'Propaganda is now another name for communication itself'

Suhail Malik and Metahaven

Suhail Malik: I'd like to address some of the themes that seem to have preoccupied you for some time, and not just as thematic concerns of your work but also for how it operates. Operation, meaning what its effects are, how it circulates, how it or you as a collaborative practice – and as a transdisciplinary practice of being artists, designers, writers, editors – contribute to a renewal or a transformation of what propaganda is. One of the striking concerns evident over the course of your practice is that the status of propaganda has recently changed. To start, could you say how and why propaganda became a theme for you?

Metahaven: There is naturally a kind of impossibility, inability or lack of necessity for us to supplement work that we've made with words, or to substitute it *by* words. Which is not to create a crypto-graphic black box so that one can no longer interrogate anything, but it's worth emphasizing that there's ways in which the work says things that we can't say here.

That said, to address your question for ourselves, like many others we initially viewed propaganda as something sort of quaint, like an old movie with a post-Soviet font, fake dust and scratches. We thought it had maybe somehow *ended* after the Cold War and had been supplanted by something like soft power perhaps, a more recent coinage of non-coercive power. Then, with the emergence of global cloud platforms as a hitherto unidentified or uninterpreted geopolitical force, together with the appearance of new rifts and ruptures inside the liberal West and also between the West, the East and South, etc. – in particular, the rifts between Russia and the West – interjected themselves in our work via a deeper interest in emotive patterns in film and communication. So, the current work develops from this combination of our own medium of choice heading much more towards moving image, and also an observation about the ways in which the moving image was taking a newly critical role in this emerging geostrategic situation in which, right now for some time, propaganda is somehow *back*.

We don't know if propaganda is really the right word, though it is the word we chose for *The Sprawl (Propaganda about Propaganda)*. It's a continuation of a longer interest that has articulated itself a bit more strongly than previously. We used to be all about things like soft power, breaking down soft power, state branding, deconstructing state branding, deconstructing practices that try to reshape the unfamiliar or the Other in the language of the familiar, such as Wally Olins's stuff about the states in Central Asia, and how no one can tell them apart.

SM: What is that?

MH: Well that's a story that was actually featured in *Uncorporate Identity*, our first book in 2010, and it's a story about a mostly UK-based brand designer who saw this emerging market in Central Asia coming out with all these unknown countries there.

SM: The Stans.

MH: The five Stans. Can you name all five of them?

SM: Er … Kyrgyzstan, Kurdistan, Uzbekistan … Um ….

MH: Tajikistan, Kazakhstan. Olins claimed that nobody could tell the five Stans apart, as we've just demonstrated. There was this idea, based on the outcome of the Cold War, that the West would bring the tools of soft power to countries that supposedly don't know how to talk about themselves. Now, however, it seems like a weird moment to talk about soft power in that same way. Maybe it's a moment to talk about negative soft power instead.

SM: But your more recent interest in propaganda seems to move on from the earlier work's concern with state branding, which is a kind of corporatisation of the state: the state acting as a market actor, not in terms of what it's actually doing in terms of finance and capitalisation, but just how it sells itself as one brand among others; for sure, that's kind of tied in to a kind of propandistic work but one attached to soft power, in that states understand themselves as market actors. And thinking about some of your more recent work from 2010-ish onwards with music videos, I was wondering whether the propaganda moment was attached to this sort of commodification of identity and status?

MH: The presumption that states are merely market actors in the post-Wall era has been proven dramatically wrong in terms of what the outcomes were. The idea that it would be a kind of competition for *thymos* – pride or merit – as Francis Fukuyama would have it, rather than a competition for power, has obviously not proven true. What has happened instead is a multiplication of state power in terms of distribution of its interests via the global cloud, in accord with means on the ground, using a variety of methods from pseudo-television to computer hacking. This has been paired with the framework of legitimacy being less and less focused on democracy and rule of law, replaced by a more base-level, primordial idea of 'effectiveness,' such as the authoritarian strongman. Within that context, figures with questionable political intent or agendas become platform agents. In this world, figures as opposed as the Dalai Lama and Ramzan Kadyrov – the head of state of Chechnya – use Instagram. It's not an accident so much as a design feature of this power model that during the July 2016 so-called coup d'état in Turkey, Recep Erdogan addressed the people via FaceTime.

