



Monday 4 July 2021

The Old Waterworks Public Statement

Censorship of *An English Garden*

We have been shocked, dismayed and incredibly disappointed by the actions taken by members of Southend's Conservative Group of Councillors regarding the censorship and ultimate removal of the *An English Garden* installation situated at Gunners Park, Shoeburyness, commissioned by The Old Waterworks and Metal for *Estuary 2021* and due to remain in situ until 31 August 2021.

The councillors made a complaint regarding the content of one of the plaques contained within *An English Garden*, claiming that it is offensive and its content unpalatable. The councillors set unrealistic ultimatums and deadlines regarding the work's removal, forcing decisions to be made in such a way that put unnecessary and unfair pressure on all those involved with the work's production. A demand was made to alter the text contained in the plaque under supervision which undoubtedly would have changed the content and meaning of the artwork, shifting the work's intentions and putting words into the artist's mouth. History is not simply a celebratory fanfare and it is everyone's right to be able to explore the nuances of this shared history and how it has ongoing impacts today.

There has been no positive engagement with the councillors who threatened to play out the dialogue across the media, bypassing all attempts of reasonable discussion. As a result, our co-commissioners, Metal, who hold the site agreement for the installation, ultimately decided that the artwork be removed earlier than anticipated. This was primarily due to ensuring the wellbeing of all those involved in the artwork's installation and exhibition for *Estuary 2021*. TOW supports and understands Metal's position in reaching this decision, however we must also acknowledge that the artist, Gabriella Hirst, disagrees entirely with this action but respects the responsibility Metal has to their staff and communities in these difficult situations.

How to Make a Bomb, the project of which *An English Garden* is a part, has been based at The Old Waterworks for nearly three years, during which extensive research has been carried out. The plaque has been informed by this research, additionally demonstrated in an artist book which accompanies the project. We invite Southend's Conservative Group of Councillors and others to read this and to discuss the project, and its breadth and nuances with us. We have reserved a copy of the book for the group at The Old Waterworks to pick up free of charge.

It was of course not the intent of the work to cause any offence to anyone, particularly residents, but to encourage those that visit the garden to contemplate the complex history of Essex in the UK's nuclear story, which is very complicated. We believe the comments within the statement sent by Councillor Moyies on behalf of Southend's Conservative Group of Councillors on Wednesday 23 June to grossly misinterpret the artwork, providing inadequate and vague justifications with no satisfactory evidence provided. Art is meant to spark debate, provoke thought and encourage new ways of seeing the world, it should not be shut down because what it proposes does not align with the views of individuals, particularly when based on extensive research and historical facts.

There have been no other negative responses throughout the duration of the installation that we are aware of with regards to *An English Garden*. TOW and our partners have welcomed the positive reaction and critical engagement from local residents and the visiting public.

Metal received all of the required permissions and followed all the necessary procedures for the work to be installed. An artwork should not be threatened with removal and censorship in the way that it was and a sensible, constructive and respectful discussion should have been possible. The Old Waterworks unequivocally stands by the work's content and in due course will respond to the Southend Group of Conservative Councillors' statement in detail in order to demonstrate its gaps and inadequacies.

The issues raised and histories evoked by the *How to Make a Bomb* project have been censored and silenced for so long, many people not even being aware of the extent of the nuclear tests in Australia to which the project refers. Therefore we will continue to seek further opportunities locally and in our public programming to discuss the issues the project raises.