

Illustration as an announcement of a world

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Abstract

Illustration is often casually assumed to be a representational practice, where ‘something out there’ is represented, i.e. shown again, in visual form. The prefix ‘re-’ in ‘representation’ suggests that something exists prior to its pictorial rendering. With reference to a project I worked on as an illustrator with a group of older feminists who had come together to record their memories of their involvement in the Women’s Liberation Movement, I use this article to propose an alternative possibility for illustration. Rather than considering illustration as representational, I submit that illustration in the process of its creation can produce the reality it refers to. It can therefore be understood as a form of performative knowledge production. In this piece I draw on my project with the feminist group and interweave this with Jean-Luc Nancy’s work on community, Rosalind Krauss’s reflections on indexicality and Jacques Derrida’s essay on the nature of declarations.

Three years after I first started working with a group of older women who had come together to write about their involvement in the Women’s Liberation Movement, I find myself chatting on the phone to Gail Chester, one of the group’s members. In 2021 I had worked with this group in my role as illustrator, facilitator and graphic designer to help them publish some of their memories of feminist activism in a book entitled *Write Women into History*. Part of my role had been to facilitate the co-design of the cover (Figure 1), for which I ran an illustration workshop with the group and incorporated their outputs into the design.

On the phone Chester tells me that to persuade a bookshop to stock the book she usually emails a picture of the cover. Because of ‘the high production values’ this usually does the trick, she says with a chuckle, humorously modulating her voice for this use of professionalized language in what is otherwise a more casual conversation.

It is such a pleasure to hear that *Write Women into History* is still actively circulating amongst numerous networks and is about to be reprinted yet again in preparation for two

forthcoming events at local libraries. It is even more thrilling to hear that the cover design is playing an active role in its dissemination. The cover contains portraits of and by the fourteen women who were part of the writing group, alongside placards with slogans reminiscent of the marches and actions the women took part in during the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

Working on this cover with the group was a significant moment in my research, as it presented me with an opportunity to test out a dawning realization that had struck me not long prior to undertaking this work: that illustration does not need to be considered a representational practice, even when the work is figurative and refers to scenarios that exist in the world. Around the time I was working on the cover I had started thinking that there might be other, possibly more productive understandings of the nature of illustrative images.

Illustration is often casually assumed to be representational, where ‘something out there’ is represented, i.e. shown again, in visual form. This is particularly the case with the kind of illustration that is broadly documentary in nature – images that in some way refer to the ‘real’ or objective world. The ‘re-’ in ‘representation’ suggests that something exists prior to and independently of its pictorial rendering. In his essay ‘The Age of the World Picture’ the German philosopher Martin Heidegger highlights the presumptions that underpin a representationalist world view, where ‘the world is set out before oneself’ and where man [sic] becomes the masterful subject standing apart from the world he [sic] is endeavouring to know (Heidegger 1977: 132–33).

I found this distant stance, where one positions oneself apart from the world one is hoping to grasp, particularly unworkable when illustrating (with) community groups. Instead of illustration representing or reporting on a pre-existing reality, I gradually realized that illustration, in the process of its creation, can *produce* the reality it refers to. In this article I will therefore argue that it can be understood as a form of performative knowledge production. This is especially resonant when working at the nexus of illustration and community.

In my work I often collaborate with community groups on projects that articulate and visualize their joint concerns and perspectives. In these projects I support participants to translate their privately held knowledge, memories and experiences into a collaborative illustration. This does not result in a distilled, agreed synthesis of people’s individual private thoughts and mental images they had in mind prior to participating in a project, but in an altogether new picture that emerges through the interlocking articulations of many. The results thereby do not *re-present* anything that existed before the production of the work but announce a new reality that emerges in the very act of its creation.

In the sections that follow below, I will expand on these ideas. I draw on my experience of working with the feminist writing group to reflect on the intersection of illustration, community and performative knowledge production.

