



True Stories

Curated by Lilly Wei

Fikret Atay
Tracey Emin
Doug Fishbone
Amy Grappell
Dor Guez
Karl Haendel and
Petter Ringbom
Fahed Halabi and
Ala Farhat
Ragnar Kjartansson
Simon Leung
Jan Tichy
Stefanos Tsivopoulos
Wang Qingsong

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Documentaries have become increasingly popular. Once considered to be primarily reportage and factual in a newsreel tradition, they now, more often than not, blur the divide between the objective and subjective, the historical and the interpretive, the aesthetic and the journalistic, the form in constant evolution in our age of raucous, insistent, unmediated revelation. Inevitably, the idea of factuality has been complicated, the ratio of truth to invention fluctuating, as video artists and filmmakers redefine the genre, layering and expanding the documentary's formats, altering its nature, finding new and powerful ways to tell their countless stories to an increasingly receptive and sophisticated audience.

What, then, constitute documentaries now? Where is the boundary between documentary and fiction? How can the real be made to look convincing and in doing so, does it lose its reality or become more so? Since the artists come from several countries and cultures, what kinds of specific narratives are presented, how are they received and what is their impact?

The exhibition is framed by a work that investigates how perception can be manipulated and one that is a live feed, the ultimate document in real time, to play in the gallery continuously for the duration of *True Stories*. The others all have some basis in the biographical and autobiographical, although many are also pegged to the social, political and historical. All of the works are art works, and since the emphasis is on the emerging and the international, several are by artists not as familiar here as they might be or as they are on the international art circuits of Europe and Asia.

Presentation of these films was another concern since the program is exceptionally long and time is always a consideration in video works, although, with the exception of Jan Tichy's venture, not as long as, say, Christian Marclay's extraordinary 24-hour video, *The Clock*. Because of that, and because I dislike headphones that tether you to a small monitor, the distraction of other videos with their flickering images and small, dark, claustrophobic rooms, I thought these films might be better seen in a simulated theater, a kind of multiplex with comfortable seating, and a schedule. The screen is large and the theater experience can be a much stronger one, focusing the viewers on the film. I also hope it encourages viewers to return, as if in a multiplex.

How it Feels, 1996, an early video of Tracey Emin (b. 1963, Croydon; based in London) and the earliest in the show by an artist who has been a household name since the advent of the Young British Artists, is a first-person recounting of a bungled abortion that remains remarkably potent, perhaps even more so in the context of today's barrage of reality shows and other confessional, genres. Told unflinchingly, in intimate,



Amy Grappell, *Quadrangle*, 2009

devastating, solipsistic detail and with what appears to be emotional honesty—anger, callousness, love, loss, pain—she critically assesses her own feelings. Emin’s audacity stands out but what is ultimately memorable is her vulnerability and delicacy, her life, often described as an ongoing performance piece, so inextricably linked to her art that it’s impossible to separate them.

Amy Grappell’s (b. 1962, Brooklyn; based in Austin and Los Angeles) film, *Quadrangle*, 2009, is more formally innovative, using the documentary as a foundation but making it into something more cinematically intriguing, with its incorporation of home videos, photographs and split screens. It also centers on the autobiographical/biographical, in this instance, the life of her parents and their four-way affair with another couple that began in 1969. Grappell’s engrossing film was conceived as an art work, a video installation with a museum context in mind, her side-by-side recent interviews of her parents not arbitrary but a way to present their divergent points of view in a judiciously controlled, consecutive manner, giving them equal time to present their analysis of the past for our judgment.

Another family chronicle, the last of a three-generation series of videos that discusses identity, race and religion in Israel from the perspective of a Palestinian-Christian (a minority within a minority) is *(Sa)Mira*, 2009, although there is also a Jewish side



Dor Guez, *(Sa)Mira*, 2009

to the family. Samira is a blonde, Hebrew University student who works part time as a waitress in Jerusalem's upscale German Colony, speaks perfect Hebrew and could easily be mistaken for Jewish. Prompted by Dor Guez, (b. 1980, Jerusalem; based in Tel Aviv-Jaffa), the videographer and her cousin, she tells him, nonchalantly at first, that she has been asked to shorten her name to Mira, so customers will not know she is an Arab. The filming is simple, low-intensity at first but cumulatively more fraught, the camera quietly but relentlessly probing, intrusive, the artlessness of the interview underscored by adding a re-take, as if it were a work in progress, unresolved, as is life in Israel.

