

Jeff Ostergren : Thanks for coming and special thanks to Kit and Theo for coming up to talk about their work. It's been a really amazing opportunity to curate a show at Franklin Street Works. It's such an amazing space, Terri is so amazing, everyone here is so amazing. So... I've been really proud to put together this exhibition. It actually started you know, sort of strangely enough, maybe almost two and a half years ago that I created a proposal for this show. It was in the lead up to the election in 2016 that I wanted to curate this show about paranoia in art and then the election in 2016 happened and things kind of changed, a lot. The whole proposal had to be adjusted. In some ways, as I sort of talk about it there were works in here that seemed funny that weren't funny any more, there were works in here that were future forward looking and they suddenly were this crazy new reality we're all sort of living in so it really shifted a lot from its original proposal um but ultimately one of the things that remained constant is this interest I've had in terms of thinking about paranoia as kind of a form of knowledge along the lines of something like intuition. It's not a standard objective form of knowledge but a way of thinking through things. To me it's a really complex idea. That's something I've tried to produce and reproduce by gathering all of these really amazing artists that I've been so lucky to work with in this show. So that's kind of come together in different ways. I'm interested in the idea of paranoia which is this thing that certainly can be a physical psychological condition that can afflict people or can be a symptom of other kinds of conditions. It also has a way of manifesting itself in terms of trying to figure out how the world works and we try to interpret the world and that produces this kind of this possibility of paranoia. Where something, the something that seems counterintuitive to the norm, could be a possibility. What seems interesting just in the couple of years of production of this exhibition is that that norms are kind of twisting and turning so rapidly and interestingly that the terms have changed. So a classic book about paranoia by Philip K. Dick which seemed sort of surreal at the time is now sort of perfectly logical. Paranoia which could have been the purview of fringe groups is now something, that I would argue, we all have at this point... and that the paranoia that we might have might be true.

I'm interested in these kinds of extremes. I hope the people have taken or will take the time to look at all the works in this show. To talk about some of them specifically, for instance the James Benning piece downstairs, Two Cabins, in which he's constructed and then filmed these two cabins... one of them based on the cabin of Thoreau and one of them based on Theodore Kaczynski, The Unabomber. Looking at these two individuals, when you look at their writing, they have a lot of overlap right? They were both environmentalists, they were both hermits, they were both clearly intelligent and had this interesting philosophical overlap but then one takes one direction and the other takes another direction. One becomes enshrined in the American literary canon and then the other is a terrorist who is now in prison and has become this interesting model for people. It's really complicated that similar ideas can go in such different directions.

I'm interested in this idea that paranoia becomes this thing that comes from within the individual, it's a way of thinking about things that is generated from the self but is so immediately tied with the rest of the world and trying to make sense of that and trying to make sense of one's place in

the world. I've tried to bring together a lot of different works that do that and represent both sides of that equation. How's that?

Terri C. Smith : That's great. As always very organized, very smart. So who do you want to... I guess we'll go to Theo next.

Jeff Ostergren : Sure, so this is Theodore's video...

Terri C. Smith : Do you want me to run it for a minute and then we'll...

[video plays]

Terri C. Smith : I just wanted everyone to get a little taste in case you haven't watched it at all. That's the bad thing about video art, you have to turn it down while you talk about it.

Theodore Darst : Hi everybody, I'm Theodore Darst. Thanks Terri and Jeff for having me and showing it.

This is my piece *The Tourists: This Machine Makes Fascists*. So I was thinking about that from Woody Guthrie's guitar, how its kind of like protest music and how its kind of an inversion of it, but then I was thinking also kind of... I guess let me just back it up with what Jeff was talking about. How this is stuff that we were working on during elections, certain things I thought of being outside the norm ideologies started to get into the mainstream.

This video changed a lot. When I was working on it I was getting really excited by this idea that all these online spaces that sort of had taken aesthetics of video game aesthetics or thriller movie aesthetics and also kind of giving me ideas of them were sort of filtering their way back to online political culture. I guess that was exciting for me as someone who's interested in media. I think of myself really as a collage artist. This video feels like an animation but most of the parts I downloaded. I download almost everything from online. If i'm taking things like the font, the fonts and all the animations, even kind of the screen capture parts, like what is going on here to the left, its sort of a reflection of what I'm seeing online. So I was sort of seeing this weird culture as this space that sort of aesthetically had a lot to do with something I was interested in.

I was thinking about sculpture and about how disposable we've become with HDTVs and how we can kind of just have them... and then buying the straps from home depot...

What I knew I wanted to have was sort of an aggressive internet crazy space but then it was interesting because as I was working on the show stuff like, um I've been interested in reptilian conspiracy theories... does that mean anything to everybody?