Singular – Plural: Illustration and community

The work of illustrators is generally not imagined as particularly communal by the general public. And indeed, this assumption is not necessarily wrong: numerous illustrators spend many hours working on their own. This solitary mode (both real and imagined) sits alongside the imperative (both real and imagined) for illustrators to propagate a ‘personal voice’ in their practice – a recognizable style that speaks of individual and identifiable origination. This focus on the singular, solitary illustrator as the main locus of generative creativity is further intensified in more recent celebrations of ‘authorial illustration’ practice – the idea (originating from within the field of illustration itself) that illustrators can and should (and must?) develop a body of work beyond the influence of commissioners or other partnerships.

What is not always talked about is how illustrators, even when they are working by themselves, are usually embedded in a network of plural relations with other people, such as clients, agents, collaborators, editors, graphic designers and anticipated audiences. Reflecting on these networks, US-American art historian Michele H. Bogart (building on the intellectual tradition of a ‘social art history’ as in Hauser 1951) suggests that we think of illustration as a ‘collective, negotiated enterprise’ and as ‘collectively generated material culture’ (Bogart 2018: n.pag.). For example, while a Coca-Cola ad by Haddon Sundblom from 1950 presents a visually unified image rendered in Sundblom’s characteristic style, Bogart rightly reminds us to look beyond the authorship of Sundblom in our interpretation of the piece. She insists that understanding the role of the art directors, ‘layout men’, copywriters, and clients alongside broader socio-historical circumstances is crucial. Similarly, UK-based illustration academics Rachel Gannon and Mireille Fauchon also highlight the social nature of illustration practice (2021: 16). This stands in contrast to the emphasis on singular authorship, or – when taken to an extreme – the figure of the romantic, solitary genius that underpins some of the assumptions the general public (and perhaps some of us too?) have about art, now transferred to authorial illustration.

I wholeheartedly welcome Bogart’s proposition to reconceptualize illustration as a ‘collective, negotiated enterprise’, and indeed this phrase describes the creation of the cover for *Write Women into History* marvellously. However, her argument is distinct from the one I make about the potential for illustration practice to attest to our multiplicity. Bogart is advocating for an understanding of how illustration comes into being under the influence of many even when the crafting itself is executed by a *single pair of hands*. In contrast, I have been working towards facilitating the creation of illustrated documents that directly incorporate the *work of many hands*, while also explicitly highlighting their heterogeneity by foregrounding the relational processes that led to their creation.

Write Women into History forms part of my research seeking to articulate possible intersections of illustration practice and philosophical reflections on the nature of community. Over the past few years, I have been asking myself how illustration can bring to light the concerns, interests and challenges of (a) community. Could illustration open up a

space for us to reflect on and perhaps even reveal the nature of community, or, to use another term, co-existence?

With these questions in mind, I turned to French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, widely recognized as a leading thinker on community. He takes up considerations regarding the nature of community at the most primary, ontological level. Community, he argues, is not an organic fusion of individuals predicated on a shared essence or identity. Instead of indissoluble fusion, it is our separation, the fact that we are torn apart, that makes community possible in the first place (1991: 12). He proposes to think of community as an *encounter* between individuals, where subjects are exposed to each other through their separation. It is precisely because of our separateness that individuals have the opportunity to reveal themselves to each other. This exposure allows them to communicate, to share their existence through a 'seizure of speech' (1997: 115). Community, in Nancy's philosophy, becomes a community of communication (1991: 25).

I hope that this woefully brief summary of what is in actual fact an overwhelmingly rich and extensive body of work on community makes that aspect of Nancy's thinking clear that is most relevant here: that community is non-essentialist; it exists in its *enaction*. Nancy describes it as a way of being and acting towards one another, especially in the pursuit of shared meaning. It is 'the infinite tying of sense from the one to the one' (1997: 113), 'the wandering labour of sense [making]' (1997: 115).

I found myself wondering how Nancy's ideas on the nature of community could map on to illustration. If community unfolds in its enaction, in its 'infinite tying up of sense from the one to the one', what are the adequate means for illustration to capture and reflect this process? Is illustration able to re-present this, or might representation be the wrong approach all together?

