Peter Kennard (PK)  My photomontages work strongly in conjunction with Kate’s new album. The power in her work is related to how she can speak of individual everyday experience and then zoom out to the whole of society and passionately argue for change – she does it through words and I try to do it through images.

CA Was the process of collaborating in this case similar to the way you’ve worked with other artists and collaborators in the past?

PK All collaborations are different. Working collaboratively as an artist means you can create work that goes beyond the individual expression of ideas and open up new areas of thought and creativity. Collaboration is not just about conversations between artists; I have worked with writers, photographers, carpenters and politicians as well as groups like CNID, Amnesty Chile Solidarity and many others. Creating an exhibition involves curators, technicians, printers, dealers. These are all collaborative ventures and the idea of the lone artist struggling in their studio is a fiction because to get the work out into the world involves other people.

My work is about society, about the world as it is and what it could be. It’s about people and I work with people to create it.

CA So collaboration is clearly broader than the artist or artists involved, but you seem particularly amenable to working with others.

This is quite apparent. For example, together with Cat Phillipps you established kennardphillipps as an artistic alliance, distinct from your own individual practice. When did this close working relationship with Cat begin, and what were the motivations for working together?

PK Cat and I started making work together under the name kennardphillipps as a response to the build-up of the invasion of Iraq. Like millions of others across the world we went on the demos against the invasion and then it happened and we wanted to use our work to respond to the horrors that had been unleashed. We produced a large gallery based series of photomontages and miniature flags attached to a clasp in protest of the actions of Bush and Blair. We wanted to create a resource for anti-war protesters, so we printed posters and put work online that could be used around the world.

Since then we have continued our collaboration, making work against exploitation, militarism and the politicians and bankers who turn the creating wheels of neo-liberalism by doing exhibitions and working publicly on billboards in the street.

Your exhibition brings together work spanning almost fifty years.

Over this stretch of time, one might expect certain artworks to diminish in their relevance or relationship with the present day – to become inextricably linked to their time and place. Doesn’t seem to be the case with your work. It continues to resonate with the political events and contemporary conflicts we’re living through now.

PK Some of my work from nearly fifty years ago is just as relevant now as it was then, if not more so. This doesn’t give me any satisfaction. It means the gap between the obscene amount spent globally on weapons as against the pittance spent globally on alleviating poverty has increased, in increasing and will continue to increase unless we act. This is one major theme that has run through my work all these years. It’s a theme that will unhapppily have to continue. A couple of weeks ago this country decided to spend billions on reconstituting its Trident nuclear weapons system – instead of scraping it. I was making posters against Trident forty years ago and so it goes on.

CA The Boardroom installation is a good example of the enduring relevance of your images. It features many of your well known photomontages, drawn from your wider body of work and redeployed here in a different context to that in which they were originally made. Is this something you set out to do – to make work that is versatile in its application?

PK With Boardroom I wanted to create an installation that totally surrounded the viewer with the atrocities of war in the twentieth century since 1945. I was born four years before the atom bomb destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The work begins with images relating to that event, then to the Vietnam War, right up to the present with photomontages on Syria and the millions of refugees escaping for their lives from war torn countries in the Middle East. It also includes statistics that shock with numbers running into billions. This is the result of war machine weapons resulting horror unleashed on civilians. It has images on climate change and oil. It’s meant to act as an early – or late – warning system; it’s a way to encourage the viewer to relate statistical facts to everyday life especially the loss of life portrayed by the images. It’s not propaganda telling you what it thinks. It presents the material hidden by corporate media. Some of the photomontages it contains I made nearly fifty years ago, some a couple of months ago, it can be difficult to see the difference.

In my book Unofficial War Artist, published by The Imperial War Museum and based on the Boardroom installation, the statistics and photomontages are welded together to narrate a series of etchings made me realise that the same name from 1982.

PK That’s right. The Decoration series of paintings were made in response to the invasion of Iraq. The idea of using the ribbons of medals plus the results of conflict attached to the clasp instead of the actual medal was based on a photomontage I made at the time of the Falklands War in 1982. This was around the time a juliette Margarthe Thatcher, who was then prime Minister, emerged from ‘0 Downing Street escorting us all to ‘Yeoman’. My idea was that we put a warship engulfed in flames. In the Decoration series I reversed the idea but with the advent of the Flakscanner was able to scan tomb miniature flags attached to a clasp and then attach images based on what was happening daily in Iraq under the clasp. The paintings are a mixture of scammed material and oil paint. I have always been concerned with trying to combine the autographic and the photographic and with digital printing I can merge the two. The paintings stand on the floor leaning against the wall like tombstones. I produced eighteenth of these canvases expressing my anger at the terrible consequences of the Iraq invasion as it took place day by day.

CA The earliest works in the exhibition are the four Stop paintings. There are similarities to Decoration, particularly in terms of materials – both series incorporate print and oil on canvas. When you made the Stop paintings, you were making a conscious decision to move away from painting in its purest form. What else was going on at the time?

PK The Stop paintings were begun when I was at the Slade in 1988. They were made at the time as cheap dye prints, some of which were flyposted in London. Later I used a eight telephone operator in the GPO (General Post Office) and could afford to print, once a month by a method called ‘true to scale’ printing using printers’ ink on canvas. They overlay images I got from picture libraries and magazines with handmade marks. It was 1988 and I’d taken part in the big Anti-Vietnam demonstrations in London. This was my first serious political involvement. I wanted to try and make work that reflected the colossal protests that were reverberating around the world. As well as the Anti-Vietnam demonstrations there were the student and worker demonstrations of May ’68 in Paris, demonstrations in Chechoslovakia against the Soviet invasion, Anti-Apartheid marches.

I made these paintings overlaying all these events as they happened to represent a clash of ideologies and generations. They bombarded the viewer with a mash-up of images.