The idea that platforms would somehow be naturally inscribed with liberal values and thus inherent instruments of soft power, for example for the US and its allies, was the presumption with which the US entered the 2010 cycle of revolutionary events in North Africa and the Middle East. The idea there being that Twitter and other platforms would provide the additional soft power that would give these events a certain political signature.

SM: That became explicit around Tahrir Square, right? There was a struggle at a certain point when Egyptian authorities blocked use of Twitter, because it was said to be the main organising media in the square itself. If I remember correctly, it became explicit that the US state was heavily backing Twitter and putting pressure on the Egyptian authorities to keep it open through the street protests, and the Egyptian state did because even through

all the revolutionary moments it was still beholden to what the Americans were wanting to do as a state power.

MH: There's a lot of these stories that claim that 'it started with a Facebook post', and often that's being said by the person who wrote the Facebook post. And all of that has given rise to a world model by which there is a technopolitically deterministic story for every event. One thing our older work addressed is the unpairing of ideas about political outcome from the standardization that occurs when power becomes tied to platforms: for example, the hypothetical case of a world in which the United States has vanished but the world keeps on speaking English.

SM: But it's also that the cloud platforms become actors themselves....

MH: They becomes *visible* as actors. The dates are important here: YouTube is 2005, bought by Google [in] 2006. Russia Today started in 2005. There's a whole bunch of these things that started in the mid-2000s and only became more visible and worked through a bit later on.

SM: Yes, and I want to come back a bit later to what you just mentioned, the 'it all started with my Facebook post' meme –

MH: – 'My Myspace post'! –

SM: – because what's quite telling about that claim is the way in which an individual actor has systemic effects. Before the internet – if anyone here can remember a before the internet – you needed to go through mediating institutions to amplify your claims or criticisms. That is, in order to have large scale effects, you needed to go through a medium or large scale organisation, of which the state is at the top end. Now, however, the myth of 'it all started with my Facebook post' speaks to how small actors can have large effects, *and* to how large-scale actors don't necessarily have large effects. There's a kind of scrambling of scales between announcements and actions or effects. But to get to that, I want to press you a little bit more on propaganda. What you've just described is the conditions in which the usual verification processes break down, so any transmission is *at once* the signal, the content and also propaganda somehow. It's not clear what counts as content, what counts as affect and what counts as persuasion. This seems to be at the core of *The Sprawl* piece: that propaganda is now another name for communication itself.

If so, the modern and critical view of propaganda as distinct from truth, as a kind of deception that undercuts truth or as a communication that's dictated only by power, that distinction just doesn't hold anymore for what you've just described as a network-based communication. Instead, you cannot tell whether the communication conveys power or a truth – whether it's subjective truth, or epistemological truth, and so on.

MH: The question is whether it ever did, or whether this development exposed that the distinction never really worked in the way that was claimed.

SM: One version of the critical left and also, for that matter, of liberalism certainly held on to that assumption. There was a clear sense from the Enlightenment onwards that propaganda was to be treated with suspicion,

requiring that a rational claim could be demarcated from propagandistic claims, at least in principal, and as a kind of critical overview. The scientific rational position would be to say we need to eliminate propaganda as a basis for actions: the technocrat, for example, says somebody [*sic*] like 'we have to work with the rational basis for constructing society,' etc. and not all the misleading propaganda and unfortunate politics. We can also see this conveyed in now-prevailing notions of the market as a kind of rational mechanism – 'the *market* says', 'the *market* dictates', and so on. The market is held to be a kind of enacted knowledge which isn't propagandistically determined, conforming to the separation of politics and economics. In effect, it's held to be a systemic process for producing rational social truths. Politics, on the other hand, is the propagandistic field – it's full of interests and distortions to the otherwise neutral informational operation of market pricing. But this can only happen if information *is* rationally communicative and *not* propaganda. But you're saying that maybe this distinction never really happens?