Artist Karl Haendel (b. 1976, New York; based in Los Angeles) made *Questions For My Father*, 2011, with filmmaker Petter Ringbom (b. Sweden; based in New York), another project that deals with family relationships. Both Haendel and Ringbom make repeat appearances in the film, as do several male friends, following one another in brisk succession in well-lighted close-ups with the clarity of a fashion shoot. Looking directly into the camera, they ask a series of succinct questions, from the irreverent to the searching, intended for their fathers. These questions hover in the air, unanswered but reverberant: "Were you proud of me?"; "Was I a mistake?"; "Did you cheat on your wives?"; that are as much portraits of the sons as they are those of the absent fathers.

Simon Leung (b. 1964, Hong Kong; based in Los Angeles) refers to *War After War* (2011) as a documentary, although a meticulously staged and complex one. It is a 90-minute video starring Warren Niesłuchowski who is also its subject. A Polish refugee born in a displaced persons' camp in Germany, an immigrant, a deserter from the army, art world habitu e and legend, dandy, and perhaps existential anti-hero, he



Karl Kaendel and Petter Ringbom, *Questions For My Father*, 2011



Simon Leung, *War After War*, 2011

is constantly sighted at gallery and museum openings, dinners, parties and other art events around the world. On a first name basis with almost everyone in the art world, the reverse is also true. Sometimes called a professional guest or a “cosmopolitan nomad,” the multi-lingual Niesluchowski has been, intermittently, a curator, editor, writer and translator and for the past decade and more, without a permanent home. Leung’s *War After War* is acutely observed, both a generous homage and encompassing philosophical meditation—with flashes of humor—about wanderers, exiles, boundaries,



Stefanos Tsivopoulos, *Untitled (The Remake)*, 2007

guests, hosts, the contingencies and conditions of hospitality and finally, tolerance for the presence of each other.

The Man, 2010, by performance artist, actor, painter, videographer, and musician Ragnar Kjartansson (b.1976, Reykjavík; based in Reykjavík), a filmic biography of sorts of a much different order than Leung's, is about blues legend Pinetop Perkins (1913-2011) who is playing the piano outside an abandoned farm beneath a brilliantly blue Texas sky. Perkins, a prodigious, enthusiastic showman, sings, jokes, smokes, and tosses out bawdy asides. Old, frail, his mind wandering at times, Perkins repeats his repertoire over and over again in a kind of open-ended loop that corresponds to the looping of the video, Kjartansson's signature aesthetic of repetition and perhaps to some kind of immortality. A meditation and tribute more than a narrative, the artist once again opens up a vista into the nostalgic, reprising an era for the moment.

The early videos of Fikret Atay (b. 1976 in Batman, Turkey; based in Paris), his breakthrough works, were vignettes of life in Batman, a Kurdish city near the border between Turkey and Iraq, near the oil fields and refineries established in the 1950s, a turbulent, terrorist hotbed. Made a year after the invasion of Iraq by the United States, Atay, using a hand-held camera and natural light in *Tinica* (2004), films a solitary teenager on a littered hill overlooking a generic housing project. Picking through the refuse, he cobbles together a makeshift drum set from soda cans and plastic bottles and plays it—to himself. He then kicks it all down the steep hill, in rage, frustration, or indifference. Atay's uninflected style lends an authenticity to the images, as does his insistence on the specificities of Batman to highlight community, its continuities and disruptions, and the breach between the promises and failures of globalization.



