

Sweet Sweet Spot

a companion text to Rachel Ara's *American Beauty (a Trump L'oeil)*,
by Laura Hudson

If you picked this text up then you were probably standing on the sweet spot ...

A Trompe L'oeil, "Deceives the Eye" ... what of a Trump L'oeil?

This text was commissioned by artist Rachel Ara to accompany her work in situ, with the aim of bringing into public domain some of the discursive, free ranging conversations the artist was having with the people around her, specifically around the idea of sweet spots and their political parallels. "Work is made through a series of conversations so I wanted to share some of the ideas discussed that opened up the work more for me".

The sweet spot is a location or combination of characteristics that produces the best results. Knowing where the sweet spot is, is something of a connoisseurship, a kind a rigorous knowing acquired through practice. The batsman knows exactly where the bat should strike the ball for maximum impact, the opera singer knows exactly where to stand on any stage for her voice to be heard at its best, and the puppeteers know just where to throw their shadows to take our eyes off a scene change.

The sweet spot was once designed to provide the King and Queen, sitting side-by-side, with the best experience. However, travelling in wave form, both sound and light converge at a mysterious point just behind the pair, a hidden vantage point behind the throne*.

The Sweet Spot, here in The Barbican? Looking out through the window, a Trumpellian vestige rolls around a windy corridor - dystopian - humorous - iconic - ironic? A brutalist past with a futuristic beginning, brutal because it's materials are what they say they are, fit for purpose and without pretence. Futuristic because the brutalists were designing for a Utopian future in which humanity could be accommodated and all traces of the past be erased. However, medieval palimpsests (wax writing tablets overwritten by future generations) show us what happens when we try to wipe the slate clean, traces of the past remain in the fabric of the thing, there is no such thing as forgetting, and erasure, it turns out, can be a particularly profound form of preservation.

"Erasure is merely a matter of making things disappear: there is always some detritus strewn about in the aftermath ... some reminder of the violence done to make the world look new again". (Dillon, Brian. 2006, Tate Etc.)

Today, for the most part, governing powers adhere to structures of high capitalism, orchestrated toward a single vantage point - the 1%. It is in their interests that policies are made, wars are waged and democracies are served. When the marginalised majority begin to show signs of unrest de facto figureheads are put forward to shift focus, frame the blame, and pretend to overturn establishments. On fighting terrorism D. Trump said "When you see the other side chopping off heads, waterboarding doesn't sound very severe." This Week with George Stephanopoulos, 2/8/16

When the sweet spot is engineered toward the '**power behind the throne**', we might point to what George W. Bush referred to as "the deciders" or Donald Trump calls the "deep state". Closer to home our own brand of political sweet spot is perhaps best illustrated by the satirical TV programme *Yes Minister*. The organ grinders sit behind the puppets; Sir Humphrey Appleby to Bernard Woolly in *Yes Minister*: "Bernard, Ministers should never know more than they need to know. Then they can't tell anyone. Like secret agents, they could be captured and tortured". Woolley: "You mean by terrorists?" Appleby: "By the BBC, Bernard". As the figureheads are rolled out what they see is choreographed and what they smell is fresh paint. As if in a pantomime we want to shout ... its behind you! But there really isn't any point. Mainstream media tell us that our politicians need to go on TV if they want to engage president Trump. It is a soap opera for an audience that isn't really Trump, rather the people he pretends to serve and the people to whom he is indebted. Truth has become a political strategy, cross-wired and engineered so that it is harder for us to tell which way is up.

Susan Sontag's *On Photography* opens with:

"Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still revelling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth.....Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it." (Sontag, S. 1977).

It seems we must shape our tools and forever after be mesmerised by the tools that now shape us. Beyond the photograph that "passes for incontrovertible proof" the wire frame matrix is fleshed out, a hybrid fiction posing as the real thing, embedded into the fabric of the thing. No longer photographic, the pixel-generated scene takes on the form of its surroundings, chameleon-like it plays host to the **reminder**, the residue after an event, trapped behind a window, inside another dimension. On the sweet spot all is as it should be, no glitches, nothing visible from previous erasures, nothing to give the game away.

