

Karen Blissett is Revolting

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BLISSETT-IS-REVOLTING](http://www.newcriticals.com/karen-blissett-is-revolting))



(<http://dvblog.org/?p=6578>)

In June 2010, Karen Blissett, a regular participant in art world debates, via various email discussion lists and social media platforms, "went multiple". She identified the email address as the kernel of personal identity in network culture and issued the following invitation:

*“Dear Friends.
Please join me.
Literally.
I want to become more open and
free, with a more distributed
identity.
So if you would like to take a break
from yourself and speak and act
as me instead, please drop me a
personal email.
If I trust you I will send you my
password and you can start
expressing me.
Can't wait!
Karen Blissett
--
Open, Free, Public and Distributed
at last.” (1)*

Many artists and art workers (including myself) then corresponded with her to gain her trust. We “joined” her, and went on to play, speak and act through her, giving expression to the ideas, impulses, opinions and responses, she inspired in us. A torrent of provocative, poetic, and often contradictory voices issued proclamations, made auto portraits, and shared psalm-like meditations on her existential transformation; distributed across online platforms and social spaces, in text, image and video.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFgdh_L7wEk&list=PLg21pXJE-7hPh3iHEgR6AwYiIFrldAEKt&index=3) What gave the phenomenon greater punch was that Karen had moved among us (her first documented email was in 2007) and passed

for a number of years as a normal user of social media and discussion platforms. Certainly on Furtherfield's Netbehaviour (<http://www.furtherfield.org/netbehaviour>) discussion list felt we knew who she was; a punky young artist with a didactic graphic style. Her visual arguments and slogans railed against ongoing patriarchal influence in culture and her conversations often felt very personal.



During the process of becoming-multiple Karen claimed to be offspring (born 1991) of the legendary, 90s Neoist, collective identity artists, Luther Blissett and Karen Eliot.(2) As arguably the first net-spawned Neoist, and certainly the first Neoist artist to grow up with web 2.0, Karen used the uncertainty surrounding her “real girl” status as a part of her artistic materials.

Through a number of auto-biographical statements she expressed typically ambivalent feelings of a young woman towards her parents. She complained of the way that they prioritised their political art actions over their parental responsibilities, leaving her to wander the net alone. At the same time she says, ‘their critical and revolutionary zeal lives on within us. We are alive with the spirit of revolt and upheaval.’

Karen Blissett inhabits similar terrain to the productively disruptive and exploratory net identities of 90s audio visual software

artists NN aka Netochka Nezvanova
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netochka_Nezvanova_\(author\)\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netochka_Nezvanova_(author)))
aka Nameless Nobodies
(<http://www.nettime.org>); as well as more
recent human-bot combos such Angel F.
(<http://www.artisopensource.net/network/artisopensource/tag/baby/>)
a baby Artificial Intelligence by Salvatore
Iaconesi and Oriana Persico (of the Italian
art duo Art is Open Source), created to
grow up 'among viruses, technological
systems, digital emotions and stories of the
fight for freedom of expression.' Karen's
ontology also rhymes with Piratbyran's
chatbot OmniHal, (3) programmed to
welcome users to their Internet Relay Chat
channel (used for years by a group of
friends to devise, plan and develop the
philosophies, software and parties that
underpinned a particular flowering of free
culture on the Internet). Over time the
chatbot mimics the words and concerns of
the IRC users, filling the channel with
echoes of previous exchanges creating a
sense of belonging and conviviality.



Karen Blissett's act of radical openness and one-ing could be read as a recognition of and reaction to the growing isolation brought about by ubiquitous personal devices, social media platforms and digital networks, (Turkle), referred to by Judy Wajcman in her previous essay for Lady Justice (<http://www.newcriticals.com/features/lady-justice>). It could also be read as an assertion of the importance of trust, friendship and intimacy (and the role of privacy and anonymity) in the construction of networked sociality. It certainly requires any participant to reassess their performance of their own individuality and agency in the network age.

In 2012 we featured her Join Me manifesto ([re-posted here on her new Tumblr blog](http://guide2seniormanagement.tumblr.com/post/84008779365/join-me-now-karen-is-karens) (<http://guide2seniormanagement.tumblr.com/post/84008779365/join-me-now-karen-is-karens>)) and videos in our first exhibition at the newly located Furtherfield Gallery in the heart of Finsbury Park, North London, Being Social (<http://www.furtherfield.org/programmes/exhibition/being-social>), about sociality in network culture; and then as part of Free Yourself? (<http://evg.dematerial.org/collection/free-yourself>), for Electronic Village Gallery, a touring exhibition in Cornwall, of artists and social hackers working with questions of freedom and identity in the Internet age.

Most striking about Karen Blissett is the radical vulnerability of her existence. Think about it. Any password holder can speak and act through her online, they also have access (with the exercise of a little patient detective work) to her profile on Facebook, Twitter, Identica, MySpace, etc as they are all authenticated through her email account. Any existing password holder could annihilate or take over her identity with a single action- changing the password. Being Karen Blissett I am forced to reflect on my own daily state of subjection in digital networks - as I invest

hours of every day building trust, shaping an acceptable coherent identity - personally, socially and professionally - through my interactions with others.