Instead of attempting to represent community, I decided to create a framework for community to articulate itself. If community exists in its enaction, could illustration provide an arena for this to unfold, an occasion for individuals to share their existence? With the feminist writing group, I planned a participatory workshop (detailed below) where I would invite the women to draw each other's portraits. During the second phase, I planned to encourage them to work on designs for the kinds of placards they might have taken to protest marches. The portraits were intended as a testament to the multiplicity of the groups' members, reflecting both the diversity of everybody's individual appearance, as well as the variability of each person's drawing style. The placard slogans would attest to a wealth of shared concerns held by the group in common.

I did not fully realize it at the time of planning, but as it happened the participatory workshop and the resulting illustrated cover artwork turned out to be a particularly resonant arena to consider questions regarding the intersection of illustration and community. First, the workshop itself became an enactment of community in the Nancean sense where individual subjects turned towards each other in an act of communal sense making. Then, because this communal sense making was being accomplished through the medium of illustration, and not via other forms of more ephemeral communication that

leave no material record (such as speech), the resulting output was able to carry forward traces of this process in the form of drawings created during the workshop. The event thereby worked as a moment of communal coming together as well as a production of its own documentation – traces of the enactment of community. (I discuss this point in greater detail in ‘Walking the Elephant’, Vormittag 2024.) Reflecting on the work with my head full of art historian Rosalind Krauss’s writing on ‘the index’ ([1985] 2002), I would eventually come to think of the presence of the original workshop drawings in the final cover artwork as a form of ‘indexical trace’, but more on this later!

Yes, there is a world and here it is! Illustration and performative knowledge

I have said that instead of attempting to represent community, I decided to create a framework for community to articulate itself. But I want to argue that this project goes beyond that. Here community *becomes* community in its act of articulation, in other words, illustration has the capacity to produce the reality it refers to. Once again it was Jean-Luc Nancy who first inspired me to think about images (and illustration) in a novel manner.

Picking up on some of the motifs he already established in his work on community, his writing on art and visual culture starts with the idea that contemporary experience of existence must contend with the ‘end of sense’ and the ‘end of the world’ (1997: 4–9). By that he means that there is no longer any unifying divine or teleological framework and/or order for our individual experiences (as would have been the case in more homogenous and cohesive societies). Rather than this spelling out a catastrophic collapse, a different kind of sense and world becomes possible in this fragmented scenario, namely, ‘world as praxis’. Practices of sense-making in the form of art, writing or philosophy become the basis of a new, pluralized ‘world-ing’ (Nancy [1997] cited in Roney 2013: 343).

Nancy links these creative, generative acts explicitly to images (2005). He is not interested in thinking of the image through symbolic structures or functionalist semiotics – interpretive theories that are often brought to bear on images. Instead, he views images performatively: in the act of their existence, they create the world they refer to. In his most resonant sentence on this topic, he writes: ‘A work of art “says” or “announces”’: yes, there is a world and here it is’ (Nancy [2005] cited in Janus 2016: 3). I read this to mean that he believes that the process of creating an artwork does not result in the re-presentation of a pre-existing world, but that it engages us in a process of world-forming. Put simply: worlds are made, not found.

The origin of the idea of performativity used here by Nancy in relation to images, is widely ascribed to British philosopher J.L. Austin’s notion of performative utterances. In a series of lectures delivered at Harvard University during the 1950s, Austin focused on specific types of speech acts that do not describe reality but create it (Austin 1962). One of his most famous examples is the kind of sentence spoken during marriage ceremonies – for instance, ‘I do [hereby] take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife’ (Austin 1962: 5).

These utterances are linguistic actions that make a difference in the world, a form of speech that – as if by magic – conjures the reality it refers to.

