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# ***Barthes' Punctum for The Extremely Online: Internet Vernacular at Paved Arts***

Madeline Bogoch analyzes the multifaceted work of Clint Enns

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January 22- February 27, 2021

## ***Internet Vernacular and Conspiracies In Isolation***

Clint Enns

"In this habitually unary space, occasionally (but alas all too rarely) a "detail" attracts me. I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value. This "detail" is the punctum."

- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*<sup>1</sup>

"The internet is an alien life form."

- David Bowie<sup>2</sup>

Browsing through *Internet Vernacular*, an archive of found images by media artist Clint Enns, is a bit like playing that children's game "what's wrong with this picture?", a visual puzzle which presents an image with a logical flaw and challenges participants to identify it. Within *Internet Vernacular*, the askew feature is less certain, more of an ineffable eccentricity that defines the photos as endemic to the digital age of image saturation and oversharing.

Enns excavates his particular brand of vernacular photography (a catchall term for photos taken for non-art purposes) from abandoned online photo albums, reassembling and contextualizing them on Instagram under the Internet Vernacular moniker. The artist's recent exhibition at PAVED Arts features a slideshow of images from the archive, as well as an artist book titled *Conspiracies in Isolation*. The slight yet incisive publication contains both found images and photos taken by the artist, alongside essays on the conspiracy theory QAnon, among other things. Appealing to a particular subsection of the alt-right base,

this internet-born fringe theory contends that a satanic cabal of liberal elites is secretly controlling the nation.

With some degree of exception, pre-internet found photographs, sourced from thrift shops or flea markets, often depict scenes from family vacations, birthdays, and other equally wholesome events. Their online counterparts, or at least the ones collected by Enns, feel a shade trashier, with the ubiquitous presence of cameras capturing more offbeat or vulgar snapshots. One photo shows a young woman in a tube-top pouring a can of light beer into a patriotically emblazoned Big Gulp mug, which Enns has titled *Make America Great Again*. This image in particular captures the nebulous aesthetics of right-wing populism, which serves as a touchstone for many of the photos included in the show. Another image depicts a toilet paper stand shaped like Elvis Presley and a handwritten price tag. The image, called *Elvis Lives*, does symbolic double duty in the pandemic; in addition to referencing the classic conspiracy theory that Elvis faked his death, and the unfortunate reality that he died on the toilet, it also conjures the rush of anxiety experienced last spring when panic-buying led to a dearth of toilet paper in stores. The ensuing climate of hysteria illustrated the fragility of our sense of security and created the prime conditions for conspiracy theories, like QAnon, to gain traction amongst those overwhelmed by anger and fear.

Striking a personal if not always earnest tone, the essays in *Conspiracies in Isolation*

reflect on the climate of truth through the flashpoint of the pandemic and rise of QAnon. The cultural cocktail that Enns conjures reflects the bizarre combination of ennui and anxiety that has characterized much of the past year. At one point, as he describes Q's followers desperately inventing vague confirmations of Q's omniscience, he reminds us that "hindsight is 20/20." It's a luxury that Enns has not afforded himself, as many of the themes evoked in the work, such as the pandemic, anti-maskers, and the murder of George Floyd, are achingly fresh in the social consciousness. There are risks to working so close to the zeitgeist, but Enns navigates this dicey terrain well, with an idiosyncratic attitude that's both clever and provocative.

At one point, during an essay titled "Resist the Truth," Enns underscores the paradoxical task of disproving even the most far-fetched claims by conspiracy peddlers like Q. The difficulty lies in what scholar Jodi Dean refers to as "the fugitivity of truth," which suggests that regardless of what is known, we will always chase the unknown down a receding horizon line.<sup>3</sup> In many ways, Q feels like the natural conclusion to the parallax of truth which has been exacerbated in the past few years. Recently, the movement has migrated from the deep recesses of online chatrooms to the front and centre of the political stage. This became evident when, after being urged by the President, legions of his supporters, many brandishing Q shirts or flags, stormed the United States Capitol in a failed attempt to overturn the U.S. federal election results. The campaign of disinformation that led to the

insurrection was proliferated through social media. Following the events at the Capitol, Trump's Twitter page was removed, a long-overdue gesture from the company, which, similarly to all other major platforms, has failed to meaningfully address the circulation of misinformation and hate speech thriving in their domains.

In a puzzling turn of events, PAVED Arts and its staff's personal accounts were removed from Facebook in response to Enns' critical reflections on QAnon, which were ostensibly conflated with an endorsement. By a stroke of luck, the pages were eventually restored, though the processes by which these appeals take place are frustratingly opaque. Regardless of the extent to which these platforms feign otherwise, they exercise full power over the content on their site. The impasse often presented regarding content moderation is that it sets a dangerous precedent to allow companies like Facebook or Twitter to censor political figures, but incidences such as this arbitrary de-platforming serve to underscore this faulty logic: the platforms already have all the power and wield it regularly. Their reluctance to apply their own rules transparently and equally is not out of a cautious preservation of the sanctity of discourse, but a demonstrated cowardice to act on hate speech beyond clumsily performative gestures for the sake of optics.

Enns supplies the images in the artist book with titles such as *Craigslist Pizzagate*, and *The "Truth About Hilary*, which go a long way to tie in the air of contemporary paranoia that



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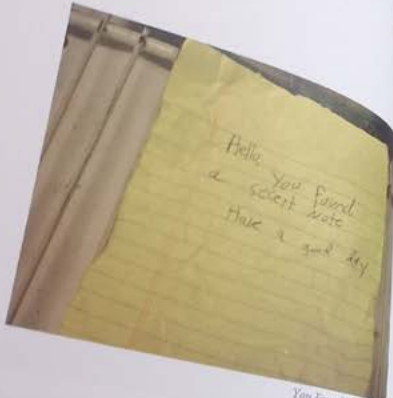
the artist is cultivating. For lack of a more specific criteria, the images from *Internet Archive* collection seem to occupy the fragile territory between the banal and the uncanny. While viewing them in succession, a certain logic starts to emerge as you tune into Enns' frequency. Perhaps if there is a single trait shared by art critics and conspiracy theorists alike, it's the desire to pursue connections and meaning beyond the point of plausibility. The eclecticism of the images resists these efforts. Unlike the neat, algorithmically driven platforms feeding us a steady stream of our own milieux, *Internet Vernacular* embraces the chaos to reflect a sense of the sublime that the untamed wilderness of the internet still has to offer.

NOTES

- 1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 41.
- 2 Laura Sydell, "David Bowie, The Internet Visionary," *NPR*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/01/12/462744754/david-bowie-the-internet-visionary>.
- 3 Jodi Dean, "The Truth is Out There: Aliens and the Fugitivity of Postmodern Truth," *Camera Obscura* 14, no.1-2 (May 1997): 45.

IMAGES

- 1-3 Clint Enns, *Internet Vernacular*. Video slide show still, 2021.
- 4 Clint Enns and Mike Hoolboom, *Facebook Fatigue: Conspiracies, Digitally-Born Photography and How to Violate Community Standards*. Screen capture of online artist talk, 2021.
- 5 Clint Enns, *Conspiracies In Isolation*. Print publication, 2021.



*You Found a Secret Note*



*Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon*



*The Foil Mask*