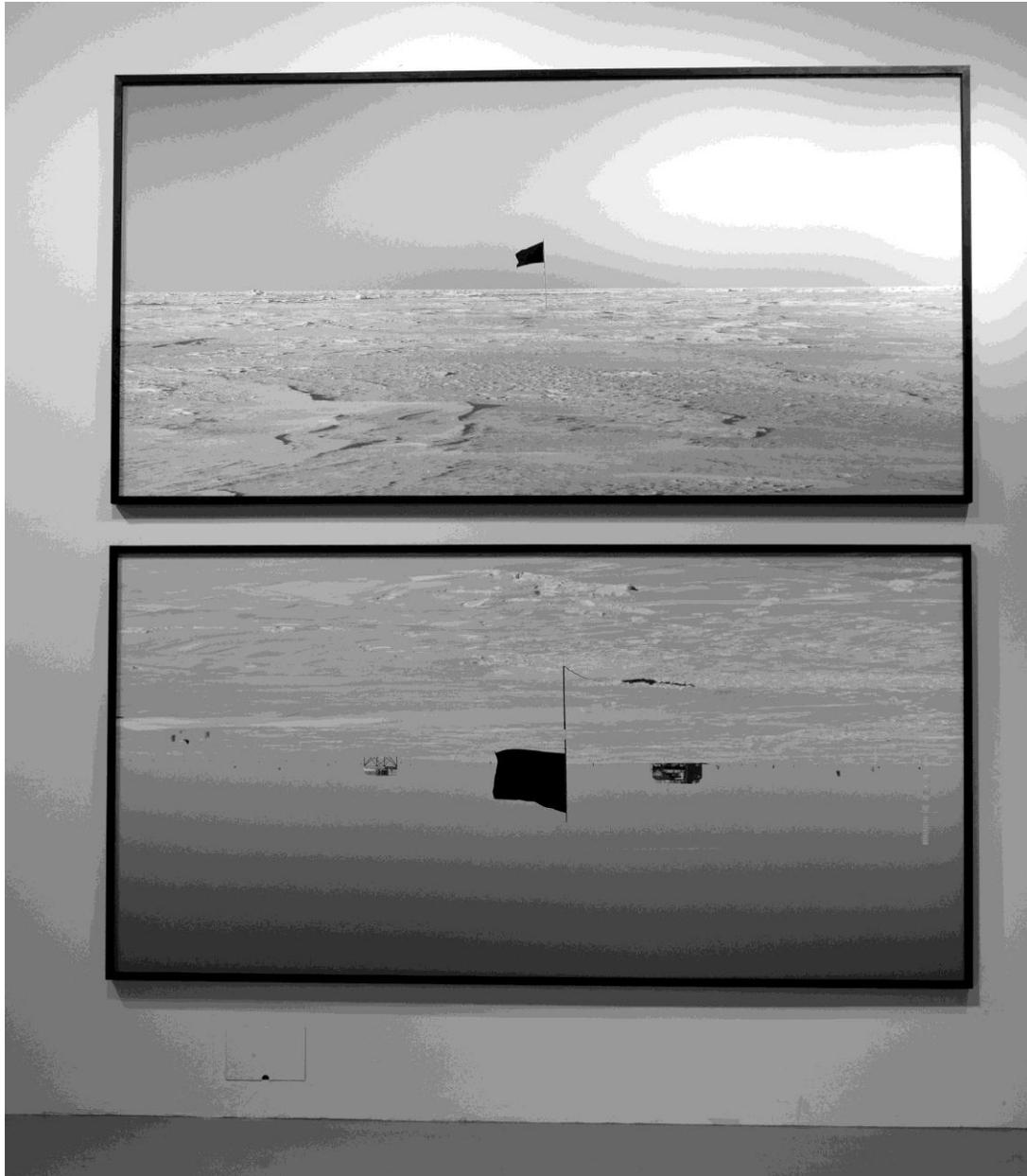


Multipolar Conflict

'Documents from the Edge of Conflict' [exhibition review, James Hockey Gallery, Farnham], *Art Monthly*, no. 453, February 2022, pp. 26-7.

