

Media Critique: The impact of Peter Kennard's artistic research into the representation of war and conflict

1. Summary of the impact

Peter Kennard at the Royal College of Art (RCA) is a leading exponent of the art of photomontage. An avowedly political artist, his research since the 1970s has explored and critiqued the circulation of mass-media images, particularly those produced in relation to war and conflict. This case study shows that Kennard's research has achieved significant impact on public opinion and sustained impact on the operations of the media in representing war and conflict.

2. Underpinning research

Kennard's research takes the form of a deep engagement with the way that 'the news' is constructed. His work as a leading political artist has explored a number of themes over a 40-year career, but it has had a particular focus on present-day conflict at home and abroad. His research is realised as artworks using the technique of photomontage. These can take the form of single works, series of works and narrative forms, such as his five books published by academic and non-academic presses [e.g. s3.1 and s3.2]. Recently, Kennard has extended his practice as an image-maker to explore the effects of online animations, video works and installations in public spaces. The question of how to achieve the precise concentration of meaning offered by the now-historic technique of photomontage in the context of the restless media environment has been addressed in works such as *Irhal*, a film commissioned by Amnesty International (2012) [s3.3].

Kennard's work is unabashedly political art which responds to events and, in particular, to war and conflict. His works deconstruct the operations of the media in the reporting of these events, and in particular what Noam Chomsky calls 'the management of consent', by using images that have circulated previously in press and television news. Kennard has been invited to research in various picture archives, such as The Guardian News and Media Archive, London (2004-06) and the National Photographic Archive, Dublin (2010), to examine and use photographic images that were made to record particular events but not published. The Dublin work, for instance, resulted in an in-situ installation in Dublin (2010) [s3.4]. In this way, Kennard's research critically examines the currency of particular media images. Moreover, Kennard's approach to the publication of his images is to create what has been called 'image-events', i.e. moments when images themselves become the subject of public or media attention.

Kennard's images often move between different media or can be reworked by others. Photo-op, an image combining a news photograph of then Prime Minister Tony Blair taking his own portrait with a camera-phone with another image of a billowing cloud of flames, first made in 2006 – has been widely reproduced in the print and broadcast media, as well as being the subject of a ban by JCDecaux and CBS Outdoor, the largest billboard advertising agencies in the UK, in 2013, an event which itself became a news story in 2013 [s3.5]. This constitutes not just a method of dissemination but a critical strategy for testing matters of public interest such as image rights and news management.

Kennard has a strong commitment to forms of collaborative practice. Since 2002, he has collaborated with Cat Picton Phillipps, who provides the technical support that allows Kennard's research to be realised in different formats. In recent years, Kennard has realised opportunities to work with different social groups at home and abroad. Opportunities to make work at sites of conflict such as Israel/Palestine have extended his research method. A visit to produce work in Palestine in 2007 extended to Kennard's studying in photographic collections and his exchange with political activists and scholars in the region [s3.6]. This resulted in a major work, exhibited

in London in 2011, that explored the history of the Palestinian people in the 20th century through public and private photographic images [s3.6].

3. References to the research

All Kennard's books – two of five are listed here – have been through rigorous commissioning and editorial processes operated by the publishers that commissioned them. Kennard's installations are usually commissioned by publicly funded bodies, whose boards of trustees typically have oversight of the commissioning process. Arts Council and local authority funding of the galleries and museums in the UK and similar mechanisms abroad require an equally rigorous approach to the commission of artworks. All URLs last accessed: 22/11/13.

3.1) @Earth (Tate Publishing, 2011) - a single-author book written with technical assistance from Tarek Salhany. The works that appear in the book were also exhibited as 'At Earth', Raven Row Gallery, London (2011).

3.2) Dispatches of an Unofficial War Artist (Lund Humphries, 2000).

3.3) Irhal, a 4 minute 35 second film made with Leah Borromeo for Amnesty International to announce the Global Day of Action, 11/02/12, calling for human rights across the Middle East and North Africa. The film can be viewed at <<https://vimeo.com/36612678>>.

