

GAO

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Jakob Brugge
2001-2006
18 April - 25 May 2019

When the so-called 'Bush-Blair 2003 Iraq memo' was leaked and reviewed by *The New York Times* in 2006 it confirmed what the global multitudes who marched against the invasion of Iraq already believed: the Bush administration would have gone to war irrespective of whether or not the United Nations Security Council had found evidence that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Get Saddam and you get the terrorist networks; get the nuclear weapons and you get Osama bin Laden, orchestrator of the attacks on the World Trade Centre.

Opening reception:
6-9 pm, Wednesday 17 April
2019

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'The start date for the military campaign was now pencilled in for 10 March,' the memo's author David Manning, Prime Minister Tony Blair's chief foreign policy adviser, noted. Paraphrasing Bush's directives, he recorded that 'Our diplomatic strategy had to be arranged around the military planning.' Blair's strategy? Emphasise the real and present danger posed by the Iraqi regime to members of parliament and the public in the buildup to the invasion, a mistruth that earned him the moniker 'BLIAR'.

From the *casus belli* to the release of the memo, the title of Jakob Brugge's exhibition at GAO, 2001-2006, might designate a period ending with the memo's outing and beginning with the attacks on the World Trade Centre. As an exhibition at a contemporary art gallery, such periodisation mimics that of an institutional museum survey to designate significant developments in the life and practice of an artist. Is this a survey of Brugge's work produced circa 2001-2006? What was happening in his life? Couldn't it just as feasibly be anachronistic work produced in 2019 to mimic a near-period style? For many of my own generation, and Brugge's, slightly younger, this period marked an awakening of political conscience.

If periodisation's institutional framing considers biography to illuminate artistic practice, an essentially romantic historiography, in

2001 Brugge, aged eleven, had no practice, made no work. So 2001–2006 is concerned with reconstruction: of mapping personal experience, a period that for Brugge coincides with puberty and the metamorphosis of his male child body, onto art and world historical military events.

The narrative particulars of Blair's collaboration with Bush shouldn't be controversial. A non-partisan committee of civil servants, academics, diplomats, and business leaders, as well as external advisors, spent years conducting the Iraq Inquiry to consider evidence of witnesses, documents and open source material to arrive at the truth. Contrast this collective, empirical apparatus of knowledge to what has become known as 'The Rumsfeldian Theory of Knowledge'. Questioned in 2002 whether Iraq had supplied or was willing to supply terrorists with weapons of mass destruction, Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Secretary of State from 2001–2006, replied, without irony:

Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know.¹

That same year, writing in *Foreign Affairs* magazine on military statecraft, he argued, a variation on his previous statement, that in a new age of terror the greatest threat facing America was the threat of 'the unknown, the uncertain, the unseen, and the unexpected'.

In his video work *The Unknown, the Uncertain, the Unseen, and the Unexpected* (2019), a scrolling text version of a performative lecture first delivered at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main earlier this year, Brugge characterises Rumsfeld's employment as Secretary of Defense as a 'period of unning'. 'The unning of things,' Brugge's text reads, 'is an attempt to dislocate understanding, to complicate by opening up possibility.' Threats, risks, catastrophes and ignorance itself are

¹ See Christopher Daase and Oliver Kessler, 'Knowns and Unknowns in the "War on Terror": Uncertainty and the Political Construction of Danger', *Security Dialogue*, vol. 38, no.4, December 2007.

particular forms of danger in a post-9/11 political landscape.
Evidence is irrelevant.

Rumsfeld's chosen enemy, Saddam Hussein, Brugge informs us, advanced his own comparable confounding strategy. But instead of locating it in absence he weaponised the positive. Between 1990 and his capture in 2003, Saddam employed at least three doubles, homomorphs who underwent plastic surgery, to make broadcast and public appearances:

Saddam in Baghdad.

Saddam in Mosul.

Saddam in Ramada.

Saddam in all three places simultaneously.

As a live circulated image Saddam was omnipresent and omniscient; as a body he was present as, to use Brugge's term, 'decoy', a mimetic device to draw in his people and draw out his aggressors. 'Saddam,' Brugge writes:

whether intentionally or not turns himself into an actor. In employing these decoys he calls his own status into question. He turns himself into an idea, a role that can be filled, a head of state with multiple heads, but only one face.

Saddam's staged image politics is one of surplus positive knowledge. Rumsfeld, however, by claiming knowledge and non-knowledge as equally constitutive of political decisionmaking, instantiated, Brugge implies, a far deeper epistemic shift: The attack on the World Trade Centre, Rumsfeld said, 'created the kind of opportunities that World War Two offered, to refashion the world'.² Imagined risks in the name of homeland security effected collapses of the actual into the virtual and the implausible into the possible. What was at stake was a modelling of the future itself. 'This is a world,' Brugge's video posits where the 'imagined and suggested are as good as real...

² Cited in Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts, *Afflicted Powers, Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, Verso, 2005, p.80.

They put ideas into the world to invert the burden of proof. They urge us to figure it out, to disprove the fictions they have constructed’.

