

Secondary Witness



Avi Mograbi, Z32, 2008, Video, 82 min.

International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP)

Secondary Witness

June 27 - July 26, 2012

Participating artists: Lana Čmajčanin, Dor Guez, Adela Jusic, Juan Manuel Echavarría, Avi Mograbi and Michael Zupraner

Curated by Maayan Sheleff

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The works in *Secondary Witness* touch upon the notion of testimony and explore the artist's position as its mediator. A testimony is an individual transmission of a story, one that in the judicial, philosophical and epistemological Western tradition may be performed only by a first-hand observer and witness. An artist who documents a testimony becomes a second-hand witness, whereas the viewer becomes a third-hand witness of the same "proof" of occurrence.¹ Many artworks in recent years, however, have ceased referring to testimony as a document of truth or as a proof of realness; instead they emphasize its inability to reflect an all-encompassing historical truth and focus on more poetic and subjective forms of documentation.

Testimony is often a form of post-traumatic reconstruction of sometimes radical and incomprehensible events. As such, it is a site of trauma, and its documenter becomes an integral part of the occurrence and the event. Thus, a person who listens to the trauma will, to some extent, experience it himself; he will identify with the subject and allow a blurring of boundaries to make room for testimony.²

The video works featured in this exhibition present various personal stories, all of which reflect societies in a constant state of conflict and trauma. Depicted are seemingly mundane stories alongside others that entail loss and turmoil, struggle or guilt.

The artists in *Secondary Witness*, natives to countries of conflict and connected to their protagonists in different ways, examine their place as secondary witnesses and their relations to the protagonists and their testimonies. They have chosen to obscure the boundaries between documenter and documented in various ways: Some by entering the photographic frame, or handing the camera to the subjects themselves. By altering the documenter's power position behind the camera, they shift the customary power relations between those who are seen to those who see (and represent).³ At times, the artist literally takes the voice of the work's subjects, an act of over identification that externalizes a mode of control and manipulation over those subjects. Others search for a performative testimony that reflects a subjective feeling, representing an abandonment of the need to represent the real, and an attempt to construct a new reality as a critical act.

The various stories originate in different parts of the world (Bosnia, Colombia, Israel/Palestine), yet reflect the inability to escape a constant state of confinement, both externally and personally. However, with many moments of humor and grace, the strength and humanity of the individual appears from within the complexities that these realities entail. The subjective, performative and poetic testimonies reject the prevalent perception of the truth, question definitions of victim versus perpetrator, and challenge preconceptions. The undermining of power relations between documenter and documented, with regard for the resulting internal contradictions, is a call to alter the existing balance of power between strong and weak, heard and silenced. It calls upon the viewer, as a third witness, to add his or her own memories and experiences, to reconsider a passive position in power relations, and to take a more active position in their realignment.

(Sa)mira, the protagonist of **Dor Guez's** work (and his cousin), is a student of psychology at Hebrew University, Jerusalem. In the

work, Samira recalls the traumatic moment when her Arab background was exposed in the restaurant where she works as a waitress, followed by her Jewish boss asking her to change her name. This episode shows how much her everyday life is determined by ethnic prejudices and provokes reflections about identity and how stereotypical codifications amount to absurdity. Guez, an invisible yet heard presence in the video, chooses to reexamine his protagonist's point of view by questioning and making her repeat her testimony, a manipulation which leads to acknowledgement of the trauma.

Guez's work employs photography and video installations to engage questions of identity, multiculturalism and national ethos, with his personal history playing an important role in his artistic practice. The two photographs shown alongside the video are part of his ongoing project ***The Christian Palestinian Archive***. The aim of this archive is to research and document the history of the Christian Palestinian diaspora, a minority spread out over the area referred to as the "Middle East," enabling members of this community to explore their history through images. Unlike the state's official archives around the world, this archive data is not based only on dates and locations, but also on the genealogy of different families, crossing borders of nationalities. The diptych ***Lod Ghetto, 1949: Samira and Jacob Wedding*** is part of the series "Scanograms #1," which includes fifteen images from the life of one woman, Samira, dating from the years 1938 -1958. Samira is the grandmother of the young Samira in the video and each image documents an important event of her family's life before they left Jaffa for Lod, Amman, Cyprus, Cairo and London. Photography in those days was a planned event, hence the pictures depict landmark moments: Samira's wedding was the first wedding in the Lod Ghetto, where many Palestinian families were deported after the war in 1948. The "Scanograms" therefore act as a sort of reenactment of these forgotten events, bringing new attention to a personal, complex moment.