Julian Stallabrass

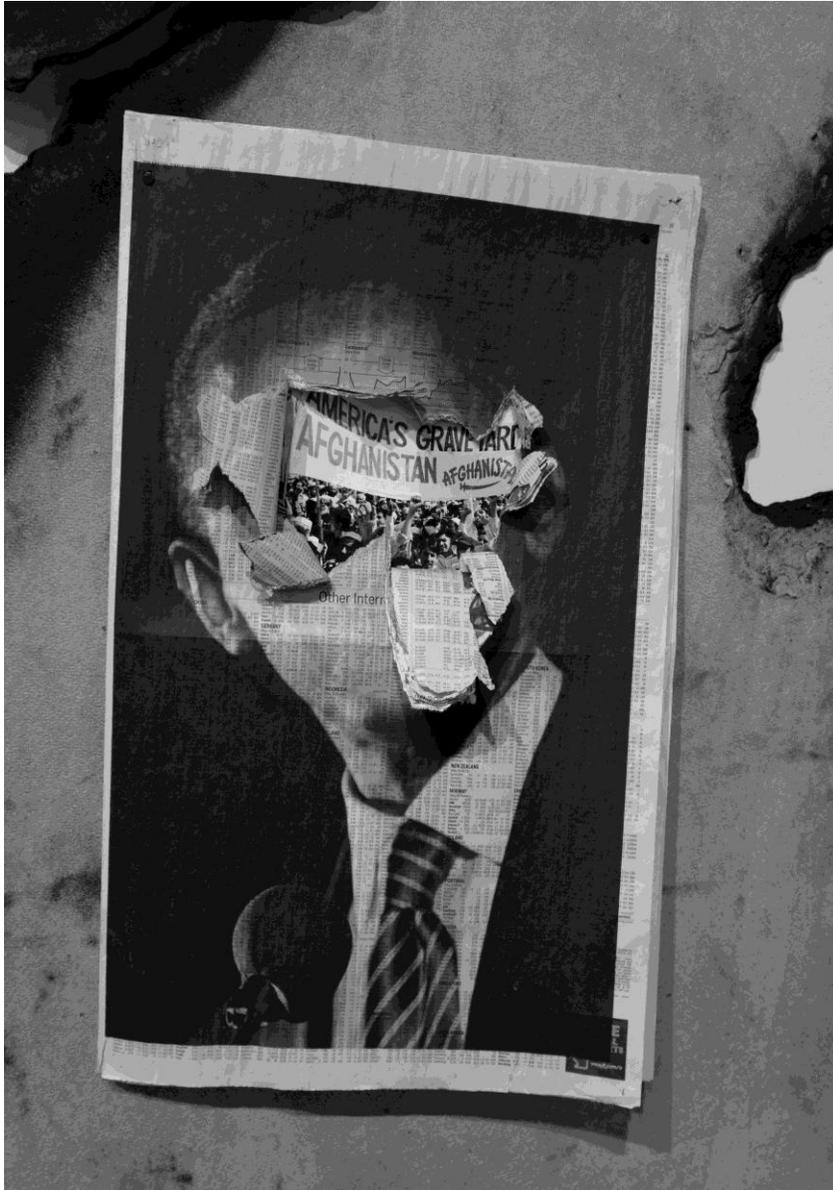


Santiago Sierra, *Black Flag, North Pole, 14 April, 2015/ Black Flag, South Pole, 14 December, 2015*.

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*, comprised of stills of right-wing nationalist demonstrations in the UK and the US, in which the flags and banners carried by the protestors 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.

kennardphillipps, 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. Both works are antagonistic but their targets could not be more different: for kennardphillipps the enemies are political leaders, while the gathered protestors 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.



kennardphillipps, from *Massacre of the Innocents* (2014-21)

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.



Paolo Pellegrin, *Tijuana – A Girl celebrating her Quinceanera along the US- Mexico Border Tijuana Mexico* (2019)

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 façade 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 traumatized 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.



Steffi Klenz, untitled work from the series *Beun* (2016)

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 feeling. 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 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 Alfredo Jarr's 'ephemeral monument' 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.