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Exhibition:

AN I FOR AN EYE

Counter-Representations of Geopolitical Conflict

SEP 18, 2013 - JAN 6, 2014

Austrian Cultural Forum New York
11 East 52nd Street, New York



Isabel ROCAMORA, Still from *Body of War* (2010)
Courtesy of Galeria SENDA, Barcelona (Spain)

CURATORS: Stamatina GREGORY & Andreas STADLER

ARISTS: Wafaa BILAL, Anetta Mona CHISA & Lucia TKÁČOVÁ, Ad van DENDEREN, G.R.A.M., An-My LÊ, Rabih MROUË, Isabel ROCAMORA, Gerhard RÜHM, Larissa SANSOUR, Dread SCOTT, TARZAN & ARAB, Sharif WAKED, Christoph WEBER, Anna WITT

New York, August 2013 - This new international group exhibition at the **Austrian Cultural Forum New York** gathers together different artistic reactions to the ways in which media representations of violent conflict and identity are increasingly rendered through a humanist, individualized, and even banal perspective.

In this moment of seemingly permanent global warfare, the experience of violent conflict is continually restaged in visual culture. Films, documentaries, mainstream journalism, and user-generated media serve as the ideological, consensus-building theater of conflict. Seen most clearly through the intimate renderings of soldiers, agents, and politicians, the identificatory power of the personal overwhelmingly occludes the broader constructs of the political. The artists in **AN I FOR AN EYE** foreground this complex politics of attachment, detachment, and affect in their counter-representations of conflict.

The exhibition was curated by **Stamatina Gregory** and the Austrian Cultural Forum's departing director, **Andreas Stadler**; the opening will mark the first event presided over by the Forum's new director, **Christine Moser**, who will be taking over in September. The show features artists working in different regions and from within different contexts, all sharing a particular focus on personal and distributed media, the cinematic, and the contemporary culture of spectacle. Using a number of strategies, including radical re-contextualization, parody, and performative strategies, these artists deconstruct—and contest—the affective means by which violent conflict is presented, imagined, experienced, and consumed.

Many of the works shown in **AN I FOR AN EYE** comment on the process of detachment by performatively manipulating contextual frameworks, or doing away with them altogether. In a video by German-Slovakian duo **Anetta Mona Chisa** and **Lucia Tkáčová**, world political leaders are subjected to judgment by two chatty teenage girls, reminiscent of the way pop culture icons are objectified - their relevance with regard to a global political context is reduced to attributes of physical attractiveness. Similarly, the Austrian collective **G.R.A.M.**, in a series of photographs, portray individual members of parliament involved in fictional skirmishes. Frozen in postures of raw violence, the decontextualized image parodies useless, yet ubiquitous tropes of legislative reportage. The Israel-

based Palestinian artist **Sharif Waked** explores the industry of amusement in his video, *Gaza Zoo*, referencing an incident in which animals in a zoo in Gaza perished during Israeli attacks, only to be replaced by an enterprising zoo owner who painted donkeys to look like zebras. Waked places the painted donkey in a shower, which slowly washes away the paint from the animal's body.

Other artists employ the irreverent, deadpan, and parodic in their works. The two large C-print images from Palestinian artist **Larissa Sansour's** controversial short sci-fi film, *The Nation Estate* (2012), offer a clinically dystopian, yet humorous approach to the deadlock in the Middle East. The project suggests a vertical solution to Palestinian statehood in the form of a single colossal high-rise skyscraper housing the entire Palestinian population, with the piece's subtitle, *Living the High Life*, expanding on the irony. **AN I FOR AN EYE** also includes a sculpture by Austrian artist **Christoph Weber**, *Untitled (Chunks)* (2004), which consists of a series of identical cracked concrete slabs, that are actually made of an acrylic resin. With this deception the artist turns these symbols of destruction through brutal force into something absurd, by bringing about a contextual shift. Three drawings by **Gerhard Rühm**, a founding member of the postwar Viennese avant-garde collective, the Wiener Gruppe (The Vienna Group), literally place the banal within a formal structure of high culture, with commentary on Austria's violent past scribbled onto music staves. A commissioned installation by New York-based Iraqi artist **Wafaa Bilal** features neon signage which playfully exposes the simplistic ways in which societies, particularly in the West, habitually view and make assumptions about cultures different from their own.