MH: Can we present our little theory about how this came about? It's a three-minute theory which is not really a theory at all. When you're saying that scientific knowledge has shattered, in some sense, our older belief systems, that we now exist on a kind of zero point where we understand truths scientifically –

SM: – That's the Enlightenment claim, anyway. –

MH: – Then we're disenchanted on a truly cosmic scale. Peter Sloterdijk writes about the 'celestial domes' that in a sense once seemed to hold our lives together: how do we keep on living now that they are shattered and we know that we are naked under an indifferent heavens? Answer: all human life has always been a bubble. In spite of, and precisely because of, our cosmic disenchantment we create bubbles for ourselves in which we temporarily, artificially, restore a possibility of belief. And then our theory, which is not really a theory at all, is actually that propaganda bubbles, as pop-ups for alternative truths, say, 'this may or may not be true, but let's do as if it is' – let's *act* as if it's true. You're then creating a world, a bubble, in which the thing that *isn't* true is temporarily suspended from scrutiny and promoted and treated as if it is true. You can grow these bubbles; they can be scaled up or down with the help of the vertical geographies of platforms in which they *were* first real: a platform-native truth claim. This realness on platforms takes the place of what in the old international relations jargon would still be called 'legitimacy'. We then have a legitimacy based on an inflation or speculation of a certain bubble. It's then only up to the other bubble to find out how to deal with the first bubble, right? What would otherwise be a matter of truth versus lie becomes a matter of version versus version. The truth is decided by the writing speed or rendering speed of the bubble that is ahead of that of the other bubble, or the factual truth, so that the most effectively rendered bubble becomes a new fact and no one is questioning it anymore on a fundamental level – because of entropy, the clock, the moving Now. We all move on to the next thing. Both the averted coup in Turkey and the Brexit campaign ran along these lines. Brexit was discussed yesterday [in the conversation with Ben Vickers], so we won't go into that today.

SM: Oh! I wanted to!

MH: OK, sorry then! The main point of this bubble theory of truth is that a fictional opponent is much stronger than a real opponent. Brexit manufactured these universally powerful villains, and it gave people the idea, via platform-induced hypnosis, that they were patriotic heroes saving the NHS, or that they would be casting a protest vote that wouldn't matter anyway; that they were somehow doing this partially in a VR fantasyland with fantasy powers as an already insignificant protest gesture, because on the other side were the all-powerful liberals, the people –

SM: – People like us. –

MH: –Yeah, the people who also didn't see it coming because of the bubble of their own Facebook world, where there are no people who actually are pro-Brexit. This bubble condition is about not seeing that there is actually a sizeable opponent at all. And all sides suffer misperceptions: fundamentally differently organised misperceptions, but which nonetheless work hand in hand together to produce the victory of the Brexit-bubble, which is real and overwrites what came before. This whole fantasy thing that Boris Johnson and other people built up around the EU has led to real facts. No one disputes that final fact, no one said Brexit didn't happen.

SM: We could start disputing it now with our own bubble.

MH: Yeah, we could pretend. Actually, Ben Vickers suggested that we should start a Dragon Party. A political party for dragons.

SM: Mmmmh….

MH: You don't want to go into that?

SM: It's a bit too bubbly for me. But, yes, Brexit seems a very good example of your theory. Trump is another obvious example: there's a massive scaling from the individual contributions to Facebook, people living within their own filter bubble which is perhaps another version of the bubble that Sloterdijk is talking about. Eli Pariser talks about the filter bubble as how the algorithms and selection mechanisms necessary for social media to function at all narrow down the range of views that you come across as a user, and Pariser complains about this as a breaking apart of social cohesion.