In ***When I die, you can do what you want***, Adela Jusic also tries to capture her grandmother's memories. The stories are heard through the voice of the artist herself like a stream of consciousness. They reflect the grandmother's strong connection to her family and her country through a life of struggle and loss (she endured several wars), depicting everyday moments and intimate feelings while reflecting a socio-political atmosphere of turmoil. The video shows Jusic coloring her grandmother's hair shortly before she died. Her hands repeatedly perform this action while her grandmother's strong gaze faces the camera and the viewer. Jusic tells her grandmother's story and attempts to memorize her grandmother's memories before they are lost, and to make them her own. Jusic's videos often recount the personal experiences of her and her family. Through them she attempts to touch the global implications of war, and the role of women in them, as well as memory and loss. In two previous works she dealt with the loss of her father, who was killed as a sniper in the Bosnian army in 1992, with minimalist performative gestures. In ***The Sniper*** (2007) she repeatedly drew a circle over her father's portrait, while reading from a notebook of his that she found where he listed how many soldiers he killed during his combat assignments. ***Who needs DRNC?*** (2008) shows Jusic cleaning a weapon in the same way that her father taught her, a joined ritual they had before he went back to battle.

Lana Čmajčanin also takes the voice of her protagonist in ***Female President***, but their relationship is different. Standing at a podium, the young Bosnian artist reads the testimony of a woman who was raped during the Bosnian war in the 1990s. The painful, sad text of the victim is read in an assertive demagogic style usually used by politicians who try to incite their audience. Reading aloud the victim's testimony, a text that is usually read in discretion or not heard at all for fear of exposure, provides a voice for those who remain unheard. It also exposes the way in which politicians exploit the pain of others for their own gain, as

well as the gender division common among victims and victimizers. In speaking in the voice of the victim but in the style of a politician, the artist takes up both roles of ruler and ruled, alluding to the intricacy of political art which employs the life materials of real people.

Čmajčanin relates much of her work to war traumas, particularly in regard to the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and often collaborates with Adela Jusic. Several of her works deal with the phenomenon of systematic rape as a war crime, and are based on a re-enactment or re-edit of real testimonies, which she collected from books and archives. After World War II, the highest number of rapes worldwide was registered in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and this reappeared during the 1990s war.

Colombia's violent history includes a period called "La Violencia" (1948-1964), during which more than 200,000 Colombians were killed. A second period of violence was set in motion around 1980, with the outbreak of illegal drug dealing, and still continues. Many villagers in far-lying areas on merchants' routes became the victims of acts of slaughter committed by Marxist guerrilla groups and far right paramilitaries (militias) involved in the trade. In ***Mouths of Ashes***, **Juan Manuel Echavarría** traveled to some of these villages and filmed survivors and refugees who had put their experiences of the traumatic events into music. The singing mediates their pain and grief more subjectively and emotionally than direct testimony. The songs are, however, also a ritual celebration of survival, presenting people who have created art under the toughest conditions.

Most of the singers are Afro-Colombians, among the poorest people in Colombia, who were forced by the harsh events to leave everything behind and move to shanty towns, where they remain abandoned by the government and ignored by the majority of the population. In creating the songs, these



Adela Jusic, *When I die, you can do what you want*, 2011, Video, 19:25 min.

individuals endeavored to come to terms with their difficult experience and decided how their story would be told. Echavarría tries to give voice to those usually not heard or seen, using the manner most faithful to their choice. The work thus changes the traditional perception of testimony, and at the same time emphasizes the place of the documentary portrait as a vehicle with which to convey the particular humanity of the documented person. Echavarría was a writer for thirty years before he became an artist. His video and photography work deals with the results of the violence in Colombia, sometimes through the memories of others.

