

# *Conspiracy: Misconceptions and Empathy*

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## **Abstract**

My master's research focuses on contemporary conspiracy culture and how artists interpret conspiratorial narratives. As outlined in the MET's 2018 exhibition *Everything is Connected: Art and Conspiracy*, there are "two interwoven camps." The first are artists who use the imagery of the "disaffected" to highlight the danger of this manner of thinking, and expose "uncomfortable truths."<sup>1</sup> The second group are those who take a pseudo-journalistic approach to their art. These artists use public and leaked records to form larger narratives of high-power deception. Another sizable group of these journalistic artists are those who use their work to present proof of their conspiratorial narratives. Additionally, my research has led me to exploring how to engage in empathetic conversations with those convinced of conspiracy. The final result of my research was a workshop at which I discussed my research and led those in the room through guided discussions.

## **Acknowledgements**

I struggled with my education during much of my time in Elementary and High School, due in no small part to a learning disability and undiagnosed depression. This cranial cocktail from hell made me feel that I could never get into grad school let alone pass Grade 11 math. My parents never gave up on me pushing me to do better even when I felt I couldn't. I owe so much to them more than I could ever hope to repay. My sister was always by my side making me laugh and allowing me to escape. With their compassion and guidance is how and why I am writing this.

I could never have gotten through grad school without the support and love of my partner. Thank you, Dina for all the times you let me lie on your couch to read and ramble to you about conspiracy. You are my shining light. Finally, my advisors Charles Reeve and Jennifer Harris I owe so much gratitude. They pushed me in directions I would have never thought of. Additionally, I would like to thank the following people for their support: Avalon Mott, Max Faulkner, Tyler Andrews, Jordan Yordanov, Ross Blocher, Lauren Fournier, Tristan Johnson, Keith Bresnahan.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgements.....	2
Me.....	5
Conspiracy .....	6-8
Belief .....	8-9
Truth .....	9-11
Now .....	11-12
Art .....	12-16
Interlude.....	16
Art(Cont.).....	17-20
Design.....	21-22
Flaws.....	23
Empathy.....	24
Dialogue.....	24-26
Workshop.....	26-27
Conclusion.....	27-28
Coda.....	28
Curatorial Essay.....	29-31
Works Cited.....	28
Bibliography.....	33-34

**List of Figures**

Figure 1 Truck Guys Screen Shot, Fournier.....11

Figure 2 Mark Lombardi Mind Map, Ecklund and Alteveer.....14

Figure 3-5 Dylan Monroe Mind Maps, Monore.....19-20

Figure 6-7 Infowars.com screenshots.....22

## Me

I, like many people, have an interest in conspiracy thanks to history channel documentaries, a favourite of mine always being ballistics experts trying to recreate the magic bullet of the Kennedy assassination on a gel dummy. Playing *what if* is always be a fun exercise. However, conspiracy has always been a much larger part of my life. My Grandfather was in no uncertain terms a spy. He was trained at a SOE training facility on the shores of Lake Ontario known as Camp - X during World War 2 to go behind enemy lines and intervene with axis power supply lines. Meanwhile, on my father's side my grandmother was an unwilling participant in the horrific Montreal experiments. Both were part of secret government operations that could be labeled conspiracies.

My family history is the reason why I am driven to investigate this topic and why I take it so seriously. I understand the power that government kept secrets can have on communities, individuals and families.

## Conspiracy

The main question that has followed me in my research is: *What is a Conspiracy Theory?* The term conspiracy on its own is easy, it is the act of planning to do something with a level of secrecy. Compared to *conspiracy theory* the lines begin to blur. On its surface it seems simple enough, it is a hypothesis regarding a group of people planning something secretly.

The issue I have found with this definition and indeed the term itself is that it leads to varying standards of credibility within these theories. As an example: I say to my co-worker that I think our employer is skimming finances from our retirement fund because of some irregularities I came across in our company's tax returns, which I then had double checked with a few of our other coworkers. In comparison I say to my co-worker that I think our employer is an alien from a distant galaxy because his license plate is IMSI - 694 which is a similar string of characters that is found in the bible that relates to the coming of angels. Both examples are technically theories, but the burden of proof is vastly different. Conspiracy Theories can range from credible to outlandish, with such a wide range the term means nothing.

Mark Rothschild in his book *The Storm Is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything* explores issues found in more outlandish conspiracies, using the example of 9/11 being an inside job and *chemtrails*. These examples "have ever been "revealed" as truth. Their sheer size and scope make them all but impossible" Rothschild asks a question which identifies an essential flaw with large scale conspiracy theories. How could these conspiracies possibly be kept true for that long? As an example, believers of the modern Flat Earth Movement would have you believe that for hundreds of years academics, scientists, and various government agencies have all kept the secret that the earth is flat. Beyond the scientific flaws with their theory, it is unthinkable that thousands of individuals have kept that secret for that long without any sizable leak of information. Look to all the whistleblowers over the past years, Edward Snowden and Julian Assange as prime examples. It

is unfeasible to imagine that a secret of that scale would have never appeared on a government data breach.

Furthermore, Rothschild gives more reasoning as to why the term is flawed, outlining the difference between conspiracy and a conspiracy theory. One of the examples he uses is the assassination of Abraham Lincoln: “All of these are conspiracies. But they are not “conspiracy theories that came true because none were theorized in any specific way.” He goes on to say that “Nobody knew about them, and many were only revealed thanks to whistleblowers, the revelation of legal documents, or the arrests of the conspirators.”<sup>2</sup> What Rothschild does here is make a clear difference between an event that had a conspiratorial element only realized after the fact and an event that had a theory of a conspiracy attached to it. This is important because the term Conspiracy theory is often attached to events that were never theorized, this added usage of the term further confuses the definition.

In Michael Barkun’s book *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* the author isolates 3 types of conspiracies divided by scope:

**Event Conspiracies:** A conspiracy is held accountable for an event or series of events.

**Systematic Conspiracies:** A conspiracy that is believed to have “broad goals”, this may be seizing control of a country or ensuring the election of an official.

