

Holzer has continued to recycle the texts she developed, but has added only other people's words to her lexicon since 2001. Her LED displays have become increasingly painterly: the 20 curved panels of *Purple*, 2008, and the 12m-long ground-level work *FLOOR*, 2015, present the words with such speed, so much overlay or such distracting light effects that we cannot easily read them. These difficulties of comprehension may ride on the back of this being familiar content to be manipulated, but they also hint at the essential illegibility of the censored confidential US government files which Holzer has depicted in recent years. There, as Holzer says, 'lack of content is the message'.

The redaction images have followed their own path towards the painterly, from silkscreens in 2004 to the black, Malevich-like 'Water-board' series, 2009-10, in which the authorities' elimination of almost all the text comes close to creating a monochrome, to the most recent works here which animate the surface through textured applications of paint not traceable to the original documents. The titular *Shifting to Softer Targets*, 2014-15, is a good example, its geometry set in a flickering sea of marks and a pattern of crosses which seems to indicate an earlier, less thorough, redaction. A contrast might be made with how the work of Barbara Kruger, perhaps the artist most like Holzer, has developed: her presentations of advertising and news language may have become bigger and more architectural but they still force us to read the words in our face. Holzer has not, though, used paint when revisiting her own writings. That seems right, allowing the painted works to refer to Suprematism as representing an optimistic period that crashed, analogous to the pre-Guantanamo US, and to spin off some of the Cold War co-option of Abstract Expressionism into representing the indomitability of the human spirit.

One room is something of an anomaly in this account. The text of *Lustmord*, 1994, deals with the use of sexual assault as a weapon of war in the Balkans – the title might be literally translated as 'rape slayer'. Holzer originally showed this as writing coloured by women's blood, and the presentation at Bruton is just as charged: parts of text can be glimpsed on classificatory labels looped around human bones. This makes *Lustmord* – in its relationship to artistic language (in this case, sculptural) and its lack of legibility – a forerunner of Holzer's move towards the unreadable. As such, it is a chronological anomaly which sits well here.

Holzer, then, continues to push forward into potentially problematic territory in her quest to expose, if not the truth, then its more abstract obstructions. To quote a Truism: 'Ideals are replaced by conventional goals at a certain age' – at 65 Holzer has not yet reached that age, and looks unlikely ever to do so. ■

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## Josh Kline: Freedom

Modern Art Oxford 22 August to 18 October

For two months in the autumn of 2011, Occupy campaigners took over Zuccotti Park in the heart of New York's financial district. Objecting to social and economic inequalities, the Wall Street protesters were driven by a profound sense of disillusionment with the current political system. For US artist Josh Kline, much of Occupy's momentum seemed to stem from a deep disappointment with the Obama administration, which many had believed would usher in a new era of hope and change. It is one of the key themes underpinning 'Freedom' (all works 2015), the dark, dystopian installation at the centre of Kline's first solo exhibition in a public gallery.

Standing in a dimly lit room loosely modelled on Zuccotti Park are four mysterious figures: equipped with guns and body armour they are ostensibly riot police, but each one wears a Teletubby mask, lending them a strange, ominous presence. Like Teletubbies, screens are embedded in their stomachs; each one plays *Privacy*, a video in which protesters' faces are digitally mapped onto those of former police officers who read scripts culled from social-media feeds. Amid a vertiginous stream of jump-cut edits are musings on state surveillance, human rights and CIA torture, all interspersed with trivial tweets and trending hashtags. The authors of these digital missives operate in an unregulated sphere where freedom of speech is assumed. But here their words are broadcast from the bowels of sinister agents of the state, raising the question of who is listening to whom and to what end. The murky world of state surveillance is further addressed by the nearby animation *Patriot Acts*. Here, an eagle clutching a key (the logo of the US's National Security Agency) combines with graphics from Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. As the eagle soars through a blue and red 'O', we are reminded – with little subtlety – that the NSA's domestic spying programme, revealed to the world by Edward Snowden in 2013 (Editorial AM384), occurred on the watch of the 'hope and change' president.

Kline's uneasiness with the US administration is articulated in the video *Hope and Change*, which revisits Obama's inaugural address of 2009. Employing a process of real-time face substitution, the president's features are digitally superimposed onto those of Reggie Brown, a professional Obama impersonator who reads Kline's reimagined speech with gusto. While Obama's oratory is perfectly mimicked, the message itself is one of naive utopianism. In this alternate reality the president admits that 'the New Deal has been replaced by a raw deal' and that the real enemies 'are those who profit from misery'. He vows to hold Wall Street criminals to account and ensure that corporations and government cannot monitor citizens' personal communications. But for all the dreamy promises of fixing the economy and finding robust solutions to the housing and financial crisis, everything about the video oozes artifice. Perhaps it is the glitchy nature of the digital face substitution or that it resembles a computer game – or maybe it is simply the implausible rhetoric. Kline's Obama is a puppet, speaking the words of another. This then reflects the heart of Kline's critique: that modern political leaders are inevitably compromised, and even those elected to office on promises of hope and change seem not to be immune.

