

Focal Point Gallery , Southend Essex, UK.
– Current Offsite Project-
John Russell 'Angel of History: I Can See for Miles'
12 September to 22 October 2011

Review by Paul O’Kane

1200 Words



God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me, but you can't fool God!"
Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night.
'God sees everything,' repeated Wilson.
'That's an advertisement,' Michaelis assured him.

F. Scott Fitzgerald *The Great Gatsby*

It would be impossibly reductive to claim there is a single 'point' to John Russel's latest work, a huge enlargement of Margaret Thatcher's eyes posted across a bridge above a Southend shopping street and subtitled 'I Can See For Miles'. The subtitle of course invokes reasonably rebellious White City mod band The Who, being the name of one of their slightly more psychedelic hits. Insiders on the contemporary art scene may be expected to recognise Thatcher's eyes immediately and make the interpretation that the matriarch of hyper-consumerism is very much with us today, like a goddess overseeing everyday life with a persistent air of conviction, reaching from our past into our uncomfortable present by means of the advertising poster - a medium which in several ways aided her ascent to power.

Southend's un-briefed shoppers however may see the image with - as it were - more open eyes and minds. Given this there may be as many 'points' to the work as there are punters. A local child, born long after Thatcher's own salad day may simply be intimidated, mentally filing Russell's image along with numerous examples of sublime imagery used on our streets to sell Hollywood frights or Harry Potter highs. Meanwhile a Friday night Essex boy reveller, staggering along the negotiating the shopping precinct with Fosters-impaired vision might struggle to focus upon the world-famous grocer's daughter's enduring gaze and come to the semi-conscious conclusion that, despite the decline of the ASBO the city itself has come alive to admonish his reckless translation of a week's wages into a stream of urine.

Those two Tory eyes are quite dissimilar. As with most of us, Thatcher's physiognomy, brought under scrutiny like this, reveals itself to be far less symmetrical than we might have imagined; and thank god! we might exclaim, because our collective memories of Thatcherism are grim and dark enough without having them pressed into even more Gothic form. The two eyes reveal a kind of schizoid horror that we might wish had been made clearer Thatcher's 1979 election posters, twisted implications of the madness that inevitably seems to lurk behind the brow of any power. Thatcher, both hated and admired for the steely persistence of her undeviating, singular vision is here revealed as nevertheless divided in herself, and in such a way as to remind us that there is never any single point to a work of contemporary art, only an encounter of one, then two, then several points of view, all temporary, none fixed, melding confluences of meaning and value, each formed momentarily before melting back into the apparently pointless passage of time.

Without roaring down the A13 in a Ford saloon or taking the Fenchurch Street line to Southend you can't tell which direction Thatcher is facing, but there is no trace of nostalgia in the images that document Russell's mural. Russell's main title 'The Angel of History' suggests – to anyone familiar with Walter Benjamin's writings- that he has tried to turn her to face the past, and in the process confronted her with a legacy. In Benjamin's lapidary phrases, which tend to compel whomsoever encounters them, the unforgettable image appears of an 'angel of history' blasted away from paradise by a persistent storm which rages from there, and in such a way that the angel is denied any possibility of turning away from witnessing the constant destruction reaped by history as progress.

Russell's conflation of Benjamin's vision with that of Thatcher's is typically contentious. It disrupts –in a way both Benjamin and Thatcher might have admired – comfortably established values habitually afforded to certain images, destabilising the dogma of images. Benjamin's volatile aphorism (one of his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History') is itself a visionary disruption of any simplistic reading of history as dialectical progress, and yet continues to promote a redemptive teleology for the Left. Thatcher's greatest advance meanwhile was to prise proletarian sympathies away from the grasp of her political opponents by offering British voters embourgeoisement now rather than equality later. Russell has waded into this complexity with an apparently simple image but one that challenges us to orchestrate a meaning; calling on us to select from a political maelstrom some sign of our own times.

Let's not forget that The Who are part of the mix, as well as the street and 'the man on the street', all of whom are implicated by Russell's title and the placement of this image. It seems crucial that this is not a gallery work but part of a growing recent interest in street art, protest art (of which Dean Kenning has recently written in *Art Monthly*) and further attempts to reduce the boundary between the privileged and purified spaces of the art world and the hard edge of real politics. The Who might be appalled to think their lyrics were associated with a reactionary figure like Thatcher, and as their words were written with a mix of psychedelic intoxication and the invincibility of youth culture they might be equally appalled to find them applied to any model of history. But perhaps *this* is the sign of the times with which Russell's belligerently provocative intertextuality

presents us, British streets from which the future is being hurriedly erased, where wide-eyed youth is harshly condemned to hopelessness by a sudden respite of Tory ideology, and where a nexus of power, money and politics which began with the Thatcherite and Reaganomic annihilation of alternatives, has obliterated dialectics, thereby signalling the onset of a form of totalitarianism.

And so, in those two unequal eyes we now see one grim vision, which no longer encourages the democratic power of the people to choose but pictures instead a neoliberal society where we have no choice but to fight either for or against unmediated economic power. Perhaps Russell has noticed that Benjamin was not a Marxist of the 19th or 20th centuries but of our *own* or some future century, wherein progress is not only singular but so strangely twisted that we struggle to align ourselves with it. Using overt strategies of triangulation neoliberals claim –as David Cameron beamed at last year’s Conservative conference – “we are the revolutionaries now”.

Are we coming or going? Looking forward or back? Without clear teleological traction how do we progress? Like Benjamin’s angel of history we should never grow tired of seeing, even while unable to deny the horrible cost of progress. Nor can we fail to note how far from paradise we are travelling. But perhaps this is what Benjamin, writing his arcane way through the fearful 1930s took most imaginative pains to stress, that the Left cannot fixate itself on a paradise now, then, or to come but only exerts full responsibility when it focuses realistically on the world’s failings, even at the expense of peddling a simplified image of a brighter future.