Crowd : [laughs] Oh, we know reptiles in Stamford

Theodore Darst : It's this idea that there's reptiles in the government and also aliens that are in the government and they're working in an epic battle, that's raging. So... that seems really wonky, I mean it is pretty wonky

Crowd : [laughs]

Theodore Darst : You see that type of stuff filtering through Info Wars and aesthetics so it's been interesting since I've finished the piece, to see how it's aged. I like that, I like seeing the piece age and thinking about what's signified with the camo and other components. Gosh, I don't really know what to say besides that!

Terri C. Smith : What sort of sources did you use to get these images were they specific, were they targeted?

Theodore Darst : Yeah so it's all... targeted but not in a political sense. I think there's no way you're going to have an objective experience online, it's all going to come out of stuff that I'm looking for on some level.

I got into the idea of these guys [gestures towards his artwork], I was working on different animations where I used this motion of a character slapping away a different character and then it was like such a good aggressive motion that it also sort of worked as a cinematic transition. I knew I wanted these scary white dudes cause, you know, that's what's going on right now... such an aggressive way to transition a character out of the scene.

Things like that or the text, I'm looking at them all sort of modularly like I'm working on the different parts on their own. So I might be working on text pieces, like these kind of poems and small things that I didn't necessarily think of as living within the reptilian conspiracy narrative so it's all coming from online and it's all a reflection of what I'm looking at I guess.

Mark : If you say there is no way you can have an objective experience online, are you saying you can only have a subjective experience online?

Theodore Darst : [briefly ponders] ... yeah!

Mark : So... my experience online is only a function of myself?

Theodore Darst : Well I think it's naive to think that you're coming into it objectively because I think about, ugh, the amount of data that's being collected on all of us all the time... from where we're walking and where we're going... You're coming into it where they know what you already know and what you're probably gonna look for. In my profile they or algorithms know I've looked at all different types of weird political blogs, or things that are way outside of the mainstream spectrum of ideology. That's gonna end up being reflected in the results I get in my search terms. I feel like it's all subjective. It's all mediated through the ads that I get for which characters or asking do I want to download, do I want to keep. That's all going to be a reflection of what I'm looking at. I started noticing the amount of nightmare video game stuff picking up and then the world turned into nightmare video game. So, that's cool, well it's not cool but it's an interesting process to work with.

I started working on this in November, right after the election, early December and then we showed the piece for the first time in March, the following year... so you know that was a very tumultuous time.

It's weird, even watching it now I see... like working on it, it was way funny to me if that makes sense and also my sound designer, Kevin Carey, who is basically a full collaborator on this because we were bouncing stuff back and forth, we thought there were a lot of jokes in this but now a lot of the jokes... Like the idea that there's reptiles in the government in a globalist conspiracy is pretty out there but it doesn't feel as out there now? I guess?

Terri C. Smith : Or it doesn't feel as out there now that other people would believe that?

Theodore Darst : Yeah, it doesn't feel as out there. I feel there are people who are respecting a lot of different... view points like that have become something that people know about. Even when I first showed the piece I had to be like oh so there's these people on forums on the internet that are like into wild... you know it was more of that. Now it feels like that's just what people know all about. You were talking about QAnon in the catalogue stuff like that, that's wilder, that's as wild as the reptilian conspiracy which seems so sci-fi but it's... nah.. that's like it.

Dwight : It's interesting how it comes out through video, it sort of exposes the possibility of a controversy between reptiles and human.

Theodore Darst : Yeah and there's a part in here where that's referenced when it's the face and it stops and then there's an eye. It was kind of a jump off place, I would do these videos where it was kind of the planet and then someone walking and then they would pause it and enhance it and zoom in on her face show the...

Dwight : It's probably like incel distortion.

Theodore Darst : yeah totally!

Dwight : But like you can see it! Kind of looks interesting to me.

Theodore Darst : Yeah! I think it's super interesting. I mean...

Mark : So you're a believer Dwight, is what you're saying?

Dwight : I believe in everything!

[laughter]

Theodore Darst : Well...

Terri C. Smith : maybe we should move on to Kit then

Guest : and then there were reports of reptiles in the caravan

Theodore Darst : uh, whaa?

Terri C. Smith : ok

Jeff Ostergren : One last question to rescue you from all of this. Can you talk about the choice to sort of suspend the screen?

Theodore Darst : Oh yeah, sure. This is kind of a strategy that I've employed a bunch of times for different video. I feel like with the amount of screen interaction we have, and I don't want to be, ya know, talking smack about that video...