CA Who were the artists who inspired you at this time? Or perhaps you drew inspiration from elsewhere?

PK I began painting around the age of thirteen and converted the coal cellar at the flat where I was brought up in Paddington into a tiny studio. I painted in a number of styles influenced by Picasso, Giacometti and Bacon and then when I went to art school at sixteen I discovered Rauschenberg, Warhol and later the Dadada. Hannah Hitch and John Heartfield were still marginalised in the art history canon at that time and I discovered them in my early twenties after leaving the Slade. Discovering Guy’s Disasters of War series of etchings made me realise that the inhumanity in the world could be reported (unreducible).

Darkroom from Life magazine, December / 1982 / photomontage

Clockwise from top:

For the series Nanogenius, 1982.
Photomontage for the Kate Tempest album Let Them Eat Chaos, 2016

Cartoonist
Broken Window / 1980 / Photomontage

Brasilia Boardroom / 1980 / Photomontage

PARIS / 1980 / Photomontage

BRITAIN’S MOST IMPORTANT POLITICAL ARTIST

Peter Kennard is widely regarded as Britain’s most important political artist with a practice spanning almost fifty years, his distinctive photomontages have decorated newspapers and magazines, and deployed on placards and banners by activist groups and non-governmental organisations throughout the UK and beyond. His images for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) including Broken Missile, are among his best known, while collaborations with fellow artists including Cat Phillips and Banksy reflect an enduring relevance and currency in his work.

Off Message brings together a collection of Kennard’s most significant works dating back to his early Stop paintings, created at the outset of his career, to his latest Boardroom, first shown at the Imperial War Museum in 2016 and updated this year in response to the shifting political landscape.

The exhibition includes artworks that have consistently challenged those in positions of power and the decisions they make. The pictures are universal in their ability to affect, speaking with great integrity and directness about causes that are significant to many, and building a visible force in campaigns for social change.

Whether they are encountered on the street, in the gallery, in print or online, Kennard’s images leave a lasting impression and urge the viewer not to be complicit – to instead question what we are told, and hold politicians and media to account. The photomontage is an effective instrument to make visible and address the inequalities and horrors in contemporary society. It’s only through confronting the events that we can suggest a possible world that isn’t but could be.
My images are deeply critical of all the status quo’s that condemn billions to live in poverty while making billions off their backs. It’s art as an ‘early warning system’ …we’ve got to hurry.

PK: The reality in our cities is that a lot of what was public space has become corporate and that even enshrined public space has adverts telling us what we need, or rather telling us what multinational companies want us to believe we need. Even the steps of some escalators on the Underground are now covered with adverts. So I think it’s vitally important that people do still paste up posters informing people of events and demonstrations that are going to take place. It’s not enough to rely on the internet, where you know how to find the information you want. On the street you are confronted by the unexpected, by what you don’t know. Street art which is created all over the world has taken on a great importance in the struggle of the voiceless against political regimes. In some countries it is one of the only outlets for speaking truth to authority. Perhaps this is a good way to describe your work and indeed your character more generally?

PK: It’s only through confronting the world as it is, that we can suggest a possible world that isn’t but could be. This arts centre has a creative energy that encourages people to open up to ideas as that they become creators rather than consumers, it demonstrates that the arts, if they are publicly funded, can be an integral part of our lives.

CA: Truly public space in our cities is becoming a rarity. Are you encountering issues with making work intended specifically for the public realm?

PK: I’ve always been concerned with the physical materials that are used as a support for images, whether it be a certain kind of charcoal that allows charcoal to merge with a printed image or the effect of tearing paper and the tears forming a violent break with a two dimensional surface. In Newspaper and Reading Room I wanted to use the financial pages of world newspapers as an impulsive backdrop to the poverty and conflict that underlie the endless lines of stock market prices. In Newspaper printed images of hands are drawn over with charcoal and appear to rip through the pages in anger, despair or desperation. It’s up to the viewer how they place themselves in relation to the work. In Reading Room newspapers are placed on ledgers with the faces of people from all over the world staring back at us. Again, it’s up to those looking at the work if they feel implicated. The faces have a warm quality. Charcoal and printers’ ink merge together. Some faces look as if they are smudging away, I want the marks – the misprintings and the charcoal fragments – to physically engage the viewer, to make a more visceral surface than a photographic print. The idea for this work is based on a memory I have from sixty years ago when I used to go to my Sunday afternoons with my dad to Paddington Library, where there was a large white magnifying curved double sided ledger with each having a copy of that day’s paper laid out on it for anyone coming to the library to read.

CA: The harrowing faces in both Reading Room and the later series Civilians, made in 2008, seem to be a nod back to painting and a genuine political engagement. I have always been obsessed with paintings of the human head. I go on a yearly pilgrimage to Keenwood House on Hampstead Heath to see the extraordinary Rembrandt self-portrait. I stare at him staring at me and he becomes part of my world in a different way every year. The Civilians pictures (a set of large works on paper) in 1994 and 1997 respectively, we can see there’s a personal and political importance I see in paintings. I always believe that art for social change should be accessible and not be about the ‘good old days but the bad new ones’ as Brecht said. The harrowing faces in both Reading Room and the later series Civilians, made in 2008, seem to be a nod back to painting and a genuine political engagement. I have always been obsessed with paintings of the human head. I go on a yearly pilgrimage to Keenwood House on Hampstead Heath to see the extraordinary Rembrandt self-portrait. I stare at him staring at me and he becomes part of my world in a different way every year. The Civilians pictures (a set of large works on paper) in 1994 and 1997 respectively, we can see there’s a personal and political importance I see in paintings. I always believe that art for social change should be accessible and not be about the ‘good old days but the bad new ones’ as Brecht said.