**Super Conspiracies:** This variation is identified when multiple conspiracies are linked together and perceived to be working towards a higher goal.<sup>3</sup>

These definitions expand upon the initial notion of a conspiracy, providing a framework for analysing various conspiratorial narratives. In conjunction with these definitions the author identifies 3 principles of conspiratorial belief.

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<sup>2</sup> Mike Rothschild, *The Storm Is upon Us: How Qanon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2022), 89-90.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Second (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 6.



**Nothing Happens by Accident:** This suggests a “a world based on intentionality” rather than a chaotic world where events can just happen without any rhyme or reason.

**Nothing is as it Seems:** In this form conspiracists believe that seemingly innocent events or statements are hiding some malicious purpose. Think illuminati, “that super bowl show wasn’t just a performance it was a rallying cry.”

**Everything is Connected:** As previously established if nothing happens by accident then it stands to reason that everything is connected in some way. The conspiracist “must engage in a constant process of linkage and correlation in order to map the hidden connections.”<sup>4</sup>

These principles further our understanding of these beliefs by providing recognizable traits within the pre-established types of conspiracy. It feels wrong to me to label all the variations of this term conspiracy theory under the same conceptual umbrella so going forward I will refrain from using the term *conspiracy theory*.

### **Belief**

An essential element of how conspiracies spread is the comfort that they instill in their devotees due to the fear and distrust that these ideas propagate. In Barkun’s book he draws a connection between the fear and the reassurance of belief. “It is frightening because it magnifies the power of evil... Reassuring, for it promises a world that is meaningful rather than arbitrary.”<sup>5</sup> Many of these theories provide purpose to the believers, once you accept that the earth is flat you are the one with the true knowledge and the scientific elite is hiding the truth, you become a freedom fighter you suddenly have a purpose.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Second (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Barkun, *Conspiracy*, 4.

Once these beliefs are deep rooted in a person's core values it can become incredibly difficult to convince them otherwise in fact the very act of disproving can create an "increased fervor". In the seminal text on fringe belief systems: *When Prophecy Fails: A Doomsday Cult On Alien Invasion* the authors provide 5 conditions under which "increased fervor"<sup>6</sup> can manifest following the disconfirmation of a belief:

1. The belief must be held with such deep conviction that it informs how the person behaves day to day.
2. The believer has taken some action in relation to the belief that is difficult to undo.
3. "The belief must be sufficiently specific and sufficiently concerned with the real world so that events may unequivocally refute the belief."
4. The believer is aware of counter evidence and outright dismisses it.
5. Social support for this belief system must exist, "it is unlikely that one isolated believer could withstand disconfirming evidence."<sup>7</sup>

These conditions are essential to keep in mind in the study of fringe beliefs as many of these conspiracies have been disproved time and time again, a recent example being the election of Joe Biden as President. It was a widespread belief in Qanon circles that all the blood drinking democrats would be arrested in a massive raid and Donald Trump would assume command once again, when that never came to pass many reaffirmed their creating counter narratives to reaffirm their belief.

### **Truth**

The key thread in conspiratorial thinking is the lack of trust in pre-established sources of knowledge. Using Steven Shapen's book *A Social History of Truth* (in which the author explores the relationship between Truth and Trust) as a guide. We can begin to understand how

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<sup>6</sup> Leon Festinger, Henry W Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Doomsday Cult on Alien Invasion* (Saucerian Publisher , 2021), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Festinger, Riecken, Schachter, *Prophecy*, 4

knowledge is distributed. Shapin describes modern knowledge channels thusly: “we are told things about the world by people we do not know, working in places we have not been. Trust is no longer bestowed on familiar individuals; it is accorded to institutions and abstract capacities thought to reside in certain information.”<sup>8</sup> This contemporary system that we find ourselves in, relies on a massive amount of trust in these pre-established systems: newspapers, universities, scientific review boards, etc. Furthermore, Shapin quotes the Austrian philosopher Alfred Schütz's take on knowledge: “Only a small part of my knowledge of the world originates within my personal experience. The greater part is socially derived, handed down... In all cases that knowledge only becomes mine through prior allocation of trust in others.”<sup>9</sup> Once we accept that the fact that the majority of our held beliefs do not derive from our firsthand observation, we can begin to understand the conspiratorial mindset.

Why should we trust these pre-established systems, when they traditionally get so many things wrong? Consider as an example the *replication crisis*<sup>10</sup>, an ongoing issue in the worlds of various scientific fields where researchers are finding that studies that form of the bedrock of their fields cannot be replicated. This is extremely important because the key aspect of the scientific model is that results from an experiment can be replicated by others. To that end how can we trust anything if these scientific studies that were held as scripture are useless now? Furthermore, once we accept that these bodies can't be trusted, we must form new knowledge by challenging the status quo. However, how far does this challenge to the norm go?

The common refrain/ rallying cry of the community is “research flat earth”, encouraging those who are interested in the theory to reject their assumptions and create their own knowledge. In that way isn't the flat earth movement right, to challenge the status quo and

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<sup>8</sup> Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1995), 411.

<sup>9</sup> Shapin, *Truth*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Kelsey Piper, “Science Has Been in a ‘Replication Crisis’ for a Decade. Have We Learned Anything?,” *Vox* (Vox, October 14, 2020), <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/21504366/science-replication-crisis-peer-review-statistics>.

perform their own experiments. Shapen even writes: “Trust and authority stand against the very idea of science.”<sup>11</sup> So who’s to say that the earth isn’t flat, when the so-called *crackpots* have completed so many experiments to prove their point!

It is natural to then ask what the difference between the Replication Crisis and the Flat Earth Movement is? A fundamental aspect to remember is that the flat earth group is working backwards from a conclusion, they go into these experiments convinced the earth is flat, unwilling to accept any counter arguments. This stands in the face of the scientific method, as the first key step is asking a question.

In contrast the very fact that there is an identified *replication crisis* in these science communities is proof of credible research being conducted. These researchers are realizing that they don’t know the answers, so they must retest to form new knowledge—unlike the flat earth movement who are certain of their conclusion, evidence be damned.