Fahed Halabi and Ala Farhat, *Working Day*, 2009



Doug Fishbone, *Untitled (Hypno Project)*, 2009



Wang Qingsong, *Iron Man*, 2008

Iron Man (2008), featuring the artist Wang Qingsong (b. 1966; Daqing, Heilongjiang Province; based in Beijing) is the first of a provocative trilogy that tests the viewer's tolerance for violence, one thread that runs through contemporary Chinese art. Part choreographed endurance performance, part documentation, it is understandably the shortest video in the exhibition. Wang submits without protest as his hair is yanked out of his head, his face pounded into a bloodied mass by fists. A socio-political metaphor for the rapid, disruptive social changes that have accompanied China's rise to world prominence, the battered man laughs defiantly in the end, transforming brutality into the triumph of perseverance.



Fikret Atay, *Tinica*, 2004

Fahed Halabi (b. 1970, Majdal Shams; based in Paris) and Ala Farhat (b. 1977, Buka'ata; based in Chicago), both Syrian artists born in nearby Druze villages in the Golan Heights, collaborated on *Working Day* (2009). The video is based on their experiences as construction workers and describes a day at the site of the Georgian Synagogue in Ashdod that, ironically, has a façade embellished with Greco-Roman columns and a Star of David. A young worker of Gazan-Palestinian origin talks about the intricate politics of identity that characterizes his relationships with his Jewish friends, his Palestinian friends in Israel, and his childhood friends in Gaza, saying: "If I were in Gaza now... I believe that there would only be a picture of me on the wall—a shahid (martyr)." He identifies with ordinary, innocent people in both Sderot, Israel and in Gaza, among them friends killed in the recent war in Gaza but he speaks with a fatalism, a matter-of-fact tone that is chilling.

Untitled (The Remake), 2008, by Stefanos Tsivopoulos (b. 1973, Prague; based in Athens and Amsterdam) focuses on history as envisioned through a camera lens, a self-reflexive documentary of shifting time frames and parallel narratives. *Untitled (The Remake)* is an amalgam of black and white archival footage that includes huge crowds witnessing a military parade at the Kalimarmaro Stadium in Athens when Greece was ruled by Georgios Papadopoulos' military junta. Contrasted with re-enacted scenes in color depicting the ERT TV news studio as it would have looked, the camera silently glides over obsolete projectors, tape recorders, monitors, editing tables, dollies and other mechanical equipment as if they were museum objects or precious memento

mori, before the studio comes alive, bustling with technicians, staff and actors. Captured by the same equipment that would have been used in 1967, Tsvopoulos claims that you come face to face with history itself when you do so.

Doug Fishbone (b. 1969, New York; based in London), a filmmaker and performance artist, recorded a group of 12 people, all of whom had been hypnotized by a professional stage hypnotist for *Untitled (Hypno Project)*, 2009 conceived as an immersive, split screen installation that repeated the perceptual loop of the original experiment. As the subjects watched a video work he had made, unaware of the embedded subliminal images and other prompts, each of them was given specific suggestions while in a trance, instructing them to respond in particular ways to the various visual and aural cues. They were then awakened and filmed as they watched the video. Their responses were remarkable, he said. Fishbone, using images from mass media, jokes and philosophical concepts, explores information dissemination and how it is manipulated, his larger subject the psychology and physiology of perception. He asks a range of questions about manipulation and behavioral conditioning and the provisionality of perception and comprehension. "How natural are our responses? How predisposed are we to respond in certain ways, and how easily can our perceptions and reactions be influenced by forces beyond our conscious awareness?"

Project Cabrini Green, 2011 (feed), is an approximately 30-day single channel video by Jan Tichy (b. 1974, Prague; based in Chicago). A light and installation artist interested in the complex narratives of the architectural in urban spaces, the artist conceived the video as part of his larger *Project Cabrini Green*, a community-based enterprise involving over 200 people. The live feed, arguably the purest, most neutral of records—and the exemplary example of a documentary in this exhibition—observed the 4-week demolition of the last high-density, high-rise building of the troubled Cabrini-Green housing project (1230 N. Burling Street, Chicago) that began on March 28, 2011. The building was lit with 134 LED lights, one per apartment, visible in the evenings during the one-month demolition period. The lights were programmed to create unique patterns that translate sound into light, based on texts and poems about their Cabrini Green experiences written by young students in the special workshops provided for them. Tichy installed the steel ammo boxes that encased the LEDs into the empty apartments before the dismantling, the lights going out one by one, destroyed as the building gradually came down although he eventually retrieved some of them from the debris.

