



Review
Olivia Plender

The World Turned
Upside Down

by Anna Colin

Photography:
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For a month in summer 2009, Kiosk gave the impression that it had closed down. Fly posters covered its structure almost entirely, making it look like a squat or perhaps an abandoned ticket office. From a distance, a familiar air of recession coupled with summer slow-down reigned over the site. On closer inspection, however, one would recognise that the space wasn't all that abandoned and that the two bills plastering the façade did not have any advertising function. Kiosk's door was open, allowing visitors to come into the quasi-empty space and pick up free copies of the posters from two piles laid on the floor. Each of the two bills contained eight vignettes depicting 'The World Turned Upside Down', or what constitutes a series of entertaining images bluntly illustrating what society would be like if hierarchies were reversed.

Typically beginning in the early 16th Century, the image of 'The World Turned Upside Down' is a genre of popular prints that were widely copied, appropriated, adapted and distributed throughout Western Europe for over three hundred years. In this reversed world, animals, children, women and others subject to the dominion of Man could take command over him, and assume his way of living – from his profession, to his privileges. Mostly accompanied by a short



descriptive caption, some of the most circulated prints included scenes of two men labouring in a field whilst being whipped by an ox; a bear ordering a man to dance; a fish standing on a river bank with a rod, angling for people; two pigs preparing to slaughter a man; or a husband nursing a baby next to his wife dressed as a combatant. Given their wide distribution and their powerful use of visual tropes understandable to a wide public, including illiterates, these illustrations were perhaps one step away from becoming a catalyst for the conveyance and organisation of radical thought. But the opportunity seemingly afforded by the idea of 'The World Turned Upside Down' wasn't taken up. Instead, satire was used in a contradictory way: to provide a playful and uncommitted critique of patriarchal society and of man's use of violence in governance on one hand, whilst on the other, actually reinforcing the existing world order and disseminating received ideas about social norms by absurdly depicting them in reverse.

Olivia Plender's take on 'The World Turned Upside Down' proposes the radicalisation and perversion of the symbols and emblematic imagery associated with the genre. What at first glance look like inoffensive and highly entertaining pieces of print in fact abound in allusions

to the illnesses of contemporary society. While some images remain largely unchanged from earlier prints in the genre (for example, the city in the clouds and the sun, moon and stars upon the ground), others are updated with contemporary characters (a cow and a horse punishing two riot police officers; or three pigs butchering a banker). In game-like fashion the posters can also be viewed upside down, revealing a very different series of vignettes. From this initially hidden reverse vantage point, we see pictures that refer to the current financial crisis and the social events that have resulted from it. These include a queue of people trying to take their money out of the near bankrupt Northern Rock bank (the first British financial institution to collapse as a result of the credit crisis), a crowd of angry demonstrators in front of the Bank of England on the occasion of the G20 meeting of world leaders in London earlier this year, and repressive policemen.

In her approach to the 'The World Turned Upside Down', Olivia Plender also continues the tradition of appropriation of images and free distribution associated with this series of illustrations. Indeed, the existence of 'The World Turned Upside Down' as a popular print genre coincided with a specific moment in the history of knowledge access and circulation, which