But, really, the question is why that's held to be a problem? To ask that is not to throw the expectation of social cohesion under the bus but only to get to understand better what it stands for. Its corrosion is only a problem if you hold on to an Enlightenment version of civil society – for which Jürgen Habermas has been the most notable advocate – as a place of competing public interests that comes to form a view close to rational truth, through some kind of deliberative democracy. By contrast, the cloud-based bubbling you mention is, we could say, a specific technically-organised version of what in the late 1970s Jean-François Lyotard called the breakdown of the grand narratives of modernity through information processes. For Lyotard, the big narratives of the Enlightenment – notably, emancipation through knowledge, or rather emancipation *and* knowledge as producers of the 'good' society – break down because they lose legitimacy through the horizontal distribution of information in network societies. The bubbles of many small narratives, each coherent as a bubble to itself, end up with the proliferation of subjective opinions that only self-reinforce, and that because the material condition of the network doesn't require any reference to a big socially organising narrative as a basic normative constraint.

What's key in this transformation of the construction of the social bond is that subjectification becomes the condition for truth. The bubble refers to a subject who understands themselves to live in a truth, because of the information they're getting, but also how it feels inside that self-reinforcing. It's what Steven Colbert in 2005 called 'truthiness': you don't necessarily know what the truth in fact is, but that it just *feels* right. It's truth from the gut, not from the head, which is to say without any epistemological or commonly public criteria. (Those aren't Colbert's words, by the way). What Colbert presented as satire at that time is what Trump now does. It's the basic condition for what's called a post-truth or post-fact politics, which is importantly set up thanks to social bubbling.

To come back to your practice more directly: it seems to me that the key crisis is currently revolving around – made explicit in *The Sprawl* – is that this move to the post-truth condition or post-fact condition *requires* propaganda as the only viable mode of political communication – if not of social composition altogether.

MH: Our feeling about *The Sprawl* is much more to do with *being inside*. We also wanted to make a film that was *itself* propaganda about propaganda, not about being the analyst who hovers above things and constructs the higher analysis. It's much more as if you're in flight mode *inside* propaganda. That also allows you to discern different qualities to truth-making in propaganda that can be more, or less, elegant. So, when you're talking about Trump truth-making – Trump-making – it is the most crude form of truth-making that there can be... –

SM: – An effective one though. –

MH: – But it's like 3dpi [dots-per-inch] truth-making with lots of bots that echo it. There are much more refined ways of doing this.

SM: What's important about refinement though? Isn't that a way of keeping a critical distance, which should be more typical of a sceptical position that looks for truth behind the propaganda? Also, though I think I disagree with your version of what Trump is, why is he (or, as a propagandistic phenomenon, it) at 3dpi?

MH: Because he blows the bubbles super fast. It's almost like a mechanical process. It's automated, like a McDonald's of propaganda.

SM: Why does that matter?

MH: Because the issue with propaganda and bubble-making is not just about *what* the bubble is but also *how* it is; not just about what it is about, but also about the *way* it is about what it is about. That's design, as Michael Rock said. So the *treatment*, let's say, of a certain proposition in semi-postfact or higher-truth or other-truth conditions is of vital importance in what it does. It's a critical issue for propagandists.

SM: Who are, then, a bit like connoisseurs?

MH: Hobbyists, rather! It's not just that once there were facts and now there are only post-facts. The idea that we have passed towards a fundamentally new era is tempting

but it's techno-determinist. If you look at newspapers in the 1950s that stood for one or another party line, you would read the same bubbles. We also don't believe that there are no other alternatives to 'post-facts' than 'facts'.

SM: No, but the difference at that point would be, at least in the modern settlement, that you have different opinions in the various newspapers and other publications and media, which are supposed to lead to a kind of consensus through deliberative democracy. By contrast, the problem you're describing is one in which the whole field is a divergence of views without a consensual meeting point. There isn't a basis for the discussion between the meeting points, nothing that any of them can claim priority over.

MH: Right, and one of the problems with 'post-facts' so far has been that in order to refute them, one first needs to repeat them. If I say you are wearing a green jacket and you say 'That's not true, I'm not wearing a green jacket. I'm wearing an orange jacket,' you're forced to repeat the untruth in order to refute it. That reiteration of the untrue is part of the post-truth condition. Hillary [Clinton] tried to get round this by asking people to 'go to hillaryclinton.com to check if what Donald just said is true.'

