

PETER KENNARD

SATURDAY 24 SEPTEMBER – SUNDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2016

OFF MESSAGE

PETER KENNARD IS WIDELY REGARDED AS BRITAIN'S MOST IMPORTANT POLITICAL ARTIST

With a practice spanning almost fifty years, his distinctive photomontages have been published extensively in newspapers and magazines, and deployed on placards and banners by activist groups and non-governmental organisations throughout the UK and beyond. His images for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), including Broken Missile, are among his best known, while collaborations with fellow artists including Cat Phillipps and Banksy reflect an enduring relevance and currency in his work.

Off Message brings together a collection of Kennard's most significant works dating from 1968 to 2016. From the early Stop paintings, created at the outset of his career, to his latest installation, Boardroom, first shown at the Imperial War Museum in 2015 and updated this year in response to the shifting political landscape, the exhibition includes artworks that have consistently challenged those in positions of power and the decisions they make. The pictures are universal in their ability to affect, speaking with

great integrity and directness about causes that are significant to many, and providing a visual force in campaigns for social change. Whether they are encountered on the street, in the gallery, in print or online, Kennard's images leave a lasting impression and urge the viewer not to be complicit – to instead question what we are told, and hold our politicians and the media to account. The photomontage is an effective instrument to make visible and address the inequalities and horrors in contemporary society. 'It's only through confronting the world as it is' says Kennard, 'that we can suggest a possible world that isn't but could be.'



IN CONVERSATION WITH CURATOR CRAIG ASHLEY

Craig Ashley (CA) You're currently working with the poet and spoken word artist Kate Tempest on the artwork for her forthcoming album *Let Them Eat Chaos*. This sounds like an interesting exchange.

Peter Kennard (PK) My photomontages work strongly in conjunction with Kate's new album. The power in her work is related to how she can speak of individual everyday experience and then zoom out to the whole of society and passionately argue for change – she does it through words and I try to do it through images.

CA Was the process of collaborating in this case similar to the way you've worked with other artists and collaborators in the past?

PK All collaborations are different. Working collaboratively as an artist means you can create work that goes beyond the individual expression of ideas and open up new areas of thought and creativity. Collaborating is not just about conversations between artists; I have worked

kennardphillips as an artistic alliance, distinct from your own individual practice. When did this close working relationship with Cat begin, and what were the motivations for working together?

PK Cat and I started making work together under the name **kennardphillips** as a response to the build-up of the invasion of Iraq. Like millions of others across the world we went on the demos against the invasion and then it happened and we wanted to use our work to report on the horrors that had been unleashed. We produced large gallery based work and posters and fliers protesting the actions of Bush and Blair. We wanted to create a resource for anti-war protesters, so we printed posters and put work online that could be used around the world. Since then we have continued our collaboration, making work against exploitation, militarism and the politicians and bankers who turn the creaking wheels of neo-liberalism by doing exhibitions and working publicly on billboards in the street.

CA Your exhibition **Off Message** brings together works spanning almost 50 years. Over this stretch of time, one might expect certain artworks to diminish in their relevance or relationship with the present day – to become inextricably linked to their time. This doesn't seem to be the case with your work. It continues to resonate with the political events and contemporary conflicts we're living through now.

PK Some of my work from nearly fifty years ago is just as relevant now as it was then, if not more so. This doesn't give me any satisfaction. It means the gap between the obscene amount spent globally on weapons as against the paltry amount spent globally on alleviating poverty has increased, is increasing and will continue to increase unless we act. This is one major theme that has

run through my work all these years. It's a theme that will unhappily have to continue. A couple of weeks ago this country decided to spend countless billions on reconditioning its Trident nuclear weapons system – instead of scrapping it. I was making posters against Trident forty years ago and so it goes on.

CA The **Boardroom** installation is a good example of the enduring relevance of your images. It features many of your well known photomontages, drawn from your wider body of work and redeployed here in a different context to that in which they were originally made. Is this something you set out to do – to make work that is versatile in its application?

