

Previous spread:
Rod Dickinson in
collaboration with
Steve Rushton, *Who,
What, Where, When,
Why and How*, 2009,
performance, SMART
Project Space,
Amsterdam, 11 July
2009. Photograph:
Nicki Musgrave.
Courtesy the artists

opposite:
Ian Charlesworth,
John, 2005, video,
13min. Courtesy
the artist

Pretexts: The Evidence of the Event

— Andrew Stefan Weiner

One man is dressed in a dark suit, a second in the uniform of a high-ranking military officer. Standing before unmarked lecterns, in front of an audience, they speak gravely of impending dangers and the need for decisive action. The situation is immediately recognisable as a government press conference, but its generic staging and lack of any other informational cues leave its purpose in doubt. At times the men seem to be making a case for war, while at others they seem to be answering their critics. Although it soon becomes clear that the two men are performers citing actual speeches given recently by well-known international officials, this feeling of certainty gives way as they begin to repeat themselves and finish each other's sentences, periodically exchanging places at the lecterns. The men's statements are all variations on the same theme: the time for speeches has passed, and now we must act. But what sort of actors are they? What kind of political action do they model? And while their performance at times resembles a re-enactment, how could they be re-enacting an event that never occurred in the first place?

✱

Two screens. On one, a man in US infantry fatigues wearing a headset with earphones and wrap-around goggles. On the other, the computer-generated scene he watches as he relates a story from a recent tour in Iraq. The contents of this screen change with his narration, depicting a desert highway ... an urban marketplace ... and then the explosion of a car bomb, in an ambush that kills one of his comrades. Viewers soon realise that the soldier is participating in a virtual-reality treatment of combat trauma, with his therapist controlling the immersive simulation. The soldier struggles to maintain his composure, at one point

even begging the therapist to stop, only to have her press him to continue. Whatever sympathies viewers might have shift after learning that the soldier and therapist are actually both employees of a software development firm, and that their entire interaction was a scripted attempt to sell the firm's VR-therapy technology to the US military. This startling reversal displaces any potential assumptions about the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Andrew Stefan Weiner examines recent works that reflect a new conception of eventhood: one not defined by occurrence in time but instead by the production of unpredictable effects that contaminate or even constitute the experience of the event itself.

While such therapy typically seeks a cathartic re-presentation of trauma, what changes when this act occurs under economic, institutional and ideological pressure? If, as here, therapeutic software shares the same platform as the battle-simulation programmes used to recruit and train soldiers, what does it mean that the ostensible method of cure can't be isolated from the technologies that helped produce the trauma?

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An adolescent boy stands alone before a black background, facing a camera. He wears a pullover, jogging pants and trainers, and slowly shifts his weight back and forth. From off-screen instructions can be heard, possibly given by a director or casting agent. The boy is asked to act out an argument with an imagined girlfriend, and his demeanour quickly shifts from polite diffidence to barely restrained rage. He backs out of character after a time, looking off-camera as if for approval. 'Good,' the voice tells him. 'Now give us another fight, this time with your mother, you've just found her drunk.' After this he is asked for yet

another confrontation, and to keep drawing on his own experiences. As the audition continues it is apparent that the boy is essentially being asked to play himself, or, rather, to play himself as the sort of stereotype one would quickly recognise on television: a working-class tough from the streets of Belfast. Despite the boy's lack of training as an actor, his capable, almost automatic responses make it clear that he understands this role well. But how? Has he been cast before, or has he somehow internalised these expectations such that he can reproduce them on demand? What does it mean for him that his experience is effectively merged with a commodified image of 'authentic' economic disenfranchisement, or that this subjectification forms the condition for his potential employment as an actor? And how do such demands change his own performance of self once he leaves the studio?