SM: Essentially, political discourse becomes clickbait. I read something around the beginning of the Trump candidacy on this. Basically, Trump began the presidential bid as a promotion campaign for himself as a brand. His basic strategy was to always 'suck all of the oxygen out of the room': he just says things which will immediately become the talking point so, like the tactic of rehearsing untruths you just mentioned, attention always goes through him and on his terms. Everything he says is simply there to generate reactions to him, which is a propagation of the brand. It's all been a clickbait operation to promote his name.

And it's been interesting to see this immediate strategy become power, because what's key in this is that the content of what he says is entirely subordinated to his mediatised presence. As with clickbait, content is a like-mechanism. However you're reacting, you're simply adding +1 to the attention that he's getting. The question then is what the basis for communication becomes? If the common space of discourse, the common space of communication and meaning – which in the modern period was called rationalism or community, and presumes some common sense – is now weak or subordinated to these affective, rhetorical, persuasive power claims, which is the field of propaganda, what is happening instead as communication?

MH: What's changed with propaganda recently is that you completely disregard the idea that there is a truth, or an objective referent. Instead, the strategy is that you disrupt, contradict, produce information that ignites itself.

SM: But strategy suggests an aim, and so a rationale. Why do that?

MH: To confuse. Before we start talking about Trump too long, let's back up a little bit and talk about the strategy of disinformation and where that started. We were looking especially at the conflict between Russia and Ukraine over the Crimea annexation and the MH17 crash. What happened there was I think a much more interesting way in which disinformation played out. There is such a thing as

fast-food propaganda. It also depends on how propaganda has to be, in some ways, a *lived reality*. Propaganda bubbles cannot be discarded as merely purely fictional at the moment of the encounter, because they exist not just on the axis of fact versus fiction.

SM: Could you say a little more on the high definition version of this kind of disinformation? It takes us back to the point about what can happen with greater-than-3dpi bubbles and the importance of the treatment in post-truth conditions. What do you find in it that's more sophisticated?

MH: Well, the Russians have said – and this is actually an important claim – that no media platform can be objective. The claim was constructed like this: every large mainstream broadcaster has ties with their national government's policy, so there's no way that the BBC and CNN don't also have ties with their respective governments as Russia Today (RT) obviously does. The claim that you actually *can* exist in an objective space outside the influence of geopolitics is never really true. Based on that, RT is then completely entitled to have their own voice alongside the other national TV news stations. And their strategy has been to create not so much a single propagandistic story imposed above all others, but to create lots of possibilities and questions around events. By opening up a Pandora's box of possible, alternative hypotheses around certain events they show that until we have the facts, we never know what happened. They do not offer a counternarrative but rather launch versions. It's like software: the constant release of beta versions of stories that may or may not make it to the finish line.

So, to return to the issue of the treatment: the production of this kind of disinformation to confuse also involves creating forms of analogue, offline parallel construction. The Russian manufacturer of the missile that took down MH17 created a Tatlin-like experimental installation of one such missile, mounted on a wooden, constructivist structure. They then positioned a discarded plane fuselage next to it. They exploded the missile to demonstrate that actually this could not have been that particular type of weapon. There was a video of that. The degree of investment in pure story is what's intriguing here.

SM: It's kind of a broadcast-statist-corporate form of the internet. The internet is just a proliferation of micro-narratives, without any basis in a grand structuring narrative, at least in its consumption. But can't we presume that people like the Russian state propagandists don't buy into this, precisely because they're doing this as a strategic end for their own power interest. For the sake of clarification, and because we're talking now about Russia, compare this propangandistic method to that of the Soviet Communist period: *Pravda* – which translates to "truth" – was the newspaper format of the propaganda mechanism of the Communist Party. The paper and everything in it were clearly understood *as* communist propaganda. So, there was a kind of enactment of clear political authority... –

MH: – An official *version* of... –

SM: – Yeah, but it's clearly not the truth despite stating that it's the truth, and that was probably well understood by a good proportion of its readership. But it was one message, and you had to take it even if you didn't believe it, even if only to know what the official line was. But

following what you've just said, what's happening now as propaganda is something completely different: the production of a multiplicity of narratives, each of which could be true, but the net effect of which is the discrediting of any official narrative from any side. So is the strategic aim is just to get rid of the viability of a credible truth-claim?