PK With **Boardroom** I wanted to create an installation that totally surrounded the viewer with the atrocities of war in the twentieth century since 1945. I was born four years after the atom bombs destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The work begins with images relating to that event, then to the Vietnam War, right up to the present with photomontages on Syria and the millions of refugees escaping for their lives from war torn countries in the Middle East. It also has statistics that shock with numbers running into billions spent on killing machines and the resulting horror unleashed on civilians. It has images on climate change and oil. It's meant to act as an early – or late – warning system. It's a tool to encourage the viewer to relate statistical facts to everyday life globally over the last seventy years. It's not propaganda telling you what to think. It presents the material hidden by our corporate media. Some of the photomontages it contains I made nearly fifty years ago, some a couple of months ago, it can be difficult to see the difference. In my book **Unofficial War Artist**, published by The Imperial War Museum and based on the **Boardroom** installation, the statistics and photomontages are welded together to narrate seventy years of inhumanity against humanity.

CA As in **Boardroom**, recurrent ideas are evident in **Decoration** too. This series of eighteen monumental canvases made in 2003 and 2004 has its roots in an earlier photomontage of the same name from 1982.

PK That's right. The **Decoration** series of paintings were made in response to the invasion of Iraq. The idea of using the ribbons of medals plus the results of conflict attached to the clasp instead of the actual medal was based on a photomontage I made at the time of the Falklands War in 1982. This was around the time a jubilant Margaret Thatcher, who was then prime Minister, emerged from 10 Downing Street exhorting us all to 'rejoice'. My medal showed a warship engulfed in flames. In the **Decoration** series I reused the idea but with the advent of the flatbed scanner was able to scan torn miniature flags attached to a clasp and then attach images based on what was happening daily in Iraq under the clasp. The paintings are a mixture of scanned material and oil paint. I have always been concerned with trying to combine the autographic and the photographic and with digital printing I can merge the two. The paintings stand on the floor leaning against the wall like tombstones. I produced eighteen of these canvases expressing my anger at the terrible consequences of the Iraq invasion as it took place day by day.

CA The earliest works in the exhibition are the four **Stop** paintings. There are similarities to **Decoration**, particularly in terms of materials – both series incorporate print and oil on canvas. When you made the **Stop** pictures, you were making a conscious decision to move away from painting in its purest form. What else was going on at the time?

PK The **Stop** paintings were begun when I was at the Slade in 1968. They were made at the time as cheap dyeline prints, some of which were flyposted in London. Later I had a job as a night

telephone operator in the GPO (General Post Office) and could afford to print one a month by a method called 'true to scale' printing using printers' ink on canvas. They overlay images I got from picture libraries and magazines with handmade marks. It was 1968 and I'd taken part in the big Anti-Vietnam demonstrations in London. This was my first serious political involvement. I wanted to try and make work that reflected the colossal protests that were reverberating around the world. As well as the Anti-Vietnam demonstrations there were the student and worker demonstrations of May '68 in Paris, demonstrations in Czechoslovakia against the Soviet invasion, Anti-Apartheid marches. I made these paintings overlaying all these events as they happened to represent a clash of ideologies and generations. They bombard the viewer with a mash-up of images.

CA Who were the artists who inspired you at this time? Or perhaps you drew inspiration from elsewhere?

PK I began painting around the age of thirteen and converted the coal cellar at the flats where I was brought up in Paddington into a tiny studio. I painted in a number of styles influenced by Picasso, Giacometti and Bacon and then when I went to art school at sixteen I discovered Rauschenberg, Warhol and later the Dadaists. Hannah Höch and John Heartfield were still marginalized in the art history canon at that time and I discovered them in my early twenties after leaving the Slade. Discovering Goya's **Disasters of War** series of etchings made me realise that the inhumanity in the world could be reported