3.4) 'We Hope to Be Finished by Lunchtime...', National Photographic Archive, Dublin (2010). Work in the National Photographic Archive in Dublin resulted in an installation as part of the 'PhotoIreland' festival (July 2010); Kennard's research was also published in the form of a 16pp. large-format newspaper, Fragments From a Broken World, edited by Anthony Haughey, published by Photoireland (2010).

3.5) Photo-op (2005): image and related press <<http://www.kennardphillipps.com/tag/photo-op/>>.

3.6) Palestine Gallery Commission, 'Palestine', Commissioned by the Palestine Gallery, London (2008). Print and paint on a mix of canvas fragments and paper on canvas, 18 x 2 to 4metres.

4. Details of the impact

Kennard has made numerous works in the period covered by this impact statement but the focus here is on those identified in Section 2. His work has also featured in many exhibitions (19 solo and in 41 group shows in Europe, the Middle East, North and Latin America between 2004–13). Kennard is the author of five major books combining his images and writing. The most recent, @Earth (Tate Publishing, 2011) was the first artist's book commissioned by Tate (3,688 copies sold by summer 2013). The Tate Publishing Director 'commissioned this title...in the belief that art has an impact on everyone's lives and that Peter Kennard's art has a particular message that is important to communicate in contemporary contexts' [s5.1].

Kennard's artworks are not solely produced for the art market. They seek out the widest social and political impact, often drawing attention from and through the news media and those engaged in conflict resolution. In 2007–8, a former political affairs officer for the UN in Kabul, Robert Kluijver, was invited to curate the inaugural exhibition for Gemak, The Hague, a public gallery focusing on the political and social potential of art. Entitled 'Red Zone/Green Zone', the exhibition featured diverse exhibits including the remains of a car destroyed in a suicide bombing in Kabul. Kennard (with Picton Phillipps) was commissioned to create a 6 x 18m installation entitled Control Room, exploring the convergence of interests between politicians and the media during the war in Iraq [s5.2]. In the curator's opinion, Kennard's work 'drew the most attention from both visitors and the media' [s5.3]. In his critical analysis of the impact of

Kennard's work in the exhibition, Dr Alan Ingram, a specialist in geopolitics and security, confirms this impact, outlining how Kennard's work 'involve(s) the viewer' by forging connections between the setting (the Hague) and violence in the Middle East [s5.4]. Kennard was subsequently commissioned to remake 'Control Room' for the exhibition 'Embedded Art' at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin (2009). Its curator describes this artwork as being 'vital' to the conception of this landmark and experimental exhibition exploring the threats to public life since 9/11: Kennard's 'artistic language...has an immediate, accessible and intelligible impact on the general public. His ability to work with complex politically controversial topics and incorporate findings from contemporary news and factual reports, in order to make them understandable to audiences both within and beyond the artworld, was essential' [s5.3].

Impact 1: Public Opinion

The impact of Kennard's research on public opinion is recognised by the political groups, charities and NGOs that regularly commission images for campaigns. They include Amnesty International (2008), the Greater London Authority for City Hall (2004), Greenpeace (2009), Interface (a cultural regeneration project in Northern Ireland) and Nakba 60 (2008). The Campaigns Manager for Amnesty International confirms the work's wide impact and international reach [s5.5]. Kennard's research in the Middle East has led to further commissions by agencies and charities that seek to promote public understanding of the role of the media in transmitting the effects of conflict. The A.M. Qattan Foundation, a charity promoting education in Palestine and the Arab world, commissioned Kennard (with Picton Phillipps) to make work – in situ – for an exhibition entitled 'Iraq-How, Where, For Whom?' at its gallery, The Mosaic Rooms, London (2012). This was reviewed in the UK and the Middle East [s5.6].

Exhibitions are used by Kennard as opportunities for direct forms of social impact. Since 2005, when Kennard (with Picton Phillipps) was artist in residence at the 'EastInternational' exhibition (Norwich), he has created 'War on War' rooms giving the public access to different resources to create their own responses to the media representation of war. In 2013, the Arts Council funded one such residency at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum (Coventry), which coincided with the group exhibition 'Caught in the Crossfire: Artistic Responses to Conflict, Peace and Reconciliation'. Here, the 'War on War Room' operated as a photomontage workshop over a two-week period, achieving direct impact by working with different groups in workshops, including disenfranchised people such as young people excluded from school and refugee communities. The resulting mass of digital and manual assemblage, signage and placards was exhibited in the museum's transitory spaces and entrance to the exhibition 'Caught in the Crossfire'. The Herbert Art Gallery Exhibitions and Events Officer wrote: 'In our view, these were highly successful events which impacted directly on local communities' understanding of the ways in which the media reports conflict. The feedback which was taken after these events demonstrated to us the importance of artists working directly with groups of young people and adults utilising our temporary exhibitions and permanent collections. We are actively pursuing other residency opportunities as a result of this' [s5.7].

