

Kennardphillips, *Photo Op*, 2007



Photo Op by kennardphillips at *Catalyst: Contemporary Art and War* exhibition at IWM North, 2007. Photograph: kennardphillips/Reuters

Materials Frame: wood. Support: paper. Glazing: Perspex. Medium: printing ink

Dimensions Frame: Depth 18 mm, Height 600 mm, Width 590 mm

kennardphillips are Peter Kennard and Cat Picton-Phillips who have worked together since 2002, initially to make art in response to the invasion of Iraq. Their work is shown in a range of contexts, online, in galleries and on protest marches. They describe their work as an integral part of political activism, a direct means of communication: 'the visual arm of protest'. *Photo Op*, depicting Tony Blair taking a 'selfie' in front of a huge explosion, has become an iconic image. It was produced in

response to the anger they felt at the UK Government's decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003, in the face of widespread public protest. They describe their need to create something that reflected and validated this public opposition, sentiments they felt were not reflected in the mainstream media at the time.



Top Iraq inquiry: Protesters demonstrate against Tony Blair in London. Digital image courtesy of globalresearch.org

Bottom Tony Blair with mobile phone, 2007. Digital image courtesy of AFP

The Guardian Jonathan Jones

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Tony Blair grins for his photograph as he holds up his smartphone to take a selfie. He's delighted with himself and what he's done. Behind him, black smoke and hellish flames bloom over an arid landscape. To many people, this grotesquely comic moment says it all – only Blair would think that's a good photo opportunity.

He did not, of course. This is not a real scene. Such is the reputation of the former prime minister and winner of three general elections that it somehow needs saying that he did not actually pose for a selfie in front of a blazing oilfield in Iraq.

What he did do is pose with his phone, apparently taking his own picture, at a photo opportunity with a group of naval cadets during the 2005 general election campaign. Political artists Peter Kennard and Cat Phillipps were combing through scores of pictures from the *Guardian* when they came across this slightly bonkers-looking portrait of a politician on campaign and realised it was just what they needed in their quest for a picture that told the truth about the Iraq war. "It was born out of two years of hard work to pull down the propaganda machine," say the artists. Using Photoshop they replaced the innocuous cadets with an apocalypse of fire. A satirical icon was born.

Photo Op, as their photomontage is called, has become the definitive work of art about the war that started with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. From that war's beginning, this manic digital collage states succinctly what a large number of people feel and believe about Blair's responsibility for the chaos that ensued. It says in a nutshell what protesters claimed at the time and what has become a generally accepted version of history – that Tony Blair was a monster charging into Iraq without scruples. Look, there he is, taking a selfie in front of his handiwork. Such is his notoriety that viewers really can take this as fact.

"Some people do," acknowledges Kennard. "He's maniacal enough for people to believe he actually would be happy photographing an oil explosion."

If an iconic picture is one that speaks to our feelings, this anti-war montage is an icon of our time. It was popularised with a little help from street artist Banksy when he included it in a Christmas grotto installation on Oxford Street, London. Campaign magazine praised it as an advert. Now it is on view

at the Imperial War Museum in Manchester in an exhibition about contemporary art and war. Although the show includes conceptual responses to war by such art world luminaries as Steve McQueen and Jeremy Deller, it is “Tony Blair’s crazed selfie”, as a headline put it, that has grabbed media attention.

This is a startling success for an artist who has dedicated his imagination to opposing war since he was radicalised by Vietnam in the early 1970s. Kennard is a veteran of British radical politics and art who for four decades has been using photo collage to fight the powers that be. When he started, the only way to join different pictures together was with scissors and paste on the kitchen table. A famous political collage by the German artist Hannah Hoch is called “Cut with the kitchen knife”. Kennard created many memorable images in support of CND using old-school cut-and-paste. In his 1980 version of John Constable’s painting *The Hay Wain*, the cart crossing a placid East Anglian stream is loaded with cruise missiles.

That gem of satire is in the Tate – but the coming of Photoshop seemed to leave Kennard’s cut-and-paste art behind until, in the run-up to the Iraq war, he formed a partnership with Phillipps. They work under the name kennardphillipps and use digital collage to campaign against war and capitalism. Their work can be downloaded free of charge – they delight in people making their own versions of *Photo Op*, even what they claim was an uncredited adaptation by the National Theatre to promote a production of Brecht’s war play *Mother Courage*. “It’s available. It was used by Stop the War. It’s been on book covers, it was even used by the British Medical Journal.” In fact it’s everywhere except on billboards owned by CBS in Manchester, which refused to carry this picture as an advert for the Imperial War Museum.

As Kennard explains, Photoshop is very different from the old tradition of kitchen-table photomontage that runs from Hoch and John Heartfield in Weimar Berlin to his CND collages of the 1980s. “With cut and paste the images are more disparate”: they don’t fuse into one image. The strange and devastatingly effective quality of the kennardphillipps portrait of Tony Blair is that it really does meld into a luridly believable scene.

The collective unconscious accepts this picture as true. This is very bad news for Blair. Any hope that history might vindicate him is fading fast. History is partly made by images. Ironically, kennardphillipps were not interested in making history when they created their digital image. They wanted to change the world, not record it: “We were trying to portray Iraq as it happened and not wait until afterwards and make a history painting.”

In spite of their intentions, a history painting is what they've made. Art could not stop the war in Iraq. It can influence how that war is remembered. There's no use Alastair Campbell putting a grim-looking photo of Blair on the cover of his diaries and writing that it reflects Blair's seriousness and sincerity as he took Britain to war. The image that stands as popular history is the one of Blair taking his "maniacal selfie" in front of the flames of devastation.