MH: It's a bit more involved than that. The West generally recognises the concept of truth in terms of *pravda* rather than the concept of *istina*, which the Russians also have. It's not so much a dispute about which one is really true, but which one is true on which level. *Pravda* seems more pragmatic, and *istina* speaks to a higher truth, necessarily trickier of course. When we proposed the concept of *istina* to Peter Pomerantsev as we interviewed him [for *The Sprawl*], he dismissed it as being a truth only known to the initiated, a more mystical form of truth that he didn't want to have anything to do with.

SM: Is there approximate translation for *istina* against *pravda*?

MH: It's more connected to religion … –

SM: – Like a sacral truth? –

MH: – Sacred, yes. Something higher, an ultimate or revelatory truth rather than a pragmatic database of facts. There's a Hungarian film called *Fehér Isten*, translated to 'White God'.
The general thought is that though the state has arrived at a postmodern embrace of post-facts – certainly, there are theories like that around certain people who are high up in the Russian government – there are however also much simpler ways to construct a similar process. Would you allow me to read something from Tolstoy's *What Is Art?*, in order to answer your question?

SM: It would be a first for me.

MH: And this is actually in [*Information Skies*] in the original Russian with a different English translation. Bear in mind that Tolstoy wrote this in the 19th century, so when you hear 'man' or anything in the male gender he would, hopefully, probably not write in a such a gender specific way nowadays:

> *Art begins when a man with the purpose of communicating to other people a feeling he once experienced, calls it up again within himself and expresses it by certain external signs, thus the simplest case: a boy who once experienced fear, let us say on encountering a wolf, tells us about his encounter; and to call up in others the feeling he experienced, describes himself, his state of mind before the encounter, his surroundings, the forest, his carelessness and then the look of the wolf, its movements, the distance between the wolf and himself and so on. All this – as if as he tells the story the boy relives the feeling he experienced, infects his listeners, makes them relive all that the narrator lived through – is Art. Even if the boy had not seen a wolf, but had often been afraid of seeing one, and wishing to call up in others the feeling he experienced invented the encounter with the wolf, telling it in such a way that through his narrative he called up in his listeners the same feeling he experienced in imagining the wolf, this too would be Art.*

Are you thoroughly fulfilled by this citation?

SM: Absolutely not.

MH: No? Well, Tolstoy is saying that in order to make us feel the wolf, there needn't be a wolf. Isn't that a much more direct access to this post-truth state?

