

Severe and Elevated

"There is a standard device to whip the domestic population of any country into line to support the policies that they oppose: induce fear of some terrifying enemy, poised to destroy them."

Noam Chomskyⁱ

Accompanying every major event in world history, particularly that of the 20th Century, is a conspiracy theory. The most celebrated and exhaustively re-visited of these surround the assassination of John F. Kennedy; the 1969 Moon landing, and possibly the most important of all: 'is Elvis still alive?' A certain amount of anarchic fun can be distilled from speculating that there is some form of a massive subterfuge relating to catastrophic or epoch-making events. Conspiracy theories create debate. They are controversial, acting as a diversion from the banal in life.

Clandestine conspiracies involving the United States and British governments circulate the Internet. Some theories claim that the US government orchestrated the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre, with many considering it to be a 'False Flag'ⁱⁱ attack designed to curtail civil liberties and a pretence for increased military spending. Post 9/11 the US government rushed through the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). According to the DHS website, the threat level for the day I write this essay – 27 June 2008 – is 'Elevated' or 'Yellow', meaning a 'Significant Risk of Terrorist Attacks'ⁱⁱⁱ. The British version of the US system states that the threat level is 'Severe', and that 'an attack is likely'^{iv}. These threat indices are intriguing in that they are rarely scrutinised in the media, or by the citizenry. Certainly the threat levels are intended to be understood easily by the general population – to infer a warning, yet they are vague and perhaps deliberately so. They have an Orwellian air to them, suggesting we be vigilant of some unspecified 'enemy' within our midst.

To infer that the British government is a totalitarian state stretches credulity, but it is difficult to dismiss. Think of the furore over the 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' in Iraq. Britain was taken to war on the basis of a disputed dossier that claimed Iraq had weapons capability to threaten British interests home and abroad within a 45-minute window of attack. Who can forget Tony Blair at the despatch box in the House of Commons making his case to the gathered MPs, with one million ordinary citizens marching through London to protest?

To discover the absolute truth as to the political manoeuvrings of influential world leaders and their respective governments is almost certainly impossible. But what is certain is that although there were protests around the world before the second Gulf War, in the developed world today there is apathy towards the political process. The questions posited by *Just world order* are concerned with political machinations and the 'fallout' from this lack of engagement, and themes of how this affects our everyday lives: are we ruled by fear, so that we become unwittingly subservient? Is there an unspoken aura of barely discernible anxiousness that permeates modern society, perpetuated by governments, and the media? With the rise of 24-hour TV news channels, even that bastion of objective journalism, the BBC, leads each bulletin with the most sensational and shocking news. In his book *The Assault on Reason* former US Vice-President Al Gore examines the Bush administration's use of fear by media, suggesting that the American people are induced to be fearful ... there is an uncharacteristic and persistent confusion about the sources of that fear; we seem to be having unusual difficulty in distinguishing between illusory threats and legitimate ones.^v However, *Just world order* is not concerned wholly with politics, or international relations for that matter, but rather with the results of what

political, Machiavellian posturing can have on the metaphysical wellness of citizens of a developed society, as mediated by the artist.

The following themes permeate the exhibition: control, and the lack of control the ordinary citizen has in society; how we engage with the world around us; angst and anxiety in relation to a sense of displacement, and identity: how we place ourselves within society as a whole. Identity, particularly our own sense of self, is inherent in the installation *Threshold* (2007) by Jane Grant. This work features sound constructed through a 'neurogranular sampler'. This new device merges sound with neurological time patterns, the firing of neurons within the human brain. Grant's work questions identity and the sense of self; the combination of barely discernable images projected on a wall of the gallery with deep, booming, sometimes high-pitched sounds coming from speakers within the space (based on the artist's breath, filtered through the sampler), is disconcerting and unnerving. Grant examines the projecting of self into space, and how we perceive ourselves within that space, stating '...the voice, barely recognisable, draws our attention to an internal to external process; the vocalization of thought.'^{vi}

Charlotte Ginsborg's *Over the Bones* (2008) features a disenfranchised truck-driver and his re-engagement with society. Accelerated by his saving of a singer from a communal motel swimming pool, and then for a short-time taking on her 'powers' as a vocalist, the truckdriver is enabled to take control of his life again. It is an intensely emotional film: a documentary presented as a narrative structure interspersed with scripted voice-overs and one-to-one unfettered interviews with the protagonists. A sense of the manipulation and displacement of real events is inherent in much of Ginsborg's recent work, prompting the intriguing question: 'how much of *Over the Bones* is staged and how much is real?

