

# The (Syn)Aesthetics of Conspiracy

Andreas Önnerfors

Associate Professor / Reader in Intellectual History  
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Douglas Eklund and Ian Alteveer, eds.  
*Everything is Connected: Art and Conspiracy*,  
exhibition catalog Metropolitan  
Museum of Art / Yale University Press,  
196pp., 222 color ills., \$50 cloth.

John J. Curley, *A Conspiracy of Images:  
Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter and the Art of  
the Cold War*. Yale University Press, 296pp.,  
32 color and 136 b/w ills., \$65 cloth.

**I**T APPEARS AS IF ART AND CONSPIRACY are intrinsically linked. Art uncovers the power of imagination and establishes the visualization of strong semantic relationships: a depiction, a representation, a performance of the hitherto unseen, the transformation of the imagined or real object into a subject/body of perceivable aesthetics. Art thus expresses an immediate interconnectedness between perception and picture and immerses the viewer into connections never seen before.

Between September 2018 and January 2019, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York hosted an exhibition titled “Everything is Connected: Art and Conspiracy” at the Met Breuer, which attempted to expose “two kinds of art about conspiracy that form two sides of the same coin.” Accordingly, the exhibition was divided into two parts, one dedicated to artists exposing deliberately hidden dimensions of socio-economic realities from public record, and the other featuring artists “who dive headlong into the fever dreams of the disaffected, creating fantastical works that nevertheless uncover uncomfortable truths in an age of information overload and weakened trust in institutions.” Thus, the curators operated along the tiny border between exposing true conspiracies and conspiracy theories. Visiting the exhibition, this approach caused however more confusion than clarity, possibly reflecting the epistemological complexity of conspiracism as such, or a premeditated ambiguity created

intentionally by the curators. A highly impressive exhibition catalogue together with an exemplary website and a string of exciting public events, some of them available online, contributed to a deeper understanding of the issues addressed. At the Met Breuer it was nevertheless possible to extract several artistic strategies of picturing the (syn)aesthetics of conspiracy, whether true or imagined, in particular when comparing to John Curley's work on Warhol and Richter, which I will return to.

**A**rriving to the subject from an academic perspective, my first impression was that the artwork could have been analyzed and categorized more properly in line with contemporary scholarship. Since 2016, researchers in Europe have been united in the research network Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories, which has already achieved a remarkable scientific output. The social psychologist Jan-Willem van Prooijen, for instance, has published a short and snappy book, *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*, in which he lists “five critical ingredients in order to qualify as a conspiracy theory”: *patterns, agency, coalitions, hostility, and continued secrecy*. In 2009, Chip Berlet suggested four similar factors: *dualism, scapegoating, demonization and apocalyptic aggression*.

**I**t could have been worthwhile to investigate how these ingredients are translated into artistic expression, since they appear to bridge the (syn)aesthetic uncovering of factual conspiracies and the conspirational (syn)aestheticization of fictional causalities. The first and overarching observation is that of syn-aesthetics. Since con-spiracies, imagined or true, (etymologically) presuppose the ‘breathing together’ of their wicked wire-pullers, it does not surprise that the artistic response is to picture or craft toxic togetherness,

