

Reality Check

[ri'æl'i:ti ,tʃek] *noun.*

An occasion that causes you to consider the facts about a situation and not your opinions, ideas or beliefs.

David McAlmont

David McAlmont is a recording artiste, art historian and tutor at the Architectural Association Interprofessional studio. He is a Birkbeck and Middlesex University alumnus (History of Western Art and Architecture, and Performing Arts), author of the 'Permissible Beauty' film. Recent works include the album 'Happy Ending' (A Guardian Album of the Year), and an article on the history of the word "Ghetto" for Mousse magazine, Shifting Visions and the Medici Society (January 2024). He is currently developing a Jacques Louis David project for 2025.

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Summer Show 2024

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In the words of David McAlmont
guest curator, Summer Show 2024

"An occasion that causes you to consider the facts about a situation and not your opinions, ideas or beliefs." Cambridge English Dictionary

During an inebriated session before the last fin de siècle, a question arose: "If you were offered a million quid to quit television, would you?" The answer was a breezy "Hell no!" Then, within ten years, I tired of having shouty louts in my living room uninvited, and musical contests not being contests at all, but rigged, home-invading, *tabloidular* conceits designed to pin one to one's couch. The TV set, a steam-powered, oversized widescreen thing was jettisoned for a brave new world or perhaps a more dangerous one: voluntary self-ostracisation from the watercooler conversation and the #XFactor trends of pre-Musk Twitter. Question Time, Wimbledon, the Nine O'clock News, competing primetime soaps, all gone.

It was in fact the stuff of zeitgeist: the mass destabilisation of former twentieth century communities of discourse, including the disappearance of tea ladies who popped into offices once a morning and afternoon. When VDU use ceased, as files parked and pens rested, and colleagues dunking *custard creams* in polystyrene cups of *builders* caught up with who watched what on the four channels last night. In successive blinks of an eye, the four became five. The *contained terrestrial* became *scattered digital*, and then a highly interactive *information superhighway* supplanted *the remote*. A rarefied group of young, newly affluent, *Silicon Valley* oligarchs exploited our inability to agree for their profit-powering model in, ostensibly, the friendliest of ways. Ultimately, remote-sized devices – *smartphones* – with seeming access to the entire world through them diluted the power of heritage communicators.

As tea ladies were displaced by the machines, family viewings around a common device declined. Personal interest profiles became increasingly individualised and bespoke. Household names became Who(s). Variant powers of critique were transmissible to potentially countless little people out there in the dark: a new matrix that devalued tests, auditions and qualifications. A new feudalism evolved around walled cyber communities of misinformation. "*Everybody is entitled to their opinion*" became a more sinister proposition. A new democratisation of autonomous thought superseded the traditional media gatekeepers. "*Choice*" was confronted with a veritable megamarket of options, which shaped our discourse, our friendships, our beliefs, our politics.

Arguably, these events led the 2016 lexicographers at the *Oxford English Dictionary* to issue one of their most alarming *Words of the Year* ever, "*post-truth*"! To a significant number, reality figured inconsequentially if it sucked. And if it sucked, a veritable smorgasbord of alternative fact pedlars, conspiracy theorists and dodgy health quacks sat poised to transmit the palatable and preferable – not the factual and actual – from their laptops directly to ours. It went beyond switching off to switching to...

"Alternative facts are not facts: they're falsehoods!"

Thus spake, Chuck Todd, MSNBC's *Meet the Press* anchor, on January 22nd 2017 when *Senior Counselor* [sic] to the President Kellyanne Conway challenged his live interrogation. The exchange made international headlines just months after the OED's November 2016 *post-truth* declaration. Earlier that month, *Independent* columnist Matthew Norman wrote, "*The truth has become so devalued that what was once the gold standard of political debate is now worthless currency.*"

The year of an infamous British referendum and notorious US presidential candidacy saw *Team OED* explaining how both of the above accelerated dual *post-truth* discourses. The term, however, didn't magically appear in 2016. Author Ralph Keyes dedicated an entire book to the idea in 2004, *The Post Truth Era*. The concept stretched even farther back to 1992 when Serbian American, *Academy Award*-winning playwright Steve Tesich wrote of the *Iran Contra* scandal and *Gulf War*, "*We, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world.*"

Arguably, *A.I.* is *post-truth's* most recent *horseman of the apocalypse*, portended like an advent of *Armageddon* even though it has been with us since we first logged on. In 2024, *Instagram* influencers need not be real anymore, *deep fake* photos of a

bigoted presidential candidate in the company of grinning African American supporters circulate. An edited portrait of the premiere British establishment family is jettisoned from respectable news sites. As recently as summer 2024 reports appeared showing that consumers are deserting *the headlines* in droves because they are "*Relentless*"! Too real?

Presented with the theme, the Society's sculptors have cleaved to this relentless reality instead, duly furnishing dystopic narratives, by turns, frank, urgent and gallows humorous. The foyer confronts arrivals with the *psychic cyclonic*. **Isobel Church's** *Siren*, a delineation of a storm's swirl about its eye; an omniscient, Sauronic *Mirage* from **Terence New** ablaze in gold on a background of dunes; **Linda Hubbard's** head on *Costumes of War: A different sort of poppy* lands an unwavering strike; The DnA Factory harrows with its discomfiting *HANDFLOWERGRENADE*; **Steve Johnson's** pointed *Façade* hangs conscious of how flags quite literally separate citizens from each other; **Michelangelo Arteaga** bucks the noisiest of silent trends with feather and anvil for *The Pen is Mightier than the Sword – a Criticism of Brexit*; **Wen-Hsi Harman's** *I Am Not White* transcends the BS of *wokewatchers*; the charm and colour of **Sadie Brockbank's** *Arc* subtly masks the profound menace of compromised climates bedeviling world fauna.

