

Peter Kennard & Cat Picton Phillipps

Uncertified Documents

Pump House Gallery, London, 30 January – 30 March 2008

Previewed in *HotShoe* no.152, February/March 2008

The idea of a “digital revolution” is thrown about quite carelessly. In actual fact, digital photographic processes have not had an enormous impact on every sphere of photography, however, PhotoShop has made one practice in particular – photomontage – much quicker indeed, and promoted the myth that, visually speaking, anything is possible. In the 1990s, the drive by advertising agencies for seamless, surreal digitized tableaux was a source of dejection for photomonteur Peter Kennard, although now, he has managed to embrace some of the possibilities of digital, much to his advantage.

In this exhibition, which is Kennard’s largest solo show, three decades of work explore war, nuclear disarmament, the environment and civil liberty through satire, black humour, delivering a particular visual brute force. He communicates messages very succinctly, with no margin for misinterpretation by the viewer. Kennard’s irreverent work is in the tradition of John Heartfield and the other German Dadaists of the 1920s and ‘30s, where the chaotic, jagged edges of their tableaux aptly reflected the terrifying prospect of the Third Reich.

There is something about the idea of physically cutting up a photograph – something that was originally conceived by the photographer as a complete, *whole* image – to remove a particular pictorial element which is then arranged in an inevitably incongruous juxtaposition with something else, that is so fitting for the subjects of war and civil dissent. Kennard’s source materials are appropriated from a variety of different media, and he has also exploited iconic images, including NASA’s photograph of Earth taken from space, and most famously of all, John Constable’s *The Haywain*, to which he added a batch of cruise missiles to create the vision of the violation of Britain’s pastoral landscape by US missile bases in the 1980s.

One of Kennard’s recent works, *Photo-op*[portunity] that was made in collaboration with Cat Picton Phillipps, depicts Tony Blair wearing his finest television grin, taking a photograph of himself with camera phone against the back-drop of a burning landscape. As well as referring to the war in Iraq, the

image (and its title) also contains something about our social attitudes towards how we take photographs nowadays, and perhaps the notion of the “citizen journalist”. It almost suggests that we are reaching a kind of photographic bursting point.

Kennard’s decision to make the montage a seamless one, and by choosing an image of Blair that is lit similarly to the background, is also an appropriate departure from the rougher cut-and-paste montages of the 1980s, and parodies the slickness of Blairism.

This image was first exhibited in 2006 in *Santa’s Ghetto*, a concept of the graffiti artist, Banksy that is an annual showcase of the work of irreverent “underground” artists in a shop on Oxford Street to both baffle and intrigue London Christmas shoppers. Last year, *Santa’s Ghetto* moved to Manger Square in Bethlehem and included this, as well as other works by Kennard. The inclusion of his work in this “squat art concept” highlights some of the questions that arise from the inter-contextuality of his practice: Despite his connection with the art establishment (his education at the Slade and current position at the Royal College of Art), there is no snobbery as to where his work is seen or how it functions; from illustrations in magazines to artworks in the gallery environment, and even ephemeral freebees. The broad range of publications that Kennard’s work has featured in is reflected in this exhibition.

Other works in collaboration with Picton Phillipps are included, such as the *Obscenities* series. This work, as well as some of their other works which criticise the war in Iraq, show a departure from Kennard’s earlier, cut-and-paste traditional montages, yet stick to his method of combined image. In *Awards*, which was one of Kennard’s first experiments with digital tools, the artists have scanned military medal ribbons which have been torn, frayed and obscured with blood, and replaced the medal emblem with images of war and its victims. These works have a particularly physical presence and are more tactile and graphically less coherent than Kennard’s earlier work, although the messages are just as clear.

However, one novelty of this exhibition is the opportunity to see Kennard’s original montages; that is, as they were assembled before they were re-photographed for reproduction, thus revealing each different pictorial layer and betraying every mark left by the scalpel blade which Kennard would previously never have considered exposing publicly. Perhaps this shows both a

celebration for the technique in opposition to the seamless finishes of contemporary digital montages, but also in light of the nature of his recent more textured works, an assertion of the photomontage as a mixed-media artefact, transcending the two-dimensional illustration.