<http://guide2seniormanagement.tumblr.com/?og=1>) Karen Blissett categorises her most recent artwork Senior Management, An Inspirational Guide <http://guide2seniormanagement.tumblr.com/?og=1>), as art for offices. She appropriates a simple enough format, an old-style boardroom slideshow presentation. It is a multi-format artwork available via Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Tumblr and as hi-resolution digital prints, on corporate display screens and computer desktops. Here, she uses her anonymity to create an "open situation in which none in particular is responsible," (4) and to launch a guerrilla style assault on the administrators of contemporary power. Viewers are addressed as senior management wannabes. We are offered a chilling sequence of managerial catchphrases (derived from found texts culled from real boardroom exchanges and managerial correspondences), alongside images of besuited managers with flaccid penises spliced into the centres of their faces. I don't know of many other artworks that operate in this genre of comedy horror but I expect it will resonate with many people's experience of the workplace in these times of austerity. I was especially fascinated by two things: the work's simultaneous banality and brutality and, given its at least

superficial waggishness, its failure to circulate online. So I contacted her by email to request an interview. She agreed.

RC: Karen, What made you do it?

KB: It was personal. We were furious. One of us was particularly distressed by their personal circumstances, and then discovered that she was not alone. After several years employed by the company, institution, service - to create something of worth and value - we realized that there was nothing we could do to preserve our achievements and those of our communities, colleagues and clients* from the reckless actions of those appointed to manage their dismantlement. They work without question to a neoliberal bureaucratic formula that has no room for anything but spreadsheet logic. We find ourselves unable to protect our jobs and resources from their smug and enthusiastic compliance with the fascist policies of the government and media relations whose blood and soil ideology is currently making a strident reappearance via the UK Tories, UKIP, and the BNP. Our health, education and freedom are at stake, and they act as if their only responsibility is to more effectively destroy our future.

KB: The initial impetus was revenge. We felt so helpless. We must express our anger. We wanted to do something like take down their pants in public, like naughty children do to each other in the playground. To humiliate them for not taking responsibility, for playing the role of "great men" (we saw women playing this role too), enjoying the swagger and benefits of their status, while blaming others for their failures.

They demand the impossible. Not in a good way, and not for the enrichment of human futures, but sucking up to power and policy makers - ministers, regulators, corporate leaders - negating their own experiences,

demonstrating their loyalty through the implementation of trivial bureaucratic obligations. They push and push until we get sick, unable to perform, we have lost confidence in our abilities, constantly threatened with replacement. They treat people like worn out parts and discard them, rather than cherish them and maintain them into old age and retirement. Throwaway culture wins out with catastrophic consequences.

RC: But why the penises?

KB: We did think about vaginas but it had to be penises. Many years ago one of us saw a political newspaper, created by activist artists. On the cover was a picture of Tony Blair with the vagina where his face should have been. The shock of it stayed with that Karen for 15 years. But it also seemed to her that the female genitals were defiled by their association with such a heartless militaristic pig. Blair's face was improved by the intervention. We also looked at Magritte's *Le Viol* and thought it amplified the violence done to his mother when he de-faces the woman's portrait replacing her expressive articulate facial features with an image of a dumb torso. So instead we decided to replace the flaccid penis for the face of the senior manager as a perfect emblem of the "little man" (as Wilhelm Reich describes him). This is the main figure of control that plays Daddy (regardless of the actual sex) in the conference room, in the office, at their computer, at meetings and conferences; excited to serve the "big man" to work the big man's machine, while maintaining his own narrow horizons, dull senses - blind and oblivious to the consequences of his actions.

KB: He or she is Simone de Beauvoir's "serious man", eager to get rid of duty to be free. His "dishonesty" issues from his being obliged ceaselessly to renew the denial of

this freedom." (The Ethics of Ambiguity). Or Thoreau's "wooden man" who can be made by the state, the army or company to carry out atrocities with "no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense" (Civil Disobedience). Invisible rivers of blood flow from the wounded consciences of those who do nothing but for petty self-interest and to maintain the status quo. He is the Nazi officer of Arendt's Banality of Evil.

This is not about men as such, but about old fashioned patriarchal forces still at play in contemporary life, perpetuating a senseless domination of human and non-human life forces through the bureaucratic and administrative channels, under the auspices of contemporary austerity politics. We are talking about cynicism, defeatism and the erasure of humanity at the hands of neoliberalism's careless foot soldiers.

Since the 70s female artists have repeatedly returned to their bodily experience as a place of personal political intelligence. As a multiple, open, distributed feminine identity, here we have returned the compliment of centuries of male artists projecting their ideas, ideals, dreams, analyses, psychologies onto naked female bodies while marginalising or suppressing other bodies, specifically the queer body. Yes, it is rude and vulgar. The situation demands it, along with other rude and vulgar coordinated radical voices and actions.

RC: What do you hope will happen? What will be the effect?