The Salon, therefore, functions as *aftermath forewarned*. In a lacerated time tunnel, **Eleni Maragaki** suspends an apparition of a sacred *Aerial Forest*; **Abigail Norris' Limb** mutates from a secret, foreboding chasm; **Kate MccGwire's** mysterious *THROB* mandala elicits textural hypnoses; **Jill Gibson's** hallucinatory phantasm *Something Chimera* perturbs and mystifies. **Abigail Norris' Wyrd Sister Betwixt Me & Her** emotes and admonishes; **Amale Freiha Khlat's** shorn *Forest* reconstruction heightens international forestry crises; **Fiona Campbell's** devastating *Pyre* demonstrates relative consequence; **Christopher Summerfield's** *Malevolent Interferer* – is it a cell, a lifeform, a virus? – stirs questions? **Nik Ramage's** illusive *Une Verre* signals the precious vitality of water; **Marianne Broch's** intriguing *Root* form perfects mortal delimitation; **Cesar Cornejo's** brick fossil *Trepanation V* archaeologically revivifies *memento mori*; unsteady reflections in **Paul Tecklenberg's** *Pair Tree* quicken the inquisitive eye.

Beyond **Caro Williams' reconstituted 3D poesy**, *For She Dreams*, the studio entertains the *coalescent dystopic*: **Ben Joiner's** monumentally nucleic corona *Dendrite*; the cautionary buoyancy of **Jill Townsley's** slicked *Splash*; In the southern studio: the dental desert of **Jane Morgan's** *My Mother's Teeth*; the mortal reality of **Srabani Ghosh's** *Who Man | Old Man Arse Over Tit*; **Sarah Villeneuve's** post nuclear holocaust toy, *Post-truth Barbie*; the morbid surrealism of **Susan Francis' Mothering Sunday**; the punctured fragility of **Julie Light's** *So Many Sleepless Nights*; **Sarah Pager's** alarming NHS puzzle *Them & Us*; **Ever Grainger's** frozen "CGI" *Vessel*; **Kate MccGwire's** kinky, organic conceit, *FLICK*; and the Ephesian Artemis recalibrated in **Didi Gaudron's** protuberant, consumerist idol, *Ram*.

To the north: **Emma Woffenden's** darkly comedic *New Body*; **Doug Burton's** *Mad Max* evocation, *Roadside Picnic*; **Martin Darbyshire's** winsome *Wir Sin Die Roboter 12*; the actuality of stainless steel courtesy of **Colin Kerrigan's** beautiful, polished helix, *Conduit*; *Glimpse*, **Sato Sugamoto's** spectacular metaverse; **Rachel Mortlock's** domesticated, peculiar *Rise of the Crustaceans, Oniscidea*; **Nik Ramage's** grimly Dadaist *Dresden*; **David Aston's** futuristic civil service, *The Corporations of R.U.R.*; **Farnoush Amini's** *Dare to Walk Over Me* negotiates its crookedly egg-peppered mile; **Poojan Gupta's** waste meditations in metalwork, *Retained I & II*; **Katie Hallam's** sobering, thought-provocative *Future Relic*; **Michael Petry's** apothecic installation, *The Space Between*, teases messianic optimism.

The theme sought a story; the sculptors returned unique subjective episodes. They reveal that sculpture would have us look toward and not away from twenty-first century realities. Where political pundits venture that nobody is talking about Brexit, Royal Society sculptors beg to differ. Where headlines decline to make much of the slaughter of minors in international conflicts, the Society thinks otherwise. Amidst increasing reports of environmental catastrophe, they amplify those concerns. Where late night comedians offer a tonic to the misery of news, *Reality Check* deploys a similar sense of humour. In divisive times of near tribal warfare and territorial self-centredness, it (re)centres Gaia.

William Blake believed that compressed evil inhabited the bodies of fleas until the parasites expired, whereupon the compressed contagion was unleashed, flitting abroad to infect the person of proximal humans. *The Ghost of a Flea*, Blake's small tempera and goldleaf delineation of the metempsychosis on mahogany threatened human possession by disturbing potential inhabitants. The work was dismissed as the ravings of a mad man when it first appeared. Whether from flea to man or man to flea, we can agree that Blake was conscious of cause and effect, something that *Reality Check* aims to verify. Curatorially importuned, the artists have spoken. *The Royal Society of Sculptors Summer Show 2024* is a stirring *plastic* essay that progresses through storm via aftermath to eerie bewilderment. Get real!

Hearty congratulations and copious thanks to the artists and the amazing team at Dora House.

David McAlmont

The Royal Society of Sculptors

We champion contemporary sculpture and the artists who create it. We are leading the conversation about sculpture today through exhibitions and events for all, welcoming everyone interested in exploring this art form and its many possibilities. An artist-led, membership organisation, the Society supports and connects sculptors throughout their careers.