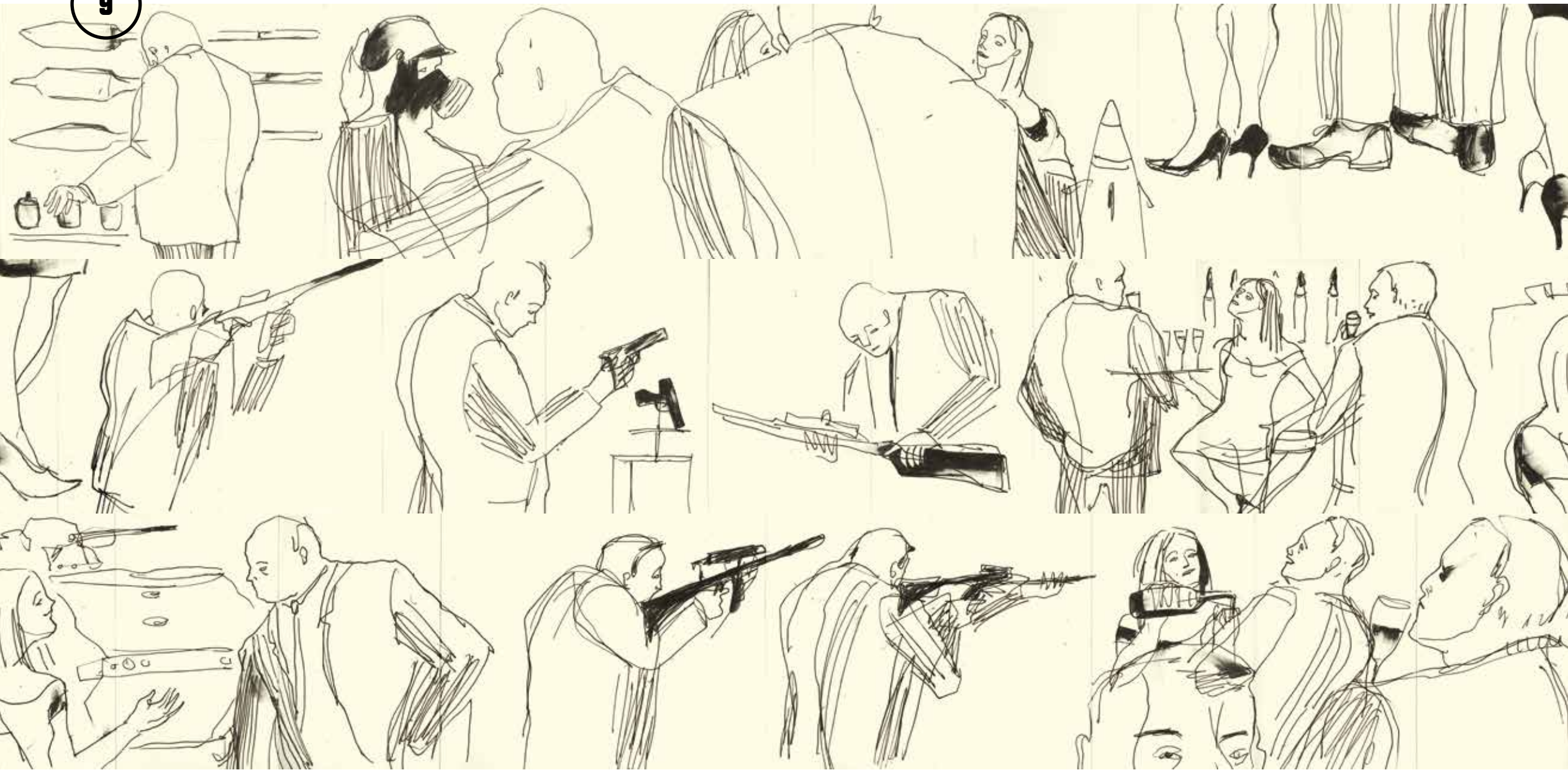
*Dr Jill Gibbon has been awarded an early career fellowship from the Independent Social Research Foundation and will be exhibiting *The Etiquette of the Arms Trade* at Bradford Peace Museum in 2018.*



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End notes

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