## **Now**

Taking the distinction between conspiracy and conspiracy theory as well as the nature of truth and belief we then can begin to examine the current state of conspiratorial thinking in the western world. I was able to ask Ross Blocher host of popular podcast *Oh No Ross and Carrie* in which the two hosts “don’t just report on spirituality, fringe science and claims of the paranormal, but take part themselves” this question: “The state of conspiracy theory in the west, being like a state of the union, the state of the union is bad when it comes to conspiracy theory, its rampant and it's really become accepted and standards for evidence just feels like they have gone out the window.” The “rampant” acceptance of conspiracy and blatant untruths was never better exemplified than when Kellyanne Conway used the term “Alternative Facts”<sup>12</sup> in a *Meet*

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<sup>11</sup> Shapin, *Truth*, 16

<sup>12</sup> “Kellyanne Conway: Press Secretary Sean Spicer Gave 'Alternative Facts' | Meet the Press | NBC News,” YouTube (NBC, January 22, 2017), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSrEEDQgFc8&ab\\_channel=NBCNews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSrEEDQgFc8&ab_channel=NBCNews).

*the Press* interview. I, like many others, took this as the moment when we had it confirmed that now for some in political discourse lies and conspiracy were not only accepted but encouraged. Over the 4 years of the Trump presidency there was a massive ongoing effort by fact checkers attempting to combat the onslaught of falsehoods. For example, CNN on broadcasts of the President's speeches would have live fact checks running along the bottom of the screen, articles were published with titles such as *Trump's false or misleading claims total 30,573 over 4 years*<sup>13</sup>, the amount of documentation, debunking and analyses content skyrocketed.

Due to this massive amount of media, knowing what one can add to the conversation can be difficult. I believe my place and purpose of this project is to use artists and their works to demonstrate these very well-established counter arguments to the contemporary deluge of conspiracy. This then brings me to the guiding question of my research: What sensory techniques does the contemporary artist/ designer dealing with conspiracy employ to showcase conspiratorial thinking and the flaws within this mindset?

## Art

In order to discuss art that focuses on conspiracy we must understand the history of this type of work, the only major art exhibition prior to 2017 tackling the topic of conspiracy was The Everson Museum of Art's 1974 show *Teapot Dome to Watergate*. My knowledge of the show comes from the exhibition's Catalogue and News Release (Thank you to Assistant Curator at the Everson museum: Steffi Chappel and her team for providing me with the scans).

The show was created as a response to the then recent Watergate scandal and additionally exploring the connections being between that event and the Teapot Dome Scandal in the 1920's. The work featured in the show ranged from political cartoons by Clifford K

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<sup>13</sup> Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, "Analysis | Trump's False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 over 4 Years," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, February 10, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>.

Berryman to American Regionalist painter Gifford Beal and Pop Artists such as Lichtenstein and Warhol.

In 2018 The Met presented *Everything Is Connected: Art and Conspiracy*, a retrospective exhibition on the art of conspiracy. The curators Douglas Eklund and Ian Alteveer made a conscious effort to “stop short of the 2016 presidential election, and, in particular, the work of younger artists just entering the conspiracy fray.”<sup>14</sup> The curators made this choice to in their words “properly tell the story of how we got here.”<sup>15</sup>

Eklund and Alteveer through the creation of their exhibition found that artists’ who create work dealing with conspiracy fall into “two interwoven camps.”<sup>16</sup> The first are artists who use the imagery of the “disaffected” to highlight the danger of this manner of thinking, and expose “uncomfortable truths.”<sup>17</sup>

Jim Shaw’s 1978 work *The End is Here* used this tactic to great effect in his parody of the Underground Press papers of the 60s and 70s, in which he presents “Proof that JFK was killed by Aliens.”<sup>18</sup> Kathryn Olmsted writes in her contribution to *Everything is Connected*, “Shaw’s absurd allegation of Martian Mind Control echo another set of real government conspiracies uncovered in the 1970s: secret brainwashing experiments.” In Kate Anastas’ article *Underground newspapers: The social media networks of the 1960s and 1970s* for the University of Washington, the author describes the purpose of these publications as “giving voice to marginalized groups and helping them build stronger communities.”<sup>19</sup> The topics and communities of these papers catered to varied wildly from publications promoting anti-war

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<sup>14</sup> Douglas Eklund and Ian Alteveer, *Everything Is Connected: Art and Conspiracy* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 18.

<sup>15</sup> Eklund and Alteveer, *Connected*, 18

<sup>16</sup> Eklund and Alteveer, *Connected*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Eklund and Alteveer, *Connected*, 19

<sup>18</sup> Eklund and Alteveer, *Connected*, 160-161

<sup>19</sup> Kate Anastas, “Underground Newspapers: The Social Media Networks of the 1960s and 1970s,” *Underground Press Geography - Mapping American Social Movements* (University of Washington, 2015), [https://depts.washington.edu/moves/altnews\\_geography.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moves/altnews_geography.shtml).

sentiment (from both GI's and civilians), feminist papers, and literary reviews. "The underground press also experimented with layout and design. This resulted in a wide variety of production methods. Some had elaborate photo collages and were printed in color, while others were made up of mostly handwritten text."<sup>20</sup> Shaw clearly drew inspirations from these methods as His "The End is Near" has illustrative and photomontage elements. Additionally, the political left did not have a monopoly on this concept. "Conservative and religious groups also published small newspapers, sometimes in the same cities as more radical leftist publications." Anastas provides one example: "In Brooklyn, for example, *Awake!* discussed connections between current events and the Bible."<sup>21</sup> The subject matter of connecting real world events to religious/ paranormal subject matter is of course present in Shaw's work. To return to Eklund and Altevveer's observation Shaw uses the well-established imagery of this subset of publication to showcase a poet's law esc work.

A contemporary example of this would be Lauren Gabrielle Fournier's work *Truck Guys*. In which Fournier performs as a conspiracy theorist convinced that several trucks around her town are planning something, the artist was inspired by:

"The sense of anger and disenfranchisement that I could see around me in Regina. In the earliest days of the pandemic, I drove past a rusty pick-up truck with vinyl decals of hands giving the middle finger that read "F\*CK COVID" on both the driver's and the passenger's side windows, and a larger "F\*CK TRUDEAU" vinyl banner on the back."<sup>22</sup>

Fournier was inspired by this various imagery in her neighborhood, seeing this connection she then filtered this through the conspiratorial character she created. I was able to ask Fournier who she imagined this character to be, she imagined this person to be male and a "reddit dweller".