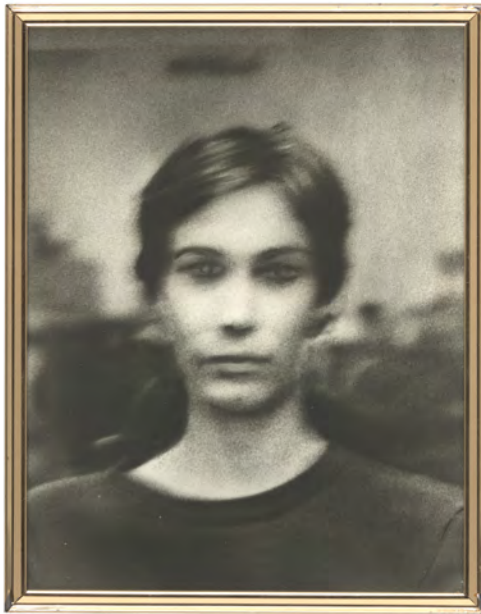
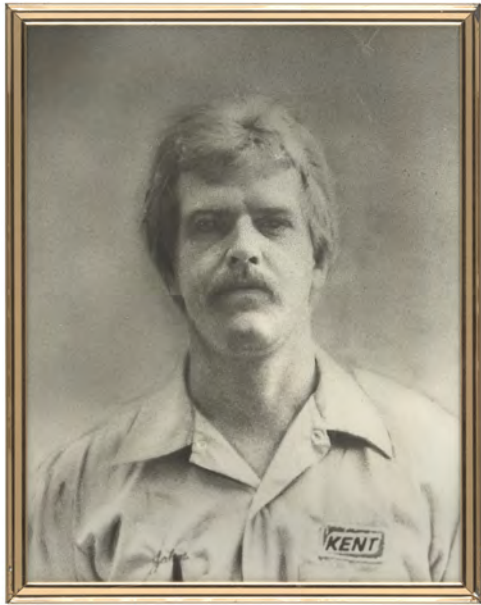
outrageous overlaps and acid amalgamations. The ultimate representation of connections is the *network*: it combines our need of pattern recognition, to detect agency and it connects dots in order to visualize or imagine coalitions, hostile to us and operating in secrecy. The horizontal network, argues Jasib K. Puar in *Terrorist Assemblages*, is perceived as a “monstrosity of perverse projectiles and chaotic presences.” There is an “anxiety to manage rhizomic, cell-driven, nonnational, transnational terrorist networks”—an anxiety that is at play regarding other state or non-state actors as well. Another prominent metaphor of secret power is the triangular pyramid, revealing a vertical and hierarchical top-down structure of threat, where the lower executive levels are unaware of the ruling machinations at the top. However, as a phallic metaphor, the pyramid (as an artificial construction) is far easier to emasculate than the network that appears to be more organic and unpredictable. Mark Lombardi's artwork in the exhibition uncovers such rhizomic network structures or possibly metastases that have spread in the body politic: the unregulated transnational flows of black capital that create a mesh of interests and interrelations between legal and illegal enterprises across the globe. Conspiracy as much as conspiracy theories are interwoven with US “paranoid styles of politics” (as Richard Hofstadter argued in 1964)—domestic and foreign—since at least the early 1800s. It does therefore not surprise that a host of artists have embarked upon projects to visualize multiple “-gates” such as the Iran-Contra affair, the illegal detention of “enemy combatants” at black sites, or coverups of gross human rights violations such as in the Abu Ghraib prison or caused by drone warfare and targeted killings. Jenny Holzer was represented in the exhibition with her iconic moving red fluorescent letters with quotes from war-zone interrogations and reports retrieved from



Emory Douglas, (American, born 1943). *The Black Panther* (back cover), September 21, 1974 (I Gerald Ford am the 38th Puppet of the United States). Collage on newspaper. © 2018 Emory Douglas / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Peter Saul, (American, born 1934). *Government of California*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas. 68 × 96 in. (172.7 × 243.8 cm). Collection of Brian Donnelly, New York. © Peter Saul. Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York.



Jim Shaw, (American, born 1952). *Martian Portraits*, 1978. Photograph, Gelatin silver prints. Each Image: 14 x 11 in. (35.6 x 27.9 cm). Each Frame: 14 1/8 x 11 1/8 in. (35.9 x 28.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Vital Projects Fund Inc. Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 2016. © Jim Shaw. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.



Freedom of Information Act releases. I had the privilege to see a far larger exhibition with Holzer's art a few weeks earlier at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams (MASS MOCA), where she tried to make aesthetic sense of declassified documents and artefacts. While I understand that this is a serious concern of U.S. politics, challenging any positive identification with and undermining trust towards the government, I wonder if such aestheticizations might be counter-intuitive and contribute to a sort of de-politicization of illegal state action. By turning human rights violations into art that aims to uncover conspiracies, they suddenly are on par with art that plays with fictional imaginations of conspiracy theories and can thus foment widespread 'deep state'-paranoia that currently is nurtured by excesses such as the far-right QAnon conspiracy theory. Holzer and other artists certainly cannot be blamed for this; rather, it demonstrates the damaged state of contemporary public discourse and of engaging in politics altogether.

