

# Alien figures + the narrative of conspiracy in Steven Warwick's 'Area 501' + his Fear Indexing The X-Files collaboration with Nora Khan

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Jean Kay

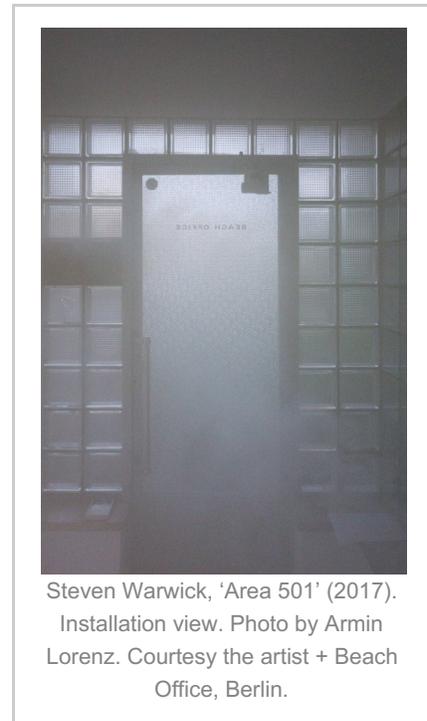
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“I think if something is too real, people don’t want to talk about it but if you abstract it, it becomes easier to discuss,” said [Steven Warwick](#) during the Q+A following a performance reading for *Fear Indexing the X-Files* at New York’s UnionDocs in June last year. An earlier iteration of the essay — written in collaboration with New York-based writer [Nora Khan](#) — was read out by the Berlin-based artist and producer with a PowerPoint presentation just days after the Orlando nightclub shooting, a-week-and-a-half before Brexit, six months before the US election. Much has changed, for the worse, since that night but with the benefit of hindsight it’s not entirely unexpected.

The piece, which is also a film in production, was written via email by Warwick and Khan and published this July by [Primary Information](#), after *The X-Files* 10th season revival and corresponding Netflix full series stream inspired them to revisit the paranormal crime drama Warwick and Khan grew up with. In doing so, they discovered the role the 90s TV show played on the paranoia and interlocking “fear of fear of fear of fear” in the domestic space that had affected the Western psyche of the Clinton era, pre-9/11 and in conjunction with the rise of the internet.

“It’s quite funny how you’re like, ‘oh, I grew up with this and it must have infiltrated my consciousness and maybe influenced me,’ and then you look back and it’s actually quite right-wing,” said Warwick, after illustrating the insinuations of the faded dreams of Americana in *The X-Files*’ ‘Home’ episode and problematic juxtapositions of marginalised groups in ‘Genderbender.’ It’s in taking the hit series as a gauge of the psychological milieu of the period — between the Cold War and the War on Terror — as a precondition for the present that *Fear Indexing the X-Files* excels, particularly at the nexus of Warwick’s work-at-large.



Steven Warwick, 'Area 501' (2017).  
Installation view. Photo by Armin  
Lorenz. Courtesy the artist + Beach  
Office, Berlin.

Picking up and putting down connecting ideas across his oeuvre, the artist drops both true and false links between practices. The name of his most recent ‘Area 501’ show, installed at Berlin’s [Beach Office](#) on August 17, references the highly-classified United States Air Force facility and famous subject of many an alien conspiracy theory, Area 51. The addition of the ‘0’ in the title could mean anything but it could also refer to the area code of the state of Arkansas where Bill Clinton was born. Everything is up for interpretation.

Faceless and hollow bodies made from mesh and papier-mâché are suspended behind glass, in what the ‘Area 501’ installation’s press release calls an interstitial space of “serenity, but also uncertainty... waiting for the next update...”. Inside, the vinyl lettering of lyrics from Warwick’s 2016 album release, *Nadir*, reads “It feels like an airport/ but the

difference is/ at any point/ you can choose/ to leave,” taken from the song, ‘Mezzanine,’ that’s named after the part of the shopping centre that inspires it. Obtuse parallels are drawn between corporatised symbols of rebellion in the grunge flannel shirt and hooded sweater-wearing ‘alien figures’ of ‘Area 501’ and recurring *The X-Files* characters the Lone Gunmen. These computer-nerd conspiracy theorists are what Warwick calls “the Generation X, drop-out, hacker, tech savvy, government-distrusting, borderline, future libertarian” in his New York reading of *Fear Indexing the X-Files*. They’re 90s counterculture precursors to what would become the social norm of “alternative facts” and fake news in 2017.

In describing the conspiracy theory as “a buffer against reality,” *Fear Indexing the X-Files* conceives what Warwick’s ‘Area 501’ realises — a site where imagination becomes material at the blurred line between fact and fiction:

“THE FOLLOWING STORY IS INSPIRED BY ACTUAL DOCUMENTED ACCOUNTS.” \*\*

Steven Warwick is presenting ‘The Mezzanine (Nadir)’ at Palais Kulturbrauerei on August 25, 2017.



Steven Warwick, ‘Area 501’ (2017).  
Installation view. Photo by Armin  
Lorenz. Courtesy the artist + Beach  
Office, Berlin.