

**Walking through
Baghdad
with a Buster
Keaton Face**

FOUND IN TRANSLATION – Thomas Galler's treatment of sought and found objects

Madeleine Schuppli

Thomas Galler takes a conceptual approach in his wide-ranging and versatile oeuvre. His artistic production, which includes video works, objects, installations and photographs, is based on the use of existing materials, such as text, image, film or sound documents. Galler's works are created through a multi-stage process of searching, analysing, selecting and re-contextualising the chosen material. When an object or a document is transplanted from the everyday order of things to the realm of art defined by its own laws, there is a shift in meaning. "Thomas Galler works with 'found objects'" is what is always said about his work. Yet it is important to put the term into perspective, as this is not about things that the artist happens to find effortlessly, like an umbrella lost on a train. The objects are more in the nature of "sought objects", in other words, the findings of an active search, the results of study and research. The artist is guided by specific questions and concerns, and looks for documents that represent his work-related themes. The essence of Galler's work draws on wide-ranging global issues. His personal environment is rarely the source of his work, which has its origins in vastly different parts of the world and is usually linked to contemporary or historical flashpoints around the globe: the Red Army Faction (RAF), African child soldiers, Iraq, the Middle East, Vietnam or the Second World War. The artist is widely travelled and has spent time working in Paris, New York and Cairo. These experiences are reflected in his work OHNE TITEL (UNTITLED, 2008), for example, a wall relief made of Egyptian military berets.¹ Therefore, to some extent, the works are definitely inspired by *indirect* experiences, but Galler's *direct* experiences as a media consumer play a more significant role. In this connection, he is an out-and-out product of his time, a representative of the medialised modern era.

The acquisition of images from the media involves a twofold transfer: from reality to portrayal, and from portrayal to work of art. That there is a crucial shift during the first transfer itself is well known – at least since Jean Baudrillard introduced the term "simulation".² Yet we all know how difficult it is to draw a clear separation between reality and media portrayal. The second transfer – from the media image to the work of art – is characterised by the shift in context. Not only are the documents now regarded differently, but this transfer also paves the way for a more differentiated reception. Galler usually makes only marginal changes to the image or text documents with which he works. The process of re-reading his "sought objects" is facilitated primarily by specific comparisons or forms of presentation. For the work titled PERSONA (2009), for instance, Galler uses 20 press and fashion photographs fea-

turing masked people. The artist has combined the photographs into a diptych and created comparisons between fashion and news reportage photographs. The resultant visual analogies are as surprising as the contextual contrasts are extreme.

One of the strengths of Thomas Galler's work – and one that also guards it against any didactic elements – is keeping an open mind about the motives and themes. He maintains a certain ambivalence, leaving us to ask whether it is fascination or revulsion that inspires the artist to put together a collection of images of weapons and display them as WEAPONS COLLECTION (2002–2008). Given the explosive nature of the themes that Galler addresses, it is this very ambiguity that leaves him exposed. Yet it would amount to a trivialisation of the human being in general if we were to blank out only the unbearable personal and social contrasts and paradoxes. An individual often reacts to the depiction of violence with both fascination and revulsion. Susan Sontag presented what is probably the best-known analysis of this mechanism in her book REGARDING THE PAIN OF OTHERS, in which she describes how the depiction of atrocity appeals to us, an appeal that defines us as human beings, and is yet disdained by us.³

Thomas Galler works not just with media products but also with everyday objects. For example, he places a bottle of Château Musar, a fine Lebanese wine, in a showcase and declares it an exhibit. The work is a ready-made because the bottle of red wine is displayed as is. In contrast to the ready-made of the historical avant-garde dominated by questions inherent to art, Galler wants us to be able to see and experience the hidden side of everyday objects. The difference in meaning between the everyday object and the work of art – even if there is no physical distinction – is explained by the philosopher Jacques Rancière by drawing a differentiation between the sensory and the sensual: the sensory aspect of the everyday object stands for pure information or for a stimulus produced by one of the senses. The sensual, the work of art, on the other hand, appeals to the senses in a way that also carries a meaning combined with a meaning, it is what is visible, something that is articulated, interpreted or evaluated.⁴