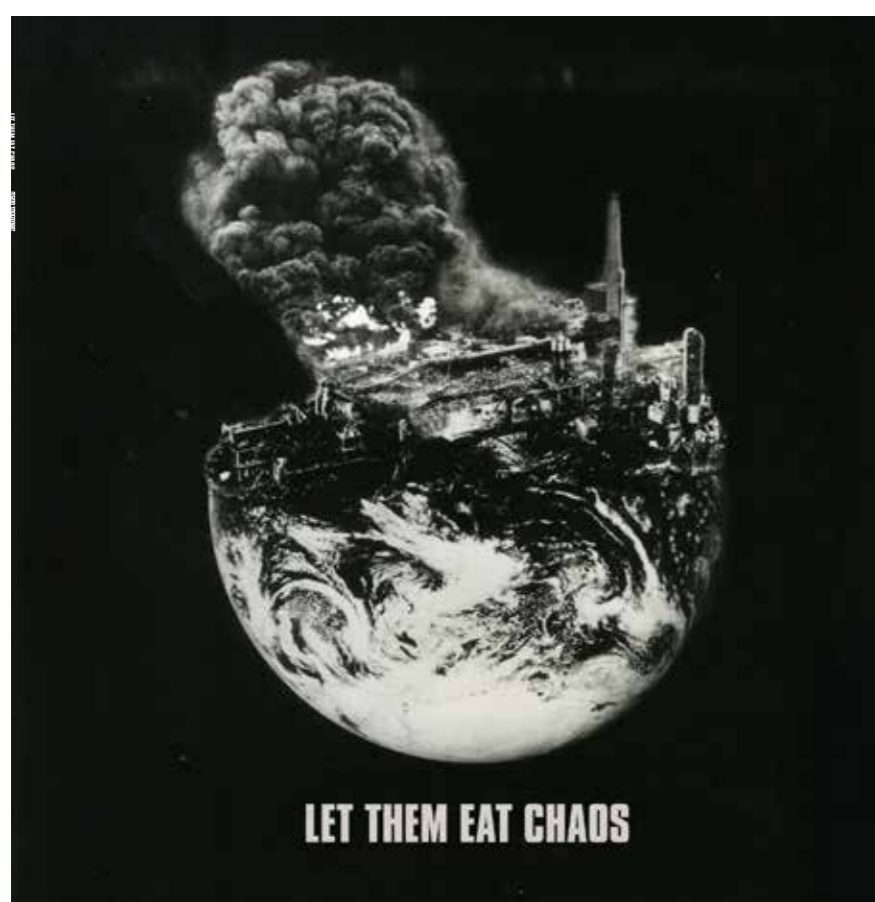
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Clockwise from top:
Decoration / 1982 / photomontage.
Tate collection.

From the series **Newspaper**, 1994.

Photomontage for the Kate Tempest album *Let Them Eat Chaos* released October 2016

Centrespread
Broken Missile / 1980 / Photomontage



with writers, photographers, carpenters and politicians as well as groups like CND, Amnesty, Chile Solidarity and many others. Creating an exhibition involves curators, technicians, invigilators, designers. These are all collaborative ventures and the idea of the lone artist struggling in their studio is a fiction because to get the work out into the world involves other people. My work is about society, about the world as it is and what it could be. It's about people and I work with people to create it.

CA So collaboration is clearly broader than the artist or artists involved, but you seem particularly amenable to working with others. This is quite apparent. For example, together with Cat Phillipps you established





on through art rather than only through film and documentary photography. Since then his work has always been a touchstone for me as has the brave photomontage work of John Heartfield against fascism.

CA With the proliferation of digital media, presumably the way you work has shifted considerably over the years. I suppose the processes and materials that you used in the **Stop** pictures, for example, simply won't be available now or otherwise that they're financially unattainable. How do you reconcile the loss of analogue production methods with the arrival of new technologies when it comes to your work and its distinctive aesthetic quality?

PK I'm one of those characters who haunt old photographic shops, that buy up people's darkrooms and sometimes get hold of old photographic paper that's not manufactured any more. So with me it's a mixture of still using old analogue materials combined with working digitally. When the work is reproduced it can be impossible to see the difference between the two methods of making. The materiality of photographs cut with a scalpel and stuck down with glue is still at the core of a lot of my work but the digital has opened up new possibilities for making work that can be transmitted digitally around the world in the form in which it was created.

