

HELP! DAVID CAMERON LIKES

MY ART.

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My Work Received Approval From the Wrong Audience

They saw the work on a gallery website. Looking for another artist's work, they stumbled across the *Today's Question* series that I had exhibited in a group show in the same gallery. They expressed an interest in acquiring the works for the UK Government Art Collection. This collection, they explained, purchases works of art for display in British government buildings around the world to promote British art and culture. However, they said the price I was asking was too high. But I was reluctant to let them strike a cheap deal and the board eventually decided to acquire only two works from the seven-piece series. The choice, it was later argued, reflected not just the limited budget, but also the fact that some pieces in the series were not really appropriate for the Government collection. Apparently the content was considered politically controversial and raised eyebrows in some quarters.

The works they selected read: 'How should we fight foot and mouth? – Kill or Vaccinate – Please tick' and '31mph – A Crime? Yes or No. Please tick'. The large text works were based on questionnaires that had been jamming my fax machine for many months in the early 2000s. The faxes had been sent out by a company pretending to poll opinion on different subjects: it was claimed the poll results would be presented to important politicians and institutions, in order to influence their decision-making. However, what purported to be a way to enact direct democracy was actually just shoddy business practice, if not fraud. The company charged people for faxing back the poll slips with the 'Yes' or 'No' boxes ticked, and so a handsome profit was made by getting people to react and send in their vote. The costs for faxing back the response included a £5.00 connection charge, the very small print stated.

The works the Government Art Collection did not like, or which were above their budget, asked:

Scrap all speed bumps? Yes or No.

Should we close St Bartholomew's Hospital? Keep it open or Close it.

24 hours drinking. Should pubs be able to open 24hrs? Yes or No.

Should we stay in Europe? Stay in or Get out.

Should the government return 11,000 illegal immigrants back to France? Yes or No.

I was both fascinated and appalled by these faxes. It was their audacity – their use of reductionist and propagandist language as a strategy to make money, while pretending that participants contributed to democracy – that disgusted me. These questions were worded to strike at people's hearts, and the raw 'yes/no' binary choice they offered felt violent and irresponsible to me. Even if I had just binned the faxes, their sheer presence would have been aggressive enough. I resolved to do something with them.

So I enlarged the text and the basic layout of the questionnaires and sprayed them in different colours with automotive lacquer on large aluminium panels. For this toxic spraying and baking process, I worked in a spray shop near Munich, where the car manufacturer BMW once produced its Art Car series with famous artists. The guys in the spray shop proudly showed me snapshots of Andy Warhol, with masking tape in hand, standing next to the Art Car he decorated for BMW in 1979. The spraying process itself is pretty fancy. It happens in a high-tech, temperature-controlled spray booth, where an extraction system sucks out any floating particles such as dust, hair or any other microscopic material that could cause even the slightest blemish on the pristine lacquer surface. We sprayed multiple layers of paint and clear coat. Using this method, the text eventually stood slightly in relief over the surrounding area. The layering also resulted in a beautiful, vitreous depth of colour, which in my view stood strikingly for the political complexity that was reduced on the original questionnaire to a banal 'Yes' or 'No' dichotomy.

I fully understand why the Government Art Collection was attracted to these works. Their surface was so shiny and seductive. They *do* look kind of cool. On one occasion, I was invited to a private view of their display with other works in the collection at the British Embassy in Paris. I had assumed that this was to be the permanent place for their display. Years later, I still pictured the works residing on that elegant wall in Paris, until an unexpected email dropped into my inbox:

Hi Eva, I'm a journalist with the Sunday Mirror newspaper in London. I was intrigued to know what you think of the Tory PM David Cameron choosing your work (*31mph a crime?* and *How Should We Fight Foot and Mouth?*) from the Government art collection to hang in his office? I was interested to know if you have met Mr Cameron or his wife Samantha or if you know how they came to know of your work. I'd also be interested to know what you think of Mr Cameron's policies, including of course the decision by his Government to slash funding for the Arts! Regards, Gary.