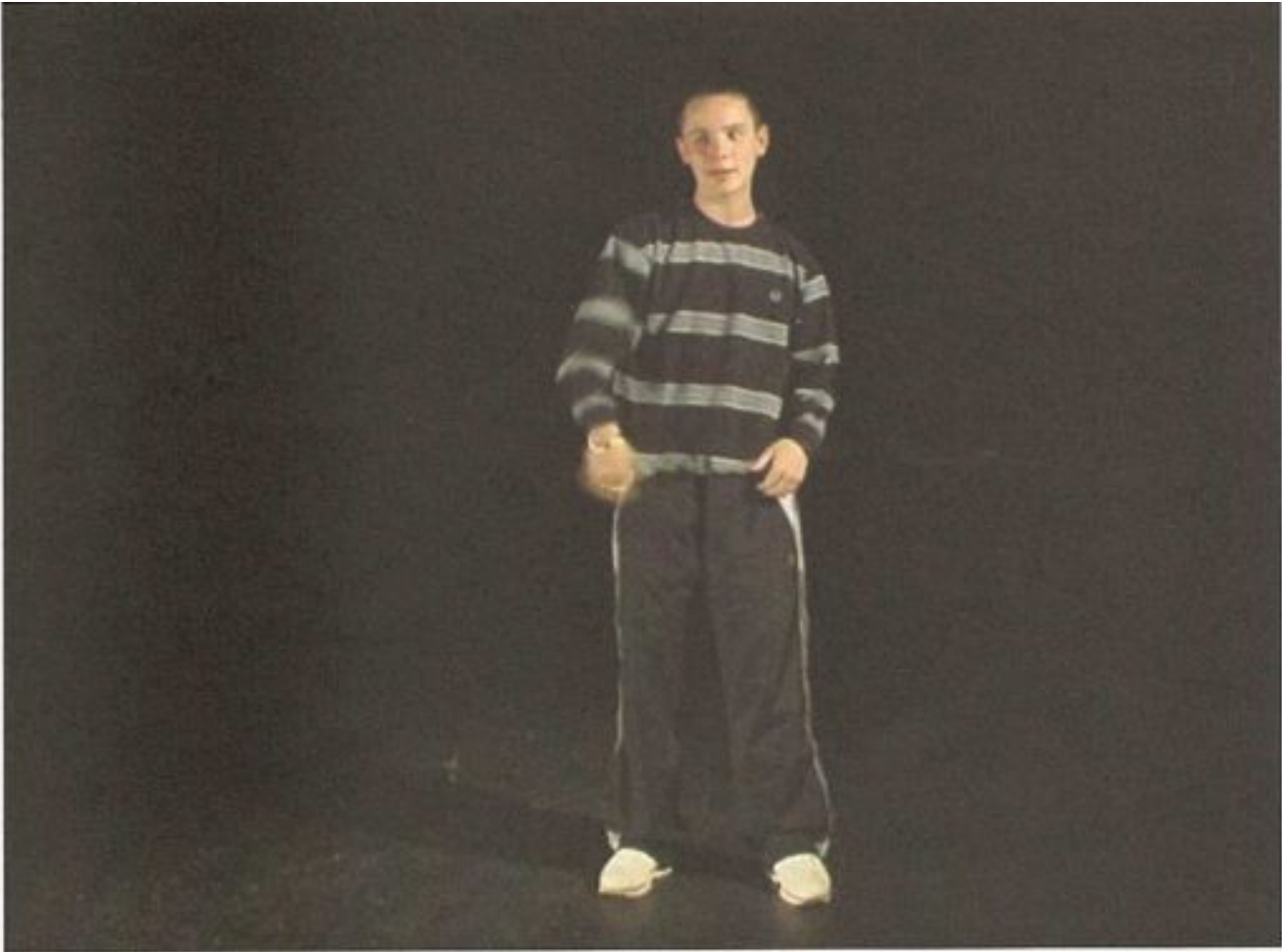


Each of these three descriptions refers to a recent artwork: respectively, *Who, What, Where, When, Why and How* (2009), a live project staged by Rod Dickinson in collaboration with Steve Rushton; *Immersion* (2009), a two-channel video installation by Harun Farocki; and *John* (2005), a single-channel video by Ian Charlesworth. Moreover, each description also corresponds to a situation that is marked, even constituted, by an entanglement of the event and its representations. In this capacity, they indicate an ever-intensifying set of transformations encompassing social relations, technical media, cultural production and even temporal structures, ultimately challenging our sense of what we mean by the ostensibly simple term 'event'. Such changes have crucial implications for contemporary artistic and critical practice, as well as for the relation between aesthetics and politics more broadly.

These shifts have already strained the vocabulary used to discuss durational art, so that even basic terms like 'performance' and 'video' now seem to lack sufficient specificity.¹ In response, a number of contemporary practices often align themselves not so much with art as with political activism, documentary, research and pedagogy. This expanded, transversal field of action enables forms of production that are more urgent and resist reductive categorisation, whether as discrete artistic media or even as art altogether. Some, like Farocki's *Immersion*, which is shown either as a two-channel video installation or a split-screen single-channel television programme, exist across multiple formats, making the question of their ultimate 'medium' irrelevant. Similarly, although works like *Who, What...* deploy codes of performance, they do not require them in order to be legible. Dickinson refers to the piece as a 'live art project', but it could be described as an experiment in re-enactment, or simply as an event in the generic sense. What matters most is the basic questions that the work's title invokes: how and why an event takes place; when, where and for whom it occurs; and indeed what it means for it to happen at all.