If this sounds like conspiracy theory it is because, as the critic Sianne Ngai reminds us in *Ugly Feelings*, conspiracy theory itself is an epistemology underpinned by fear. The conspiracy theorist, which Ngai identifies with a particularly male form of contemporary knowledge production, is one who is unable to decipher wide-ranging, even transglobal technological and political structures. ‘The disposition to theorise,’ Ngai writes, ‘finds itself aligned with paranoia, defined... not as mental illness but as a species of fear based on the dysphoric apprehension of a holistic and all-encompassing system’.³

Brugge is no conspiracy theorist. Located precisely in this space of knowledge and non-knowledge, his exhibition *2001–2006* constructs its own fiction populated by a selection of ornate, symbolic and U.S. vernacular objects. Both ‘props’ and ‘evidence’, as Brugge calls them, they are forms of burdensome proof to counteract fear and paranoia.

Early in Brugge’s film there’s a neat segue between Saddam’s homomorphs to Roger Caillois’ famous essay ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’ and roadside American vernacular architecture built in the form of commodities. Creatures that mimic their visual environment, Brugge tells us, following Caillois, dissolve figure and ground, acting with violence or passivity for the purposes of offensive hostile activity or covert disappearance. To mimic, whatever its purpose, is an expression of desire.

This roadside vernacular that Brugge brings into relation with Rumsfeld has its own particular aesthetic-political history. In separating exterior form from interior function, buildings such as ‘The Long Island Duckling’ departed from the European modernist ideal that form follows function. For the architectural critic Peter Blake in *God’s Own Junkyard* (1964) it was the expression of ‘America’s affluent uglifiers’, a squandering of manifest destiny’s resources, whereas in *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972/77) Robert Venturi,

³ *Ugly Feelings*, Harvard University Press, 2005, p.299.

Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour perceived it as proto-postmodern. Ornament in Brugge's exhibition, whether in the guise of ceremonial flags, architecture in miniature, or, indeed, a defense department silk robe, are nationalist symbolic surfaces.

Apparently, Brugge tells us, Rumsfeld attributed the U.S. defeat at Pearl Harbour to a 'failure of imagination'. 'How,' Brugge asks, 'do we mitigate or manage failures of imagination?' After all, 'all the knowledge in the world won't save the smartest guy in the room'. Turning fear back against itself, Rumsfeld, Brugge's video work suggests, is haunted by the things that he failed to imagine. These are the things that keep him up at night: the attacks on the World Trade Centre and, occurring at the end of his term as Secretary of Defense, the collapse of global markets.

Brugge's goading of this *great* American – the humorous soundtrack in the gallery accenting the pathos – is not dissimilar to the wry pleasure the philosopher Slavoj Zizek took in adding a fourth category to 'The Rumsfeldian Theory of Knowledge': the 'unknown knowns'; the things we don't know that we know. This, precisely, was the Freudian unconscious, "the knowledge which doesn't know itself", as the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan used to say'. 'In many ways,' Zizek wrote, 'these unknown knowns, the disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to, may pose an even greater threat.'⁴

Assuming the display style of evidential neutrality, Brugge's work situates the viewer in near-recent history. This history's proximity is why it might seem not to bear scrutiny. Viewed in a gallery, 2001–2006 historicises evidence and activates narratives differently than if it appeared in a military museum or any municipal institution. By bringing the artistic production and framing of knowledge to bear on Rumsfeld, Brugge destabilises knowledge's claim to the known for our contemporary moment that aspires to nothing more than the total colonisation of the unknown knowns – desire itself.

Jonathan P. Watts

⁴ See 'Iraq's False Promises', *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2004, among other articles.

A peculiar symptom of the destabilization of democracy caused by Brexit and the presidency of Donald Trump – among other things – is how both Blair and Bush have reemerged in public life as voices of 'reason' and 'civility' (I was not alone on the left in thinking that things could not possibly get worse than a Labour leader collaborating with a U.S. President to go to war). Maintaining that the British people were lied to, Blair is a vocal advocate for a second referendum, while Bush, although not explicitly naming Trump, noted in a recent address at the George W. Bush Institute in New York that 'Bigotry seems emboldened. Our politics seems more vulnerable to conspiracy theories and outright fabrication' and that discourse has been 'degraded by casual cruelty... Argument turns too easily into

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Score
2019
Speaker System, Audio, Framed Ink Jet Print
Dimensions variable

Team Player
2019
Cotton
75 x 600 x 10 cm

The Unknown, The Uncertain, The Unseen, and The Unexpected
2019
Digital Video
17:05 min

Trophy Case
2019
DOD Issue Silk Robe, Architectural Models, Trophy Case
195.6 x 120.3 x 25.6 cm

Jakob Brugge (b. 1990 in Los Angeles, CA, USA) currently lives and works in Frankfurt am Main, DE. Solo exhibitions include *Fences*, fffriedrich, Frankfurt am Main, DE (2018); *Double Talk*, Johanne, Frankfurt am Main, DE (2018); *Jakob Brugge*, Human Resources, Los Angeles, CA, USA (2016). Selected group exhibitions include *Sink Hole*, Tor Art Space, Frankfurt DE (2018); *Plazoletto*, Sky Line Plaza, Frankfurt DE (2017); *Man of Average Means*, Human Resources, Los Angeles, CA, USA (2015).