

Hardeep Pandhal interviews Peter Kennard

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Peter: Are you in your studio Hardeep?

Hardeep: Yes! Yes I am. Thankfully I can still come here to get away from home to focus on things.

Peter: I'm in my studio. I've just been walking here. I haven't been anywhere else for the last year, haha! Going slightly mad, like all of us.

I've seen your video ['Ensorcelled English'] and I like the transformations in it, into the rap at the end and the critique of the art school. Fake right on-ness about it on the surface and what's actually going on, it's a strong piece of work.

Hardeep: Thanks, it's one of those things that comes up for me a lot of the time and perhaps something you may have been drawn to as well is that the reception can be quite mixed or it can be confusing or be misread as being negative. Or the question of where is the hope? And I sometimes struggle with that or forget why I'm doing things sometimes, in that video for example there's ambiguity between what the characters are saying. I've always been interested in trying to present complexity within an image or within a narrative, to do it justice because I think audiences are smarter than people sometimes suggest.

Peter: That's what I liked about it, you had to think about what the characters were saying and you had to think about where they were coming from. The thing you were saying about hope. I've always felt the most optimistic thing is to engage with the actual struggle, not to show some utopian end to it, which is not interesting, not powerful. I always think it's strong to go straight into the actual imagery and if the imagery seems hopeless, I think hope comes from hopelessness. Gramsci said 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will', whatever you're pessimistically thinking you're keeping it going on and on.

Hardeep: I know what you mean, and stylistically some of the references that I'm drawn towards are quite popular or even considered 'low' culturally, so for example rap music. I'm presenting it within the context of a contemporary art exhibition, and the animations borrow

from video game aesthetics or aesthetics that could be the animations you get in teaching material for example, it's quite basic. It's not there to sweep you away in terms of a visual feast. I guess it's the question of beauty or aesthetic beauty, standards of beauty, again it's this positive / negative antithesis that seems to be provoked when I've been making work. I suppose there is an element of protest within some of the works, it's not so direct but the angrier element or confrontational aspect of it comes from that urge to make a protest gesture.

Peter: Yeah, the show, 'In a Right State' at Aspex was a few months after Thatcher had been re-elected for the third time.

Hardeep: Right, okay.

Peter: So the anger was very clear and direct. The idea of showing it was a sort of protest, I put the work on this wire mesh fence that we erected in the gallery and the photos had eyelets in the corners and they were attached to the fence with ribbons, which was a reference to Greenham Common; this great demonstration by the Women's Peace Camp in 1981. Nuclear missiles were being placed at RAF Greenham Common and the women sat in front of them and demonstrated.

Every other weekend everyone was invited down to Greenham and we all put up work on the 8 mile perimeter fence around the concrete silos, where these missiles were inside. It was an amazing giant collage. I think it was one of the great artworks of the twentieth century, but it doesn't get looked at like that. You had people putting tapestries out and drawings, bits of flowers into the fence and behind the fence were these concrete death machines, so that was almost like a 3D montage in itself. That's where the idea in the exhibition came from, of erecting this fencing in the gallery and then putting prints onto it in a very non-precious way, the holes were put in the side of the picture, they weren't framed, they were just put up with ribbons to reference it. I think the fact that they were shown, they were quite heavy images, shown on a fence of protest in that sense so the hope was through that, that the protest would continue.

Vickie Fear (Aspex Curator): Can I ask a quick question, did I also see that you had Thatcher in a bin?

Peter: Yeah, I did a kinetic sculpture of Thatcher and it had her face moving backwards and forwards, it was pretty crude, there was a photograph of a skull behind it, so you saw her and then she came off to the side and you saw the skull and it went back again.

Hardeep: I didn't realise that was a kinetic work.

Peter: When looking at the slides it was on the wall as well but I think the kinetic element was in the gallery, I can't quite remember but I think it went into a shop window in a Charing Cross Road Bookshop.

A lot of the images in the show were about the rise of the security state, the nuclear state, the collapsing of the welfare state and all the things that were happening through Thatcherism and it was a few years after the miner's strike. So all those elements were in the work which was meant to be a cascade of living in a right state. Graham Budgett's work was about US imperialism and we also had John Heartfield's work in the exhibition.

People like John Heartfield and Hannah Hoch, they'd been totally sidelined in terms of the art canon and they only really came out through the 70's and 80's. Heartfield became a big influence, we showed the one in Aspek of Hitler doing that salute and capitalists putting money into his hand. It was the sort of exemplary idea of montage where you bring two images together and you create a different meaning and that was called 'Millions Stand Behind Me'. Hitler had given a speech a week before saying millions stand behind me, so Heartfield was actually using the language of Hitler and turning it on its head with the addition of images. So those images were there as a source and when they were done in the thirties the actual economic atmosphere was similar to the time when the exhibition was on. The welfare state was going, there was inflation, strikes, all the things happening under Thatcher and of course they were reflected in what's happening now with this current government, it goes on.