Biographies

Lilly Wei is a New York-based independent curator, essayist and critic who writes regularly for *Art in America*. Wei is a contributing editor at *ARTnews* and formerly a contributing editor at *Art Asia Pacific*. She writes for several other publications here and abroad, frequently reporting on international biennials. In addition, she has authored many exhibition catalogues and brochures on contemporary art. The curator of a number of exhibitions in the United States, Europe and Asia, she is currently developing an exhibition of contemporary Israeli photographers and video artists for the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York. She lectures on critical and curatorial practices, serves on several advisory committees and is a member of many review panels. Additionally, she sits on the board of several art institutions and organizations. Wei was born in Chengdu, China and has an M. A. in art history from Columbia University.

Fikret Atay was born in 1976 in Batman, Turkey, a small Kurdish city close to the Iraqi border, and currently lives in Paris. Atay has had solo exhibitions at the Arter, Istanbul; Bonner Kunstverein, Germany; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf; and the Vienna Kunsthalle. His work has been included in group exhibitions at the Tate Modern, London; New Museum, New York; and in several biennial exhibitions worldwide.

Tracey Emin was born in 1963 in Croydon, UK and is a British artist of English and Turkish descent. She was part of a group known as the YBAs (Young British Artists) and in 1997, she established herself with her piece *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* (1963-1995). She was a Turner Prize nominee in 1999 and was invited to join the Royal Academy of Arts in 2007, the same year she represented Britain at the Venice Biennale. Her first major retrospective, *20 Years*, debuted in Edinburgh in 2008, and toured Europe until 2009.

Doug Fishbone is an American artist living and working in London. Selected solo exhibitions include Tate Britain, London, and *30,000 Bananas* in Trafalgar Square. His work was shown at the Busan Biennale, South Korea; and at the Hayward Gallery, London. He performs regularly at both international and UK venues, including appearances at London's ICA and Southbank Centre. His most recent project *Elmina* had its world premiere at Tate Britain in 2010 and is currently on view at the ZKM Karlsruhe, Germany.

Amy Grappell was born in Brooklyn, New York and currently lives and works in Austin, TX. Her recent film *Quadrangle* was initially conceived as a video installation and selected for the *New American Talent* in Austin in 2009. As a film, it premiered at Sundance in 2010, winning an honorable mention jury prize, and won both Best Documentary Short and the Wholphin Best Short Film award at SXSW (2010). Grappell is currently working on a narrative screenplay based on the group marriage story.

Dor Guez is a Jerusalem-born artist working in photography and video. He currently lives and works in Tel Aviv. Guez's personal history, as a scion of Palestinian-Christian and Tunisian-Jewish parents, plays an important role in his artistic practice. Guez's work has been the subject of several solo exhibitions, recently at Petach Tikva Museum, Israel; Jewish Museum, New York; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; Tel Aviv Museum of Art; and Beursschouwburg, Brussels.

Karl Haendel was born in New York, and lives and works in Los Angeles. His photorealistic graphite drawings reproduce images culled from the world of mass media and everyday objects, calling into question art world conceptions of originality, production, and reproduction. His work was the subject of a solo exhibition at LA MOCA, and has also been included in group exhibitions such as P.S.1, New York; Orange County Museum of Art; the Whitney Biennial (2006), MoMA, New York, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art and Prospect.2, New Orleans (2011). Swedish filmmaker **Petter Ringbom** graduated from Cooper Union School of Art. He has taught at Parsons School of Design and NYU, and served on the board of the American Institute of Graphic

Arts. His film *May Fly* premiered at Stockholm International Film Festival and his first feature documentary *The Russian Winter* will be released in 2012.