In questioning these fundamental conditions of occurrence, such work exemplifies an increasingly widespread concern with the status of the event. This emergent proliferation of event-oriented practices relates to but is not identical with performance as the term is usually understood, inasmuch as these forms do not necessarily require staging or re-enacting actual events for an audience. As in Farocki's video, such work might not directly intervene in the proceedings it depicts, but rather represent them as instances when the concept of eventhood comes into question. Event-oriented practices might concern duration without possessing an extended duration themselves, or question eventfulness without themselves aspiring to it. Viewed collectively, such practices can be understood as critical engagements with the event that resist or reformulate existing matrices of recognition: the coordinates by which we map certain phenomena as art or as politics, as eventful or uneventful, and so forth.

1 While these terms initially designated practices whose contingency, hybridity and marginality directly opposed institutionally sanctioned art, theatre and media, this radical valence has been eclipsed by an ongoing process of validation, which has retroactively deemed both performance and video stable artistic genres. In the case of performance, this attenuation of its possible radical character has been amplified by the ascendance of post-Fordist modes of production, which have refigured labour as the performance of regulated modes of personality. See Martha Rosler, 'Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment', in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (ed.), *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, New York: Aperture, 1991, pp.31–50; Carrie Lambert-Beatty, 'Against Performance Art', *Artforum*, May 2010, pp.208–12; and Sven Lütticken, 'An Arena in Which to Re-enact', in S. Lütticken (ed.), *Life, Once More: Forms of Re-enactment in Contemporary Art*, Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2005, pp.17–60.



Ian Charlesworth,
John, 2005, video,
13min. Courtesy
the artist

This development surely asks to be thought of together with the fact that the theorisation of the event has been an ongoing preoccupation for Continental philosophy since the late 1960s, with Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and more recently Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek all proposing their own distinct conceptions of eventhood. While acknowledging the formidable complexity of this field, one might nevertheless argue that the most pertinent theorist for recent event-oriented practices is in fact Jacques Rancière. This might seem slightly perverse, given that Rancière offers no coherent theory of the event as such, perhaps to mark his distance from post-Structuralism, phenomenology or academic philosophy in general. However, different types of the transformative event are in fact central to his influential account of politics and aesthetics. For Rancière, democratic politics consists of the intermittent actions by which dissensus is articulated, contesting the fact that the means by which the rights to appear, speak and act are unequally distributed within the field of the sensible.² The force of critical art manifests itself in attempts to analyse or repartition this field such that appearance can happen under different conditions.³ In this view, democracy and critical art aren't abstractions or ideals but phenomena that unfold in shared time.

We might thus understand the event along similar lines as a singular, contingent encounter between aesthetics and politics in which their established coordinates are reorganised or rearticulated so that forms and affects can circulate between them. This ultimately suggests a plastic, capacious definition of the event as that which allows eventhood to be thought or experienced differently, or as that which doesn't register as a recognisable type of occurrence. These tendencies are all in play in the three works described above as they track the transformation of event-structures across multiple levels – ranging from a subject's actions to the conditions of representation, distribution and reception.

More specifically, Dickinson, Farocki and Charlesworth all problematise *the evidence of the event*: not only the different means by which an event is constituted, mediated,

2 See, for example, Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (trans. Julie Rose), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, pp.29–30.

3 Rancière outlines this position in 'Problems and Transformations of Critical Art', in J. Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (trans. Steven Corcoran), Cambridge: Polity, 2009, pp.45–60.

recorded and evaluated, but also its status as evident, existing within a shared domain of perception. As this essay intends to demonstrate, the multiform relation between evidence and event delineates a common horizon of many recent artistic practices, one traversing the boundaries between art and other activities, including politics. This diverse field centres around an insistence that the event cannot be considered apart from its representations, and that these elements irreducibly constitute and contaminate each other.

Such unstable reciprocity means that the consequences of these event-oriented practices are necessarily unpredictable and singular, and that their impact derives from their particularities, as with most complex art. This heterogeneity notwithstanding, a brief schematisation of the work discussed above shows several common traits. The first of these is a tendency to appear in the form of an event, but one in which the typical parameters of occurrence are altered. While most people would concede that the interpretation of evidence can retroactively determine the implications of an event, as in courtrooms or in the psychoanalytic process, it seems counter-intuitive to claim that evidence can precede an event, determining it before the fact. This, however, is the scenario subtending *Who, What...*, in which the appeals given by the speech-makers presume prior knowledge of the official rhetoric of state warfare, such that the legitimacy of their assertions is, in a sense, pre-established.