Hardeep: Yeah.

Peter: The fact that a gallery in Portsmouth would take it, something so direct, which had public funding was amazing. There was this sense of freedom that you don't get so much now, where there is so much corporate money put into places, some galleries are very careful about what they show.

Hardeep: There are some things now that come to mind in terms of technology for example with the kind of image play and montage and that technique, I suppose you were doing it physically and probably still are?

Peter: I am, yeah.

Hardeep: Yeah, that's something I never grew up with and nowadays in terms of the media there's so many questions around what's real and what can be manipulated through algorithms and deep learning software.

Peter: It's a double-edged thing because it's great that so many people are now working with photoshop and making montage and animations like you do, it has opened it up. But I still like physically cutting, I do work with photoshop as well. Photomontage is about cutting things together and I like the crudeness, when you look closely at the ones in the Aspex exhibition, they're quite crudely put together but I always think that encourages people to think about the breaks. It's not trying to create a smooth reality like adverts which are saying if you buy this product you'll get this wonderful life out of it.

I always liked the crudity of montage. You're bringing two things together to hopefully reveal something underneath the smooth exteriors. I remember when photoshop came in, all the art schools thought, oh wow we can get rid of all the darkrooms, the printing presses and the students can sit silently in front of their computers and won't make any mess, they'll be very quiet. Then gradually the students started demanding to be able to work with their hands again, with printing presses and darkrooms because that's a very important aspect of transforming material, doing it by hand. Then gradually photoshop became seen as being one tool amongst many, so all the art schools had to try and buy back all the materials they'd given away!

Hardeep: Yeah and now there's a trend sometimes amongst more recent generations to use older analogue equipment and that becomes glorified through fashion.

Peter: A bit like vinyl.

Hardeep: Yeah, I still feel like I've been having this relationship between drawing on paper with ink, which is what I do predominantly, and then drawing with a digital tablet. Which is similar because I'm still using my hand but you can erase mistakes or change things quite quickly and the pressure is off, and the physical act of colouring has an excitement to it or risk perhaps, there's more risk involved.

Peter: It's much slower of course, as when I did mine, in order to join two images together I had to print lots of different sizes because you can't work it out in your head, you have to actually make it, so I spent about 25 years of losing my brain in the dark room, just printing and printing whereas now you can make things bigger or smaller in a second on photoshop.

When I did the images for the Aspex show they were done with actual prints, even the Ministry of Defence used to send me photographs of missiles before they realised what I was doing with them. I used to go to picture libraries which you've probably never seen because it's all on google images now. You went to a file and you had these physical objects in the form of prints. I still think in terms of the material object. The works at Aspex were big prints made from 5x4

negatives of the originals, but I show the originals now because I think, especially young people, are really interested in seeing all the bits of sellotape and glue dropping off. I remember I showed one in a gallery and it had bits of blue stuff and a kid asked me what it was and it was the carpet that I was working on at the time on the floor and it had just got glued into the work, there was a roughness to it and I do like that.

This goes back to Brecht as well, he talks about crude thinking, and with what you were saying originally about how people say there's no hope. When showing one of his plays in the theatre he once said I'd be very happy if there were two exits, one for people who agreed with its message and one for the people that totally disagreed with it. It wasn't about bringing the audience together, it was about actually having those breaks in it so that people could think and that's the essence of a montage as a way of working. In your video I saw that, one is made to think when one is looking at it, it's not a smooth ride and that's really important.

Hardeep: Yeah, the process of going to art school, for me it was changing your outlook and perhaps unlearning things that you've been encouraged to consider as valuable; playing around with your values and encouraging critical thinking, to unpack what you're used to, or seeing behind the surface. It's quite a formative moment for most people. I do a bit of teaching here and there and now students are all on Zoom and it's a sad situation for a lot of people and for the universities and for the staff, but there's no organised resistance towards any of this, to this condition or situation. There's a lot of frustration but it's very suspect what's happening, the ushering in and out of students during this time, especially art students when they need physical space and social spaces.