Kennard's works have been acquired by many galleries and museums of international standing, including the Scottish National Gallery (2007), V&A Museum (2004/11) and Tate (2007). In 2010 and 2011, the Art Fund (AF) and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) supported acquisitions of Kennard's work for the Imperial War Museum, London and the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry. In making the case for acquiring a set of montage works dating back to the beginning of his care for the Herbert, with public money, the Director of the AF stated: 'It's important these works go on public display to help provoke thought, debate and dialogue. The Herbert's Peace and Reconciliation collection is an ideal home for them' [s5.8].

Impact 2: Operations of Media

The reproduction of Kennard's work in the press and other media contexts is evidence of its sustained and long-lasting impact on the operations of the media. To take one example of many, Photo-Op (2005) has been described by The Guardian as 'the definitive work of art about the war that started with the invasion of Iraq in 2003' [s5.9]. It has taken the form of an 'original' artwork in galleries and museums including Tate Britain ('Rude Britannia', 2010; 59,821 visitors) and Imperial War Museum ('Catalyst: Contemporary Art and War', 2013–14); a much-reproduced image in diverse branches of the press (British Medical Journal, 2006; British Journal of Photography, 2008 and many others); the cover of a book (Art & Agenda – Political Art and Activism by R. Klanten et al., Gestalten 2011); an animated public projection close to the site of the Iraq Enquiry (Chilcot Enquiry) in London, organised by Stop the War Coalition (January 2011) and widely reported in the press. Esteemed campaigning journalist John Pilger employed Photo-op in his documentary, 'The War You Don't See' (cinema release/ITV broadcast, 2010), writing 'This piece occupies a vital place in the film, shortly before its end, and has been remarked upon enthusiastically across the world' [s5.10]. The image was adapted by the National Theatre, London to promote a 2009 production of Brecht's 'Mother Courage'. Guardian art critic, Jonathan Jones's assessment of this multifaceted process of remediation is that this image has had a remarkable 'influence on the way how that war is remembered' [s5.9].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Copies of all sources to corroborate the impact are available from the HEI upon request. All URLs last accessed: 22/11/13.

- 5.1) Letter from Publishing Director, Tate (dated 13/09/13).
- 5.2) Letter from former Political Affairs Officer for the United Nations (dated 7/10/13).
- 5.3) Letter from Curator of 'Embedded Art' at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin in 2009 (dated 26/08/13).
- 5.4) Alan Ingram 'Art and the geopolitical: Remapping security at green zone/red zone' in Alan Ingram, Klaus Dodds, eds., Spaces of Security and Insecurity. Geographies of the War on Terror (Ashgate, 2011), 257–78.
- 5.5) Letter from the Campaigns Manager for Amnesty International (dated 28/08/13).
- 5.6) International press for exhibition at The Mosaic Rooms, London (2012), including CNN: <<http://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/20/world/meast/iraq-artist-george-bush-shoe-thrower/>>; The Tripoli Post: <<http://www.tripolipost.com/articledetail.asp?c=4&i=8530>>; News Abah: <<http://www.newsabah.com/ar/2295/26/75385/montage.htm?tpl=21>>.
- 5.7) Letter from Herbert Art Gallery Exhibitions and Events Officer (dated 6/11/13).
- 5.8) Dr Stephen Deuchar, Director of Art Fund, announcement on the Art Fund website (31/04/11), <<http://www.artfund.org/news/2011/03/31/new-works-for-herberts-peace-and-reconciliation-collection>>.
- 5.9) Jonathan Jones, 'The Tony Blair 'selfie' Photo Op will have a place in history', in The Guardian (15/10/13).
- 5.10) Letter from Journalist and Filmmaker (dated 18/09/13).