A second common element is a focus on the action of performativity within the event. As is clear in Jacques Derrida's reading of J.L. Austin, the illocutionary speech-act (an utterance such as 'I pronounce you husband and wife') is as much transformative as performative, a force that effectively generates new objects while altering the conditions under which they can be meaningfully recognised.⁴ Given that any event requires mediation in order to be intelligible, and since this mediation often (if not always) relies on performativity, representations of the event are liable to change the identities of the speaker or audience, or even constitute the realities they otherwise purport to document. In this sense, whatever indexical verity it may claim, evidence always simultaneously refers back to this process of constitutive mediation, whereby the representation of evidence alters the context within which such evidence appears. At their limit, these performative properties can deform the event such that it resists or even exceeds the logic of documentation, if not that of representation altogether. By exposing the volatile overdetermination that thus marks even seemingly simple occurrences, event-oriented practices contravene much of what the term 'evidence' usually signifies: verifiable facticity, epistemological certainty and consensus. One could say they pose evidence as a question, uncovering a field of contesting forces that belies the ostensible neutrality of this concept.⁵

While evidence usually evokes the law, many recent artworks frame their relation with the event in terms that are not restricted to juridical institutions, instead situating this conjunction within dispersed, heterogeneous discourses of power-knowledge. Here evidence emerges as an effect of processes similar to those that interpellate the subject.⁶ However, in addition to this institutional-discursive function, the law also operates through the register of the symbolic. As is clear in Charlesworth's video, subjectivity is never something that we simply possess, but rather becomes sensible only when articulated within given matrices of convention.

4 In Derrida's words, the performative 'produces or transforms a situation, it effects'. Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context' (trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman), *Limited Inc*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988, p.13. Without over-hastily equating the speech-act with other forms like technically reproduced images, one might recall Derrida's insistence that all forms of representation *qua* writing can exist only through their capacity of being repeated, and thus remain open to the possibility of citation.

5 In doing so, they show an affinity to various philosophical critiques of representation, particularly the interrogation of the sign conducted by semiotic theorists during the 1960s. If the photograph had long been the master trope for an unproblematic account of evidence, recent event-oriented practices engage the technically reproduced image in terms similar to those deployed by the early Roland Barthes: as a site where meaning is not depicted but generated, altered and transferred. In this view, photographic images enact a peculiar slippage between denotation and connotation, such that certain values are retroactively projected onto the image, where they appear to have existed all along. See R. Barthes, 'The Photographic Message', *Image Music Text* (trans. Stephen Heath), New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, pp.15–31, especially pp.17–20.

6 One thinks in this context of the historical research undertaken by John Tagg and Allan Sekula, who linked photographic portraiture to the ascendance of criminology and para-scientific fields like phrenology, along with the implementation of police databases and the surveillance of populations. Examples include J. Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993; and A. Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', in Richard Bolton (ed.), *The Contest of Meaning*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1989, pp.343–88.

The fact that evidence must always be produced and recognised under unpredictable conditions means that it harbours a force resisting reductive judgements that might quantify or otherwise fix its value. Evidence thus further resembles the law in that the iterability that necessarily constitutes it also leaves it invariably subject to failure or graft, as Judith Butler has argued.⁷ Oppositional practices are themselves not immune to this condition of exposure, but can only negotiate it. So if this immanence leaves them open to recuperation, misinterpretation or reframing, it simultaneously enables them to mobilise a more archaic meaning of evidence: that of a shared sensible manifestation, where that which is evident exists to be seen by any and all.⁸ What sorts of community does this potential promise? What modes of being-together does it organise? And how can we understand the event of its manifestation?

Given the decades-long lag that has separated early experiments in performance from their inclusion in mainstream art institutions, it is no surprise that the most promising responses to such questions today are coming from alternative spaces. One compelling recent example was the 2009 exhibition 'Performing Evidence', curated by Anke Bangma for SMART Project Space in Amsterdam. Though modest in size, the show presented itself ambitiously as 'a speculation on the role of representation in the actualisation of certain scenarios of reality'.⁹ As its title suggested, this approach positioned evidence within an ongoing chain of mediations as a representation of its own performative production that then influences future actions, and so on. Though such a recursive problematic has a clear bearing on current conditions of media saturation, Bangma intended a more comprehensive historicisation that could relate contemporary cultural production to the development of the human sciences and related techniques of social management.