Peter: Yeah, I think a lot of students are very depressed. One of the things about making art, is that it used to be sort of propagated in art schools that you're meant to sit alone in a studio and wait for inspiration to hit you on the head, which is total bollocks. It's about communal thinking, discussion, debate and looking out to the world as well. In terms of subject matter, that comes from interaction of people and you just can't get that in the same way on Zoom, it just doesn't happen. I still like the physicality of exhibitions. One of the things that's happened now with digital and the internet is that we're bombarded by millions of images the whole time, everyone's taking photos, so it's difficult for images to actually stay in the mind; you're onto the next thing all the time. It's still really important to get work into galleries that people don't expect to see in galleries work which is more political and also get it into the street because a lot of different groups, protest groups, now just advertise themselves on the internet but that's only seen by people in the bubble, whereas if you're on the street, it's seen in relation to the advertising, and the privatisation of the streets which has increased. It's really good to see something that counters that and actually surprises you.

Hardeep: Yeah definitely. I've been asked to do something that's mostly sonic, sound based, that's the invitation and it's going to be online as well so I guess we're all sort of complicit with this situation.

Vickie: Does it worry you that the audience for work in galleries can be quite limited and do you feel an obligation to put work outside of galleries?

Peter: The 'In a Right State' work began as a Camerawork project, a collective I was involved in. We did exhibitions of photographic work with text that were all laminated and had pinholes in the corner, so they didn't have a value as framed objects. Sometimes, the things I did with Camerawork ended up in launderettes or in community halls, town halls, there are ways to show in the gallery and outside the gallery. But when I think of a place like Aspex, at the time a lot of people came to it who were sympathetic and it strengthens people to see it. I think some people were Thatcherites who came but a lot of people were anti-Thatcherites who came, and seeing it in a gallery actually supports them, seeing that you can have something in a gallery that is critical in that way is really important. So I've always tried to work everywhere I can, in galleries, outside galleries, in the street, on badges, t-shirts, you name it, I don't see a hierarchy in that way.

One of the great things about galleries is that it's one of the few places left now where people have got time to look at something and actually think about it, it's a very important space. But of course galleries are becoming much more politicised now, the white male canon is being exploded you could say, in the last few years, the Tate has more women artists up at the moment than men artists. Work by Black and Asian artists that was being done in the past and being sidelined in the same way that Hannah Hoch and Heartfield in the past were sidelined are now coming into the centre, into the canon which is completely breaking away and I think that's great, very important, very powerful in terms of galleries.

Vickie: Is that something that you were conscious of in the past? Did it feel like a very white male space within art and showing your work?

Peter: Yeah, it did. Because I was working more in the alternative side, spaces like Camerawork or smaller funded galleries, I wasn't showing in private galleries, so there was always much more of a mix of men and women but there weren't and still aren't many Black curators. There were Black artists I knew who were doing amazing work in the eighties which is only now being shown again. They did get sidelined, there was an innate racism in the art world, that is obviously being questioned all the time now and that will mean different sorts of work will go into galleries and is going into galleries. The other problem now is that you've got sponsorship of galleries and a lot of sponsorship comes with strings attached. Private sponsors like work

that's sort of birth, copulation and death generalised, sort of Damien Hirst style but anything that's too specific politically they get very worried about. The central voices in our country, in our capitalist system, are that you're not sent to prison for saying or writing something or making a painting, which happens to artists and writers all over the world, you're not sent to prison but you're sidelined. You don't get many dissident voices, it's censorship by erasure, by leaving people out that are making something too direct.

Vickie: Do you feel optimistic about the future and the next generation?

Peter: Well I feel optimistic when I meet people in their 20's and 30's who are much more aware than we were at that age. I think in terms of climate and horrific racial hatred, I think they will struggle against that and actually fight it. In terms of art, I showed work with a lot of young artists at The Design Museum and they discovered that The Design Museum was hosting events for arms manufacturers so they all demanded that the gallery stopped doing that, which they wouldn't do, so they took their work out. Instead of just signing a petition, these young artists actually took their work out and showed it somewhere else, they're much more active. Also for young artists now things are so difficult financially. In terms of getting studios in London it's almost impossible for people, so they are organising together much more. This idea of individualism that can be overemphasised in art schools is being broken down by the reality of the times we are living in. Which is a bit similar to the 1970's and 80's when the [In a Right State] show was on because we were in a big struggle with the Thatcherite government, we did actually join together and find ways to work communally, and of course we're in a similar struggle now with this lot, who are becoming more and more triumphantly right wing, right up to the current police bill that's supposed to be going through.

