

## House of Illustration – Illustrator in Residence programme 2016

Report for the Barbara and Philip Denny Trust May 2017



*“The process raises questions, such as who is the illustrator here – the pen, our collective limbs, our combined brain-waves, our bodies? This is practice as research, drawing as discourse.”* **William Luz**



Hackney-based collective **Nous Vous** were the winners of the House of Illustration residency in 2016 – our third residency to date. **Nous Vous** is Jay Cover, William Luz and Nicolas Burrows. They collaborate on a broad range of projects including illustration and graphic design commissions, exhibitions, curatorial work, publishing and teaching. [www.nousvous.eu](http://www.nousvous.eu)

Nous Vous wanted to use the residency to focus on collaboration. Having worked as a collective for over 10 years they felt that, even though they were sharing a studio, they were working more and more independently and starting to work less collaboratively. They wanted to explore what makes them want to work together and to understand the collaborative possibilities within illustration, storytelling and image-making. The end result of their residency was a three-month exhibition of 12 large-scale illustrations in House of Illustration’s South Gallery – **Nous Vous: Three Men in a Boat** 18 March – 11 June 2017.

### **The residency**

During the residency **Nous Vous** conceived and built a three-person drawing machine, operated by three people pulling levers left and right, up and down, in order to make a mark. The idea behind the

machine was to make artworks completely collaboratively; the machine consciously removes hands from holding a pencil, in order to resist the idea of any drawing having an individual style. All work on the drawing machine is the result of collective decision-making.

Nous Vous describe the ideas behind the drawing machine as follows:

- It forces discussion about seemingly obvious or simple objects or ideas.
- Different operators have different viewpoints so there's an element of trust in helping other members of your team who can't see the paper.
- It is slow. It slows the operators down.
- It allows a truly egoless result, if all participants are equally influential in the discussion.
- It allows for a visual language that is part machine, part participant 1, part participant 2, part participant 3.
- It's drawing by committee.
- The results are not 'good', rather they are interesting and filled with potential.
- There's an element of the 'magic' associated with printmaking/photographic development etc. when the result is partially unexpected and essentially uncontrollable.
- It's the uncontrollability that is attractive in undertaking the process.
- And perhaps most importantly: using the machine illustrates the nuances of collaboration.

As the culmination of their residency, Nous Vous used the drawing machine to create all the pieces in their final exhibition – a series of 12 large-scale illustrations illustrating Jerome K. Jerome's classic novel *Three Men in a Boat*. They were interested in setting themselves a conventional brief – to illustrate a novel – but completing this in an unconventional way by using the machine to collaborate on every aspect of each drawing. This served as a catalyst for discussions around the potential and pitfalls of collaborative practice within the context of illustration – typically an individual pursuit.

*".. a body of work that truly examines the working life of an illustrator"* **It's Nice That** review of Nous Vous's exhibition



*"We used a three person drawing device to illustrate a story that amusingly mirrors our endeavours; that articulates the nature of attempting to do something together, working as a three (To Say Nothing Of The Dog). The book serves as a way of describing certain aspects of collaboration: being silly, having fun, getting frustrated, trying new things and failing. Even though I consider the majority*

*of the drawings very ugly, crude and unrefined, they truly convey in their scale and in their jittery, uncertain line, a collaborative visual conversation.”*

**Jay Cover**

*“We’re trying to make images which could not have existed without all three of us working on them. We’re trying to make something that surprises us, makes us laugh, in a way that we can’t predict or properly control – and that gives a clear indication of the process through the marks.”*

**Nicholas Burrows**



Nous Vous’s residency consisted of the following activity:

- A day of drop-in public workshops for all ages at House of Illustration as part of The Big Draw on 30 October 2016 – demonstrating the drawing machine;
- A December workshop for House of Illustration staff and volunteers on collaboration – exploring the idea of working together through play to make collective images
- Bi-monthly three-part blogs on the House of Illustration website detailing their artistic work inspired by the residency;
- Hosting a *Sketchmeet* at House of Illustration – an evening of live sketching for 80 people
- 18 March – 11 June 2017 – an exhibition of work produced during the residency in House of Illustration’s South Gallery.

## **Comments on the Residency by Nous Vous**

### **What are the main benefits that the residency has brought you?**

The residency offered us the time to experiment which is not a luxury we are often afforded. To develop our practice and have time and space to explore alternative ways of working. As an illustrator you don't often get afforded this opportunity – as commercial illustration relies upon you being consistent and offering a particular type of visual language to the market. It gave us an opportunity to investigate an aspect of our practice that is often overlooked and unsupported. Being able to exhibit in House of Illustration at the end is a wonderful context for exhibiting more experimental work alongside established illustrators. It is very easy to say that without this opportunity we would not have considered such a project and now we feel we have a new model and process for approaching our collaboration.

### **How do you feel about the body of work you have produced during your Residency?**

We are very happy with the body of work we produced. It is very much a work in progress or the start of something we'd like to develop. Without the residency we never would have produced this work, or thought about making the machine to make work with.

### **Do you think the residency will have a long-term impact on your work?**

Yes certainly. We would certainly imagine continuing the project we started and have ideas of how we might to transfer it to different contexts and perhaps inviting other practitioners in. Alongside this it has had a really beneficial impact on our working relationship.

### **Have you developed any new skills that aren't related to your illustration practice?**

It has made us more aware of the need to communicate with each other as practitioners and to an audience. Whilst the machine is predominantly about drawing, it can teach interesting lessons about how talk about images and drawing, and just talk to each other in general. We've also all learnt a lot of practical things about image making through trial and error ie shading and depth, an alternative way of using colour and certain types of materials we aren't familiar with. Also learning to loosen up and let the process do the talking, reflecting on the impact this has on image-making.

### **Would you recommend the Residency to other illustrators? If so, what would you say about it?**

Yes, the time, financial assistance, and presence that showing at House of Illustration brings is a great option for anyone working with illustration.

### **Press for Nous Vous**

The announcement of Nous Vous as residents at House of Illustration and their exhibition generated significant coverage in the specialist arts press including *Creative Review* - with a mention of the Denny Trust (reach: 2m twitter followers ); *It's Nice That* (350,000 unique browsers; 210k twitter) and *Digital Arts* (3m online readers; 63k twitter); plus pick of the week in the *Metro* (1,476,115 circulation).

<http://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/news/illustration/nous-vous-see-time-as-illustrator-in-residence-at-hoi-as-time-refocus/>

<https://www.creativereview.co.uk/nous-vous-artists-residency/>

<http://www.itsnicethat.com/features/nous-vous-illustration-310517>

Metro scan attached.