CA **Off Message** features original photomontages loaned from the a/political collection. It's interesting to look at the physical artefact now. To see hand-printed photographs that have been hand-cut and pasted to create the iconic images we're so familiar with. We don't often see the evidence of the act of making in such a transparent way.

PK Before the advent of digital image making I refused to show the originals of my photomontages as I considered they were only a means to an end. They were made to be reproduced for the widest possible circulation. But nowadays I actually think it's really important to show that the decisiveness of a physical cut to a piece of paper, rather than a Photoshop cut, can be an important part of the toolbox of young artists who want to create critical images. I've found that students are now not foregrounding the digital over the hand-made as much as they were, but are becoming more and more concerned with what the work is saying and searching for the right tools with which to say it.

CA There's an archive section within the exhibition, drawing together a range of materials featuring your work – from books, newspapers and magazine cuttings, to pamphlets and leaflets, t-shirts and badges, together with a collection of posters from activist groups that employ your images to petition for a variety of causes. Clearly your work needs to have a relationship with people outside of the gallery context. Can you tell me more about this?

PK The vitrine containing the archive materials is precisely about the process of getting the work out into the world, to as many people as possible, in a form that is available freely or



Top: Civilians 4, 2008.

Bottom from left: Welcome to Britain / 1994 / installation, Royal Festival Hall, London. Germany Shakes / 1989 / photomontage. A/political collection.

Poster for anti-trident demonstration, Finsbury Park Underground Station, February 2016.

Archive / 2016 / Vitrine containing newspapers, magazines, books, leaflets and various items.

PK I've always been concerned with the physical materials that are used as a support for images, whether it be a certain type of paper that allows charcoal to merge with a printed image or the effect of tearing paper and the tears forming a violent break with a two dimensional surface. In **Newspaper and Reading Room** I wanted to use the financial pages of world newspapers as an impressive backdrop to the poverty and conflict that underlie the endless lines of stock market prices. In **Newspaper** printed images of hands are drawn over with charcoal and appear to rip through the pages in anger, despair or desperation. It's up to the viewer how they place themselves in relation to the work. In **Reading Room** newspapers are placed on lecterns with the faces of people from all over the world staring back at us. Again, it's up to those looking at the work if they feel implicated. The faces have a worn quality. Charcoal and printers' ink merge together. Some faces look as if they are smudging away. I want the marks – the misprintings and the charcoal fragments – to physically engage the viewer, to make a more visceral surface than a photographic print. The idea for this work is based on a memory I have from sixty years ago when I used to go on Saturday afternoons with my dad to Paddington Library, where there was a whole row of magnificent carved double sided lecterns with each having a copy of that day's paper laid out on it for anyone coming to the library to read.

CA The harrowing faces in both **Reading Room** and the later series **Civilians**, made in 2008, seem to be a nod back to painting and a preoccupation with the portrait.

PK I have always been obsessed with paintings of the human head. I go on a yearly pilgrimage to Kenwood House on Hampstead Heath to see their extraordinary Rembrandt self-portrait. I stare at him staring at me and he becomes part of my world in a different way every year. The **Civilians** pictures (a set of large works on paper) were made as an angry response to endless talk about the accuracy of 'smart bombs'. That is bombs that are so accurate that they don't hit civilians. This is a lie, they do. In these photo-drawings I show the cross-hairs that are meant to create accurate targeting overlaid on the faces of civilian victims, mainly women and children. They are what is known in the military trade as 'collateral damage'.

CA When we were discussing the title of the show, **Off Message** emerged out of the sense of unfaltering integrity in conveys. It's not simply jargon or rhetoric drawn from the political lexicon, but reflects the act of taking a principled position and questioning those in power or

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CA As an arts centre located at the heart of a number of communities in Birmingham, mac is an interesting space for your work. It combines the conventional gallery space with a less specifically purposed public space. Aside from an invitation to exhibit, what drew you to mac?