Sam Mendes's Film *American Beauty* was written by Alan Ball, who recalls the moment of seeing a bag dancing in the wind as the original inspiration for his screenplay, which in turn became the inspiration for Ara's *American Beauty* (*a Trump L'oeil*). Beyond the visual reference there is a also deeper resonance. In the film the protagonist is shot in the back of the head, precisely because he dares to walk out of the cave of projected shadows. To break with the social pact and pretence of what his life really is. He reaches out to open a window onto other worlds, after all, his world was only fronting 'this entire life behind things'. Another filmic reference can be found in the Matrix, a black cat crosses a doorway, when it crosses again, it is the déjà vu that signals that the matrix has been altered by the machines. In 1895 the experimental French poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, said that 'everything in the world exists in order to end in a book', in 1977 writer and political activist Susan Sontag challenged his assumption with her belief that 'Today everything exists to end in a photograph'. 40 years on we could be tempted to challenge Sontag herself - with everything existing to end flicking on a screen; a sound bite, a disempowered glimpse that passes by. Unlike the printed page or the analogue photograph, without a physical presence, a meme; transient, mostly untraceable, viral yet temporary, is open to erasure and expiration, but capable of hitting multiple targets, unseen. This new cave of flickering shadows is hosted by giants - harvesting every trace of us and serving up what they want us to know, one by one.

The holographic principle tells us that everything exists as information and nothing is ever lost...

we just need to know what we are looking for. The persona of Trump deflects from the very real and devastating changes to policy being irrevocably done. Sweeping deregulation means that measures put in place to protect people, resources, wildlife and their environments are now gone.

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References

- *In reference to a conversation with **Joe Robson** from AVR London, whose work using CAD to map perspectival and anamorphic visualisations in the work of Holbein (The Ambassadors 1533) and the Theatre of Sebastiano Serlio, (1545), was published in Computers and the History of Art (CHArt) 1996. <https://www.gim-international.com/content/article/how-historians-are-now-using-computer-technology>
- **Dillon, Brian.** (2006) The revelation of Erasure. Tate Etc. issue 8: Autumn 2006 Accessed March 29 2018 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/revelation-erasure>
- **Sontag, Susan.** 1977, On Photography <http://www.lab404.com/375/readings/sontag.pdf>
- **Stéphane Mallarmé** (1842-1898) A major French poet and critic whose experimental work inspired many of the revolutionary artistic schools of the early 20th century. Mallarmé changed the way poetry was viewed, writing the first poem mediated by cinema and anticipating concrete poetry in his obsession with layout.
- **American Beauty**, 1999, [DVD]. Sam Mendes. Dir. USA: DreamWorks The title of the film refers to a breed of roses that while pretty and appealing in appearance, is often prone to rot underneath at the roots and branches of the plant. According to his Oscar speech, screenwriter Alan Ball was sitting at the World Trade Centre plaza when he saw a paper bag floating in the wind and was inspired by it to write the film, which was originally conceived as a stage play. (IMDB)
- **The Matrix**, 1999 [DVD] The Wachowskis Wr. Dir. USA
- **Yes Minister**, 1980-1984, TV series, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) UK. The political satire ran very close to the bone, but as the series progressed, perhaps due to its popularity, became more focused on the comedy - sometimes the only way to tell the truth is through humour.

Notes

The **holographic principle** as a theory was first proposed by physicist Leonard Susskind in the 1990s.

The original concept of **a power behind the throne** (a person or group who exercise the real power behind a high-ranking office) was a medieval figure of speech referring to the council or councillor, out of common sight, but whose influential whisperings had the ear of the monarch.

The term **deep state** was defined in 2014 by Mike Lofgren, a former Republican U.S. congressional aide, as "a hybrid association of elements of government and parts of top-level finance and industry that is effectively able to govern the United States without reference to the consent of the governed as expressed through the formal political process." wiki

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