

unassuming contribution stands out. Discretely shot, a single motif runs through the works, each entitled *Handpunch*, 2014–15, named after and displaying the workplace installation of a biometric time clock produced by the US company Schlage (a company name that probably, even if misspelled, borrows from the German plural of ‘schlag’, meaning ‘punches’, ‘blows’ or ‘hits’; how apt). The melding of these two devices – the time clock, a mechanism mostly used to discipline a low-waged labour force, with a data collection technique that, as the artist reminds us, stems from the history of policing and ‘criminal indexing’ – is little short of bleak.

While the two works are physically separated, it is hard not to spot resonances of this complex of control and discipline in Simon Denny’s *Amazon worker cage patent drawing as virtual Aquatic Warbler cage* (US 9,280,157 B2: “System and method for transporting personnel within an active workspace”, 2016), 2020, presented in the sombre confines of the West Gallery alongside works by Mohamed Bourouissa, Shadi Habib Allah, Liz Magic Laser and Yuri Pattison. Where Denny’s *Amazon worker cage*, as its extended title suggests, tends towards both excess and exactitude, Habib Allah’s *Dropping the 10th Digit*, 2018, eight photographs presented on lightboxes, suggests a more pared-down but no less desolate view of life and labour sketched by the breadline. Arranged in a pentagon with soft-seating filling the middle, the five-channel video installation by Laser, *In Real Life*, 2019, tracks the rise of international gig work in the labour market, while variations on a pecuniary motif are mirrored in the counterpart pairing of Bourouissa’s take on the minting of a fiat coin, with the mining and circulation of Bitcoin at the centre of Pattison’s *the ideal* (v/ O.3.2), 2015–.

Just offside from all this, to use a mixed sporting metaphor, is Sondra Perry’s *IT’S IN THE GAME ’18 or Mirror Gag for Projection and Two Universal Shot Trainers with Nasal Cavity and Pelvis*, 2018, one of the highlights of the exhibition. Surrounded by chromakey blue, screens and basketball training equipment, the video and installation are a complex reflection on various historic, contemporary and continuing mechanisms of racialised exploitation in imperial global centres. Fatigued, outraged, frustrated, irreverent, Perry and her twin brother, Sandy, discuss and repeatedly question the predatory practices of the EA Sports franchise on sporting teams such as Georgia Southern, where Sandy played basketball, as well as traversing and confronting the provenance of museological objects and cultural artefacts held at the Met in New York and the British Museum in London.

Finally, it would be unfortunate to overlook *Asia One*, 2018, a feature-length film by Cao Fei, on view downstairs in the museum’s auditorium. Portraying a justified listless melancholy of two JD.com workers, Cao’s surreal and uncanny picture of the lifelessness of an automated warehouse is irregularly punctuated by restless choreographic interludes. It is hard not to leave this film, and with it the exhibition itself, with a sense that the surpassing of capital, land and labour by information, knowledge and technology, might, just might, be all a little too anachronistic.

‘Post-Capital’ travels to Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, 17 September to 15 January.

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‘Documents from the Edges of Conflict’ installation view

Documents from the Edges of Conflict

James Hockey Gallery, Farnham
1 December to 25 February

Two black flags – the flags of anarchy – are flying over ice fields in large matching prints set one above the other, the lower print being displayed upside-down. Santiago Sierra had the flags placed at the North and South Poles, as a staking-out of the entire globe, as signs, he says, of his disgust with borders and the befouling of the landscape by nationalism, and they take their place in an intelligently curated exhibition, ‘Documents from the Edges of Conflict’, in which flags and borders frequently recur. Indeed, the show as it runs down the long space of the James Hockey Gallery has its own ‘poles’ with contrasting works seen at either end, both made by artist duos.