The New Statesman 22 October 2013

A response from Peter Kennard and Cat Phillips: Censorship is flourishing in our "public spaces"

Their Tony Blair "selfie" was recently banned from public display after advertisers refused to display the image. Here Peter Kennard and Cat Phillips speak out about the censorship of their work.

Ours is a story exposing the absolute loss of democracy in British urban space: what the British public is allowed and not allowed to see in the streets. We're talking about images. Our photomontage "Photo Op" depicting Tony Blair taking a "selfie" in front of a burning oil field has just gone on show at Catalyst - the first major exhibition at the Imperial War Museum's (IWM) national contemporary art collection in Manchester.

Since 2013, the image has been shown at Tate Britain, at Banksy's Santa's Ghetto on Oxford Street and in numerous other exhibitions. It has been printed full-page in the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, has been bought by the National Galleries Scotland, the V&A and the Imperial War Museum for their collections, and used in numerous ways across print and online media globally. It's even been used by the British Council in an exhibition of British art in New Delhi, India.

It is popular.



Photo Op in the window of Banksy's "Santa's Ghetto", Oxford St, 2006. Digital image courtesy of kennardphillips

The IWM decided to use it as the lead image in a campaign to advertise their new exhibition. The adverts were to go on bus shelters and hoardings in and around Manchester. But it didn't happen.

Shortly before the show opened, IWM informed us that the companies who own the advertising space, CBS Outdoor and JCDecaux, were refusing to allow the IWM to use the artwork in the advertising on any of their sites.

As they own the majority of the sites in Manchester (and according to a government report from 2011, 50-70 per cent of all the outdoor advertising sites in Britain), the IWM were forced to scrap the entire campaign (along with the Blair “selfie”), and choose an image more to the corporations’ liking.

The reason CBS gave to the IWM was that “they will not run anything ‘deemed to be political’ nor ‘involving explosions’ – on ‘public transport media’”. JCDecaux declined to give a reason and refused to reconsider.

CBS’s corporate interests stretch worldwide. Sexist and violent images sell products and are a mainstay of advertising across the companies’ many thousands of hoardings, buses and Underground stations. It has been shown on CBS adspace in the London Underground (all of whose advertising space is licensed to CBS) is a poster for Frederick Forsyth’s latest book, *Kill List*, which uncritically depicts a drone flying out of an explosion, firing a missile in the viewers’ direction. It runs with the strapline: “IDENTIFY. LOCATE. DESTROY.”

Try and show an artwork that is prophetically anti-war and has enjoyed huge public popularity, even within the context of a major new exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, and the message suddenly becomes anti-business. It doesn’t serve company profits.

Perhaps, CBS thought that major companies advertising their products might have subsidiary companies that manufacture weapons? We cannot know for sure. Better to cause no offence and *certainly* better not to offend Blair, the Middle East peace envoy (*sic*) and popular speaker at corporate functions.

Our work has been censored by a large corporation before.

In December 2003, we were asked to make an image symbolising “peace on earth” as part of a public event organised by Bob Geldof. The commissioned images were to be projected onto buildings around London - ours on Trinity House in the City of London. We made a photomontage based on a painting of the Virgin Mary in the National Gallery. We turned her halo into a peace symbol and her face into an image of the earth. The image evokes the position that we are far from a life of peace on earth while giving a locus for hope in both the CND symbol and the original painting itself.



Peter Kennard and Neville Brody, *Peace on Earth*, 2016. Digital image courtesy of Peter Kennard and Neville Brody

Before any projection happened we were told that our image had been banned. Instead a photograph of Nigella Lawson’s mince pies was projected onto Trinity House. At that point we learned that Orange was the company financing and running the event. Following the controversy that followed the banning of our image, Niamh Byrne, head of Media Relations at Orange, wrote to the *Guardian* that Orange had decided “small children and grandparents would not appreciate” our image. The Orange mission statement reads: “We are ready to push boundaries and take risks, we are always open and honest, we say what we do and we do what we say, we want to make a difference to people’s lives”.

We title the work “Peace on Earth, banned by Orange”.

Corporations whitewash their reputations by sponsoring the arts on the one hand and censoring art on the other. It is a commonplace that a corporation will only sponsor what it deems to be good for its image and business. Edgy is good for companies with a young demographic, but only so far - not to the point of an actual critique of our lords and leaders, be they politicians or businessmen. Certainly nothing suggesting that peace might be worth more than war.

CBS is a corporate monolith that has powerful interests in politics and business (it is a major TV channel in the states, heavy in political content, as well as being a big player in the global entertainments industry), but the fact that CBS actually controls what we see on the posters in our so-called “public space” is less commonly known.

Artists are imprisoned all over the world for making work about injustice and for criticising their governments. In Britain the censorship of dissident artists appears benign, but is more insidious. The penalty is more likely to be that their work is marginalised rather than that their life is threatened. This can result in self-censorship rather than state censorship. Artists subconsciously know that there is an invisible line that must not be crossed if they want to make public art which, nowadays, is mainly sponsored by corporations.

Nearly every surface in all our public spaces has become a gallery for the corporate art of advertising. To participate in that public space as an artist you either have to be sponsored and pointless or put your hood up and work illegally.

The gagging bill is nearly on the statute books: an example of the government's further attempt to curtail freedom of speech and public debate. But in the same way that CBS has censored our image for an exhibition at the Imperial War Museum (not exactly the most subversive institution in Britain) the bill surely shows that both our political and corporate leaders are aware of the danger to their wealth and power from a global public with a desire for dissent.