Deep England (2007) by Rachel Garfield is a video work that deals with identity mediated through themes of 'belonging, isolation, nationhood and the landscape'. This work embraces a sense of displacement, and in particular the artist's own sense of being 'out of place' after she moved with her family from her native London to the Midlands. Garfield's film is eerie, with images placed out of context, juxtaposed with what appears to be holiday footage. It serves to engender a sense of unease, of an anxiety perhaps experienced by the artist in an attempt to understand and comfortably order the world around her.

Order, as it is to be considered in the term 'Just world order', is derived from an essay by Steven V. Hicks, Professor and Chair of Philosophy at Queens College of the City University of New York, entitled '*International Law and the Possibility of a Just World Order: An Essay on Hegel's Universalism*'. In his essay Hicks refers to Hegel's idea of the 'civil society', and concludes that:

...Hegel's political theory supposes that, through international legal reforms and the gradual development of new "transnational" communal relations, the world can slowly but peaceably become a just world order.'^{vii}

Many other texts by numerous political activists and philosophers, such as John Rawls, Hans Köchler and Samuel S. Kim, echo Hicks' conclusions and Hegel's ideas. They focus on questions regarding world justice and a society ordered around a common sense of purpose. Nonetheless, although the emphasis on the words 'just' and 'order' in the context of the exhibition relates to the latter theories (not be confused with the term 'New World order'^{viii}) the title could also be considered in terms of our simply

'just ordering' our world about ourselves; or more to the point – making sense of the world and our place within it. Tim Simmons' large-scale, immaculate and haunting photographs embody a certain degree of displacement mixed with the deliberate artistic act of placement. Standing before them the viewer has to work at ordering the image for it to be read as a whole. Simmons' *Hawaii Lava Box* (2003) appears as if it has been staged; the incongruous object within what appears to be a lunar landscape appears to be both out of place whilst in its natural setting. Ansel Krut's paintings hover at the edge of what we could consider to be the recognisable. They have a definite psychological hold on the viewer. Identity is questioned in its broadest sense of the term in that the artist is manipulating what we consider to be acceptably figurative. But these paintings embrace displacement: as we position ourselves in front of each canvas there is a yearning to make sense of what we see, even though what we see incontrovertibly makes sense.

The intense pseudo-corporate PowerPoint presentations of Kim Noble are typically anarchic. Noble's latest works, designed in relation to ArtSway and its surroundings, are a mix of the deadpan and the absurd. Much of Noble's work sees the artist harass visitors in the gallery setting, and generally being disruptive. Here self-help videos feature the artist dispensing his own brand of advice on how to live our lives, examining levels of control, and in particular control by someone assumed to be in authority. Authority in a different form is analysed in the work of Mark Dunhill & Tamiko O'Brien through their large-scale sculpture, fabricated from pink paper fabric and suspended from the ceiling of the main gallery space. This object was made by lining the hole of a trench made by itinerant medieval bell founders, who dug a large trench to cast a bell for a Cistercian Abbey in Italy in the 11th Century. Dunhill & O'Brien's grandiose mountain-like object has no discernable use, but also perfectly embodies the role of the bell, and how it came to control a populace, albeit in purely religious terms.

Are artists lightning rods to the public mood? Do they unknowingly work hand-in-hand with the philosopher to attempt to make sense of the world around us? All of the artists in *Just world order* highlight the sense of unease engendered in modern society by those in authority. Although not a deliberate attempt to come to some form of conclusion, the exhibition is nonetheless contrived to ask the question: 'are we knowingly or unknowingly ruled by fear of the unknown?'

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Dunhill & O'Brien, Ansel Krut, Rachel Garfield, Charlotte Ginsborg, Jane Grant, Kim Noble,
Tim Simmons, curated by Peter Bonnell
ArtSway, Hampshire, UK

End Notes:

ⁱ Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, Pluto Press, London, (1989), p.269

ⁱⁱ False flag operations are covert operations conducted by governments, corporations, or other organizations, which are designed to appear like they are being carried out by other entities.

> https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/False_flag

- iii > <https://www.dhs.gov>
- iv www.homeoffice.gov.uk/security/current-threat-level/
- v Al Gore, *The Assault on Reason*, the Penguin Press, New York, (2007), p.25
- vi Artist statement.
- vii Steven V. Hicks, *International Law and the Possibility of a Just World Order: An Essay on Hegel's Universalism*, Rodopi B.V. Editions (Dec 1998), p.225
- viii Taken from a speech entitled 'Toward a New World Order' by President George H. W. Bush before a joint meeting of the US Congress on 11 September 1990
- > <http://www.sweetliberty.org/issues/war/bushsr.htm>