I thought it was important to make political work because we also got the privilege of being able to do it without getting locked up or shot. It was privileged in the sense that I got a grant and the fees paid and after college I squatted. There were all these ways of living that we had, one could live on almost nothing. I was on social security for quite a long time, they had a special register for artists believe it or not, so they never found you a job, ha! All these things that made it much easier to live, you could live much cheaper as well. In the end I got a job as a night telephonist of all things, I stayed there a few years just to make enough money to make the work I wanted to make. So, economically it was a privileged time and I know for artists now it's so difficult. Then I got teaching, part-time teaching. That again is very difficult now and it's all become much more bureaucratised in art schools.

One of the things about making the sort of work I make, I don't make much money out of it. That's one of the reasons why I've taught for years because it's given me the freedom to make that work. I don't have to try and make work that might be nice for people's walls because I've

had an income, been able to raise a family on teaching and that's of course much more difficult now as well.

I actually love teaching, I see it as part of making work because one can discuss the politics of it. Sometimes if a student wants to make something very direct the tutor says well I think you should layer it a bit because that's what art is about, layering the passion that you feel and I think that's crap! If someone really knows what they want to do subject wise, I think it's great that they just go into it as hard as they can. I like having those sorts of debates with students and discussing things which is great when it's for real, it's not so easy on Zoom. I think we're living in such a state of emergency now that artists groups and people working in all different media are gonna come together more for survival and because everything is so urgent in terms of what's going on in the world, subject matter has become vital.

Hardeep: I suppose the directness is something that some people or audiences will shun because it's too confrontational or not pretentious enough. It depends really, I think there's still a degree of masking and opacity for suspense and I suppose when you're making videos that have a durational element, you can play around with that. I don't want viewers or people seeing the work, pondering too much. It needs to be divisive, which is like what you were saying about the theatre.

I guess specificity as well, it's happened to me sometimes where I don't feel like what I'm doing is that specific but then it can appear that way in the general art world because there's references to things or the characters are speaking their mind. I think even there was a time when in my bio or when people are writing my artist bio sometimes, I was always wondering why, because if I wrote British-Sikh or they wrote British-Sikh, I'm not religious, but it's something that people need to sort of declare for some reason or other and that's quite specific, but there's a reason why they need to say that because some of the work and imagery and references speak to that but that can immediately put off loads of people because it's too specific. There's a lot there and what I'm trying to work out now or devoting time to, is that if these issues are cyclic or recurring, or evolving, where does artistic agency lie in the future? What do we do essentially? In your work Peter, is there an assumption about an interpretation as a way to play with that?

Peter: A critique in a montage is usually very direct but it can go off kilter. I did one of Thatcher as Queen Victoria which was in the Aspex show. I used an old photo of Queen Victoria and put Thatcher's head in because Thatcher talked about going back to Victorian values as a good thing.

Hardeep: Oh right yeah, yeah, 'Thrift'!

Peter: Yeah, 'Thrift'. It was a newspaper cover and a poster and someone told me, I went to a cartoon gallery opening and there were these Tory types there and one said to me that Thatcher loved it and had it in the bog at number 10! I don't know if it's true but that's what they said, so that's a failure because she thought oh great, I'm Queen Victoria! Haha!

Hardeep: One of the things that actually reminds me of, is that there's this mimicry. For example, with figures like Boris Johnson, well they're caricatures anyway so you can't really caricaturize them and there's a strategy in which they incorporate any criticism or any satire. So that's a thing I'm conscious of when I'm working with imagery that looks somewhat satirical. It's hard to avoid there being parties that can work with it, it's a funny thing.

Peter: Yeah, they're backed up by their image however critical. Trump was like that.

Hardeep: Exactly, yeah.

Peter: Whatever was thrown at him, it bolstered him up however critical. It's important to try and make something that's more iconic than that but it's difficult because we're in this culture of, image after image, images of fame whether it's critical or not, it's just another image. I didn't do much on Trump because like you say, how do you out trump Trump, they're beyond satire. Boris Johnson is a figure of satire, with the upper-class twit image that he has which is very difficult to satirise.

Vickie: We're so used to seeing the kind of imagery that you're using alongside a headline or alongside text that is telling people what that image says or what opinion to have of that image, whereas it's different with an artwork. Is that something that you think about?

Peter: Yeah, I've also got another practice where the work is very much gallery based, which isn't so direct and it's more about the physicality of the materials, I've done images on pallets and installations with newspapers and charcoal on images. I started off as a painter, so I've still got that feeling of working with materials where there is a total surprise at what happens when you work by hand with paint or charcoal, you can't legislate what's going to happen in the same way as you can with photography.