Closely related to the network are representations of assumed *causality and control*. Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck's *UNstabile-Mobile* (from the series *Modern Entanglements, U.S. Interventions*, 2006), visualizing economic interests in Iraq, is a fascinating piece that sets conspiracy three-dimensionally in motion—one movement at one end of the mobile will affect the entire structure. The wirepuller is yet another manifestation of control and manipulation, such as illustrated by Emory Douglas' untitled 1974 artwork in which Gerald Ford is represented as a string puppet controlled by a host of corporations. Toxically tentacled entanglements of conspiracy are almost archetypically expressed through the *octopus* (or the mythological sea-monster Kraken). We do not exactly know when in

time the octopus was associated with conspiracism, but the link dates back to at least the 1700s. Peter Saul's *Government of California* (1969) is an ambiguous pop-art psychedelic example of tentacle-pornographic aesthetics in which Martin Luther King, Jr. is depicted as a black octopus with a halo, but yet completely and inseparably interlaced with the evil forces of economy, politics and drugs. Such animalizations have another sci-fi sub-category: alienization. Jim Shaw's *Martian Portraits* (1978) elaborate David Icke's conspiracy theories of a ruling class of shape-shifting alien lizards beneath human skin. Yet another strategy of syn-aestheticizing conspiracy is the *collage*, which through its particular technology of assemblage establishes immediate interconnections between apparently unrelated images and events. Lutz Bacher's *The Lee Harvey Oswald interview* (1976) is an elaborate exemplification of manic pattern-recognition, uniting several tessellation-techniques. Press cuttings, photocopies, hand- and machine written texts assembled with sticky tape create images of stereotypical DIY investigations (stapled on pinboards and interconnected with red threads) an army of conspiracy theorists could have produced in garden sheds, garages, basements or attics, those typical man caves in which predominantly male recruits make meaning out of an increasingly complex ontology. Conspiracy seems to be intrinsically a male genre, also in arts (only a minority of the works in the exhibition were produced by women).

It is perhaps an irony that theories developed in caves frequently produce cavernous representations, harking back to the etymology of the German noun '*Geheimnis*,' ('a secret') and verb '*heimlich*' ('secret' or 'private'), which is related to the home (*Heim*), to what happens inside four walls (the 'secret' etymologically denotes something that is isolated and separated

from). Apparently strongly influenced by Foucault's view that institutions produce disciplinary control, Mike Kelley's *Educational Complex* (1995) models an architecture with sinister labyrinths and hidden subterranean structures. By entering these buildings, you would be immersed by the fear and anxiety that is produced inside. This existential angst is multiplied infinitely in Sarah Anne Johnson's *House on Fire* (2008), a peep show into the surreal and deeply disturbing world of CIA-sponsored mind-control programs. One of the pinnacles of the entire exhibition was the descent into Jim Shaw's cave *The Miracle of Compound Interest* (2006), a 1950s gas station covered by interwoven red spiderwebs. When entering the gas station, you are immediately drawn into a conspiracy of three garden gnomes framed by two large crystalline formations and convening ritually around a fireplace and fluorescent material placed on a cushion. Approaching them on the mosaic-masonic pavement resembles an initiation into their incomprehensible and primordial cult. Thus, we are reassured that in the end, concerning conspiracies real or true, we know that we don't know anything. But we might also act upon the assumption that we know something. The artistic expression of this dim state of potentiality between knowing and not-knowing is *blur*, a fuzziness that at once creates distance and proximity, and thus togetherness as an option.

It is here the artwork of Gerhard Richter and Andy Warhol comes in. Locating both artists and their production within a shared ontology of the Cold War, John Curley points out that they also shared similar techniques to illustrate and uncover paranoid tensions of their time. I remember that when seeing Richter's blurred photograph *Onkel Rudi* (1965) at the Wallraf Richartz museum in Cologne almost three decades ago, it made such a deep

impression upon me that I decided to become a historian in order to explore the Nietzschean promise of a past that can intervene in the present. Richter enables the imagination of the contemporaneity of the non-simultaneous. In the age of the Kennedy assassination, the Cuban missile crisis and finally the moon landing, pattern production and detection were on an all-time high in everything between grainy photographs, hidden assassins on amateur movies and Jackson Pollock's action painting (according to van Prooijen, this was a watershed in analyzing the psychological susceptibility to conspiracy theories).