Michael Zupraner's work, *Snow Tapes*, reflects one of the most complicated situations to come out of the Israeli occupation. For years, Palestinian families in Hebron have been forced to spend most days inside their homes, due to increasing violence by their Jewish neighbors, and strict restrictions imposed on them by the IDF (Israeli Defense Force). Against the backdrop of this reality, Zupraner chose to "settle" in Hebron, in a deserted Palestinian house. For two years he has lived there, and together with Issa Amro has transformed the house into a studio and a communal meeting place for the project HEB2 and its accompanying website— HEB2.tv. Also, over the past four years, the B'tselem organization has distributed video cameras to Palestinian families in the area, as a means of documenting human rights violations. HEB2 was aided by this program and worked with the local camera holders to help them also create expressive and personal documentary photography.

This work, the first to emerge from this experience, features two points of view. The first is through the eyes of the Palestinian el-Hadad family, who documented a violent encounter with a group of neighboring Jewish settlers. The other, seen through the artist's lens, documents the family in their living room viewing the footage they captured on camera. The duplication of documentation generates a distance from the documentary gaze,



Lana Čmajčanin, *Female President*, 2005, Video, 3:17 min.



Dor Guez, *(Sa)mira*, 2009, Video, 13:40 min.

and irony toward the political-activist art that it ostensibly represents. The family expresses artistic criticism of their own cinematography, as it fails to properly reflect the occurrences of that day, and this also reflects the voice of the artist himself attesting to his inability to represent the pain of others. Zupraner's gaze at the shifting of the camera to the hands of the Palestinians is twofold: on the one hand, it is an honest attempt to give them the power of documentation which may, if needed, serve as testimony in a court of law; on the other, he realizes that the camera is not an adequate enough weapon to change existing power relations, and so he acknowledges his own problematic power position.

A different testimony, the one of the so-called perpetrator, is depicted in **Avi Mograbi's Z32**. Mograbi has been directing films since the early 1990s, most of which have been critically acclaimed in both Israel and around the world. His experimental approach to the documentary genre often includes inserting his own character into the film. Through his overtly personal gaze, he critically reflects the political situation in Israel.

In *Z32*, Mograbi uses one of the testimonies he encountered during the course of his work with the organization Breaking the Silence, which collects testimonies from former IDF soldiers attesting to their unethical deeds in the occupied territories. Mograbi's unique, provocative work is both a testimony and a reflexive gaze at the relationship between the documenter and documented. The soldier recounts an event during which he shot innocent people while following an illegal order. Mograbi inserts himself into the film, deliberating on camera the morality of the act of documentation, which enables the witness to clear his conscience. He employs unusual cinematic approaches, usually foreign to the documentary medium. An animation hides the face of the confessing subject—a technical tool which protects him from exposure, while metaphorizing the documentary genre's manipulative potential—and musical numbers in which the

artist sings his deliberations like a Greek chorus or characters from a Brechtian opera. The women in the life of both the artist and the ex-soldier represent the voice of morality, adding yet another layer of reflexivity and criticism.

¹ Shoshana Felman, *The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah*, in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 204-283.

² Dori Laub, *Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening*, in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, op. cit. n. 2, pp. 57-74. Laub speaks of the position of a psychologist as a listener. I'm comparing it to the position of the documenting artist in the sense of being a second-hand witness, although the responsibility, purpose and methods of the artist are obviously different than those of a psychologist.

³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 72. "The other," writes Sontag, "even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone [like us] who also sees."



Michael Zupraner, *Snow Tapes*, 2012, 14 min.



Juan Manuel Echavarría, *Mouths of Ash*, 2003-2004, Video, 18:15 min.

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Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Secondary Witness*
curated by Maayan Sheleff
June 27 - July 26, 2012

Text: Maayan Sheleff
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Programs Manager: Shinnie Kim
Published by International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP)
Printed by Ideal Graphics, NY

International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP)
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ISCP is a 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization.

ISBN 978-0-9855741-0-9

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Thanks to Independent Curators International; David Ayala Alfonso; Maja Ciric;
Eyal Danon and the Israeli Center for Digital Art, Holon; and H.G. Masters.

Special thanks to Sergio Edelsztein and the Center for Contemporary Art,
Tel Aviv.

This exhibition has been made possible thanks to the support of:
National Endowment for the Arts, Department of Cultural Affairs,
Brooklyn Arts Council, Greenwich Collection and The Andy
Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.