



## The Black Flag Game

### Facebook

Everyone's been there. Everyone's been disappointed. Come so close. Convinced it was in the bag. Convinced all the time, effort and careful planning were going to be worth it. Convinced that final bid must surely cover any others. Convinced that girl was yours... Only to be screwed over with just your disappointment and wasted dreams for company. You came close but didn't quite cut it. Better luck next time, if there is one. You didn't really think it would happen *did* you?

Sweet, sweet disappointment is the concern of a new global, site-specific performative work, 'The Black Flag Game', initiated by artist Alex Pearl and involving any interested participants, which is being documented through online phenomenon Facebook, the fastest growing social networking site worldwide. Pearl cites his inspiration for the "ten-year project", which began earlier this year, as being the story of explorer Robert Falcon Scott, who, in seeking to conclude his quest to become the first man to lead an expedition the South Pole in 1912, arrived at the end of his journey only to discover that his rival, Roald Amundsen, had beaten him to it – the Norwegian's celebratory black flag planted firmly in the ground, a testament to Falcon Scott's failure.

Taking the precise moment Falcon Scott's disappointment was realised, Pearl has formulated his own game. In his own words: "The rules are simple. Take a black flag, go somewhere and as long as there are no other flags in sight, plant it. Hang around and watch the disappointment of others when they arrive second. Admittedly at first the game will be easy but soon flags will cover the globe and things will get interesting."

***"Throw in Dawood's 'Billy da Krishna' and an opera singing Valkyrie and it is clear this isn't a straightforward Western."***

Alex Pearl is no stranger to disappointment. His individual artistic practice draws on the inherent human failure bound within us all, its humorous consequences and results. He makes miniscule 'epic' films, video installations, sculptures and books, which often use readily available objects and software, and convey a playfulness, an awareness of their own limitations and a knowingly hopeless desire for greatness. Pearl has documented many of these projects publicly through online facilities such as

YouTube and blogging communities. Subjecting the work to such open scrutiny and criticism is arguably an attempt at diversifying his audience; taking the work from the gallery and offering it to a much broader, perhaps more populist, online audience. The usefulness of such online methods in the creation and reception of artworks is debatable, and a concern 'The Black Flag Game' seems to consider, by using the internet, not only in the recording of the player's 'conquests', but also as a component tool in the growth and development of the project itself.

Online social networks are a relatively new phenomenon. They achieve the strangely paradoxical notion of bringing people together, whilst simultaneously promoting the anti-social act of sitting at a computer. Artists have often seized on burgeoning technological developments to find new ways of challenging, expressing and playing with their content, and the internet has proved no different. But considering where 'The Black Flag Game' lies in cyberspace, what can stop it from degenerating into another of the inane and 'quirky' groups that dominate Facebook, such as 'Having Sex with Justin Timberlake Would Make My Life Complete'?

Alex Pearl seems to recognise the contradictions and vacuity at the heart of Facebook within 'The Black Flag Game', and in integrating the spread of the flags across the globe with the viral manner in which online networking spaces function, elevates 'The Game' from the tools and associations of Facebook and blogging that it uses. The onus here is on us as both audience and participator in the real world. One mirrors and feeds the other. And this cyclical nature, in turn mirrors the humorous push and pull of participation and disappointment intended within the work.

While 'The Black Flag Game' does instigate moments of defeat, I would proffer that it also articulates the kind of human endeavour and creative thinking perhaps required to avoid disappointment. In this respect 'The Game' lies in the true spirit of competition, replete with all its rewards, and bittersweet with failures; though thankfully with some light-hearted humour attached. (After all, Falcon Scott did die on his return journey from his own eponymous 'black flag moment'.)

I wouldn't begin to profess I know how the work will grow in both the real and virtual worlds over the time frame of ten years Pearl has allocated for the project, or how the issue of documenting the moments of disappointment will be resolved. Just don't head for the South Pole. It's been done.

**Thomas Darby is an artist based in the Midlands.**

**1 Alex Pearl, *The Black Flag Game*, 2008.**