



**PETER KENNARD**  
**“Domesday Book”**  
**Gimpel Fils**  
**December 1999**

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Peter Kennard has always, as far as I'm aware, made art which engages with politics - the course of his own planet, therefore, has remained steady and it's the course of politics which has altered, causing a satisfying collision. DOMESDAY BOOK\* focuses on the issue of poverty in a global context, and on the very day the accompanying exhibition opened in London, all hell was breaking loose in Seattle. Bad days for the multinationals, who, in the coming years, will be pouring stories into the media, like fluoride going into the water supply, to tell us how green and caring they are. Newsprint forms Kennard's key material in recent work - specifically, the columns of figures showing share prices.

Triggered by the sight of the Millennium Dome rising by the Thames in London, Kennard's book is about those shut out of the feast. One thinks of the penumbra of poverty round some of our cities apparently "revitalised" by the restaurants and smart stores babbled about in magazines - yeah, Glasgow's so cool. It is about those who are "voiceless" - including the homeless round and about the Dome itself, but the concern stretches wider, to the poorest of the world's poor. Working here in black and white, Kennard is, as John Berger has said, "a master of the medium of photo-montage." The images are formed into a number of sequences as we go through the book; the most striking device is where the artist has "printed" images of human faces and figures as barely visible traces on battered wooden pallets and on abandoned protest placards. I'm reminded of the traces left behind by atomised

victims of the bombs dropped on Japan. In another sequence, Kennard has reversed the process, with text from the financial pages of newspapers printed on to human skin.

But alongside the ferocious and skilful mutations of soldiers, dealers, guns, and missiles in these montages, there is text as well: Kennard's book is an amalgamation of poetry and image. I fear this is not Kennard's strength. He's angry, his text is angry - he wants poetry to work like a spear ... But perhaps poetry works best as a multifaceted thing: it needs to contain mirrors. Reflective surfaces complicate and make for ambiguity: these short, stabbing and insistent lines have rather too many phrases like "brain scared shitless" and "skull a pus-filled dome."

This is a kind of art that does, I guess, rather "tell us what to think" and we can feel resistant. But there's plenty of art around, God knows, full of wit and irony to delight the well-educated ... Meanwhile, a holocaust was allowed to happen in Rwanda and a million deaths made hardly a ripple. Auschwitz is a safer bet for a writer keen to fill our comfortable theatres, our smart galleries: we can wallow in our guilt-free horror. Or is Kennard wallowing in his anger? What should be the target? No Nazis here to make comic strips from. Your "arms dealer" is fast emerging as a suitable candidate for rent-a-villain, but anyone who has cash saved anywhere other than in ethical investments (which, sorry mate, don't make such a good return) is implicated, and isn't that most of us? We want a "them," we want "fat cats" to hate - but we shouldn't be let off the hook too easily. And perhaps that weakens Kennard's work a little: I'm not sure he quite brings it all home. Images of wealthy people gathered round a gaming table, images of politicians gathered round a UN table in session - these can safely equal "them." But the fact is the country we're living in is one of the world's major weapons producers. How, as a therapist might say, do we feel about that? And what might we do about it?

In a way, Kennard is himself defeated by the immensity of the wrongs he is contemplating. His poetry stops and starts, sputters and roars like a chainsaw, and finally grinds its teeth, lapsing into silence. The final pages are a series of "double spreads" from newspapers, with a face superimposed on each one - anguished, staring, desperate. Beside each image Kennard puts the one word: "Speak." This is a good closing, like a single, piercing and sustained note to end the concerto.

*Hugh Stoddart*

\*Published by Manchester University Press.  
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