

Drawing Conclusions Symposium, Utrecht, June 24, 2015

The “Drawing Conclusions” symposium held at [BAK](#) on Wednesday June 24, 2015 in Utrecht caught my attention as a conversation that could possibly align itself productively with some of the main objectives of the BABE project. An afternoon of insightful, challenging and inspiring dialogue confirmed my expectation. An institute that operates at the intersection of art, politics and activism, BAK (which stands for “Basis voor Actuele Kunst” in Dutch, or “Base for Actual Knowledge”) has since its inception in 2003 functioned as a platform for a wide range of critical voices (among whom are students, artists, scholars and activists) and debates on the role of art as “active knowledge” in the contemporary social and political climate. As Maria Hlavajova, artistic director of BAK, stated in her opening speech, while the symposium itself was centered on the question of drawing within art production, the larger question at hand was to consider how to not merely think about art, but rather how to think “through” and “with” art so as to understand the political dimension of art production. The primacy and the urgency of a dialogue about drawing was made eloquently clear by Klaas Hoek, initiator and organizer of the “A Call for Drawings” project, when he stated that there is hardly anything in this world that did not start as a drawing – save for us. A sobering thought, and one that emphasizes the powerful ways in which drawing can function as a primary conveyor of meaning. These insights support the emphasis that is placed upon drawing in general, and mapping through drawing more specifically within the BABE project as an especially fruitful form of research at the intersection of art and academia. The invited speakers, a combination of artists, curators, writers and academics, brought varied and rich perspectives with regard to this topic, proving that drawing is neither an innocent nor an obsolete endeavor, though it might be relegated to that position in the age of digital communication and rapid technological advancement. Among the tentative conclusions that were drawn, one stood out as particularly relevant, namely that drawing is an “activity” that requires a specific bodily engagement, and therefore represents a unique way of thinking, as the individual translates their thought onto a surface. Drawing, as an always unpredictable and even unstable endeavor perhaps allows for a certain spontaneity, creativity and immediacy that might be lost in the act of creation through technological mediations, which instill more precision and control. The keynote given by Mel Gooding was particularly illuminating, as Gooding presented five propositions that help establish the centrality of drawing to human endeavor. These five propositions are the following: 1. Drawing is human 2. Drawing is heuristic 3. Drawing is artificial 4. Drawing is instrumental 5. To draw is to imagine As Gooding himself quickly pointed out, these propositions should not be understood as a taxonomy of drawing, as all five might apply to one particular work in varying degrees (and indeed, they often do). The first and the final proposition stood out as particularly significant for me in relation to the BABE project. Drawing is human, says Gooding, because drawing is the child of gesture, and gesture the beginning of empathy. Similarly, if drawing is to imagine, then it is to imagine a way of life, a life observable and visible where it had not been previously. It is a means of asserting the self. If we think of drawing as a language however, we must realize we are resorting to a metaphor, Gooding further emphasized.

Drawing, in its specificity, emerged “alongside” language as a primal and primary act of social awareness, and needs to be recognized as its own form of expression. These and similar points that were raised during this inspiring afternoon provided me with insight and ‘food for thought’ regarding our own research aims and practices in the context of the BABE project. More than anything, it was an affirmation of the centrality and necessity of drawing as a significant means of expression, communication and the creation of meaning. This point came across not only through the illuminating presentations we enjoyed, but also through how the space we inhabited was organized: all the tables we were sitting at were covered with prints of drawings that were made by artists and others within the context of the [“A Call for Drawings”](#) research project, emphasizing the immediacy and materiality of this endeavor.