The diverse materials gathered for the show, which included the works by Dickinson, Farocki and Charlesworth mentioned above, shared a common trait: a presentation of evidence that was at odds with its mediation, often subtly or surprisingly. These conflicts produced uncanny effects, as in *The Battle of Seale Hayne* (1918), a film produced as part of an experimental therapy at a British clinic, in which traumatised World War I veterans were asked to write, stage and record themselves participating in mock combat.

As is clear in Charlesworth's video, subjectivity is never something that we possess, but rather becomes sensible only when articulated within given matrices of convention.

The apparent realism of the battle sequences prompted an unsettling question: was this an effect of the soldiers re-enacting their own actual experiences, or of their somehow aligning their account with the conventions of the war film?

By exhibiting such documentary materials, which were produced outside the context of art, 'Performing Evidence' tracked

movements between fields as seemingly distinct as art video, medical records, moving-image installation, colonial-expedition films and performance. The show developed its argument by pairing apparently incommensurable objects together, as in a gallery that contained Guy Ben-Ner's *Wild Boy* (2004) — a home-video re-enactment of Kaspar Hauser's education starring Ben-Ner and his son — alongside photographs taken in Ghent in the 1920s at an asylum for handicapped children. The pictures were the work of the institute's well-meaning director, who outfitted his wards in formal dress and had them role play various scenes from adult life. Viewed together with *Wild Boy* — in which one first thinks the boy is aping his father, only to learn that the original sequence has been reversed and that Ben-Ner is thus copying his son — the Ghent pictures punctured the sentimental romanticisation of childhood by suggesting that children's play can be dictated by adults intent on realising fantasies of their own lost freedoms.

Another effective juxtaposition was realised with Farocki's installation, which was placed alongside *The Battle of Seale Hayne* and other World War I-era films in which British soldiers act out the symptoms of war neuroses in 'before-and-after' fashion so as

7 Judith Butler has provided a sustained close analysis of the relation between iterability, performativity and agency, for example, in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993, pp.12–16.

8 As per the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Latinate etymology of the word 'evidence' links the faculty of sight to the condition of exteriority; that which is evident is literally 'out-seeing', plain for all to see.

9 Anke Bangma, *SMART Papers: Performing Evidence* (exh. cat.), Amsterdam: SMART Project Space, 2009, p.3.



Harun Farocki,
Serious Games 3: Immersion, 2009,
 double-channel video,
 20min. © the artist

to document their successful treatment. As with *Immersion*, these recordings, which were made to persuade military and medical authorities to adopt methods of re-enactment and favour certain hospitals, do not document the specific psychodynamics of therapy, but rather its promotion or marketing. They further suggest how demands for evidence can serve as forms of suggestion, producing the symptoms they purportedly reveal. Whether intentionally or not, such materials portray military psychology as conflicted in terms of whether to treat patients as civilians or soldiers, and whether combat is simply incommensurable with psychic health. The currency of these questions is unmistakable, given the recent media attention on the systemic failures in care for traumatised US veterans, as well as on US intelligence and security agencies' employment of doctors and psychologists in detention and torture procedures.¹⁰

The crucial insight of *Immersion* comes in relating these issues to the penetration of warfare into seemingly non-militarised spheres of activity, intimating the existence of something like a military-cultural-industrial complex. Such a position brought together two of Farocki's long-standing interests: the function of disciplinary power within everyday life, and the link between optical and military technics. Yet where one might have expected totalising conclusions, the video exhibited a welcome restraint. Rather than re-stage the scenario familiar from Paul Virilio's writings, in which battlefield technologies are repurposed for consumer use,¹¹ *Immersion* detailed an open circuit between the military, Hollywood, video-game developers and experimental psychologists. Virtual Iraq, the programme featured in the piece, was produced at the Institute for Creative Technologies, a US Army-funded research lab at the University of Southern California, and was in fact based on *Full Spectrum Warrior*, a game developed by the US military in the early 2000s as a recruitment tool.¹² In these circumstances the term 'immersion' assumed new meaning, designating a condition in which the distinctions between actual and virtual warfare lapse, with soldiers recruited, trained, entertained and treated with technologies similar to those used in combat. Although the installation, itself immersive, clearly meant to implicate its own audience in this problematic, the potentially accusatory tendencies of such a move were countered by the dual screen, which allowed viewers a degree of interpretative freedom, a technique Farocki has termed 'soft montage'.¹³