This is a useful thought when reflecting on Galler's CHATEAU MUSAR 1975 (2005). The quality of a wine depends on its region of origin and its vintage. The wine connoisseur will therefore first turn his attention to these details. It is likewise crucial to combine these two properties for a contextual reading of Thomas Galler's work: Château Musar is a well-known Lebanese vineyard and 1975 was when civil war broke out in Lebanon. The choice of theme also signifies the relation between the individual and the collective experience of the world, as the Lebanese war was one of the first political global events that Galler consciously perceived as a child. As a repository of memory, CHATEAU MUSAR 1975 extends beyond itself to other levels of meaning. At a symbolic level, a link can be established to Christian tradition: at the Last Supper, wine represents the blood of Christ. For its part, the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon was – at least outwardly – religiously motivated.

In conclusion, I would like to discuss Galler's INVADER (2009), a work that combines different levels of his artistic strategy. The video was made for an exhibition at the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Switzerland. INVADER features a walk of about 60 minutes through the collection rooms on the upper floor of the gallery that houses the museum's classical art collection. The collection spans the landscape paintings of an artist like Caspar Wolf from the late 18th century to Alberto Giacometti's work from the 1950s. Galler recorded his tour through the collection at night, in a museum devoid of people. The individual paintings can be seen in dark rooms thanks to a camera equipped with an infrared light. Galler walks very slowly through the rooms. The camera dwells momentarily on the individual paintings and sculptures that appear like ghosts in the seemingly endless museum halls at night. The exhibits are literally only shadows of themselves, yet remain identifiable. A special filming technique drains the colour from the works of art, as the video image is almost black and white, with a slight greenish tinge. INVADER makes it possible for us to take a second, fresh look at all that is familiar. Before or after visiting Galler's exhibition at the Kunsthaus, one can walk through the display rooms that have been filmed and experience them as usual by daylight. INVADER thus reflects this experience. Not only does Galler prompt us to re-read these works that bear testimony to art history, but he also portrays this cultural legacy in all its fragility. Even a staged situation in which one pays a visit at night to Ferdinand Hodler and his contemporaries provokes misgivings about a break-in, about an unauthorised visit at the wrong time, when the paintings wait patiently, unprotected, in the deserted museum. The title of the work plays on the situation of breaking in and makes reference to the military term "invasion". The filming technique can also be traced back to this context because the infrared camera was developed originally for military purposes. We recall the images from more recent history of the US military forcing its way into empty museums in Iraq that were circulated by the media. At the same time, however, vastly different cinematic memories are cautiously evoked – be they from the tradition of art theft films or from that of the thriller in general. There is virtually nothing that panders more to our inner fears than a journey with a camera through a dark room. It is interesting that even in INVADER, Thomas Galler manages to leave the situation ambivalent in that he does not identify the invader but instead assigns this role to us as observers. The artist, the anonymous invader, and the observer share absolutely identical views.

- 1 *Ohne Titel #1*, 2007, 10 Egyptian berets, 150×120 cm.
Collection of the Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau.
- 2 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1995.
- 3 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2003.
- 4 Jacques Rancière, *Ist die Kunst widerständig?*
Merve Verlag, Berlin, 2008.

IN CONVERSATION WITH THOMAS GALLER

Hilde Teerlinck

Hilde Teerlinck When I first saw your work, it appealed to me immediately, as it analyses and reflects on all aspects of cinema and film-making from a highly personal angle. Subjects such as “stardom” and “celebrity”, or the illusion/disillusion of the world of the moving image, find subtle expression. The manner in which you handle text, soundtracks and references reminds me of HOLLYWOOD/BABYLON, the book by Kenneth Anger, which is now considered a classic. Are you inspired primarily by American film history or are there other authors, from Europe, Russia or Asia, who have influenced your most recent works?

