



# TRUE LIES

In a world ruled by sensationalist real-time updates and unchecked Twitter tirades, what can art teach us about fake news? Plenty, as Peter Hill finds out.

By Peter Hill

RACHEL MACLEAN  
*Spite Your Face*  
 (still), 2017  
 digital video  
 Commissioned by  
 Scotland + Venice  
 Courtesy the artist

Below, left to right  
 Installation views  
 GUILLAUME BIJL  
*Central Airport*  
 Basel, 1996  
 Theater Basel  
 GUILLAUME BIJL  
*Casino*, 1984  
 Kunstverein Smak, Ghent  
 Courtesy the artist  
 and Galleri Nicolai  
 Wallner, København

One of the standout artworks at the current Venice Biennale is a 37-minute video by Scottish artist Rachel Maclean. It is screened within, and framed by, the ancient church of Santa Catarina. Titled *Spite Your Face*, it is a retelling of the Pinocchio story, against the golden backdrop of Donald Trump, and the lies of Brexit. Noses, inevitably, grow and become increasingly more phallic.

"When I came to Venice to write the script," the 29-year-old artist (who trained as a painter at Edinburgh College of Art) says in a British Council video, "it was shortly after Donald Trump and the American election. I was interested in how lies played into the Trump campaign. And despite the fact that there's a lot written to expose the lies, it didn't affect the election results."

The boundaries between truth and fiction – between "reality" and "Reality TV" – have become dangerously blurred. As Simon Kuper wrote in an August 2017 *The Financial Times* article, "John Kelly imagines he is Trump's chief of staff, whereas in fact he's *The Trump Show's* new Marine-general character."

Fake News is not new. Machiavelli, for one, would be astonished that we might think it is. What is new is the ability for a United States President to be able to tweet to the world at six in the morning. Propaganda is as old as politics and warfare. Hyper-connectedness, with no built-in space for reflective or peer-reviewed comment, is what is new.

Since the election of The Donald, George Orwell's *1984* has been hovering around the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list. Exceptional though that book is, it is still self-contained within its bound covers, or within the timeframe of film and television adaptations. To examine the way that 'open' rather than 'closed' strategies can mediate between reality and fiction, and use a network of subterfuge to challenge our sense of the real and the fake, we need to go back beyond Orwell's 1949 text to Orson Welles' radio broadcast, over a decade earlier, of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. There were two levels of Fake News to this event. First, a scheduled radio program was interrupted midway through, an occurrence Americans had grown used to in the lead-up to their entry into World War II. The pop-up broadcast sounded like another government security announcement, except this time it was about an alien invasion from Mars, rather than from Japan or Germany. Some people fled their cities to seek refuge elsewhere. There was much confusion, some panic, and arguably one or two deaths caused as a result. The second level of Fake News happened when the US press made this a front-page story and exaggerated the resulting panic out of all proportion. Today, there is a similar symbiotic relationship between, say, Trump's denunciations of mainstream journalism as "fake", and tabloid television, radio, and newspapers' lies (which is what Fake News at its most basic *is* – lies) on everything from climate change to Russian involvement or non-involvement in election campaigns, and nuclear threats from the Korean peninsula.

But let's go back even further, to ancient Greece, and notions of *trompe l'oeil*. Authentic or not, accounts of birds being fooled by the verisimilitude of grapes painted on Athenian walls and swooping towards them, are highly relevant to a range of 20th and early 21st century artists, usually working in the visual field. (Janet Cardiff might be seen as exploring the audio equivalent of *trompe l'oeil*; others such as Singapore's Adeline Kueh have worked with scent.)

Since the early 1970s, when I created six contemporary artists, placed them several years into the future, and made the type of artworks I thought they might then be making – backing this up with fictitious interviews by equally fictitious art writers – I have been constructing what I call Superfictions, and have catalogued over one hundred artists around the world known for creating their own imaginary worlds – from fictitious airlines (Res Ingold, Switzerland) to *faux* cosmetics companies (Eve-Anne O'Regan, Australia), and my own Museum of Contemporary Ideas in New York.