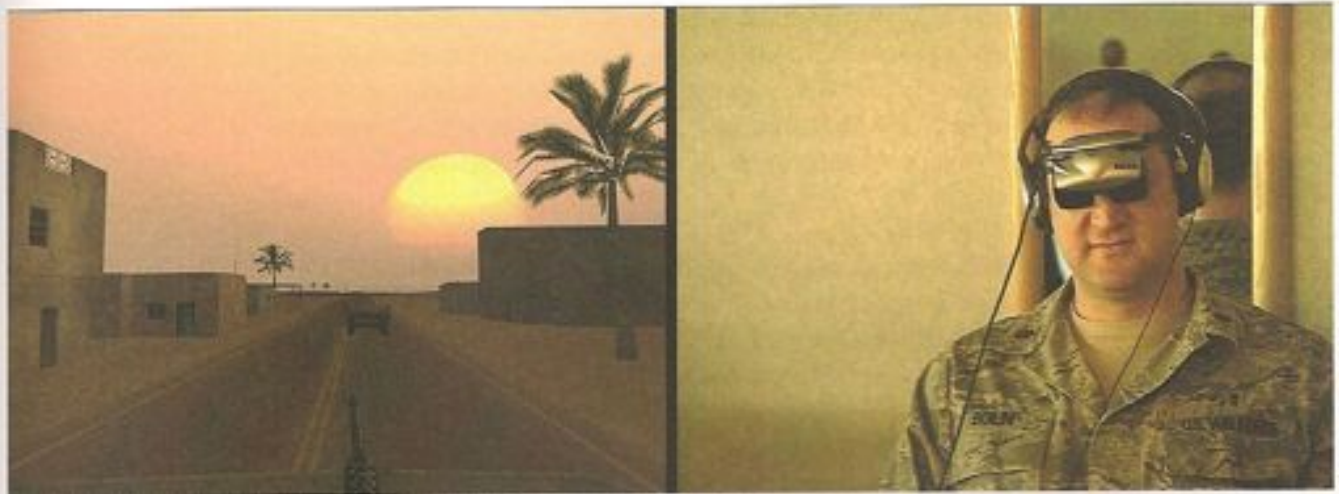
By contrast, Dickinson's *Who, What...* addressed this militarisation from the vantage point of electoral politics. There the interchanges between the generic politician and army officer – their swapping lines and lecterns – suggested the reversibility of Carl von Clausewitz's famous maxim, with politics becoming the continuation of war by other

10 For coverage of the former issue, see, among others, Dana Priest and Anne Hull, 'Soldiers Face Neglect, Frustration at Army's Top Medical Facility', *The Washington Post*, 16 February 2007; for the latter, see Neil A. Lewis, 'Interrogators Cite Doctors' Aid at Guantanamo Prison Camp', *The New York Times*, 24 June 2005.

11 See, for example, Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (trans. Patrick Camiller), London and New York: Verso, 1989; and P. Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (trans. Mark Polizzotti), Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2007.

12 Sue Halpern reports on the program and its development in her article 'Virtual Iraq', *The New Yorker*, 19 May 2008, pp. 32–37.

13 Farocki elaborates on the theory behind this technique in conversation with Kaja Silverman in K. Silverman and H. Farocki, *Speaking about Godard*, New York: New York University Press, 1998, pp. 141–43.



means.¹⁴ The piece proceeded to map the recent metamorphoses of a classical rhetorical scenario: the announcement of the *casus belli*. This precedent, invoked by many of speeches cited, now seems completely outmoded in a moment when war is often starkly asymmetrical, if it is even declared at all. Quotations from UN representatives, Bill Clinton and members of the George W. Bush administration made clear that the ubiquity of human rights rhetoric calls its credibility into question, as such appeals often serve merely as pretexts for politics as usual. These selections, read unaltered and straight-faced, ironically conjured an endless series of speeches on the limits of rhetoric and the virtues of action. In shuttling between ostensibly disparate figures – Clinton and Slobodan Milošević, or Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush – the script didn't cynically equate them, but rather examined how they all exploited the conventions of a given speech situation. Following this argument, such speeches are themselves already essentially a strange sort of re-enactment, claiming authority through an implicit identification with historical precedent. It is thus almost as if the legitimacy of military action were already taken for granted, with its rhetorical pre-texts serving as pretext, a form of evidence that comes before the event of its presentation to the public. Here evidence is less a contestable rationale than a mere formality, a claim that will likely be rendered irrelevant after new facts on the ground have been established. By incorporating its own means of documentation, with a photographer and camera man playing members of the news media, *Who, What...* sceptically questioned the status of such speeches as public events, implying that they happen not as part of a democratic process, but rather simply to have happened, so that officials can either justify themselves before posterity or, if all else fails, indemnify themselves.