Thomas Galler The moving image was the trigger for these earlier works. There was this key moment during a film festival in the early 1990s when I saw films by Bruce Conner, Kenneth Anger, Ernie Gehr and Ken Jacobs as part of a retrospective. These found-footage classics made a deep impression on me and I realised that apart from traditional narrative story cinema, cinematic material can also be subject to subversive film treatment. Reflections on the fundamentals of the medium, the break with convention in the montage, the dismantling of the cinematic syntax, and the pursuit of political motives and goals define the poetic power of this film genre. It was in this context that I came across HOLLYWOOD/BABYLON (1965), adopted the title, and used it for one of my first exhibitions. The pieces on display worked with references to popular cinema. In terms of content, I was less interested in the East-West question or the discourse on popular culture versus high culture. Instead, the questions that cropped up addressed the illusions put before us by the film industry:

What is fiction? What is reality? How is fiction reflected in reality and how is real life negotiated in fiction? The works that emerged are situated in a kind of in-between area, in a zone with trapdoors and secret corridors. DENNIS H. (2001) is a video work in which I pretended that the protagonist was Dennis Hopper because the two men shared physical similarities. I obtained the footage from a colleague. They were private recordings in which her father can be seen with the family in an Alpine setting. I combined this material with the final sequence and the credits in Dennis Hopper’s EASY RIDER (1969) to create a small resurrection story. For WAR HISTORY (2007), I used typology as a criterion and extracted all the film titles containing the term “war” from the imdb.com database and from HALLYWELL’S FILM GUIDE. These were then combined to form lines of text. In its detail, the text not only highlights the history of war but also reflects a history of cinema and the specific manner in which it has dealt with war.

Hilde Teerlinck For many of your works you need as source material found footage that is rich in history: objects, images, films – forgotten materials that can be interpreted afresh and given a new lease of life because of your contextualisation.

Thomas Galler Yes. Or it is a criticism of the way in which specific content is represented. Acquired materials offer me first and foremost the possibility of dealing with a media-based environment. I believe that such media products are decisive in shaping individual perception. In some way, my works have already been created in these found things. Often all it needs is a minor structural intervention for the original statement to take on a different tone. The original material remains clear, tangible, and therefore also assailable.

Hilde Teerlinck Are you a translator who conveys an original message in a new form? Or do you see yourself more as a manipulator who assumes a more complex role in that he adds information and new conceptual content to the source material?

Thomas Galler I am happy to take on both roles depending on the potential of the material that I have before me. If I assemble footage, as I did for *INCHES* (2005), where I took footage from the war film *THE THIN RED LINE* (1998) by Terence Malick and combined it with a monologue from the film *ANY GIVEN SUNDAY* (1999) by Oliver Stone, this is both translation and manipulation, which relentlessly forces the original material into a self-referential conflict.

Hilde Teerlinck In the work *WEEK END* (2008), you adopt a similar strategy in that you download pictures from the Internet that were taken by US soldiers in Afghanistan and in Iraq during their free time and then posted on YouTube.

Thomas Galler The strategies are the same, but the source material is at a different level. There is the real life, shot illegally by American soldiers with their mobile phones and digital cameras. YouTube, as a platform for free expression, is an option for the soldiers, particularly against the background of the censorship imposed on military matters. The first informal collection led me to concentrate on recreation in the context of the war mission, as I learned nothing from the news about this aspect of a soldier's everyday life. As I studied it more closely, the material, in its abundance, became more and more interesting. It became a kind of mirror, not in the morally judgemental sense, but in that it shows how the lives of these young men lie somewhere between fiction and reality. Hip-hop culture has a strong presence in the military context too, and is the actual leitmotif of this work. It is reflected in poses, gestures and clothing, as also in the substantive aspects of actions. *WEEK END* starts with the sentence: "Hey, man, we're doing this... this shit is real!", a rap song, highly critical of the American occupation of Iraq, sung by a soldier. Assembled parallel to this is a choreographed four-person GI ensemble dancing in the corridor of a Container Living Unit.

Hilde Teerlinck In your work, the concept of power occupies a central position: violence, terrorism, weapons and war. Often there is this link to a kind of “sexiness”: guerrilla girls are dangerous and – as with virtually any weapon-carrying woman – are also considered attractive. What is your view as a man of this inherently fatal combination?