This linguistic conjuring capacity is undoubtedly exhilarating, and indeed, the idea of performative speech (or performativity more generally) has been enthusiastically taken up by many thinkers in a variety of disciplines and contexts (see Loxley 2007). I too was excited about performativity and more specifically the idea that an image could somehow make the world it referred to. I tried to think through the details. How might illustration be performative, I wondered? Can illustrations create new worlds, in the same way that Austin's performative utterances do? I was not sure how this might work, exactly. Austin is very much focused on language, and, as I read more of his work, I came to see that his 'performatives' often relate to existing conventions and social norms (such as marriage). And Nancy was not that much use to me on this occasion either: his writing is original, poetic, and evocative, but sometimes drifts into the esoteric and enigmatic (especially when one is confined to the English translation as I am). Besides, his work on the image is much sparser than his writing on community, and some of it has not been translated. For a while I deferred my quest for a more thorough understanding, and simply stayed with my conviction – somewhat vague in its formulation – that illustration could (somehow) act as a type of performative utterance.

It was not until much, much later, when working on the second version of this article in fact, that I came to fully understand the nature of performativity in the cover artwork for *Write Women into History*. I had been looking at it and thinking about it for a long time and was caught in a cloud of confusion. I knew that there was more going on than I had been able to articulate up to that point, and the reviewers had confirmed that something was not quite working in my piece. It was at this point that somebody I trust finally persuaded me to read Jacques Derrida. And just as Rosalind Krauss (whose work I incidentally also had picked up with some initial trepidation!) had helped me understand key aspects of my project, so did Derrida's work finally furnish me with the ideas I needed to finish this piece. It even transpired that my confusion was a necessary part of it, an 'undecidability [that] is required to produce the sought-after effect' (Derrida 1986: 9). Don't worry, I will explain all this in my reflection below. For now, I think, it is time for me to describe the work.

Write Women into History: Project description

The illustrated book cover for *Write Women into History* was created by the Hackney HOWLers Writing Group with my assistance over a period of several months during 2021 (Figures 2, 3). The writing group was comprised of fourteen older feminists predominantly based in the Hackney area of London, set up by members of HOWL (<https://howl-uk.org/>) – the History of Women's Liberation, a group of women involved in the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. The writing group had received a modest amount of funding from a local charity and had decided to use this money to organize a series of seven

sessions (held online, due to the pandemic), encouraging each other to write about their lives and to document their involvement with feminist activism. The charity specified that some of the funding should be used for activities that would support the women in producing visual material which could then be used as part of the production of a tangible output in the form of a booklet.

I was introduced to the writing group via the charity that was funding them. At the time I was in touch with a number of local organizations in search of a group who might be interested to work with me. When I heard about the women's writing group, I was keen to get involved and the charity suggested that I should join the group as an arts facilitator. They introduced me to them as an 'artist' who would help with the creation of visual elements for the proposed booklet and oversee the printing and production process. The booklet was originally intended as a little memento for group members, but the enthusiasm that arose during the sessions amplified the group's ambition for the output and they decided to raise additional funds themselves for a more substantial publication with a larger print run.

All seven meetings of the writing group, including the 'arts session' that I ran, were held online on Zoom. I attended all initial writing sessions as a (predominantly silent) listener and worked closely with the two editors, Gail Chester and Celia Burgess-Macey (who were also group members), to plan the 'arts session' which took place in February 2021. I then continued attending sessions and worked with the group to realize the publication. The arts session was planned as the fourth session, which meant that by the time I was planning it I had already had some opportunity to listen to people sharing their memories and the lively conversations that had unfolded in response to these. While members were using the supportive environment of the group to reflect on and record all manner of different recollections and experiences, I noted that one notable commonality was a spirit of protest and rebellion. All group members had strong memories of organizing and attending protest marches, so I decided to make this overlap the focus of the arts activities.