Ultimately, the chief interest of 'Performing Evidence' lay not so much in its historical argument, which somewhat exceeded its own evidence, but rather in the transversal perspective it adopted, linking art with numerous non-art forms and practices. Such an approach remains regrettably rare, with non-art materials usually displayed as merely illustrative 'context' to the extent that they appear at all. The show's successful pairings directed viewers' attention to a crucial intersection, intimating various analogies, migrations, conflicts and 'zones of indistinction' between the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics.¹⁵ By reframing the relation between evidence and event in these terms, the exhibition effectively demonstrated that its problematic could usefully be applied to other materials and sites.

One key area for such investigation might be the war crimes tribunal, which in recent decades has become a central instrument of international law. The film *The Specialist*,

14 Étienne Balibar discusses this reversal in his lecture 'Politics as War, War as Politics: Post-Clausewitzian Variations', Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 8 May 2006, available online at <http://www.elepf.fr/tpip.php?article=57> (last accessed on 2 July 2010). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari address similar questions in *G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus* (trans. Brian Massumi), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p.467.

15 This distinction and terminology are borrowed from Rancière, who explains them in detail in *J. Rancière, 'Problems and Transformations of Critical Art', op. cit.*

made in 1999 by Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman, is among the few efforts to engage this history, analysing a decisive moment in its early history: the 1961 trial in Jerusalem of Adolf Eichmann. Assembled solely from appropriated footage of the proceedings, culled from the hundreds of hours recorded by the official camera crew, the film forefronts the status of the trial as an international media event, the first ever to be broadcast worldwide. In depicting the prosecution's use of procedurally irrelevant testimony from Holocaust survivors, the film argues that the performance of evidence was used to develop forms of memory that could go towards redeeming genocide in the foundation of a Jewish state, and would legitimate that state's sovereign right to exercise violent force in self-defence.¹⁶ The importance of this aesthetic dimension to human rights legislation cannot be discounted, especially inasmuch as transitional justice increasingly takes televisual form, with the tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia designed expressly around the needs of the television camera.¹⁷ Such a shift defies monolithic criticism, especially given how the broadcast of hearings has in some cases integrated previously disenfranchised constituencies, transforming basic assumptions about public speech and affect.¹⁸ However, most critical analysis of this field has focused on questions of jurisprudence or international relations. Only interventions that chiasmatically intertwine aesthetics and politics can engage issues that might otherwise go overlooked, like the ways in which the trial can become a transformative event in which technical mediation alters the conditions under which collective identifications are possible.

A second area of critical interest is the array of discourses and practices associated with the 'war on terror' initiated by Bush in 2001, and continued with certain modifications by the Obama administration. Its aesthetic and political implications are complex, mirroring the intense heterogeneity of a 'war' that has taken unprecedented forms: recorded on camera telephones and uploaded to YouTube, conducted in prisons like Guantánamo Bay, Bagram Air Base and others whose names are still unknown.¹⁹ Given this complex array of determinations, transdisciplinary discursive practices are best equipped to register effective responses. Though Farocki's *Immersion* is exemplary in this respect, a more intensively performative engagement with these issues was manifest in the 2007 project *9 Scripts from a Nation at War*, undertaken collectively by Andrea Geyer, Sharon Hayes, Ashley Hunt, Katya Sander and David Thorne.²⁰ The group's initial research mobilised a diverse archive of sources, ranging from interviews with veterans and journalists to transcripts of military tribunals, that they then collated into nine separate scripts. It then inflected these materials through various devices: compounding multiple opinions into one anonymous voice, having speakers deliver each other's lines, combining trained and non-professional actors, and interlacing fact with fiction. By thus scrutinising and rearticulating the operation of the scripts, the project provocatively re-presented such new types of event as the US military's 'Combatant Status Review Tribunals', sham trials in which defendants had no access to the evidence used to justify their indefinite detention.²¹

The stakes here extend well beyond the project's innovations within the field of contemporary art. Projects like *9 Scripts* pointedly distance themselves from the more typical concerns of performance: authenticity, the relation between embodiment and mediatisation or the ways that re-enactment problematises historical truth. Instead, they situate themselves as contingent engagements with the very structural conditions that make events intelligible, possible and actionable. This immanent, experimental

16 Benjamin Robinson provides legal and political analysis of these dynamics in his essay 'The Specialist on the Eichmann Precedent: Morality, Law, and Military Sovereignty', *Critical Inquiry*, vol.30, no.1, Autumn 2003, pp.63–97.

17 Sivan discusses these developments in regards to *The Specialist* in the article 'Archive Images: Truth or Memory?: The Case of Adolf Eichmann's Trial', in Okwui Enwezor et al., *Experiments with Truth*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002, pp.277–88.