I was confused. I was just on my way to the dentist, trying to get rid of a throbbing toothache. As soon as I got back home, I rang the number of the Government Art Collection. Nobody was available to give me any information, but two days later I received a letter from the collection's director:

WORKS OF ART ON DISPLAY IN 10, DOWNING STREET

Further to our telephone conversation, I am writing to let you know that there is a very strong possibility that your paintings *31mph a Crime?*, and *How should we fight foot and mouth?*, will shortly be installed in a room in 10 Downing Street. We wanted to let you know in advance of our plans, as sometimes displays at 10 Downing Street attract publicity, as you know already.

With good wishes
Penny Johnson, Director

I tried to gather more information. Was it only 'a very strong possibility' that the works would be displayed in Downing Street, or were they already there? They were already there. Who selected the work? It was Samantha Cameron. Where exactly were they displayed? In the Camerons' private residence at 10 Downing Street. Why? No answer. I then sat down and wrote a letter to the Prime Minister and his wife, stating politely that I was flattered – I kind of was – and asking what they liked about my work and why they had selected it. No answer.

I felt compelled to find other sources of information to answer my questions. I searched online for anything I could find about David and Samantha's apartment in Downing Street. An image of Michelle Obama and Samantha Cameron came up, in which the two women were sitting on a mustard-yellow sofa in the Camerons' open-plan kitchen at Downing Street. At the time the exaggerated costs of remodelling their kitchen diner was being discussed in the news. What troubled me was the particular yellow shade of the sofa: it matched too perfectly the yellow shade of my *Kill or Vaccinate* piece. Was it really just the nice colour they liked my work for?

Some time later, at a private view at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, selected works from the Government Art Collection were on view – including one of mine. There I was introduced to the Facilities Manager at Downing Street. We had a lively conversation at the bar. He said he was a big fan of my work and that, if I wished, I could come round to Downing Street for a guided tour. Wow! I was excited to do that! In the emails that followed, he clarified that of course the tour would exclude the private residence, but that he could show me around the rest of the building one evening. Still wow. In further email exchanges, he started to back down, stating that because of workload it might be tricky to find a date soon. The summer came. Then complete silence.

Meanwhile, sources close to the art collection told me that one MP proposed a question for a Prime Minister's Questions. The MP wanted to ask: is the artist Eva Weinmayr British enough to be collected by the UK Government Art Collection? The request, fitting the current political climate, apparently did not make it through to PMQ at that time.

Eventually my moment of opportunity came. During the re-election campaign, David Cameron's private residence was opened to a film crew from *The Sun* newspaper. They produced a ten-minute clip, 'One day in the life of David Cameron', which showed the prime minister preparing breakfast in the kitchen at home. In the film, the camera sweeps over shelves with glasses and tumblers. It catches a glimpse inside the fridge, and then follows Mr. Cameron to the central dining table, which stands in an open-plan living space. The camera's gaze rests on the table, which is crammed with books, papers, a Weetabix box and a jar holding pencils and a toothbrush, before pulling back to a wide shot of the prime minister sitting at the table with a steaming coffee mug. Leafing through a disorganised stack of papers, he is sitting in front of my picture, which

is given pride of place on the central wall. The prime minister of Great Britain relaxes at home under the unmistakable motif *Kill or Vaccinate?*

Version A

Start from Dave's [Cameron] entrance. Eva [W] and Samantha [C] are sitting in the drawing room having tea. DC comes in. Ah, PM, hello I am E. Good to have you here, etc., replies DC. More shallow banter occurs and E starts to filter in her political messages: that she finds his cultural policy abhorrent, that he should remove the plan for wide-ranging cuts for everything art. She goes on to detail her point while SC sits still and is remarkably quiet. Then comes the moment.

Eva produces a huge fire axe and puts the spike into DC's head. He immediately falls to the floor and dies. SC, still calm, says: OK now let's put him into the credenza. The V&A people will be here any moment [to collect it] and this is a good way to get rid of this man who is good for nothing? You are so right to raise your voice for the arts.