The session started with some brief warm-up exercises that helped the women familiarize themselves with the art materials that I had distributed in advance of the meeting (via post for those who lived further afield, and by cycling around my neighbourhood for those who lived close by). I then created digital break-out rooms, randomly placing two women in each 'room', where they were invited to draw each other's portraits, without concerning themselves too much with capturing a strong resemblance in their drawing. They each could see their paired counterpart on the screen of their computer at home, and they drew with the conventional (non-digital) tools I had supplied: pencil, pen, or ink on paper. I made various suggestions to mitigate inevitable anxieties about creating 'good' drawings, for example to draw with the non-dominant hand, or to create quick drawings during a very short time. After swapping roles (sitter/ illustrator) and going through this exercise a second time, everyone left their separate digital break-out rooms, and we reconvened in the general meeting space of the Zoom call. Some women held up

the drawings they had made to their camera, and it was much fun to see how differently everybody's work had come out.

During the final exercise everyone created a typographic design for a placard with a feminist slogan of their choice. I suggested they use sheets of Letraset dry-transfer lettering that I had distributed to them. Most women did so, reminiscing (or in one instance moaning!) about times when they had used this method to create publications as part of their feminist activism. Others preferred to render their slogans by hand (Figure 4).

After the session I collected the drawings and typographic designs in a Covid-secure way from participants' homes, once again either by post or more frequently by bicycle. To create the cover design, I then scanned, amended and combined the drawings and typographic slogans. One group member's placard leant itself naturally to become the title of the book: 'Write women into history'. I paired this with a strong and stern looking portrait by another woman. (I am not crediting individuals, as the cover artwork was very much a collective effort. See 'Reflections' below.)

The hybrid role of the illustrator-designer-facilitator has no agreed set of principles, and the question of how (much) to intervene in the production of a collective design that intends to capture and articulate the shared concerns of a particular community can be a contentious one. Even after a workshop such as this one, where everybody essentially draws the same thing (portraits and feminist slogans), the material-visual rendering often remains mercilessly heterogeneous and visually diverse. This heterogeneity has always delighted me – up until the point when I then try to consolidate the work into a legible, visual outcome. Without *some* degree of visual coherence and aesthetic finesse the work will have trouble finding an audience willing to spend time with it. How does one harness the spirited vitality of the original contributions while also introducing just enough synthesis and order to make the illustration 'work'? I had fretted over this question for months on end during a previous project, where I felt I had perhaps lost my way (see Vormittag 2024).

In *Write Women into History*, I used the original portraits of the participants and drew around them, adding bodies and hands to create figures holding placards in a way that was suggestive of a protest march. When participants submitted more than one portrait, I selected the one I felt worked best. On some of the drawings I thickened lines, removed smudges, added some hair (when it had been cropped or covered), or filled out an area with a block colour to add more weight to an otherwise lightly drawn image. I proceeded in a similar way with the placard designs, only altering them subtly, and only when I felt it was necessary to bring out their strengths. The cover illustration gained its coherence through my use of a unified colour scheme (mainly purple, white and green, reminiscent of an earlier wave of women's activism – the suffragettes) and the introduction of a grid structure that 'housed' the individual figures. (It was not until later – and I mean *two years* later – that I suddenly realized that this gridded framework bears an uncanny resemblance to the visual display of a Zoom meeting.) I shared draft versions with the group and sought feedback along the way, thereby extending their participation in the creation of the cover design beyond the initial drawing phase. Their review comments concerned details – a request to

remove what could be interpreted as make-up on one of the figures (shame on me for adding pink cheeks!), to refrain from altering a figure's hair too dramatically, to swap one placard for another, and to change the design of a shirt.

This level of involvement on my behalf felt right, and the women of the group repeatedly told me how grateful they were for my work. This however does not absolve me from reflecting on questions of authority, power and positionality. My choices about how to intervene in the design of the cover artwork stem from my experiences of working as a commercial image maker in the creative industries. Undoubtedly my decisions were influenced by my Western European background and education. This has imbued me with familiarity with a particular kind of visual language, which I put to use in this work. However, working with community requires me to harness my expertise in a self-reflexive way, maintaining an awareness of the limits of my knowledge, and a sensitivity and respect for the experiences of others.