The Palestinian identical twins, **Tarzan and Arab**, raised on bootleg DVDs of Hollywood films in the absence of movie theaters, produced, directed and starred in the 2010 short film *Colorful Journey*. The film portrays factional infighting within Gaza and its political, social, and personal cost, and the brothers' identical appearances reinforce this comment on fratricidal war. In their *Gazawood* series of posters advertising films named after Israeli army operations, Tarzan and Arab both employ and subvert common cinematic tropes to comment on the violent situation in the occupied territories.

AN I FOR AN EYE also includes works by artists who employ self-reflexive strategies of performance and appropriation, such as Lebanese artist **Rabih Mroué**. With his video reenactment of Syrian snipers shooting directly at civilians who simultaneously point mobile phone cameras at them, Mroué meticulously deconstructs these moments of "double shooting." By isolating sound from visuals, using extreme slow motion, and by zooming into the gunman's eyes in a manner that surpasses what technology realistically allows, Mroué's video searches for the possibility of human connection in the midst of an alienating civil war. British-Spanish filmmaker **Isabel Rocamora's** film, *Body of War*, dissects hand-to-hand combat between soldiers and breaks it down into slower and slower repetitions. She reveals the ambiguity that arises between brutality and love as reflected in the intimate act of waging war, by juxtaposing the fight of an organized collective with the individual human being, prompting questions about the transformation and use of a person as an instrument of a government. The series of deadpan images by Dutch photographer **Ad van Denderen** depict young Dutch army recruits assigned to peacekeeping (or war-extending) activities, anonymous save for their identification numbers. In contrast to strategies of recent war films, the portraits withhold heroics, pathos, or any means of identification with their subjects, interrogating the abstract figure of "occupation" itself.

Other artists confront the perpetual emotion machine of contemporary visual culture by proposing historical counter-narratives and providing perspectives unrepresented in the media. Vietnamese photographer **An-My Lê**, who came to the U.S. as a teenage refugee in 1975, knows the Vietnam War mainly through a variety of sources including history textbooks, movies, and magazines. With her series *Small Wars* (1999-2002) documenting Vietnam War battle re-enactments in rural America, she explores the cumulative effect that various accounts of war have on memory, both individual and collective, and ultimately questions how we remember, glorify, and imagine war after the fact. In Austrian artist **Anna Witt's** film, *The Eyewitness* (2011), a group of young children is confronted with Reuters news images. Detached from their respective contexts, the images are reinterpreted from a childlike perspective, allowing for a completely new reading in light of regional education and personal events. New York-based artist **Dread Scott** was commissioned to produce a series of screen prints on paper, which feature subtle portraits of a variety of drones in an unidentified sky, highlighting the invisibility and media silence on drone surveillance.

>> **Press images** are available online at <http://www.acfny.org/press-room/press-images-texts/an-i-for-an-eye/>

ABOUT THE AUSTRIAN CULTURAL FORUM NEW YORK

With its architectural landmark building in the heart of Midtown Manhattan, the Austrian Cultural Forum New York hosts more than 200 free events annually and showcases Austrian contemporary art, music, literature, and academic thought. Fall 2013 marks the inaugural season for new director **Christine Moser**, who will be the first woman at the helm of Austria's flagship cultural outpost. Ambassador Moser is a senior career diplomat who served in Paris, Brussels, Geneva, and most recently as head of the Permanent Mission of Austria to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The former Fulbright scholar has always been involved with the arts, with a clear focus on all things contemporary and a special penchant for the visual arts.

ABOUT THE CURATORS

Stamatina Gregory is a New York-based independent curator and art critic. Gregory participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program (2005/06), and was the Whitney Lauder Curatorial Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary Art at Upenn (2007/09). She is co-curator of the national pavilion of The Bahamas at the 55th Venice Biennale, and is organizing exhibitions for the Wende Museum, Culver City, and The Jewish Museum, NY. Gregory is also a PhD candidate at CUNY, working on a thesis titled "Strange Terrains: Photographing the Militarized Landscape in the United States."

Andreas Stadler is a diplomat who served as the director of the Austrian Cultural Forum New York from 2007 to August 2013. During his term, the Forum mounted around 20 international group exhibitions which included artists such as Marina Abramovic, Matthew Barney, Thomas Hirschhorn, Rashaad Newsome, Ed Ruscha, and Cindy Sherman, and also exposed New York audiences to Austrian trailblazers like Maria Petschnig, Hans Schabus, Matthias Herrmann, Zenita Komad, and many others.

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E, M, 6 Train to 51st Street/Lexington Avenue

Bus:
M 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 to 53rd Street

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