KB: After we posted the first images through social media only two people shared them. We spoke to a few people privately and they said that the images were so disgusting that they did not want them on their FB pages. This shows something terrible about how people self-censor, as they build their identity on the

FB wall. Where once- before contemporary surveillance methods took hold- the mob found power in anonymity, people are now isolated and bound to individual rather than collective identities or mutual subjectivities.

So we have repackaged the work in as harmless a wrapping as we could find. We are in the process of inserting them under the noses of the people who they portray in the form of some glossy leadership brochures and some eye-watering large scale digital prints to hang in their offices.

KB: We work with an art dealer. We believe that the work that will do very well in the commercial gallery system. This is macho pacho like Damien Hirst. This is the most irresponsible, posturing, despicable work we have ever created - we think it will do very well. But we know that this is not really a progressive net art work. It cannot be. It is for old fashioned people.

Nevertheless with clever use of hashtags to reach to our target - they will discover the work for themselves. Or their colleagues will circulate the slideshow thinking 'This is funny. It is about him or her. I wonder if they will recognise themselves?'. Perhaps they will upload them to their senior managers' desktops, screen savers, or on their company marketing screens, or among photos on the walls of fame in their golf clubs. Perhaps people will commission me to make enflaccidphalused portraits of their own senior managers, or create and circulate their own versions (it is not hard to do). These images will be burned onto the minds' eyes of those they portray.

In a private exchange a friend of ours commented: 'almost all white ... no small ones, I feel embarrassed, don't know exactly why ...' There are reasons for this. Enter "senior manager" in any image search engine in Western Europe, to see

how many non-white faces are displayed. This is relevant context. In addition, size is relative- in these images the humiliation of the subject should be complete.

RC: Yes, you seem very angry and yet the people I have shown the work to have roared with laughter.

KB: This kind of rage is always entertaining when it's directed at someone else. Also the joke is about how the managers think they are the winners. They are not. They are the victims too.

You asked 'What will be the effect?' Around the Western world, as senior managers see themselves in the mirror held up to them by this artwork, they will shrivel in shame or burn incandescent with an impotent rage proportional in intensity to the future freedoms and wonders that they have destroyed with their heedlessness. Others will stand around pointing and laughing.

Soon the subjects of the artwork will slump in their office chairs, collapse in their meetings and weep. Some part of them will expire, rot, wither. They had better hope that some part of them still retains a glimmer of humanity, otherwise they may snuff out completely.

Then they will start to laugh with their family, friends, and colleagues from the heart they forgot they had.

RC: Are you not concerned that you may just be adding to the defeatism? Some might regard your anonymity as cowardly.

KB: We see what you're doing here - the dirty work of neoliberalism. Attack the whiner - to discredit and undermine their genuine experience. The truth is that the current political oeuvre makes it impossible to act responsibly in society - this work is a poetic response, a symptom of one multiple artist's allergy to the current conditions.

We are surprised that people are not constantly vomiting with fear and disgust in rural ditches and the gutters of our city streets.

RC: You have been quiet for a while.
Where have you been?

KB: When I first became multiple it was an ecstatic experience, my multi-personal Ur-moment, a mystical one-ing - then we lost all drive to take care of our art identity. We just got on with life. You know, domestic concerns. In a sense, we Karens are the only true artist, because we just do the work which is absolutely necessary for the whole world (separate from ideas of career, status, worldly survival). We are a true net art saint!

RC: Thanks Karen

KB: Please could you put my answers back and forth through online translation tool a few times - to disguise our written style?

RC: Good plan. How about Russian in honour of Netochka Nezvanova?

Senior Management, An Inspirational Guide is available for redistribution in three formats.

Animated slideshow for corporate display screens (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNTpRGHkNdw>).

High resolution digital prints.
(<http://guide2seniormanagement.tumblr.com>)

Slide show for conference presentation.
(<http://www.slideshare.net/KarenBlissett/senior-management-33711144>)

Contact the artist to commission a portrait of your own senior manager:

karen.blissett@gmail.com
@Karen Blissett
(https://twitter.com/Karen_Blissett)

* = customers, clients, students, users, patients.

‘Karen Blissett is Revolting, Ruth Catlow interviews Karen Blissett about Senior Management, an Inspirational Guide’ is published by Lady Justice, New Criticals, and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. 2014

Footnotes

1. Email from Karen Blissett Subject: [NetBehaviour] Invitation to join me, to NetBehaviour for networked distributed creativity
<netbehaviour@netbehaviour.org>
(Furtherfield) 10 Jul 2010 14:43:24 +0100

2. Qui êtes-vous, karen blissett? by Emmanuel Guez, 2010
(<http://writingmachines.org/2010/07/29/qui-etes-vous-karen-blissett/>)

3. OmniHal has been recreated and rebooted by Piratbyran for Furtherfield’s current exhibition Piratbyran and Friends
(<http://www.furtherfield.org/programmes/exhibition/piratbyran-and-friends>), May-June 2014 You can visit RiotChat
(<http://copyriot.meteor.com>)online and feed OmniHal with slogans, jokes and messages for fellow revolutionaries.

4. Stewart Home - on the Blissett Enigma – YouTube.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2LoDtbjuZY>)

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