The works comprising 'Freedom' are set in what Kline describes as 'the soft dystopia' that we all now inhabit, which for him began with the financial crash of 2008. But, that the social and economic chaos of today began long before this is alluded to in *Crying Games*, a video in which George W Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Tony

Jenny Holzer  
*Lustmord Table* 1994

**Josh Kline**  
*Hope and Change 2015*  
installation view



Blair are shown incarcerated in cells, sobbing to camera: 'Oh God, I'm so sorry, all those people!' cries Bush; 'I'm so sorry, forgive me, please,' weeps a contrite Rumsfeld. While the nature of their transgressions is undisclosed, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the existence of Guantanamo Bay and the atrocity of 9/11 are surely in view here. The truth is that many of the problems addressed in this exhibition are rooted in the events of 11 September 2001. Kline has captured something of the post-9/11 zeitgeist – a world where real hope and change seem a far off possibility. But where then may they be found? It is a question to which Kline has no answer, but it has to be based on more than wishful digital fantasies. ■

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## Benedict Drew: KAPUT

QUAD Derby 27 June to 6 September

'KAPUT' is an exhibition that is almost gleefully free of context or interpretation. Rather than entering to a panel of introductory text, the viewer is instead treated to an oppressive, sensory overload of light and noise immediately upon crossing the threshold to the gallery. In this small antechamber, with its deep red lighting and clashing noise from the two sections of the exhibition, Benedict Drew sets the tone for the overall experience, clearing the viewer's mind, putting them on edge through the immersion, preparing them for the experience to come.

Moving into the exhibition proper, the giant spectral face of Richard Branson gazes out over the room. Branson is presented as our God-king and this is his altar, complete with sacrificial offering beneath him, and flanked by dual projections of his saxophone-wielding herald. Cables sprout through the holes where Branson's eyes should be, connecting to and thus drawing attention to each of the speakers in the room, affirming the importance of sound to this work.

Four such speakers are situated in the corners of the room, embedded within gold foil-covered rock-like structures that give the appearance of breathing as the sound is projected from them, rendering them as alien, biomorphic objects as they play the unnerving soundtrack provided by the saxophonist. This is complemented further by the sound created from feedback that is generated as cables directly meet the screens of two monitors. These monitors provide some context for Branson's ascension; they play a looped and reversed shot that has been appropriated from a Virgin Galactic promotional film. Out goes the uplifting music and the

**Benedict Drew**  
*KAPUT 2015*  
installation view

talking heads speaking of the utopian aspects of commercial space travel, and in comes footage of a CGI Virgin Galactic spacecraft dropping down to earth. It is a violent image that evokes the all-too-real crash of Virgin Galactic's SpaceShipTwo earlier this year – Drew's commentary on the hubris of space travel as a billionaire's hobby.

The Virgin Galactic connection affirms 'KAPUT's place within the wider Grand Tour cultural programme across Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, with Drew looking forward rather than back, positioning Branson as the 21st-century grand tourist. By doing so, the artist implies that in spite of societal and technological progress, some things are still very much a case of 'same as it ever was' with the patriarchal, wealthy white male as our cultural better whose personal travels provide enlightenment across society.

Moving into the second part of the exhibition, the viewer is again greeted by a hostile environment, enveloped in droning noise and darkness while a solitary film plays. The shirtless torso of a lone man is shown engaging in what appears to be some sort of ritualistic behaviour, convulsing and shouting guttural, violent noises that are sometimes audible, sometimes not. The figure is all veins and tendons, flexing and stretching in aggressive, unnatural-looking ways. In a close-up shot, his back and shoulders appear as a living geological feature, the pores, freckles and other imperfections becoming an abstract, biomorphic landscape while the creases on the back of his neck, as his head jerks back and forth, further this dehumanisation in a ritual of metamorphosis.

As with the portrait of Branson, the eyes, or lack thereof, become an important focal point, since we see the hollow voids where our anonymous protagonist's eyes should be. During this passage, he appears to stare directly at the viewer in a confrontational, fourth-wall breaking pose, involving us in the ritual, not allowing for passive observation. The introduction here of abstract elements, scratched and repeated text and a heightened score tell us that the ritual reaches its climax as this figure completes his metamorphosis. He functions as Branson's acolyte, his ritualistic metamorphosis presumably enabling him to comprehend the new knowledge brought back from Branson's 'grand tour in space'.

Drew takes the idea of the grand tourist and pushes it into the absurd, with the grand tourist as a figure of societal and cultural progress becoming an object of cultish worship. In this particular instance, there is also the pervading sense that it has all gone horribly wrong, from the oppressive noise of the score to the evisceration of the sacrificial offering at Branson's altar. Yet Drew also acknowledges the absurd with a degree of humour, with the vaguely humanoid figure on the altar appearing as a neon mess of silly string and viscera presided over by Branson's eyeless gaze; the punchline in a horrible joke. ■

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