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<sup>20</sup> Anastas, *Underground*

<sup>21</sup> Anastas, *Underground*

<sup>22</sup> Lauren Gabrielle Fournier, "'Auto' Theory ," Vtape.org (Vtape, 2022), ["Auto" Theory: | Vtape](#).

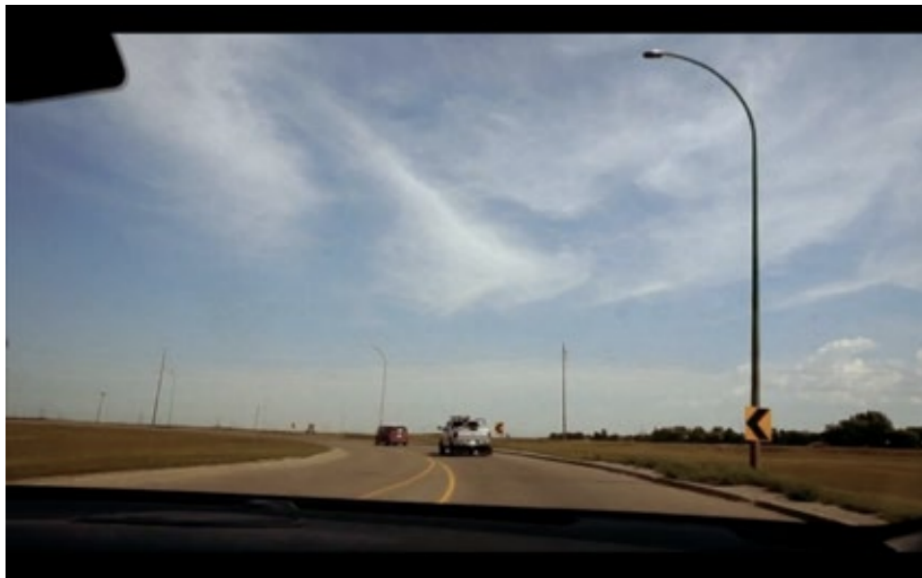


Figure 1. Fournier, Lauren Gabrielle. "Auto' Theory ." Vtape.org. Vtape, 2022.

<https://vtape.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/22Auto22-theory-essay.pdf>



The identification of this character as a “reddit dweller” I found to be an important descriptor. Rothschild cites reddit as the source of Qanon’s massive spread, this is important to note as Fournier was creating this work in a post Qanon world with the understanding that reddit has “a robust conspiracy theory community”<sup>23</sup> As the video is shot POV Fournier creates an immersive work, presenting the viewer with the relatable feeling of driving around suburbia on a summer day which quickly becomes disconcerting when one realizes the content of her speech.

Fournier's work became almost prophetic as the work was created in 2020 “before any formal organization like the Truck Convoy had begun (2022).”<sup>24</sup> If we view *Truck Guys* through the framework created by Eklund and Alteveer’s, the work clearly falls under the first group. Fournier herself is not a “conspiracy theorist” and was inspired by the growing “post-truth” movement she observed in the 24-hour news cycle.

### **Interlude**

I don’t believe in signs or omens, I think it just goes along with my skeptic, reformed angry atheist mindset. But on the first day of my final semester and the day that I realized that I had a lot of words to write and not a lot of days to write them. I was sitting outside the main building of OCAD U trying to get my bearings after running around all morning from meeting to meeting, when I heard the unmistakable sound of honking, shouting and soft country music driving past me. Freedom convoy protesters were driving down McCaul street, their trucks practically leaking Canadian Flags. It was a wakeup call knowing that my winter break of reading Star Trek novels and playing Minecraft was over and I needed to get back to it.

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<sup>23</sup> Rothschild, *Qanon*, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Fournier, *Auto Theory*.

## Art (Cont)

On the other side outlined by the MET there are those who take a pseudo-journalistic approach to their art, artists who use public and leaked records to form larger narratives of high-power deception. A prime example of this type of artist is Mark Lombardi. A now-passed New York artist, his work existed as large-scale interconnected mind maps, creating connections between high power individuals to create larger narratives of deception. Interestingly Lombardi first sunk his teeth into conspiracy-based artwork when he collaborated on a multimedia collage as part of *Teapot Dome to Watergate*, then almost 50 years later his work would be featured again in the MET's spiritual successor exhibition!

Lombardi worked by doing in-depth research, accessing publicly available government documents and other sources, identifying key figures in his proposed "Narrative Structures" with circles and connecting with large arching lines filling up sheets of paper. Patrica Goldstone in her book *Interlock. Art, Conspiracy, and the Shadow Worlds of Mark Lombardi* identifies Lombardi's need to create these works was to "connect all scandals of his generation into one huge interlock."<sup>25</sup> Additionally in one of Lombardi's unearthed manifestos after his death he identified his work as surpassing "the limitations of investigative journalism... to go deeper and detail connections more fully than the capabilities of publishing allowed."<sup>26</sup> This insight is key to understanding Lombardi's work; he viewed his work as an essential service for exposing the truth behind high power deception.

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<sup>25</sup> Patricia Goldstone, *Interlock* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2015), 151.