[crowd laughter]

Theodore Darst : I get really, I get really, I feel like I need stuff to exist in a sculptural way for me to engage with it. This sort of came just from working site specifically and figuring it out. The monitor... I've been thinking about this... there's a lot of good shows right now about 70s monitors and old like... I've been thinking about the sculptural space of these monitors that are now just everywhere and out on the streets people are just throwing them out. I'm always excited by it, I like looking at TVs like that. I think they're, I feel like you just don't think enough about that. I mean there's just so many of them so like its fun. I feel like you can just do anything you want with them. I feel like there was this moment not that long ago where flatscreens felt sort of like precious and new and now. I like it suspended like this... it works.

Terri C. Smith : It's more like an object, or it feels more like sculptural like an object.

Theodore Darst : Yeah, Totally. Now I feel we're just so conditioned when they're on the wall and flat. You're not going to think about what it is, you're just going to look at it for the video but I feel like this is something nice about when it's just sort of floating there because then you're like oh, what seems to be going on in space you know. It kind of almost makes you consider your own relationship to it in this way that I think the wall really doesn't address.

Terri C. Smith : I agree and Jeff collaboratively placed it there and it sort of shifts how people move through the gallery space which is fun too.
So Kit did this piece and... let's talk about it!

Kit : We're just gonna talk about it. This is *Anthropiscene War Machine 2: North American Front*. It's a direct sequel to *Anthropiscene War Machine 1*, which is the one that was shown in the solo show at SOHO 20. All of this work exists within a universe that I've been working with for about 2 or 3 years now in which I'm thinking about a future earth that's covered entirely by water which is a very plausible thing. I've been doing a lot of climate change research and It's probably not

going to be entirely covered by water but I live on coastal cities. I lived in New York, I live in Providence and I'm from LA so I think a lot about... drowning. With these predictions I started using this predictive sci-fi speculative fantasy around climate as a way of thinking about displaced populations and linking them back to my own lineage as a person coming from displacement, which is my parents came from South Korea because of the Korean War to the US. Thinking about the way in which those things are related in terms of diaspora... this particular piece I call this a post apocalyptic kimchi making rig. So the way I think through this future universe is thinking about what are the materials that will be available to humanity to figure out how to survive, what are the adaptations we will need to make either on a synthetic biology level or even in the way in which we preserve our food, the processes that we make our food, the basic things we take for granted, what will exist in this future water world? All the materials that I used are things that will hypothetically still be around in case New York or wherever gets covered by water. So it's galvanized steel which has some water resistance, it's plastic which won't degrade, and all of that comes out of these plastic bottles that drip over this vinyl or plastic sheet, drip down the fish to collect in this kimchi jar that's just filled with salt and Korean jeotgal which are the active ingredients in making sure kimchi doesn't rot during the fermentation process. The decals themselves on the vinyl are all ingredients in a Korean dish called budae jjigae which is literally translated as army stew. It was a dish that came out of the Korean War. People were scavenging the US army bases so they were getting these canned goods which were introduced to Korean cuisine because that was the only place you could really get meat. so you have these vienna sausages you have things like spam or like pork and beans. spam is super popular in Korea still, they actually make christmas packages, you can get a spam basket that's packaged beautifully it's a very popular thing to give apparently. This dish is still really popular in Korea town, it's everywhere. The ways that thing that were born out of desperation, the innovation that comes out of those times and the way that they get integrated into a culture and the ways that we reframe our relationship to these basic commodities is also another element of it. I can keep talking forever so i'm going to pause for some questions

Terri C. Smith : I didn't see your first piece, could you talk about what it contained?

Son Kit : Yeah! So because this one is a direct sequel, it was very similarly structured in a steel frame, a vinyl sheet a cyborg mechanic mecha fish. It was hung vertically and it also had a video component. So I work very modularly. I usually make an installation and a video component that can have the chance to work together. The first piece in the series I showed it in multiple configurations either with the video projected next to the steel frame or projected through it. The video itself was a poetic take on my family's immigration story but making it seem like it was an account of fictional underwater and mythological creatures. That's kind of where the cyborg fish metaphor was being developed more.

Crowd : The top piece on the water bottle, is that meant to filter out or purify the water?

Son Kit : Yeah, so that's a fermentation airlock. You put that into a jar, if you're making preserves or anything, so that when there are gasses from fermenting it won't explode the container.

Terri C. Smith : Jeff, you talked in your essay about this clash of cultures. I can't remember the words you used, not mutability but this kind of cancelling out in aspects of imperialism... and colonialism. Were you thinking about this... obviously there's a connection of the two things and a combining of them but how do you see it as an allegory or a metaphor?