This new evidence of the work's conspicuous location in the Camerons' living room was too much for me. Before this revelation, I had a hazy imagination of my works being installed somewhere else – a corridor perhaps, or among other pieces jam-packed across a wall, or even behind a door. But it was not to be. The prominent and solitary position on the prime minister's living room wall and its proximity to the goings-on in the room were a cause of growing anxiety for me. What instances, private moments and very private moments had my picture been forced to witness? A silent companion held hostage, being forced to dwell with a man who stands for the most ignorant cultural budget cuts, education bills and housing politics proposed in a long while. It was precisely this – the imposed companionship – which infuriated me. Johnny Marr, guitarist with The Smiths, was similarly frustrated about David Cameron back in 2010 when the prime minister publicly declared himself a fan. Marr tweeted:

DAVID CAMERON, STOP SAYING THAT YOU LIKE THE SMITHS, NO YOU DON'T. I FORBID YOU TO LIKE IT.

'I forbid you to like it'. That is wonderful. I am not naïve. For the last ten years, I have been working on the complexities of circulation – deeply convinced that once a work is out it is out. Whether published, sold or broadcast, you relinquish control and let the work go to have a social life of its own. It can inspire, comfort, alert or make people think in many different ways. But, fuck, why is it so wrong on this occasion? Maybe I need to examine my own reaction more closely?

Version B

_____ Eva does not show up. Nothing happens for ages. Samantha is just sitting in the
_____ sitting room doing nothing. Eventually Dave comes in and asks her what she's
_____ doing. I'm waiting for Eva Weinmayr, the artist. Dave replies, 'Ah' and sits down.
_____ Nothing happens for a while longer. Then he says, 'When...when is she supposed
_____ to arrive?' Samantha replies, 'She is a little late.... She might be stuck on the tube.
_____ Do you think she'll be here soon?' I imagine so. But you don't know? No. Can't you
_____ text her? I haven't got her number. And she hasn't texted you? No. She hasn't got
_____ mine. Another long pause. It's just that I'm expecting the Ambassador of
_____ Belugistan, Dave blurts out. Samantha shrugs.

_____ Let me explain my agony. The work in the [prime minister's](#) living room points
towards the implicit violence of 'Yes or No', a judgment without nuance, arguments,
discussion, negotiation or room for compromise. In that [sense](#), the work is a critique of
propagandist language. Has he missed that? Has he simply interpreted the works as
celebratory cenotaphs of direct democracy? Has he even, perhaps, been attracted to the
vicious polarisation that the fake opinion pollsters [prompted? Seen](#) the need to translate
the questionnaire one-to-one into real-life politics? I am asking because [throughout](#)
Cameron's life, he and his country [have](#) never [been](#) friends of direct democracy.
Britain's strictly representative parliamentarism, after all, is [nine hundred](#) years old.
However, contemplating the bland words 'please tick' on his wall, he might have
suddenly felt [urgently](#) that the British people must have their say...

Version C

*Eva shows up and has a polite conversation. Eva sits in the sitting room having tea
with Samantha. They exchange pleasantries. DC comes through the door and
further politeness ensues. Everybody is bored by this. The actors are reading from
prepared A4 sheets and fail to fall into any kind of dramaturgy. In this style the
scene rumbles on with an embarrassing cheesiness. It gets so boring that the
Uzbek ambassador, who is a side character here, dozes off. Things start flying in
the direction of the stage: a tomato, a Diet Coke can, various fruit.*

Welcome To Your New Home

David Cameron had to leave Downing Street in a rush after resigning, following the failed Brexit 'Remain' campaign. There was not even time to clear the table of empty coffee mugs the morning he learned that the referendum was lost, or so I have been told. Imagine the moment Theresa May stepped into the deserted kitchen dining room with the oversized questionnaire offering two boxes to be ticked: *Kill or Vaccinate*. I see Theresa May clearing Cameron's dirty mugs in uncomfortable awe. I hear the jangling sound of teaspoons on porcelain and I see her staring at my work and finding it utterly

perplexing. After all, she has just swept into Downing Street as the newly elected Conservative leader after a similarly simple-minded, divisive question was put to the British people. Thirty million Brits had put their cross either behind 'Remain a member of the European Union' or 'Leave the European Union' – with a slim majority picking the latter option. The political nature of my work made her shudder while she tried to move the mugs onto a tray, and eventually she had to put them down again on the table, perhaps struck by a coughing fit.