<sup>26</sup> Goldstone, *Interlock*. 151

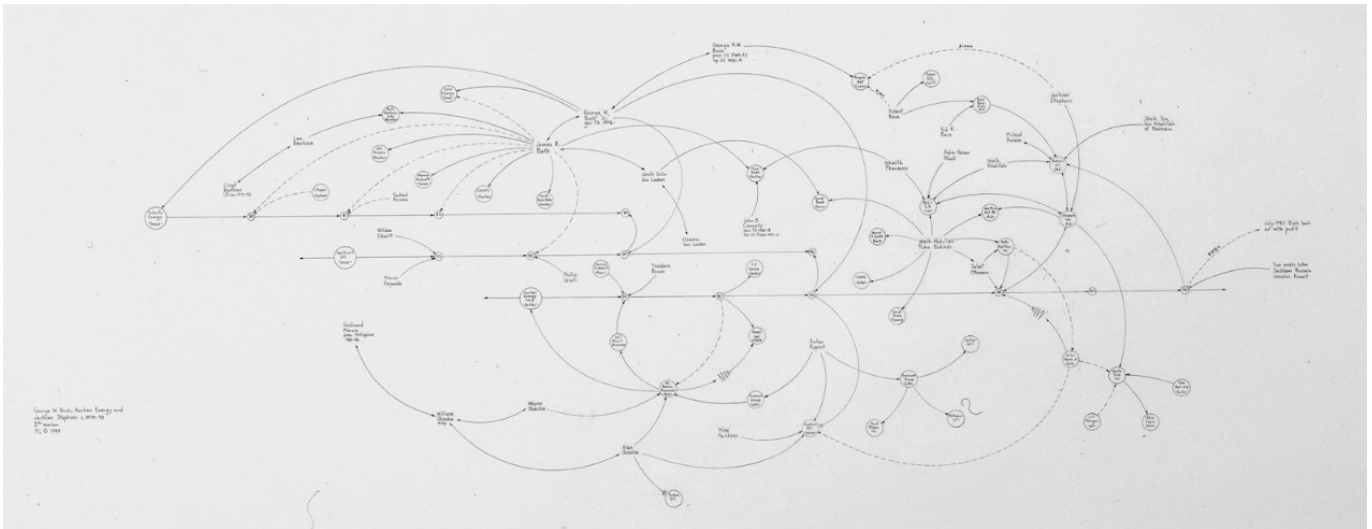


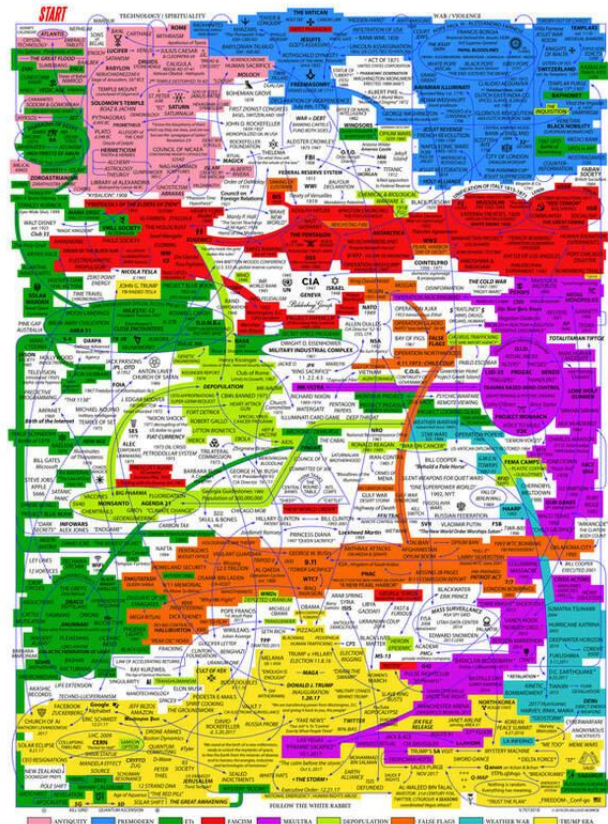
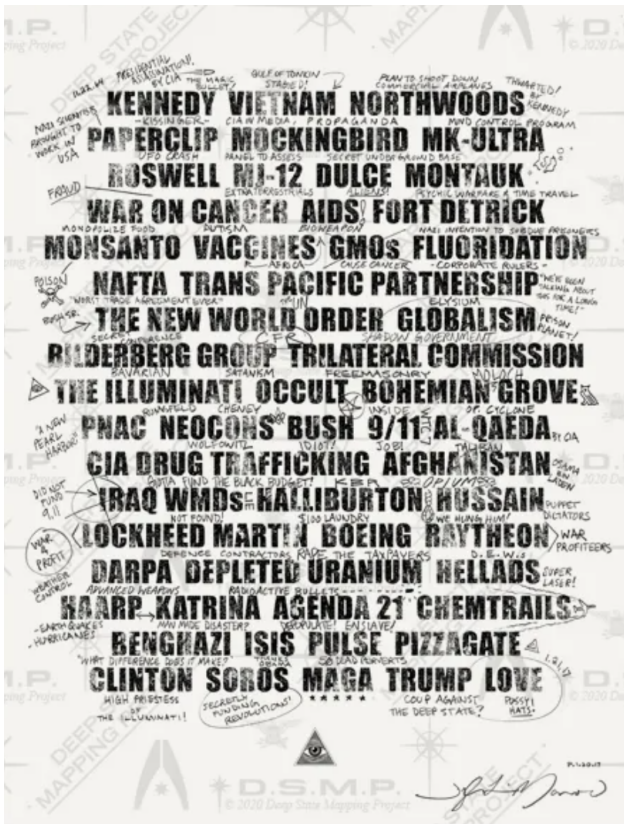
Figure 2 Eklund and Alteveer, Connected, 88

Like Lombardi in style is Dylan Louis Monroe, one of the most prominent genuine “conspiracy theory” artists working today, Monroe exists in a crossroads between the conventional art and design world and the so-called “fringe”. An Ohio based digital artist, he received his BFA from The Parsons School of Design in 2007 in fashion. Post grad he worked for major labels such as: Derek Lam, Coach, Marc Jacobs and Hugo Boss, in 2017 at the start of the Trump presidency one of his works went viral.

*The Grievance List* was the first of his works to go viral. It was created in response to the women's rights marches that were occurring around the globe at that time, Monroe saw the women's rights marches as “Misguided.” Monroe’s work now exists as a website at which he sells various prints, posters, hats and stickers based on his work. During his appearance at the *Conscious Life Expo 2019* in LA Monroe experienced an epiphany where he felt he became in contact with Lord Ashtar the leader of The Galactic Federation who gave him his moniker of the map maker.