When I teach I never advocate a way of working because I think the most important thing is for someone to find what they feel passionately about and then realise they can make art about it. The things I've done that are more object based are usually about poverty, the chasm between the obscenely rich, who are getting richer, in the last year the number of billionaires has tripled but I don't make an image of that I make an image of the poor. The other work I do isn't so direct, it's still political but in a different way, in a slower way. I always thought I might be able to

join the two together. I've done quite a lot of books. I like getting work out in books because that's available to people quite cheaply and it's possible to make a narrative with montages and those other sorts of images that aren't so direct but I can bring them together in book form. I like the idea of talking about history, I did a book called 'Visual Dissent' and that's a history of 50 years from when I started making more political work but I did it as a history of events rather than my own personal history and then I could merge these different ways of working together.

In terms of art teaching it's about allowing different ideas to come in and stimulating people with different things, it's important to have a basis in art history as well, I might be a bit old-fashioned but I never liked the idea of 18 year olds coming to art school and then being told they've got to read Derrida or something out of the blue rather than knowing that Cubism came after Cézanne. I think that's really important because one is part of a community being an artist, it goes back in history, I really feel that, that's what can keep one going and when you're an artist it's keeping going that's the important thing. It's about not expecting too much from what's going to come from it, except what's going to come from you in the work.

Vickie: Is that something you think about Hardeep, where you come in that canon of art history and how you relate back to previous artists' work?

Hardeep: A little bit. I suppose when I was a student, there were only a few artists I remember looking at, like Basquiat haha. I guess they're quite romantic like pop-stars and kind of like icons so it's easy to find inspiration in that. Also they're quite tragic figures, heroic in some ways. And then I spent my time mostly reading and edifying my own consciousness with different ideas from different sources, historical, cultural studies, yeah different things! I try to keep up to speed with things and I do a bit of teaching on the side as well and that again helps me be part of conversations that I wouldn't be otherwise. It's interesting with the more recent turn towards recuperating or respecting or giving space to some of the artists in the UK from the Black art groups from the 80s, and feeling somehow kind of connected with that even though I wasn't there and I didn't really know about any of them until recently, even in art school. I try to do what I think is contemporary art. I don't see myself as belonging to a particular movement, I'm not aware of it, I probably am. That's the funniest thing just being aware of a movement that didn't really materialise in the way that it should have perhaps and then with a 30 year gap.

Peter: Yeah, yeah. Well that is the racism of the art world where there were a whole group of really strong Black artists who were sidelined and they were also sidelined because their work was quite political. It was about race and one's work is sidelined in the art world in England especially if it's too directly political, one's got to put up with that, it's right across everywhere now, in terms of the media, newspapers are all totally corporate, the main TV channels are totally corporate, you hardly ever get strong dissident voices there, they're sidelined now they're

just not put out there or else they're destroyed. My work didn't get much of a mention in the official art world until quite recently really, which didn't worry me because there are different audiences, the political audience is very different from an art audience and I think it's great to try and cross-over between the different audiences.

Hardeep: How do you find ways to keep going? Because I'm conscious that young people and younger artists are sensitive to being liked, literally on things like Instagram. How does one let go of that and still maintain a practice without the usual or the expected results of it?

Peter: It is very difficult if you make work and it's not shown. There's no easy answer to that. Keeping working is the important thing, to find enjoyment in the creating and in the making, the excitement. What I've seen of your work, it's got that feeling that you're creating while you're making it, it's not like it's all completely sussed out, the thinking and the making feel very embodied and that's the way to continue and to get out there and relate the work to other people, not just the art scene but to people in different cultures. When I started, I was very lucky there were tonnes of left-wing magazines in the 70's and 80's, alternative magazines, trade union newspapers, all these different groups and one could just send them pictures and they'd use them. Now you can put it on the internet but to me it's not quite the same because I was brought up with the tangible stuff. Also collaborating is great, I did a whole lot of work with an artist called Cat Phillipps, we wanted to do some stuff about Iraq after the invasion to keep people's minds on it. There was one we did of Tony Blair with a mobile called 'Photo Op' with an explosion behind him and that one did get quite well known through the internet. Whenever Blair dares to pop up it tends to appear.

Hardeep: Oh yeah, yeah haha!

Peter: When you google him it appears, it must really annoy him! It's quite difficult for images to stick these days because there's so many images. Even the photo of the little boy who drowned on the beach, the refugee, that image had an effect on people but not for long, people were back to all the old disgusting talk in the newspapers about immigrants taking our country. We're living in a very disgusting society more so than ever. The thing is, if one goes on fighting and gets involved in groups that are campaigning for real social change and equality, then I think there's ways to keep going. I've always thought art didn't change anything on its own, it's not gonna change the world but if you align it with groups that you believe in, it might be Black Lives Matter, it might be the CND, Greenpeace, or countless others, your work can be used as the visual arm of protest.