

David Blandy: The World After

Climate grief and posthumanism have been prevalent themes across artistic production in recent years, often offering potential ways for us to comprehend and metabolise seemingly insurmountable anxiety. There is no clear consensus on how bad things really are, but it is likely that we have passed numerous points of no return, which means that instead of back-peddalling in order to restore an imagined state of harmony with the natural world, we need to be able to think in terms of what comes next, and what happens after. This is what *The World After* is concerned with, produced to accompany David Blandy's exhibition of the same name at Focal Point Gallery, whereby the remarkable biodiversity of Canvey Wick in Essex constitutes the starting point for an exercise in communal storytelling. One of Blandy's cited influences for this work, Ursula Le Guin's oft-quoted statement that 'we live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable - but then, so did the divine right of kings', is highly pertinent, being an appeal to consider how drastically societies have changed throughout human history even when resistance seems futile in the present. *The World After* is set an immense 8,000 years in the future; eight millenia past is difficult to imagine, and so the future could feasibly be just as alien.

The World After as a whole comprises a gallery-based installation and film, along with the book that weaves an original narrative of mutation, megafauna and elemental magic, while also serving as the rules and instructions for a tabletop role-playing game. Blandy collaborated with a number of game designers, game players, poets, authors and others to develop and realise the extent of interrelated storytelling and world-building required for a project like this, an appropriate approach given the work's ethical framework. It is pertinent to note that the project emerged from a larger partnership between cultural institutions in the East of England, aiming to facilitate and promote new site-specific work based around a number of publicly nominated sites of interest. One of these sites is Canvey Wick, which has been reimagined for *The World After*. But while the narratives in the book are geographically and, to some extent, culturally rooted - referring to the industrial heritage of the site as well as to local legends, some of whom appear in the game bestiary - this does not limit the work's wider relevance. Rather, this specificity emphasises how a close

reading of landscape and an awareness of wildlife is a necessary part of engendering potentially new and more co-operative ways of living with the non-human world.

The way that the values of ecological awareness and Harrawayian kinship are reinforced through *The World After* is interesting to trace, and is in obvious contrast to the militaristic and conflict-based tales found in popular and established tabletop games like Warhammer. A vital part of the RPG (role-playing game) process is to create a character which can then be directed, evolved and mutated throughout their adventures, and it is notable that, throughout the mythology and bestiary pages of *The World After*, relationships, feelings and the effects of displacement and trauma are foregrounded. Class-based and interpersonal skills such as 'persuasiveness' and 'courtly manners' are also listed alongside features more typical of the field, like physical strength and weaponry skills. The expression of ideals like communality and of concepts like interspecies kinship clearly advocates collective world-building, whether fictional or real, over the individualistic hero and chosen-one narratives that seem increasingly inadequate in the face of impending catastrophe.

Although positioned somewhat within the tradition of high fantasy, with references to JRR Tolkien and the like, the imagery used throughout *The World After* is not dissimilar to that found in Jeff Vandermeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*, 2014, and other such works of eco-conscious science fiction. In *The World After*, technology and nature are no longer separate spheres of human endeavour, but have combined and are expressing a fierce will to live that is unconcerned with civilisation. This is detailed in one of the 'starter adventures' designed to be followed by teams of players, describing the wildlife of a far-future Canvey Wick, 'you try to touch them, and they skitter away, hiding themselves from your monstrous form'. By utilising a game format that necessitates togetherness to explore and express the desperate anxiety fomented by impending climate collapse, as well as an affectionate and wry engagement with the locality of Canvey Wick, Blandy posits that perhaps it will take a ludic as well as a communitarian sensibility to create a future worth living in.

David Blandy, *The World After*, ed Aida Amoaka, Focal Point Gallery, 2019, hb, 112pp, £25, 978 1 907185 27 4.

Lauren Velvick is a writer and curator based in Lancashire.



Jérôme Havre, Cauleen Smith
& Camille Turner

Chloë Lum & Yannick Desranleau

Victoria Sin



Exhibition

24 January – 22 February 2020

Preview & Performance

Thursday 23 January 5.30–7.30pm

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+44 (0)1382 385330 | exhibitions@dundee.ac.uk
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Books

Huw Lemmey: Red Tory – My Corbyn Chemsex Hell

William E Jones: I’m Open to Anything

At a Chemsex party in Parsons Green, Tom, a Blairite twentysomething, finds himself in a bathroom with a thinly veiled Crispin Blunt, dressed only in arse-less lime-green boxer briefs. The two snort a greyish powder, and enter into the erotic tango: Tom begins to piss into the popper-loving MP’s mouth. As the drugs really kick in, Tom feels a swell of power, ‘not personal, physical power, but the power of the Westminster’, and he sees the bathroom around him transform, but wonders what his sex partner is experiencing. ‘What do Tories hallucinate on their sex drugs?’