Monroe as an artist serves as an intersection of the traditional art and design world combined with the fringe conspiratorial realm bringing his apparent proficient graphic design skills to make extremely compelling images. When I first discovered his work, I was instantly reminded of Mark Lombardi.

It is natural to draw comparisons between Monroe and Lombardi, while both stylistically both works are quite similar the major difference between the two Monroe intentionally creates easy to digest and internet friendly graphics to portray his messages. While Lombardi's works are meant to be experienced in person as the viewer can take in the perceived connections.



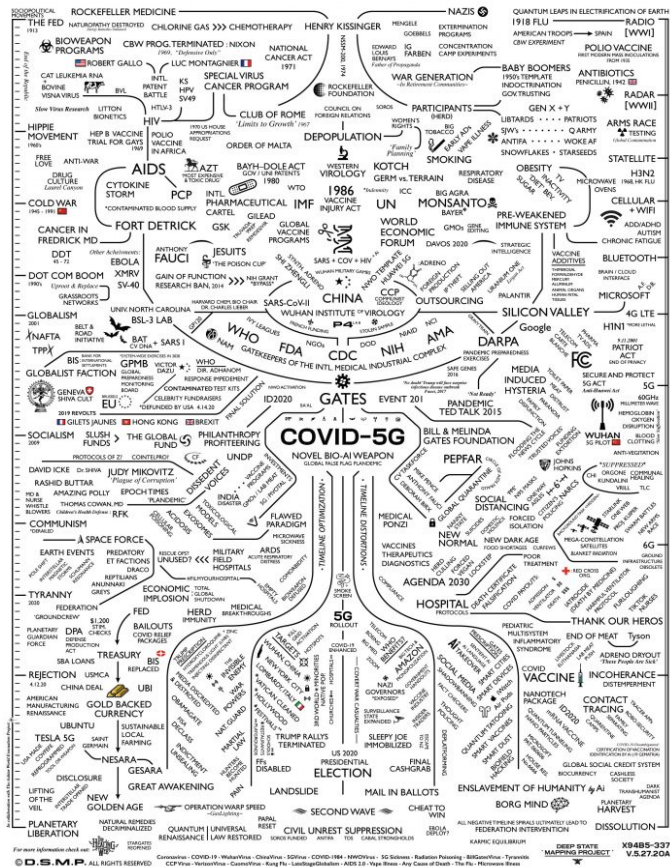


Figure 3-5 Monroe, Dylan. “Deep State Mapping Project,” <https://deepstatemappingproject.com/>

**Design**

Monroe’s work brings into question the evolution of graphic/ web design used by conspiracy theorists. In my conversation with Blocher he had this say regarding design:

“I feel like conspiracy theory is at odds with good art let alone good typography. Usually, it’s the people holding the signs that have horrible kerning and awful font choices and stuff like that. Usually, the conspiracy theorist gives you a lot of clues where you can see just in their writing all the misspelling and poor organization and visually the representation of it feels like “oh comic sans, unequal line weight and random bolding.” That disorganized mind kind of shows itself visually and a side effect of the tools online being better the tools for creating content and the tools for expanding your circle and having more people get in on this movement

so now you are losing some of these clues that used to be the canary in the coal mine “well this looks like shit so it probably is.”

What Blocher does here is isolate a key evolution in works of design work done by *fringe thinkers*. It was almost an internet cliché that all websites dealing with these topics “look like shit”, distressingly when we look at the evolution of sites that were present in the early days of the internet the difference in professionalism is clear. The best example of this trend is the Alex Jones vehicle InfoWars. While InfoWars to many is a something to be parodied, one can not underestimate the effect that InfoWars has had on guiding individuals *down the rabbit hole*, as many cite Alex Jones as a jumping off point <sup>27</sup>. To show this shift in aesthetics I used the internet archive to pull two versions of the InfoWars website. The first iteration from 2005 of the InfoWars site has all the hallmarks of an early internet “conspiracy site.” However, when looking at a screenshot from 2022 could almost mistake it for a credible news source <sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Rothschild, *Qanon*, 91

<sup>28</sup> The current InfoWars logo uses the typeface “Avant Garde” popularized by new york art magazine Avant-Garde, which is the type face I have chosen for the title of this project.

INTERNET ARCHIVE <http://infowars.com/> 74,115 captures 8 May 1999 - 28 Oct 2022

Go MAY JUL 01 AUG 2004 2005 2006 About this capture

**OBEY**

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POLICE STATE  
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## Flaws

Both Fournier and Monroe's work are emblematic of the inherent flaw of conspiratorial thinking, the "unique slippage between the concept of data and information,"<sup>29</sup> as outlined in Matthew N. Hannah's Article *A Conspiracy of Data: Qanon, Social Media, and Information Visualization*. While the two terms data and information "are often used interchangeably,"<sup>30</sup> the difference between them lies in how the concepts are applied, Hannah quoting theorists Charles Meadow and Weijing Yuan illustrates this difference: "Data are a set of "symbols," broadly construed to include any form of perceptible difference in the world . . . Information, in Meadow and Yuan's definition, is realization of the informational translating data into knowledge."<sup>31</sup> While one can create links on a diagram between Stanley Kubrick and the moon landing or express your concerns of truck drivers.

Furthermore, in relation to Lombardi and to a greater extent Monroe's work, while the works are incredibly visually interesting, that factor does not contribute to their points. Even in the explanatory article *Digitally Researching the Network Drawings of Mark Lombardi* in which the researchers create digital networks of Lombardi's drawing they admit that: "visualization itself does not necessarily add value to the data."<sup>32</sup>

Empathy

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<sup>29</sup> Matthew N. Hannah, "A Conspiracy of Data: Qanon, Social Media, and Information Visualization," *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 3 (2021): p. 205630512110360, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211036064>, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Hannah, *Data*, 2

<sup>31</sup> Hannah, *Data*, 2-3

<sup>32</sup> Robert Tolksdorf, "Digitally Researching the Network Drawings of Mark Lombardi," *Leonardo* 47, no. 3 (2014): pp. 278-278, [https://doi.org/10.1162/leon\\_a\\_00781](https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_00781).