SM: I guess. It makes sense to me in its own terms, but it's an expressionistic and representational notion of art. When Tolstoy says a successful work of art is an individual expressing something that the recipient understands and feels, if the recipient gets what the initial experience is, the fear of the wolf and so on, then there is perhaps a kind of truth. But it's an affective truth, set into a subjective basis, and it's a unique experience. But in the condition you're describing, it's important there are *many* bubbles, not just the extension of the artist's bubble to another person. And it's the aggregate effect of this at once unique and multiple production of subjective truths that I'm trying to get at.
It seems to me that [what] you've identified in the notion of propaganda is the net consequence of all these strategised and corporatised notions of art. The consequences of that are very different to what Tolstoy is describing, much as his account – if you are into it, which I am not – may be a good description of what art should do on the micro-level of subjective experience. You could say that such an aggregate-level effect is a consequence of postmodernity as Lyotard described and theorized it – there are only small narratives without any calibrating grand narrative – as it is the realization of now fairly well-ingrained poststructuralist claims that all so-called truths are only in fact power claims. And that feeds into the assumptions you'd expect for critical art practice: skepticism towards power, skepticism towards anything that claims to be a truth claim because, in fact, it stands for something else.
So what interests me in your position as regards art is that somehow your work on propaganda addresses what certain state or state-corporate actors are now doing as large-scale network operators, as a kind of instrumentalised postmodern, poststructuralist avant-garde. What you're dealing with is how, in a sense, state-level organisations have caught up with the things that have been happening in art for some 30–40 years now: the dismissal of the grand narrative; the primacy of the subjective position; the attempt to impose or persuade whoever receives the communicative moment of art, a subject who is structurally unknown, that this multiplicity of positions all have equal validity; that there isn't some kind of rational claim to the work, but it's a set of subjective positions which are not quite opinions, and so on. Combined, these are, I think, the standard formation of the contemporary art schema, certainly that of critical practices which would dispute any effort to say that it can propose a clear truth claim. All you're left with is a series of alternatives without a unifying horizon or a gathering narrative. And now the state takes that form of communication too.
I know I'm going on a bit again, but let me just add one more point because it's crucial for how we situate art practices in general today and into the future. The problem then for contemporary art, or for an art that makes critical claims, is that such practices have historically understood themselves to be sceptical of the state and corporation as they are sceptical of the notion of objective truths; critical art sets itself up to be counter-statist, counter-

hegemonic, anti-capitalist, and so on. But the hegemonic powers, perhaps only most clearly exemplified by Russia but unexceptionally so, are now replicating or duplicating exactly what critical art practices have been doing for some time.

So, if we still want to maintain a critical position via the received precepts of contemporary art, this is a crisis. We can't then maintain any distance or separation to a big-bad power actor 'over there' thanks to our scepticism or our insistence on the truths of our mini-narratives against the lies and propagandistic untruths of big power (which is itself a kind of libertarian stance, and would explain the success of the so-called alt-right in adapting these critical premises to their own ends). The dilemma for a contemporary art that wants to maintain its received and, it has to be said, worthwhile critical position is that *its* operation – what it does – contributes to a power structure and operation that such art usually disclaims through its content.

But I wonder if your ambivalent position on propaganda – perhaps, better put, your fascination with it – takes another stance than the paralysing dilemma contemporary art now faces. And that is to say something like, 'Oh, actually, fantastic! Art practices now work in the same way as power at the state level – or in the same logics as the state'. Which is to say that the power effects the art field can have, operate in the same dimension, or in the same kind of strategies, as state actors.

MH: Well, we don't have the scaling tools that the state has, so we're very tiny when you compare us to the things that you're comparing art to now.

SM: But you locate yourselves in the art field, not the design field. So the question's more about being involved in the art field and how your production, and the effects that you want to have, are also what you're describing in the practice, its thematic content. Isn't there a kind of convergence between the forms of operation of the art field and of the state actors, and you're exactly at the intersection point between those two things? I'm wondering whether that feels like an opportunity or a curse, because it seems to me you nonetheless want to remain sceptical of the state form.

MH: Well, the general thought is that the state has arrived at this postmodern embrace of post-facts as the result of its inhalation of postmodern theory — there are theories like that around certain people who are high up in the Russian government, such as Dugin and Surkov. But, as we were saying through Tolstoy, there are much simpler ways in which a similar process can be constructed. *Information Skies*, for example, is within a post-truth condition yet it's a very personal exploration of a kind of story that is not overtly political when you see the film.

We see many limits to taking everything through a sort of geo-political lens, and in fact we also really need to expand the way that we tell stories, the way we work, and the way that we transfer things that we feel into things that other people then feel. All of this will always use methods that have resonance in a geo-political field. It will always talk about our world in a larger sense — but how small should the sample be? *Information Skies* takes a much smaller sample and makes it much bigger without actually referring to anything that happened, for real, in the world. We tried to construct a way in which something which didn't happen — or you can debate if it happened or not — can be real for someone.

