

THE COMMON GUILD

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COMMENTARIES

Steven Claydon

22 April – 9 July 2017



'Archipelago of Contented Peoples'

Archipelago of Unstable Knowledge

Steven Claydon's exhibition *Archipelago of Contented Peoples* was not a stable entity built on solid bedrock. Instead it was a territory of grumbling volcanoes, eroding stone and quicksand. The archipelago was filled with objects, characters and ideas that operated as signposts, as much to warn as to direct.

To begin at the end, the gallery text closes with a quote from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) stuffed with ideas and images: mimicry, crocodiles, chameleons, the pink panther. At a reading group years ago we read *A Thousand Plateaus* through its extensive footnotes without having read the main body of the text. On that occasion we were encouraged to improvise and riff around the references held within the footnotes which spanned *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1968) by Carols Castenda, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka* (1948), and Gregory Bateson. Initially we were confused, cautious and reverential, aware of our immense ignorance, but soon we were inventive and irreverent. Recalling this 'reading' as I surveyed Claydon's archipelago, I was sure one of the footnotes referred to the parable of the three blind men encountering an elephant, in which each man describes a different part of the animal—trunk, tusk, tail, leg—each account valid and truthful, but in isolation only generating a partial understanding of the animal. But when I checked, there was no such footnote, nor does it appear in the section of the text I read in the early 2000s. I also checked my notes from the session, and found no elephants or blind men. So I'm left with a *cul-de-sac* of a reference, an echo of an idea, and crucially an example of the instability of knowledge and memory. I had mistakenly recalled my interpretation of the exercise as a reference within the exercise. Misremembered the map as a point on the journey.

The exhibition's objects and 'words' are littered with footnotes, references and clues. Enticing and seductive, they include the stories of explorers, dynastic-heirs, possible cannibalism, women aquanaughts, Fulbright scholarships, cartoon fish, Trajenta tablets and citronella. These entities weave narratives between the ingredients of antihistamines and antidepressants and the plants found in Papua New Guinea; the cartoon fish of *Das Boot* (1981) in the cold north Atlantic and what the women aquanaughts would have encountered in the tropical waters of the Virgin Islands; the transaction between heir to a fortune, Michael Rockefeller, and the tribe he visited, the art he was acquiring and the life he gave up.

It is an uneasy task to utilise the flawed, layered and partially visible signposts left by Claydon to navigate the grumbling volcanoes, eroding stone and quicksand. Efforts to pin down truth expose layers of imitation, duplication, copy and fabrication. Signposts indicate doubt and caution over fixed destinations. What appear to be 'real' totems and camera lenses are actually cast from resin and gilded in gold; Michael Rockefeller's seemingly courageous expeditions could be reinterpreted as hubris; the Pink Panther's cartoon re-imagined colonially, painting the world his preferred colour.

At some point in my journey around the archipelago I noted an idea by physicist, Werner Heisenberg: "We have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning."¹ Recognising our shortcomings is a pertinent qualifier of the limits of our understanding. A wise travelling companion on any journey.

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1. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science*, New York, 1962, p. 58.