PK I think mac is a perfect place to show my work. It is very much part of the local community where people of all ages appear to consider it very much part of their lives. It is a great atmosphere to show my work in, without the respectful hush that pervades many cultural citadels. What I make can communicate to everyone, with or without specialist knowledge of art. I always believe that art for social change should be accessible and not be about 'the good old days but the bad new ones' as Brecht said.

PK The reality in our cities is that a lot of what was public space has become corporate and privatised. Every available surface has adverts telling us what we need, or rather telling us what multinational companies want us to believe we need. Even the steps of some escalators on the Underground are now covered with adverts. So I think it's vitally important that people do still paste up posters informing people of events and demonstrations that are going to take place. It's not enough to rely on the internet, where you know how to find the information you want. On the street you are confronted by the unexpected, by what you don't know. Street art which is created all over the world has taken on a great importance in the struggle of the voiceless against political regimes. In some countries it is one of the only outlets for speaking truth to



cheaply. When I create an image I make it in relation to what's happening at that moment in time and I am either commissioned or make contact with NGOs (non-governmental organisations), campaigning groups, or newspapers – those who could use the image. I don't believe art in itself can change the world but when it is aligned with campaigning and pressure groups it can become the visual arm of protest and communicate directly to people. It can encourage people to think further into a subject and realise they can intervene in struggles that might appear inexorable and unrelated to their own lives.

It's only through confronting the world as it is, that we can suggest a possible world that isn't but could be. This arts centre has a creative energy that encourages people to open up to ideas so that they become creators rather than consumers, it demonstrates that the arts, if they are publicly funded, can be an integral part of all our lives.

CA Truly public space in our cities is becoming a rarity. Are you encountering issues with making work intended specifically for the public realm?

power and the artists risk imprisonment and state execution for making their work.

CA In **Newspaper and Reading Room**, made in 1994 and 1997 respectively, we can see there's a move away from purely image-based work. Using newspapers as the support, tearing into them or printing onto them, and incorporating wooden frames or lecterns, the materials begin to play more of an integral role – both intrinsically within the work and the conditions within which it is viewed. How did this shift come about?

authority. Perhaps this is a good way to describe your work, and indeed your character more generally?

PK It's important to me as an artist to be like the canary down the mine. Sniffing out danger and coming back up with images that act as a warning. My images are deeply critical of all the status quos that condemn billions to live in poverty while making billions off their backs. It's art as an 'early warning system' or a 'late early warning system' we've got to hurry.

ASSOCIATED EVENTS Off Message Exhibition Tour

Thursday 27 October, 7pm
 Gallery. £3

Join artist Peter Kennard for a tour of the exhibition and for an insight into the making of some of his most iconic images.

Lessons in Physics Conference

Friday 18 November, 10am – 5pm
 Cinema £15 (£12 concessions)

Following on from the 2013 conference *Lessons in Geography*, this is the second in a series of "lessons".

Concerned with the way matter and movement can inform ideas and understanding, *Lessons in Physics* looks at how material and the physical act is utilised by artists as a vehicle for expression. Speakers include Jitish Kallat, Mary Griffiths, Professor Johnny Golding and Peter Kennard.

Lessons in Physics is co-produced by mac birmingham and The University of Derby.

Further information and tickets please visit macbirmingham.co.uk or call 0121 446 3232.

PETER KENNARD: **OFF MESSAGE** is produced by mac birmingham and curated by Craig Ashley. It has been realised with support from a/political and Arts Council England. The artist and mac would like to extend a special thank you to Sylvie Borel, Becky Haghpanah-Shirwan, Mark Murphy and Richard Slocombe for their time, enthusiasm and expertise in helping to realise the exhibition.

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mac birmingham,
 Cannon Hill Park, Birmingham B12 9QH
macbirmingham.co.uk

Exhibition opening times:
 Tuesday to Sunday, 11am – 6pm

a/political