18 For an insider's perspective on these questions, see Albie Sachs, 'Different Kinds of Truth: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission', in O. Enwezor, *Experiments with Truth*, *op. cit.*, pp.43–60. Sachs was appointed by Nelson Mandela to serve as a judge on the Constitutional Court of South Africa, and was involved in numerous important post-apartheid rulings.

19 For a representative analysis of one response to these developments, see Karen Beckman, 'Telescopes, Transparency, and Torture: Trevor Paglen and the Politics of Exposure', *Art Journal*, Fall 2007, pp.62–67.

20 A more detailed discussion of this project can be found in Ian White, 'One Script for 9 Scripts from a Nation at War', *Afterall*, no.18, Summer 2008, pp.100–07.

21 An early account of these tribunals can be found in Neil Lewis, 'Guantánamo Prisoners Getting Their Day, but Hardly in Court', *The New York Times*, 8 November 2004.

approach seeks to identify and test the sort of rules that govern cultural production and political action. It asks how we might act within this conjuncture, how we might modify it and how it might in turn act upon us. In this sense, they internalise a certain logic of encounter, in which an unpredictable situation demands that we respond without the knowledge of readily foreseeable consequences. Against the implicit voluntarism that often marks interpretations of performance art, this scene is premised on a negotiation with a radical and irreducible heteronomy. This condition of exposure unifies such practices despite their particularities, and makes them singularly qualified to track the ongoing proliferation of event forms.

Although the contours of this transformation remain fluid, several shifts are worth noting. Chief among these is the fact that most anyone can now produce images on mobile phones, inexpensive cameras or computers, vastly multiplying our access to representations of events while simultaneously making the provenance or the medium of the image less relevant. Concurrently, the news media has increasingly adopted what Hito Steyerl has termed a 'transnational documentary jargon', fusing the codes of journalism

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with those of fictional narrative; this has happened at a moment when corporate media convergence and declining state arts funding have made independent cultural production increasingly precarious.²² The resulting conditions are highly ambivalent, with the increased power and proliferation of the image renewing utopian aspirations for democratic communication, largely dormant since video experiments of the 1970s, while inspiring a backlash within the US art world against installed video,

avowedly political content and documentary.²³ Although there is obviously no simple formula to explain these shifts, it is nevertheless clear that oppositional interventions will have to reckon with their consequences if they hope to prove viable.

In this vein, it is tempting to claim that future practices must continue to work through the problem of the event and its evidence. But this would foster the illusion that the problem is an object we can choose to study from outside, rather than a historical conjuncture whose coordinates can't be precisely charted, and from which it is impossible to extricate ourselves. At the risk of sounding portentous, this critical engagement is an event in its own right, one whose outcomes and risks are inherently undecidable. It is within just such an aporetic relation between actuality, virtuality and possibility that the event resides, destabilising the foundationalist ontologies that continue to subtend theories of aesthetics and politics.²⁴ If evidence and event are unpredictably transformative of each other, how does this free reciprocity alter our thinking about modes of collective manifestation, or the transitivity of the art object? How might it model the sorts of exchange and encounter that can occur between media and forms, between the hierarchical schemes that map the social onto the sensible, between discrete logics of critical resistance? We might say, after Maurizio Lazzarato, that the event *insists*, adamantly reiterating such questions over and against our sense of what is given, real or obvious.²⁵ It insists on what is possible and what is common. It insists on the evidence of what is manifest to all, even if the fate of this equality is by no means self-evident. Without pretext or condition, the event insists — and continues insisting.

22 For discussion of this conjuncture see Hito Steyerl, 'A Language of Practice', in H. Steyerl and Maria Lind (ed.), *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008, pp. 225–31.

23 Such criticisms have come both from the centre-left (Rosaling Krauss) and centre-right (Peter Schjeldahl), particularly around the programming at Documenta 11 in 2002, curated by Okwui Enwezor. Enwezor offers an insightful response in his essay 'Documentary/Verité: The Figure of "Truth" in Contemporary Art', in Mark Nash (ed.), *Experiments With Truth* (exh. cat.), Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2005, pp. 97–104.

24 Gilles Deleuze relates this ontological singularity of the event to what he terms its 'double structure': its articulation of a present actualisation with a neutral, indeterminate past and future. See *The Logic of Sense* (ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale), New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 151–53.

25 Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Struggle, Event, Media' (trans. Aileen Derieg), archived online at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1003/lazzarato/en/print> (last accessed on 17 June 2010).