While I might share a gender identity with the members of this group, I am not directly part of their community. The experiences, memories and achievements they write about are theirs, not mine. However, while I am not one of them, I am a keen supporter of their work. I am enormously grateful for their activism, which has undoubtedly made a positive impact on subsequent generations of women's lives (like mine), and I am also alert to the urgency of capturing and documenting this work, alongside the lives and circumstances that gave rise to it, before this knowledge slides into oblivion. Because of my enthusiasm for their work and my respect for them as people, my desire to listen to and learn from them was genuine. I did my best to tune into their concerns and their attachments, perhaps in a similar way I might have done when working for a commercial client, but with considerably more authentically felt interest.

After the cover had been completed, I organized a session with the group to reflect on the process of working together. One of the women spoke about the risk of working with somebody who, like me, is an 'outsider'. She said: 'What I want to say [...], is that you were very respectful of us. I must admit, I was anxious about that issue, whether somebody who wasn't of our experience and generation would get it. I thought you were extremely sensitive to the mood and the atmosphere and the content of our book, and of us as women. I think that's a real achievement because you were not there. It could have been disastrous, if we had had to argue with you [about the illustration and the overall design]. But we didn't have to argue with you. That's a great credit to you' (Figures 5-7).

Overall, my ambition was to create a cover design that visually reflected the spirit of the times and the stories in this collection – the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. I mobilized my experience of working as a commercial illustrator in my attempt to create a piece that communicates clearly in a visually impactful way, working to design a cover that can claim its space in the busy environment of an event or a bookshop. As Gail Chester jokingly pointed out to me during our recent phone conversation, the resulting artwork has 'high production values'. But, and this is what I am about to argue in

greater detail below, it is more than just a 'good cover'. It is also an announcement of a world.

Reflections

I have been using this article to think in greater depth about the nature of performative knowledge production in illustration, and to ponder the capacity that (some) illustration has to announce a new reality that emerges in the act of its creation. I had previously found myself stuck at the level of this general idea, unable to arrive at a more detailed articulation of what this might mean. I (hopefully!) have now managed to organize and extend what had previously been a cloud of tantalizing but underdeveloped thoughts.

In the title of this article, in direct reference to Nancy, I propose the possibility for illustration to act as an 'announcement of a world'. What does it mean to regard the artwork for *Write Women into History* in these terms? What is this world that the cover is supposed to announce? By what means does it make this announcement?

While illustration clearly cannot alter the material worlds we find ourselves in, it can transform the realities of our social relations and our emotional attachments. It does so most powerfully by way of a public announcement, the communication of something significant in the public sphere. An illustration lying dormant on my desk(top) might be charming in all sorts of ways, but only by making it public, through the act of publication, it can fully unfurl its power.

Throughout this article I have repeatedly stated that illustration can produce the reality it refers to. This is not to say that creating and publishing the cover design of *Write Women into History* was some momentous point of inception for the writing group. It was not. But I do want to argue that there are multiple ways in which the creation and subsequent publication of the illustrated book cover has quietly made a difference, has made a world.

Attestation

I started this work with questions about the intersection of illustration and community. The very nature of community is that it is never given or settled. Community exists in its enaction, in us being and acting towards one another (Nancy 1991, 1997). This brings to mind the portraiture drawing task, when the women drew each other in pairs. In an essay on portraiture Nancy writes that '[t]o paint or to figure is no longer to reproduce, therefore, not even to reveal, but to produce the exposition of the subject. [...] to bring it forth, to draw it out' (2018: 14). The multiple meanings of the word 'draw' overlay each other in a particularly pleasing pattern here. The women made lines and marks on paper (they drew), but they also pulled (drew) each other into the foreground of their perception while doing so. These are moments during which we allow ourselves to be made by another, where one's singular existence is exposed to and rendered manifest by someone else.

There were of course countless moments like this during the multiple group meetings I attended, when individual women found their life experiences and memories valourized and validated by others. The group was in a continuous process of relational, collective sense-making. The difference is, however, that during the portraiture drawing task this enactment of community was rendered explicit and immutable through its pictorial inscription. On this occasion the enactment of community left a trace. The portrait drawings are material evidence that the women had indeed come together to be in community, to 'draw each other out'.