MacDonaldStrand show a three-screen video called *No More Flags*, 2021, comprising stills of right-wing nationalist demonstrations in the UK and the US, in which the flags and banners carried by the protesters have been whited out. The camera sometimes tracks across the stills, and sometimes takes a blown-up fragment of an angry face or a macho pose. The soundtrack, which can be heard throughout much of the gallery, is of shouted English nationalist and EDL slogans. kennardphillips, by contrast, use the stock listing pages of the *Financial Times* to rough out images of well-known war-mongering politicians which are ripped through to reveal either fragmentary images of their victims or anti-war demonstrators. The most aggressive of these evoke the fantasy that such figures are held accountable for their crimes, so that the tears become wounds in their faces, which are torn apart to highlight those that they have killed, maimed or bereaved, directly or indirectly. Both works are antagonistic but their targets could not be more different: for kennardphillips, the enemies are political leaders, while the gathered protesters are on the side of virtue and peace; for MacDonaldStrand, the protesting mob is held up for condemnation, as the aggressive chanting of nationalist slogans produces an allergic reaction in the presumed gallery-goer: Judith Butler’s performative assembly set against Gustave Le Bon’s psychotic mob, perhaps.

Another contrast is seen across the gallery at the midway point in two straight photographs that stand out amid a range of conceptually inflected and performative work. On one side, a poignant image by Paolo Pellegrin – a Magnum photographer, no less, and thus a representative of documentary humanism – showing

a young woman in an elaborate dress celebrating her coming of age, while facing the brutal architecture of the US border wall with Mexico. On the other, a small Wolfgang Tillmans image of a potentially sublime scene – rough waves on the open sea – is a charged symbol of a realm across which no physical lines can be drawn (or built). Each stands alone as an exemplar of wider photographic practices and can be no more than that, since both photographers usually work with elaborate sequences in which meaning emerges across contrasting images.

Between these four points, much work is displayed which deals with issues of borders and conflict in self-reflexive ways. Ori Gersht, for example, shows two time-lapse videos of the Israel-Palestine border in which the image is blurred or obscured for most of the run, leaping into clarity only for an instant, as if the border issue itself can only be fleetingly held in the mind, and as if the means for its representation are chronically inadequate. Sarah Pickering shows uncanny photographs of a mocked-up urban space used by the police for riot training: the presence of a job-centre facade and a shuttered shop branded ‘Dickens’ suggests some political awareness on the part of the police as well as the photographer. George Barber videos actors channelling Tony Blair, imagining him as both traumatised and self-righteous, haunted above all by his loss of the public’s ‘love’. Steffi Klenz (also one of the curators) offers elegant photographs of constructions, based on an image of a German concentration camp, which tend towards gridded abstraction. Mona Hatoum in her moving 1988 video work *Measures of Distance*, stands out for the complexity and self-reflexivity of her work, reading letters from her mother, as they are parted by civil war, as she reflects on exile, family love and tensions, and also on privacy and the ethics of using the very images that Hatoum builds into the work.

The exhibition shows work made by artists who were mostly formed in the postmodern era, which of course reflects a much wider wave of practices that in similar ways deals with nationalism, borders and conflict. What, implicitly, does such work want? In its critical take on the use of reproductive technologies, it seeks to vitiate the power of national symbols and patriotic feelings. It gestures towards a world without conflict and national pride, and with freedom of movement. This is the dream of Moshin Hamid’s 2017 novel *Exit West*, in which migrants travel from nation to nation simply by stepping through doors, and it is the nightmare of the conservative political theorist Carl Schmitt



kennardphillips, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 2014–21

in which enmity, and with it politics, are dissolved in a global liberal mush. Yet since there is no reasonable expectation that any of this will happen, artists offer works that gesture towards such a Utopia, or pieces that mourn its absence, as in the ‘ephemeral monument’ by Alfredo Jaar to the thousands who have died trying to cross the US-Mexico border.

Things have arguably changed among the artists who followed this generation: the postmodern and ‘end of history’ armour was cracked wide open, revealing a highly conflicted and perilous cultural, political, economic and ecological field. Social media transformed culture in unanticipated ways, some liberatory and some invidious. Much documentary became marked by a revamped global humanism in a rejection of postmodern precepts. In some of this work, there is also a revival of antagonism – of the picking out of an enemy – especially in acts of iconoclasm, and thus of a more explicit and activist politics, both radical and reactionary.

Julian Stallabrass is the author of *Killing for Show: Photography, War and the Media in Vietnam and Iraq*, Rowman and Littlefield, London 2020.

**Bryan Giuseppe
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27.01.2022 – 27.03.2022

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