Thomas Galler There is a 1970s directive for the police force governing direct confrontation with terrorists: Shoot the women first! The authors of this policy for anti-terror units based their premise on a remarkable image of women: in existential situations, women are less hesitant, have stronger characters, and are more assertive.

The first consciously perceived images in this context that I remember are the wanted posters at police booths for members of the Red Army Faction; on television, the Schleyer kidnapping and the civil war in Lebanon. I recall what my mother said about the RAF: “. . . so many women . . . and how young and beautiful they are.”

Meinhof, Baader and Ensslin were to be seen recently as fictitious figures in a feature film playing at the cinema; fashion photos of models with balaclavas; a picture of Patty Hearst at a bank robbery; the young Leila Khaled laughing, a Kalashnikov in her hand; Prada Meinhof; Brigitte Mohnhaupt's portrait on a T-shirt made by Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich: a world of politically charged images starts to condense, abandons the timeline. And I am reminded of a photograph of my father in autumn 1977, on the beach at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, in jeans, checked shirt, with dark sunglasses and long hair. We children were agreed at the time: this is what terrorists looked like.

Today, we live in something of a formalised retro culture. Every couple of years, trends and images from the last 40 or 50 years are produced, given new connotations, superficially transformed and filled with any content that one fancies. I am thinking of the number of teenagers who wear the Palestinian scarf, the keffiyeh, as a fashion accessory. At the airport in Barcelona, I saw wanted pictures of very young ETA terrorists, a 16- or 17-year-old girl with pierced lips and a Che Guevara T-shirt, a boy of around the same age with blonde hair, grunge look, a bit like Kurt Cobain.

There is a photograph in my studio that falls somewhere between feminine attractiveness and danger. This composition is the ironical reinterpretation of an established type of image usually used by men. The lady is armed with a Beretta, her blood-red lips are partly open, and she calls herself Lydia Lunch.

VICTIME DE LA MODE was the name of an exhibition that you curated a while ago where you dealt with these questions. What is your experience as a curator in dealing with these issues?

Hilde Teerlinck For instance, I showed ANTI-DOG (2000–2006), the video made by the Dutch-Spanish artist Alicia Framis. This consists of video recordings of various performances showing models in clothes made of a material that is normally used by dog trainers who work for the police. The material was printed with political messages directed against public and domestic violence. These performances were conducted at highly symbolic venues, such as the entrance for fans to the Amsterdam ArenA, home of Ajax. This is without doubt a perfect reflection of the ambivalent relationship between attraction and revulsion – presented with a “feminine touch”.

In FRAC Nord-Pas-de-Calais, I curated an exhibition titled TROUBLE GIRLS (2007). For this we acquired the work PATRICIA HEARST, A THRU Z (1990) by Dennis Adams. It comprises 26 portraits of Patty Hearst: pictures of her past as daughter and heir of the famous American media mogul Randolph Hearst; as hostage, kidnapped by a revolutionary, anti-capitalist group; as terrorist, posing under the name “Tania” written above to justify her involvement in violent attacks; as prisoner, following her arrest; at the court; before her return to a bourgeois life with marriage. This work highlights quite brilliantly the extent to which we are influenced by the mass media and the press. I think a large part of your work is based on this complex relationship between reality and the media.

Thomas Galler Yes, this is an extremely important aspect, also in private life. We are constructs of our social environment: I am what my acquaintances, friends, family, the outside world project onto me. I am convinced that media products are that much crasser: they create images that are anchored in a collective memory. What remains of Patty Hearst is a reproduction in a magazine, a picture that one can copy and duplicate. I recently downloaded pictures of the late Heath Ledger from the Net, a young Australian actor with a cult status. People repeatedly pointed to a striking similarity between me and Ledger. That aroused my interest in him and led to a photographic series that I call COMPENSATION PORTRAITS. In this context, it is not Ledger’s fame that interests me or the mundane matter of our physical similarity. Of far greater importance is the fact that this has fuelled a debate: How is life staged? What remains in the public domain? How is a personality constructed? What is left out consciously or subconsciously? We are dealing with a hybrid puzzle, with a person with several codes. Ultimately, one cannot quite fathom this individual but can only imagine what he is like. A person exists because there are certain images of him that exist.