Fact Checker

Wally Olins's stuff about the states in Central Asia: *Wally Olins, Trading Identities: Why Countries and Companies are Taking on Each Other's Roles* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 1999)

The Stans: Kurdistan, mentioned by Malik, is not in fact one of the five 'Stans.' And both Metahaven and Malik omitted Turkmenistan in this conversation.

the earlier work's concern with state branding: Vinca Kruk, Daniel van der Velden, Marina Vishmidt eds., *Uncorporate Identity: Metahaven* (Baden: Lars Muller, 2010)

some of your more recent work from 2010-ish onwards with music videos: Holly Herndon, *Home* (2014) and *Interference* (2015)

a kind of competition for thymos – pride or merit – as Francis Fukuyama would have it: Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992)

the Dalai Lama and Ramzan Kadyrov – the head of state of Chechnya – use Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/dalailama/?hl=en and https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/26/chechnya-ramzan-kadyrov-social-media-russia-instagram-facebook > Kadyrov was pushed off Instagram

during the July 2016 so-called coup d'état in Turkey, Recep Erdogan addressed the people via FaceTime: Reuters, 'Erdogan addresses Turkey via FaceTime amid attempted coup – video', *The Guardian*, 16 July 2016 [www.theguardian.com/world/video/2016/jul/15/erdogan-facetime-turkey-coup-attempt]

the US state was heavily backing Twitter and putting pressure on the Egyptian authorities to keep it open through the street protests: Sharon Gaudin, 'Social networks credited with role in toppling Egypt's Mubarak', *Computerworld*, 11 February 2011 [www.computerworld.com/article/2513142/web-apps/social-networks-credited-with-role-in-toppling-egypt-s-mubarak.html]

Peter Sloterdijk writes about the 'celestial domes' that in a sense once seemed to hold our lives together: Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres I: Microspherology* (New York: semiotext(e), 2011)

Eli Pariser talks about the filter bubble: Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You* (New York: Penguin, 2012)

an Enlightenment version of civil society – for which Jürgen Habermas has been the most notable advocate: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1989 [1962])

what in the late 1970s Jean-François Lyotard called the breakdown of the grand narratives of modernity through information processes: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010 [1979])

what Steven Colbert in 2005 called 'truthiness':
The Colbert Report, Pilot Episode, Comedy Central,
17 October 2005; Benjamin Zimmer, 'Truthiness
or Trustiness,' *Language Log*, 26 October 2005 [itre.
cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002586.
html]; 'Stephen Colbert's "truthiness" word describes
campaign rhetoric,' *The Washington Post*, 18 August
2016 [www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/aug/18/
stephen-colberts-truthiness-word-describes-
campaig/]

That's design, as Michael Rock said: https://2x4.org/
ideas/19/mad-dutch-disease/

Hillary [Clinton] tried to get round this by asking
people to 'go to hillaryclinton.com to check if what
Donald just said is true': https://www.washingtonpost.
com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/09/everything-that-was-
said-at-the-second-donald-trump-vs-hillary-clinton-
debate-highlighted/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.
e2fbb6b35da1

Trump began the Presidential bid as a promotion
campaign for himself as a brand. His basic strategy
was to always 'suck all of the oxygen out of the room':
Eli Stokols and Ben Schrekinger 'How Trump Did It,'
Politico, 1 February 2016 [www.politico.com/magazine/
story/2016/02/how-donald-trump-did-it-213581]

the Russians have said – and this is actually an
important claim – that no media platform can
be objective: Dmitry Kiselyov, quoted in http://
supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/eating-glass-the-
new-propaganda/

The Russian manufacturer of the missile that took
down MH17 created a Tatlin-like experimental
installation of one such missile, mounted on a wooden,
constructivist structure: https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=0r63cskl08o

There's a Hungarian film called Feher Isten: https://
www.imdb.com/title/tt2844798/

Tolstoy's What Is Art?: Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?,* trans.
Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London:
Penguin, 1995 [1897]).

All so-called truths are only in fact power claims:
Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews
and Other Writings, 1972–1977,* ed. & trans. Colin
Gordon et.al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).