Many of these artists I came across in 1989, in different parts of the world. Broadly, their Superfictions break down into two categories – 'Poetic Superfictions' and 'Realist Superfictions'. Both often rely on forms of *Neo-trompe-l'oeil*.

The Catalan duo Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera's creation of a fictional German zoologist, Dr Peter Ameisenhaufen, is a poetic Superfiction. The mythical creatures he has made (through taxidermy) and photographed (on rare German photographic paper), such as a griffin shaking hands with someone in a medical lab coat, calls on us to suspend disbelief and enter into a constructed reality in the same way we would engage in a play by Shakespeare or an airport novel by Karin Slaughter. We know it can't be what it appears to be, but we are drawn in.

Belgium's Guillaume Bijl, by contrast, has spent most of his career creating slices of contemporary life – from a 7-Eleven store to a fully operational airport arrivals hall, complete with baggage carousel and Avis Car Hire outlets. These are either installed within art museums, artist-run initiatives, or Brutalist theatre foyers, and are very much realist Superfictions.

Dozens of artists, and art teams, fall into either or both of the above categories, including SERVAAS, Seymour Likely, Rodney Glick, DAMP, The Leeds 13, Cameron Bishop, David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology, Michael Vale, Xu Bing, Ulrich Lau, Jacqueline Drinkall, Tricky Walsh and Mish Meijers, Suzanne Treister, Saint-Orlan, Gary Carsley, and Robert Zhao's Museum of Critical Zoologists. A few artists, like Cindy Sherman, Martin Kippenberger, Adrian Piper, Alexa Wright, or the Adventurist artist Michael Candy, produce works that are tangential to Superfictions *per se* but help broaden the debate.





The 'political' nature of the work of some artists and groups, aligns them more closely with the term Fake News, a term that we seem destined to navigate around from here to the apocalypse. Group Irwin from the former Yugoslavia were the visual arm of Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) and mirrored fictional government departments, as Leibach did with the NSK collective for music and opera. Irwin famously covered Moscow's Red Square with a black square, referencing Malevich. Canada's General Idea dealt politically with environmental issues, AIDS, and the fantasy world of Miss General Idea. The writer and artist Ian Hamilton Finlay, from his garden temple Little Sparta in the Lowlands of Scotland, sent his *Saint-Juste Vigilantes* to do his bidding in different parts of the world, when the politics of the moment required.

So how do we know what is true or false - what is Fake News - when relying predominantly on visual evidence? Some philosophers of science, such as Sir Karl Popper, devoted a great deal of their time to asking such questions. Sophisticated Methodological Falsificationism was Popper's answer. He showed that we can *approach* the truth, perhaps even claim it for a short period. You can see white swans any number of times, his famous dictum went, but you will never be able to say "all swans are white". However, a single sighting of a black swan does allow you to say "not all swans are white". You still can't say "all swans are white or black" because you don't know if someone will catch a glimpse of an orange or a blue swan one day. It may sound pedantic, but it's not. It is the sort of sophisticated, internal way of thinking that we will never get from The Donald - whatever colour that particular duck happens to be. **V**

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He is an artist, writer, and independent curator currently on an extensive global lecture tour titled *Fake News and Superfictions*.

<sup>1</sup> Irwin exhibited in Nick Waterlow's bicentenary biennale of Sydney in 1988, and in 2004 they showed their Like to Like Project at Artspace, Sydney.

Top to bottom  
Museum of Jurassic  
Technology Facade  
9341 Venice Blvd,  
Culver City  
Photo: Jennifer Bastian

Installation view  
GUILLAUME BIJL  
*Your Supermarket*, 2003  
Tate Gallery, Liverpool

Courtesy the artist  
and Galleri Nicolai  
Wallner, København



Megaloponera Foetens,  
Stink Ant of the Cameroon  
Photo: MJT