Krauss writes about marks or traces that acquire their meaning due to a direct, physical relationship to their referent. After semiotician C.S. Peirce, she refers to these as 'indexical marks', which are 'marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer' (1986: 198). One could say that the portrait drawings, in all their manifest difference and variety, are like a 'pointing gesture' (another one of Krauss's phrases, 1986: 216), in that they point back to their moment of creation (the collaborative workshop). When I assembled the individual portraits into the overall cover design, I took care to preserve as much as possible of the original drawings – to allow them to refer back to the polyvocal moment of their origin, with the least possible interference by me. I have previously argued that this can be understood as a *trace* of an enactment of community (Vormittag 2024), but perhaps a more dynamic way of putting this is to call it an attestation, confirmation or documentation. The cover artwork, in its manifestation as a permanent inscription on paper, thus acts as an attestation of an enactment of community, a document that confirms that this has, indeed, taken place.

Invention

One convention of the genre of the portrait is its promise to bear resemblance to its sitter. The women in the group had varying levels of drawing experience, and during the workshop I had always stressed that achieving likeness was not important here. While some drawings did bear a strong resemblance, in general the identity of the sitters and in some cases even the illustrators became forgotten and blurred as the project progressed. When I presented the cover design for review there was much merriment amongst the group attempting to work out which drawing corresponded to whom. Some group members also struggled to remember which drawing they had submitted. We did finally manage to work it all out together, but at subsequent meetings I noted that some women had once again forgotten who was who. Referencing this confusion during the feedback session, one woman commented: 'I mean, I know who people are, but I don't think that matters. It doesn't matter whether we look like we think we look. It really doesn't matter. But you can see that it's this group of individual women, with individual character and style'. The group portrait really became a presentation of the group *as group*, where multiple singular exposures resulted in a plural world.

As I mentioned previously, Austin's linguistic performative utterances tend to rely on convention. For example, the sentences spoken during a marriage ceremony reiterate a

rigid set of rules, protocols and traditions. In contrast, when creating the artwork for *Write Women into History*, we did not perform a predetermined set of ritualized acts. Instead, I provided a framework (a loose set of suggestions) and allowed things to run their course. Because there were so many people acting concertedly (including myself, of course), each one of us with our distinct flair, ability and style, the precise nature of the outcome was unpredictable. Even though it refers to something in the real world (a group of women coming together for regular Zoom meetings during a pandemic) it presents them in a new light. The cover artwork does not *re-present* anything that existed prior to its creation but makes visible for the first time ‘this group of individual women’ brought together by their shared convictions and experiences, delighting in their plurality.

Declaration

When I wrote the first version of this article, I was more-or-less aware of these two points: one, that the cover artwork functioned as an attestation of the workshop that had led to its creation, a moment where the women had enacted community, drawn each other out, and captured this process on paper as a kind of trace. Two, that the cover design blurred the identities of the individual group members while speaking of multiplicity and variety, thereby presenting and visually rendering the group *as group*. But after receiving thoughtful comments from various reviewers (thank you!) and while working on the second version of this piece, my mind was spinning. I could not shake the feeling that I was missing something. I sat in confusion and filled pages of my notebook. The finished cover artwork was doing something else that I could not quite put my finger on. Five pages of circular ramblings gave way to the following sentence: ‘In the act of depicting themselves, they become what they are depicting’.

When I sat down to read Derrida’s essay on the U.S. Declaration of Independence (Derrida 1986), I found to my delight that he had articulated a similar thought, albeit a ‘slightly’ (ha!) more sophisticated version of it. In the Declaration of Independence, published in 1776, the ‘good People of these Colonies’ declared themselves independent of British rule. ‘One cannot decide,’ writes Derrida reflecting on this momentous document ‘[...] whether independence is stated or produced by this utterance’ (1986: 9). In other words: Are the ‘good People’ referred to in the declaration already free and are only stating the fact of their emancipation, or are they freeing themselves in the instance of this declaration? The declarative act appears to be a simple descriptive statement of already existing affairs, but simultaneously it produces these very affairs by virtue of making this official, public statement.