Son Kit : Totally! So to talk specifically about the fish... that is kind of what makes me think of that. I think a lot about cyborgs and the definition of a cyborg we tend to think of it as a human-robot-hybrid but really it means anything that combines organic and mechanical components. It could be a cyborg dog, it could be a cyborg fish. I think about the ways in which cyborgs play into our ideas around dystopia or future projections. AIs are considered super scary, they usually take the form of a cyborg or robot in movies. This clash, so to speak, of cultures or the ways that imperialism is embedded in this so actually the robot that I took components of, like the components that are in the fish from, is a gundam model, a gundam being a giant mechanical robot that you pilot... it's from a Japanese anime series. This particular model is designed for a north american front so it has a lot of the decals, the color schemes and a numbering of themes from US army design in general. I was thinking about ways that would play across a North American landscape-

Terri C. Smith : The fish itself?

Son Kit : The fish itself and also the war components and integrating them into a Korean landscape. The fish itself being representative of this adaptive cyborg model of integrating into yourself, of becoming a creature of violence, of having something that seems violent done to it... its cut apart you can see the mechanical components it. We as a population think about the future of synthetic biology as something violent and scary because it's a fundamental changing to what we consider the parameters of our humanness to be and the way that conditions of war and the ways that crossing between cultures can make you question what those fundamental conditions are for yourself.

Jeff Ostergren : Can I ask you to talk a little bit about, for lack of a better word, the design of the piece? I'm thinking about when we went to install it you provided us with these amazing, in them-self beautiful instructions that were almost this perverse Ikea instruction book. It made me think of it as a designed element. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit, maybe it could be more broad, but even just specifically about placing of the water... how did you come up with the scale and how did you design this structure?

Son Kit : Yeah, totally it's funny because i'm studying design in Grad school right now and the instructions... There's an excellent book I can't remember who made it, it's a book of Ikea furniture assembly instructions but as you're composing the furniture it becomes components of

a satantic ritual. You're three quarters the way through a chair and it says, "add the goat leg," and you're like- what?

Crowd : [Laughter]

Son Kit : Anyways... So when I make installations or sculptures I like to joke around and say that all of my art is just me browsing on Amazon for hours on end and then figuring out what is interesting because I like to use prefabricated materials because when I think about this future earth a constraint is it has to be things that would survive into then. I could, hypothetically, design a brand new thing that doesn't exist yet that I would build, custom and do that but I don't think that it has the same impact as recontextualizing and refamiliarizing objects that already exist and people now know about. With the water bottles and the materials and the placement... These are all science lab clamps I've just taken apart, reconfigured and put back together... breaking apart the fermentation process... taking things from - I shop at pet-co a lot for art supplies there's a lot of stuff from like aquarium valves and fish tanks that show up. I'm putting myself in the shoes of someone who has to assemble rigs in the future and thinking what is available to me and how can I make that into a design object essentially. We buy things that are functional because they look nice as well. That would serve the function of it being an art object if it looks nice but thinking through... what does each component do, what does each component mean, what does each material do to help bolster the world that I'm building, how does the placement of this... I think I asked you to hang this at around table height to invoke the dinner table through these associations we have with physical space to objects and our proximity and the ways that we don't really think about that. What does this feel like when it doesn't look like a dinner table but we have that association to it? What do these clamps look like when they aren't in a science lab... those are the ways that I select things.

Mark : You were saying you browse on Amazon looking for stuff and I was thinking about the comments over here about online experience is only subjective so... how do you break through what amazon is showing you to find what you're looking for?

Son Kit : It's really convenience for me because I share an Amazon Prime account with maybe 8 other people and we all have very different... So actually I'm the one always messing up their recommendations because I'm buying weird things for art. Sometimes I'll get a text message from my friend who is the main account holder being like why am I only getting recommendations for veterinary lube right now? So there's some reach in there... and I agree the internet has become such a mediated space, thinking about the ways that advertising and tracking just makes it so things are more and more tailored to us so it makes it harder for us to break out of the bubbles we've formed jut from our browsing habits. I'm not complaining because it makes my work more cohesive as I build new pieces... and I love going down these rabbit holes you know i'm not familiar with the pantheon of steel objects but Amazon might show me interesting things that are made out of the same materials just from my recommendations so if the algorithm is going to be my collaborator... you can kinda lean into it as a condition of the way that I work and the way that we experience things online

Mark : My worry is that when I go online looking for stuff, and I'll do a lot of research, it's just mirroring back what it thinks it wants me to see and I'm like no, no I really wanted something different now. A shared account is a really interesting way to throw that off... My daughter was home from Japan, she used my laptop for a while and for months I was getting Japanese car ads everywhere.

Son Kit : Yeah, I think I recently likes a couple of my friends baby pictures recently and now facebook thinks I'm a mom.

Crowd : [laughter]

Terri C. Smith : That's great, this is amazing everyone is here for a while. Thank you everyone for coming. Have wine, become a member if you can.