## Empathy

One of the core tenets I viewed as essential to this project has been empathy. That term I find can be thrown around without a great understanding of how to initiate it. I do believe empathy is cardinal when speaking about and to those who are convinced of so-called *cuckoo* ideas. To many of these ideas are facts, imagine how terrifying it must be to go through life and **truly** believe that the world is controlled by a shadow cabal of wealthy individuals whose goal is to institute a new world order. This deep state cabal is threatening to take away your freedoms and everything you love. Only you and a handful of other free thinkers can fight this evil regime. You know the truth because you are making sure to listen to others researching and fighting the good fight. Why doesn't everybody else see it? Well, they are listening to fake news and comedians who are openly mocking you and your fellow freedom fighters.

I have struggled with this idea through my research, but we must keep in mind that for these folks these ideas are real.

We cannot mock them

We cannot shame them.

We must try and understand.

We must try to GENTLY nudge

## Dialogue

Through the development of this project a question that I considered more and more is how to approach conversations with those who are convinced of conspiracy. We have all encountered somebody who believes in a harmful conspiracy to some degree, this ranges from a passing curiosity—i.e.: “I think it is possible that Bush might have had foreknowledge of the 9/11 terrorist attacks—to those who make that belief an essential part of their lives and core values i.e., “Scientists are lying to us, and the earth is flat.”

My personal approach when I have found myself in these discussions is never to disprove or debunk as that is an exhausting undertaking. There are those who have devoted their careers to debunking fake news and claims of conspiracy. So put simply, that isn't my job, my goal is to have civil conversations on belief. In addition, I honestly find these conversations enjoyable allowing me to have a window into different ways of viewing the world.

It must be noted I will not attempt to provide advice on how to talk with those who are suffering from a mental illness as I am not a medical professional. I have jokingly referred to my method as the *Thanksgiving Table Model*, as this is designed for conversations with *that uncle* or *that guy* at the party.

The first step is to ask if you really want to engage, if the individual is overly aggressive or talking down to you it may be best to just walk away or deflect. You are under no obligation to take part in this exchange. The second step is to be polite, as Mick West writes in his book *Escaping the Rabbit Hole: How to Debunk Conspiracy Theories Using Facts, Logic, and Respect* "People will push back when they feel they are attacked."<sup>33</sup>

Thirdly in order to have an actual discussion we must develop an understanding of their beliefs. It is too easy to assume what somebody believes based on your own experience. This becomes especially important because there are so many different permutations of conspiracy-based belief. Once you understand what it is they believe you can then begin to build trust, a great method is to "Validate Genuine Concerns." Many of the time within these conspiracies there may be an undercurrent of real issues. For example, in West's book he turns to the theory of chemtrails: "Planes (like most vehicles) are sources of pollution. The contrails that planes leave behind are just composed of water, but they are a stark reminder that the plane's exhaust is spewing things out into the upper atmosphere."<sup>34</sup> This is a strong way of creating common

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<sup>33</sup> Mick West, *Escaping the Rabbit Hole: How to Debunk Conspiracy Theories Using Facts, Logic, and Respect* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2020). 68

<sup>34</sup> West, *Rabbit Hole*, 63

ground, one does not have to lie to isolate actual issues. From there I would recommend asking questions you are unsure about in their theories: “Why would this scientific elite have to gain by covering up the real shape of the earth? Or “Why would killing JFK benefit the CIA?” They will almost certainly have answers for these questions, but you never know, these lines of enquiry may create doubt in their minds.

Once again, the purpose of this segment of my project is not to debunk theories for individuals, it is simply to have respectful conversations with believers. To effectively debunk one must have a working knowledge of a topic, you can't expect yourself to learn everything there is to know about chemtrails to refute somebody's claims. Who has the time?

### **Workshop**

The final iteration of my research (up to this point) is a workshop, the format of which is a 30-minute lecture with an activity taking place in the middle, with the remaining 30 minutes being an open discussion (The slides of the workshop are available in the *Workshop Materials Section*).

The first ever presentation of the workshop took place on March 15th, 2023, these are my reflections of the experience: The presentation began with outlining my distinction between the difference of conspiracy and conspiracy theory (As written in the conspiracy section). This section provides the conceptual backing that the rest of the seminar will be based upon. Following that I began to introduce the genre of conspiracy art, specifically the two camps as outlined by the MET exhibition, which led into my introduction of my 4 core artists (Shaw, Fournier, Lombardi and Monroe). Succeeding the discussion around Lombardi and Monroe I then introduced my own mock conspiracy mind map outlining to further show how connections can be made.

This then led into the activity, I asked the room to create their own connections between people and organizations found on the provided info sheet with the markers and paper I placed

on each chair (The Info Sheet can be found in the *Workshop Materials Section*). I did not collect any materials made by the participants. To further direct the activity, I provided an example connecting Stephen Harper to The Lochness Monster: Stephen Harper - G20 Summit - Glasgow - Scotland Tourism Board - Loch Ness - Loch Ness Monster. The activity went extremely well as it led to fun exchanges when the participants talked through their connections.

Subsequently I then went over a truncating version of my discussion of truth vs trust as outlined in the *Truth* section using the examples of Replication Crisis and The Flat Earth Movement. Finally, I talked through my *4 steps to having civil conversations with conspiracists*.

Overall I view the workshop as a success in no small part to the discussion that took place afterward. Two notable questions arose, one being a person asking me about similarity between conspiratorial beliefs and religion. Which is a discussion I deliberately left out of my presentation for the sake of time. Going forward I will add in a segment speaking to this connection. The second question was one person's observation that all of the conspiracies that I spoke on were North American based. This was a deliberate choice I made early in the project, as the question of how conspiratorial narratives spread and operate in non-western capitalist societies is one I view as a separate discussion and one outside the scope of my project at this time. As previously stated, I view this workshop model as a success and I hope to present in other settings in the future.

### **Conclusion**

I had just finished my work for the day, and I was sitting back in my computer chair, it must have been around 3pm, absently minded scrolling Instagram I was confronted with images of protestors storming through the US capital. Seeing the collective fears of the left realized in this open attack on democracy I did the only thing I could do: I turned on my PlayStation.