Has Theresa May kept the artworks up on the wall? Her taste and style is certainly very different from that of the Camerons. She apparently modified the sleek, industrial-style modernist kitchen into something more floral and colourful. Her thing is seemingly all about patterns. But what about the art? Again, I wrote a letter:

London, 12 July 2016

Dear Theresa May,

First of all, congratulations on what must be a very exciting new appointment for you. I wish you every success.

As you arrive in Downing St, you'll probably notice some images on the walls of your new flat that have a decidedly referendum-esque feel about them. These are artworks and, as their author, I thought I ought to write to you to introduce them.

They are part of a larger series *Today's Question* (2005), which are based on fake opinion polls, unsolicited faxes sent to UK households. I was so interested in the strategic and emotional rhetoric in these documents that I enlarged them and sprayed them with car paint and lacquer on aluminium boards.

As it happens, by sheer serendipitous coincidence, there are two other works in the series that are particularly relevant to the present situation. These are: *Should we return 11,000 illegal immigrants to France?*, and the even more prescient *Should we stay in Europe? Stay in/Get out*.

Wouldn't it be amazing if this work was in Downing Street now? Perhaps I don't have to evoke the impact these could have on visitors during some of the more 'informal' negotiations you're likely to be involved in over the coming months or even, dare I say it, years. Imagine, for instance, Angela Merkel arriving for a cup of tea and seeing *Should We Stay in Europe?* in pride of place above the mantelpiece! What could better impress upon her that the question is constantly uppermost in your mind? Not least because these works are authored by a (mainland) European artist.

Unfortunately the Government Art Collection has never acquired this freshly resonant work. However, now that it has certainly gained a different weight at this specific moment in time and most likely in British history, perhaps you might find a way to secure it in perpetuity for Downing Street? I would love to be able to meet with you to discuss this or the works.

Yours faithfully,
E

This time around I received a response:

9 September 2016
From the Direct Communications Department

Dear Ms Weinmayr,
The Prime Minister has asked me to thank you for your correspondence from 12 July, requesting a meeting with her. I apologise for the delay in replying.

The Prime Minister appreciates you taking time to write to her. However, owing to the tremendous pressures on her diary, I regret that it will not be possible to arrange a meeting. Thank you, once again, for writing.

Yours sincerely
Correspondence Officer

What a shame. No word about the artwork swap. Later, I learned from news reports that she had replaced most of the artwork at Downing Street with enlarged quotes from her own speeches. Apropos speeches, remember the Frida Kahlo bracelet Theresa May wore during the most important speech of her political life at the 2017 Conservative Party Conference in Manchester? The bracelet showed miniature self-portraits of the Mexican painter, a lifetime Communist Party activist concerned with the plight of the impoverished and imagining that one day we could live in a classless society. Art again slipping into unintended contexts? Would Frida have tweeted 'I forbid you to like my art'? I have my doubts – but only because Twitter was not available back then.

| Watch 'A Day in the Life of David Cameron' on The Sun's youtube channel.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9hqE5HVVQk

The theatrical inserts are taken from *Downing Street* (Los Angeles: New Documents, 2015), a play I co-wrote with writer John Moseley and journalist Titus Kroder in order to have the conversation I had been denied. The script imagines Samantha and David inviting Eva for a visit. The audience, which is scripted as a character in the play, comes up with scenarios suggesting how Eva should solve the dilemma of her art being appropriated as 'radical chic'.