Equally hilarious and prescient, this question is evocative of the stark political sexual satire in Huw Lemmey’s second novel under the pen name Spitzenprodukte, *Red Tory: My Corbyn Chemsex Hell*. Set roughly between Jeremy Corbyn’s ascent to the leadership of the Labour party and the aftermath of a Brexit where food shortages have befallen London, *Red Tory* follows Tom Buckle, a New Labour acolyte whose political, (homo)sexual and social identity are forged in the Tony Blair-worshipping circles of Oxford’s Gay Labour group. Living in Hackney during the mid 2010s, Tom is undone by the political changes of his adult life, seeing his party professional ambitions undone by mediocrity and living a life that is all about the middle: ‘middle class. Middle England’.

Tom’s life in the corners of Gay Labour are spiced by a sustained flirtation with an anarcho-German named Otto and Grindr hook-ups that lead him into the world of chemsex benders. Early in the novel, Tom swaps out GHB and coke for a mysterious new street drug called MMT, which gives him wild hallucinations. In one encounter, Tom is spit-roasted by two men, who morph into cloven beasts with porcine snouts. Tom’s dalliances in chemsex trigger a sense of disbelief as he comes down from his high; the next day, he believes he is still hallucinating when he goes to the newsstand to find headlines reading ‘Cameron: Confirmed Pigfucker’. Reality is a trip, especially when served up by the tabloid media.

The primary target of Lemmey’s satire is the centrist class of Labour acolytes and also the news media which thrive equally on sexual scandal and the supposed Red Scare of Corbyn’s rise (crushed by December’s election, and quickly periodising the novel). It is not drugs or chemsex that reflect a faulty order in the city, but a broken belief in a centre that was always farther to the right than any of its proponents wanted to admit. (To this end, *Red Tory* shares its title with Phillip Blond’s 2009 plea towards centrism, perfectly timed to the end of Gordon Brown’s run as PM.) Lemmey’s *Red Tory* reads like a hilarious annotation of recent events, mixing class and politicised imagery – GHB, falafel, McDonald’s, croissants – into sharp satire.

The focus on centrism rather than the moralism around chemsex is part of what makes this novel a valuable addition to the canons of both Brexit and pornographic literature. Lemmey writes compelling,

detailed sex scenes that integrate how political and sexual selves coexist, and how those barriers can come down, if only in the temporary throes of orgasmic bliss. For Tom, in the end it is not party politics but sex that opens his doors of perception, leading him out of his siloed Gay Labour social milieu into a world of sex that crosses political and class lines.

Camille Roy wrote of pornographic literature as a loosening of the subject, creating a pleasing rupturing of characters that passes that pleasure on to the reader. Writers of experimental pornography, she writes, explore ‘narrative tools, discovering exactly how they manipulate or release the contorted social body – because it’s the one we live in, the one that feeds off us, the one that has swallowed the visible horizon’. Lemmey’s use of porn and satire are not just in the service of titillation but also of redressing the social order and its ideologies. He walks us through ex-council flats and back alleys where licking the sweat out of someone’s ass crack and merging flesh can be the grounds of a substantive political transformation, undoing the middle-class social mores that guide us into stilted beliefs.

Red Tory was published in the spring, roughly the same time artist William E Jones released his debut novel *I’m Open to Anything* with Los Angeles’s We Heard You Like Books. Jones’s novel follows an unnamed narrator with stark similarities to his writer’s interests and biography (eg a fascination with fisting pornographer Fred Halsted, whose biography Jones wrote in 2011), navigating the Reagan 1980s of Los Angeles and forging relationships while discovering the joys of anal fisting. As a writer of sex scenes, Jones is more clinical than Lemmey, describing his narrator’s careful navigation of the pleasure receptors of the lower GI tract. This is, of course, a style commensurate to the acts described: fisting is an exacting art form, requiring careful preparation; chill-out chemsex invites a more libidinal, hallucinatory language. *I’m Open to Anything* leans towards the nostalgic in its detailing of encounters in a pre-digital sphere, but these moments point to ways of being and political understanding that feel more akin to Samuel Delaney than a Grindr hook-up.

The joint appearance of *Red Tory* and *I’m Open to Anything* is noteworthy not merely because these books appear adjacent to a puerile art world afraid of sex or because of their interest in pornographic writing. Rather, the two writers are creating prescient navigations of pornographic writing as a form of urban critique in the vein of earlier homophile *flâneurie à la* John Rechy, seeing how politics and cities create and destroy possibilities for connection. Since gay liberation, the city has long been understood as the bastion of gay identity and free sexual expression. But 50 years on from Stonewall, how have the centrists of Gay Labour been complicit with the destruction of urban space and what versions of the city are possible? Perhaps, as Tom realises in *Red Tory*, the future belongs to the holetariat.

Huw Lemmey, *Red Tory: My Corbyn Chemsex Hell*, 2019, Montez Press, 400pp, £15, 9781 1 916063 40 2.

William E Jones, *I’m Open To Anything*, 2019, We Heard You Like Books, 150pp, £10, 978 0 996421 89 8.

Andrew Hibbard is a writer and curator based in London.