I view January 6th, 2021, as the official start of this project. As previously stated, conspiracy has always been of interest to me, however that day I knew I had to add to the

conversation in some manner. The days following, I worked on my application to OCAD U's MFA program, and to my delight I was accepted.

The original intent of the project was to expand on Eklund and Alteveer's goal to "tell the story of how we got here"<sup>35</sup> by telling the story of where we are now. *Conspiracy: Misconceptions and Empathy* expanded beyond that as I realized that I wanted to create a framework to educate folk on conspiracy through art.

### **Coda**

When I first began this project, the original intention was to present it as an exhibition, an unbiased presentation of the art of conspiracy. Whether the work was created by a self-proclaimed "conspiracy theorist" or a skeptic I wanted it to be shown with the same priority and acceptance, the intention being to demonstrate that those who hold fringe beliefs do have the ability to create well designed images. I wanted the exhibition to be challenging, allowing those viewing the show to view work by the Dylan Louis Monroe's of the world in an unbiased environment.

I still believe this model for an exhibition would be effective and one I hope to present in the future. I do not think this was a feasible goal at the end of my MFA. I could foresee many challenges of presenting an exhibition of this type at OCAD U.

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<sup>35</sup> Eklund and Alteveer, Connected,  
18

## Curatorial Essay

The final result of my thesis research will be a workshop titled *Conspiracy: Misconceptions and Empathy* the purpose of which will be to discuss the difference between conspiracy and conspiracy theory. Furthermore, the workshop will educate on how to engage in discussions with those who are convinced of harmful conspiracy.

The impetus behind my MFA research began after January 6th, 2021, I like many others viewed the siege on the US capital as the inevitable result of contemporary conspiracy culture. Realizing that research into conspiracy culture is already being done by sociological, philosophical and political science academics, I knew that I needed to develop a unique take on it. As a member of the Toronto arts community and getting an arts centric education from both OCAD-U and Humber College I knew that my entry point into this topic was through the arts.

I then began to investigate artists/ designers who use conspiracy as inspiration. This led me to the MET's 2018 exhibition *Everything Is Connected: Art and Conspiracy*, a retrospective exhibition, the curators Douglas Eklund and Ian Alteveer made a conscious effort to “stop short of the 2016 presidential election, and, in particular, the work of younger artists just entering the conspiracy fray”<sup>36</sup>. The curators made this choice to “properly tell the story of how we got here”<sup>37</sup>, this quote inspired me and encouraged me to tell the story of where we are now.

Eklund and Alteveer defined two groups that artist dealing with conspiracy fall into: those who use the imagery of the “disaffected” to highlight the danger of this manner of thinking, and expose “uncomfortable truths”<sup>38</sup> and those who take a pseudo-journalistic approach to their art, artists who use public and leaked records to form larger narratives of high-power deception. It is my belief that both camps of artists whether intentionally or unintentionally showcase the inherent flaws in conspiratorial thinking, as outlined in Matthew N. Hannah's Article A

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<sup>36</sup> Douglas Eklund and Ian Alteveer, *Everything Is Connected: Art and Conspiracy* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 18.

<sup>37</sup> Eklund and Alteveer, *Connected*, 18

<sup>38</sup> Eklund and Alteveer, *Connected*, 19

*Conspiracy of Data: Qanon, Social Media, and Information Visualization*. While the two terms data and information “are often used interchangeably”<sup>39</sup> The difference between them lies in how the concepts are applied. Hannah quoting theorists Charles Meadow and Weijing Yuan illustrates this difference: “Data is a set of “symbols,” broadly construed to include any form of perceptible difference in the world... Information, in Meadow and Yuan’s definition, is realization of the informational translating data into knowledge.”<sup>40</sup>. The distinction between Data and Information put forward by Hannah is essential. While one can create fascinating graphics or visually compelling art works presenting data it does not translate to information. Even in the explanatory article *Digitally Researching The Network Drawings of Mark Lombardi* in which the researchers create digital networks of Lombardi’s drawing they admit that: “visualization itself does not necessarily add value to the data”<sup>41</sup>.

An essential question to keep in mind when looking into conspiratorial thinking is: are they working backwards from a conclusion? For example, in the flat earth movement conspiracists will present example after example proving their point. However, whenever they do a new experiment, they find a way to make it fit into their theory. This goes against the core of the scientific method, which starts with a question and continues until you have answered the question.

Understanding the flaws within conspiracists mindsets and manner of thinking an essential element one must hold close is empathy. That term I find can be thrown around without a great understanding of how to initiate it. I do believe empathy is essential when speaking about and to those who are convinced of so-called *cuckoo* ideas. To many of these

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<sup>39</sup> Matthew N. Hannah, “A Conspiracy of Data: Qanon, Social Media, and Information Visualization,” *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 3 (2021): p. 205630512110360, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211036064>, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Hannah, Data, 2

<sup>41</sup> Robert Tolksdorf, “Digitally Researching the Network Drawings of Mark Lombardi,” *Leonardo* 47, no. 3 (2014): pp. 278-278, [https://doi.org/10.1162/leon\\_a\\_00781](https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_00781).

ideas are facts, imagine how terrifying it must be to go through life and **truly** believe that the world is controlled by a shadow cabal of wealthy individuals whose goal is to institute a new world order. This deep state cabal is threatening to take away your freedoms and everything you love. Only you and a handful of other free thinkers can fight this evil regime. You know the truth because you are making sure to listen to others researching and fighting the good fight. Why doesn't everybody else see it? Well, they are listening to fake news and comedians who are openly mocking you and your fellow freedom fighters. I have struggled with this idea through my research, but we must keep in mind that for these folks these ideas are real.

The original intent of *Conspiracy: Misconceptions and Empathy* was to expand on Eklund and Alteveer's goal to "tell the story of how we got here" <sup>42</sup> by telling the story of where we are now. The project expanded beyond that as I did more reading and I realized that I wanted to create a framework to educate folk on conspiracy through art.

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<sup>42</sup> Eklund and Alteveer, *Connected*, 18



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