Curley devotes an entire chapter to explore "Paranoid styles: Warhol's and Richter's conspiracy theories of painting." The main argument is that the "pictorial ambiguity [as] one of the hallmarks of Cold War visuality" inspired both artists to explore a paranoid style acknowledging a "dynamic between history and fantasy" which had the potential to "dismantle the rigid visual and ideological structures of the Cold War" nurtured by nuclear anxiety. Warhol's obsession with Campbell's soup can paintings reveals the intricate relationship between consumerism and U.S. patriotism, ascribing an agency to the soup cans and its brand in creating "history paintings that account for the Cold War contest over meaning" and simultaneously referencing and repressing cold war anxieties.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Richter started to turn photographs into paintings, forcing "viewers to question received notions about appearances and reality." These images "thematize the conspirational nature of images and historical narratives" and "address the clandestine nature of the conflict and its resistance to stable representation." Richter's *Uncle Rudi* "suggests a fluid notion of history"; he is "a transhistorical figure, existing in both moments and so in neither



Sarah Anne Johnson, (Canadian, born 1976). *House on Fire*, 2009. Mixed media. 31 × 33 × 45 in. (78.7 × 83.8 × 114.3 cm). Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Purchased with the assistance of Michael F.B. Nesbitt, 2009. © Sarah Anne Johnson.

Sarah Anne Johnson, (Canadian, born 1976). *House on Fire (detail)*, 2009. Mixed media. 31 × 33 × 45 in. (78.7 × 83.8 × 114.3 cm). Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Purchased with the assistance of Michael F.B. Nesbitt, 2009. © Sarah Anne Johnson.



Lutz Bacher (American, born 1943). *The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview*, 1976. Collage in 18 parts, 11 × 8 ½ in. (27.9 × 21.6 cm) each. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel and Anonymous Gift, 1999. Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. © Lutz Bacher.



moment,” at the same time revealing both West and East German ‘incapacity to mourn’ and to confront its Nazi past (and at the time divided present)—a shared conspiracy to willfully forget the trauma and simultaneously accuse each other of it. Curley seems to assert that the ambition of Richter’s art is to liberate Germany out of this paroxysm (towards unification?). Both Warhol and Richter are engaged in new forms of allegorical history painting full of “visual puzzles” which “allow the depicted image to conspire against itself.” By “connecting various pieces of disparate evidence into a narrative,” active viewers of their art are empowered “to give form and coherence to an unstable world” and to confuse “the anxieties and utopian desires of both ideological sides” of the Cold War conflict. At the same time, the meaning-making of art is unleashed beyond any artistic intentionality and authorship, the viewer turns into a co-producer of meaning, anticipating post-modernism. Curley suggests that such an ability even can help to “correct the ideological blindness of the present.” Being equipped with “a conspirational mind” enables to “reimagine alternative positions [...] whether artistic or political.”

I must admit that I do not entirely share Curley’s enthusiasm. Whereas conspirational imagination certainly can develop potent (visual) counter-narratives to existing power structures, there is an ever-present threat of their fallacy and exploitation for unintended purposes. We cannot hold art accountable for the erosion of our contemporary political vocabulary saturated with the language of conspiracy. But both the exhibition at Met Breuer and Curley’s study of Warhol and Richter are important reminders of their intriguing interrelationship. <sup>1</sup>

## References

- Berlet, Chip. *Toxic to Democracy. Conspiracy Theories, Demonization and Scapegoating*. Somerville, Mass.: Political Research Associates, 2009.
- Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories in Europe*, 2016. [conspiracytheories.eu](http://conspiracytheories.eu), accessed 28 January 2019.
- Everything is Connected. Art and Conspiracy*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met Breuer), 2018. [www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2018/everything-is-connected-art-and-conspiracy](http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2018/everything-is-connected-art-and-conspiracy), accessed January 28, 2019.
- Hofstadter, Richard. “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s Magazine* (November 1964), pp. 77-86.
- Jenny Holzer. North Adams: Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), 2018. [www.massmoca.org/jenny-holzer/](http://www.massmoca.org/jenny-holzer/), accessed 28 January 2019.
- Puar, Jasib K.. *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- van Prooijen, Jan-Willem. *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*. London: Routledge, 2018.