Derrida takes this point further by questioning the precise nature of the ‘good People’, who make and sign this declaration (via their representatives). Do they even exist as an entity prior to their description as such in the document? Derrida argues that ‘they do not exist as an entity, [...] before this declaration, not as such’ (1986: 10). At the instance the declaration is signed and published, the ‘good People’, through a ‘fabulous retroactivity’, are brought into existence as a group able to carry out such an act in the first place (1986:

10). In this scenario, the people producing the performative utterance have themselves been conjured by the utterance being issued. In other words, it is as if this entity, the 'good People' had existed in advance of making the declaration, their fictitious prior existence lending them the authority to do so. But in fact, they have been retroactively brought into being, as if saying: 'Henceforth this is who we have been all along.'

I found this detail of Derrida's argument absorbing, but also somewhat mind-boggling. This retroactive conjuring trick was the locus of my confusion, the 'undecidability' I described earlier. On the face of it the Declaration of Independence (or the group portrait on the cover of *Write Women into History*) appears to be describing or representing something that already exists, but in actual fact it is retroactively conjuring the group *as group* into existence. In the same way that the 'good People' of the Declaration of Independence become an entity and acquire the authority to declare themselves independent in the very act of doing so, the women of the writing group become the group they claim to be in the very act of producing and publishing their image: 'In the act of depicting themselves, they become what they are depicting'. Once the illustration was brought into existence by the women, it is as if they had always already been the group presented on the cover, 'this group of individual women, with individual character and style'.

I acknowledged above that the illustration was not uniquely responsible for generating a group identity. There were numerous moments during the process when the women were acting towards one another, sharing their overlapping experiences, encouraging and supporting each other with their writing. However, as we have seen, the illustration is an instance when these otherwise ephemeral acts are captured, rendered as material picture and subsequently published for all to see. Look, this is us. Here we are.

Final comments

So where does this leave us? I have introduced a fair amount of vocabulary in the preceding paragraphs in an attempt to think through the facets of performativity at play in the cover artwork of *Write Women into History*. Announcement, attestation and declaration are admittedly very similar in their meaning, but I have found focusing on their marginal differences helpful for an analysis of the work. I use 'attestation' for its temporal orientation towards the past, to signal that the illustration presents a confirmation of a past event. The cover artwork attests that the collaborative workshop, the materialized enactments of community, did indeed take place. The word 'declaration', in contrast, signals an attempt to establish the conditions the illustration asserts as an ongoing state of affairs, reaching into the future. This temporal extension (reaching both backwards and forwards) sets the stage for the generative newness that arises from the improvisatory nature of the process, in which the fourteen women of the writing group publicly presented themselves as 'this

group of individual women', by depicting themselves as such. I use the term 'announcement' as a kind of umbrella term, to gather up these various facets.

When illustrating (with) community, it can be difficult to know how to proceed, especially when you yourself are not a member of the group you are working with. Instead of trying to represent them, I created a framework that enabled the group to present itself. But my argument stretches beyond the idea of letting a community speak for themselves. In this project community *becomes* community in the very act of presentation. We can become ourselves by showing the world who we are. Illustration, its formal expansiveness coupled with its communicative focus, seems perfect for this task.

Illustration researcher Jaleen Grove recently wrote about illustration's capacity to help us empathetically conjure a different future, when we find ourselves mired in a problematic past (Grove 2023: 17). Expanding on that, I would like to end this article by suggesting that illustration can remake us right here in the present too. It can announce who we are, and who we have become in the very act of making the illustration. It can be an arena for reconsidering and remaking our relationships towards one another – by looking, noticing and thereby enacting, articulating and revealing our interrelations with the world around us. And through the act of publishing – by making it public – an illustration can attest to those processes having taken place. It announces: Here we are, this group of individual women, here we are!

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