Fahed Halabi was born in Majdal Shams, a village in the Golan Heights in Israel, and currently lives and works in Paris. Solo exhibitions in venues such as Dear Noga Art Window and Hamidraha Gallery in Tel Aviv, Fateh Modarris Art Center in Majdal Shams in the Golan Heights, as well as in exhibition spaces in Bilbao & Guernica, Spain. His works have also been displayed in various group exhibitions worldwide, at institutions such as geh8 gallery, Dresden; Memoire de l'Avenir Gallery, Paris; The Herzliya Museum, The Jaffa Museum, and The Gefen House, Haifa. **Ala Farhat** was born in Buka'ata, a village in the Golan Heights in Israel. He currently lives and works in Chicago. His work was shown in art centers throughout the Golan Heights and in the exhibition *Men Under the Sun* at the Herzliya Museum, Israel, in 2009. Farhat founded the Gadal Art Center in Buka'ata in 2005.

Ragnar Kjartansson was born in Reykjavik, Iceland, where he lives and works. He has been the subject of numerous solo and group exhibitions, most recently at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Germany; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; BAWAG Contemporary, Vienna, Austria; and Hafnarborg, Hafnarfjörður, Iceland. In 2009, he was the youngest artist to represent Iceland at the Venice Biennale's International Art Exhibition.

Simon Leung was born in Hong Kong. He has participated in the Guangzhou Triennial (2008), the Luleå Summer Biennial (2005), the Venice Biennale (2003), the Whitney Biennial (1993), and has also exhibited at MoMA, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; Generali Foundation, Vienna; 1a Space, Hong Kong; NGBK, Berlin; and Sala Mendoza, Caracas. In 2008, he received a Guggenheim fellowship and the Art Journal Award for his essay, *The Look of Law*.

Jan Tichy was born in Prague, Czech Republic, and lives and works in Chicago. He works at the intersection of video, sculpture, architecture, sound and photography; many of his works combine these elements. Tichy has had one-person exhibitions at Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv. Upcoming shows and events include laboral - Centro de Arte y Creacion Industrial, Gijón, Spain; The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford; and the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Stefanos Tsvopoulos was born in Prague and is a Greek artist living between Amsterdam and Athens. He is the recipient of the Golden Cube Award for best video installation at the 25th Kasseler Documentary Film Festival in Kassel, Germany. Recent solo shows include Heidelberg Kunstverein, Germany; Smart Project Space, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Art Forum Berlin, Germany. His work was recently included in group exhibitions at Witte de With, Rotterdam, the Netherlands; Centre Pompidou, Paris, France; and BFI Southbank, London, UK.

Wang Qingsong was born in Daqing, China, and lives and works in Beijing. Qingsong is a photography and video artist who has exhibited internationally at such venues as the Sydney Biennale, Australia; the Gwangju Biennale, China; Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; National Gallery of Canada. He recently had solo exhibitions at the International Center of Photography, New York; Kunsthalle Nexus, Saalfelden, Austria; and Baltic Contemporary Art Center, Gateshead, UK.

All videos and images courtesy the artists and galleries Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv; Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago/New York; Harris Lieberman, New York; Luhring Augustine, New York; Pekin Fine Arts, Beijing; and Prometeogallery, Milan.



Ragnar Kjartansson, *The Man*, 2010

Program

Shorts (main screen)

Videos screen on a loop and begin every 2 hours at: 10am, 12pm, 2pm, 4pm

Tracey Emin, *How it Feels*, 1996 (22:33 min.)

Amy Grappell, *Quadrangle*, 2009 (17 min.)

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

Karl Haendel and Petter Ringbom, *Questions For My Father*, 2011 (11:17 min.)

Fikret Atay, *Tinica*, 2004 (7:32 min.)

Wang Qingsong, *Iron Man*, 2008 (4 min.)

Fahed Halabi and Ala Farhat, *Working Day*, 2009 (16 min.)

Stefanos Tsivopoulos, *Untitled (The Remake)*, 2007 (14 min.)

Doug Fishbone, *Untitled (Hypno Project)*, 2009 (12:55 min.)

Feature length (back room)

Simon Leung, *War After War*, 2011 (90 min.)

10am, 1pm, 4pm

Ragnar Kjartansson, *The Man*, 2010 (49 min.)

12pm, 3pm

Real time (main space)

Jan Tichy, *Project Cabrini Green*, 2011 (30 days)

True Stories

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Friday, February 3, 5:30–7:30pm



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