Heath Ledger is a multifaceted figure and a surrogate for me, one whom I play back as a modified model in the public arena. In 1942, Marcel Duchamp, as publisher of the catalogue for the exhibition FIRST PAPERS OF SURREALISM in New York, asked the participating artists to choose a picture of somebody else – a compensation portrait – to represent themselves. This was an ironical political commentary.

Most of the artists were immigrants and had experienced the adversities of the war and entry into the United States. Duchamp himself chose the portrait of an older woman, wasted and broken, marked by the economic depression of the 1930s.

In PERSONA (2009), I dealt with the opposite, namely the act of concealing identity. I collected photographs of people wearing a balaclava. The balaclava is a storm mask that made its first appearance in the 19th century, during the Crimean War, and helped protect British troops stationed in a place called Balaclava against the cold. The mask then became familiar primarily because of the IRA. It is still worn today, for instance, by anarchists in a street fight, by the police themselves, and by members of organisations such as Hamas and Hezbollah in the Middle East. Having had such a strong presence in recent political reporting, today the balaclava appears as a fashion accessory. There are characters in computer games that wear this mask. PERSONA is a large series in which pictures from different contexts – documentary, fiction and virtual – are placed side by side.

Hilde Teerlinck Your work WAR IS OVER (2004) is another excellent example of this kind of convergence.

Thomas Galler WAR IS OVER is a ready-made, a page from the *New York Village Voice*. It is not much more than a hand movement; with thumb and index finger I reach for a bunch of newspapers and pull out a page from the last edition of December 2004. Yoko Ono and John Lennon's peace advertisement with the words "War is Over" on page 4 goes together with the escort advertisements printed on page 133. And so things come together that do not in fact belong together and yet, in this form, are no longer separable: art and real life come face to face, an activism of the 1960s that keeps reproducing itself in direct and stark contrast to the modern business of bodies for sale. These are for me the unrealised utopias of the 1968 generation.

Hilde Teerlinck WHITEHOUSE (2008) is a work that addresses a virtual reality. The observer, the visitor, is taken along on an adventurous "walk on the wild side" to the secret and high-security rooms in the White House in Washington D.C. The soundtrack for this imaginary trip is based on the emblematic song by the post-industrial band called Whitehouse.

Thomas Galler WHITEHOUSE combines different elements with a common denominator that goes beyond the concept. On the one hand, there are panorama shots of various rooms in the White House in Washington D.C. Using IPIX technology, these are 360° panorama photos taken directly from the official website whitehouse.gov, with a monitor recorder. After a 360° rotation, the scene switches to an adjoining room. What interested me at first was the art collection at the

White House and how it is displayed in the different rooms. The China Room, with its cabinets full of presidential porcelain, seems in its fragility to represent the diplomatic relations between the US and the rest of the world. It all looks immaculate. The cut flowers have a freshness beyond compare. Nowhere do you see a book lying on a table or a newspaper near a sofa. It was clear to me that I should do something about this – tidy it up a little in my own way and bring a bit of disorder into the system.

But Whitehouse is also a power electronics band founded by William Bennett in 1980 and known for its extreme audio collages with lyrics that deal with pornography and violence: BIRTHDEATH EXPERIENCE, TOTAL SEX, BUCHENWALD, PSYCHOPATHIA SEXUALIS, to name just some of the titles in their discography. They are the actual protagonists of this genre. The name of the band refers to Mary Whitehouse, a British activist who started to campaign in the 1960s against the collapse of moral values. The installation WHITEHOUSE includes THANK YOUR LUCKY STARS from 1990, produced by Steve Albini, and for some people the “last rock ‘n’ roll record”, as an audio media ready-made, which is played simultaneously in the exhibition room.

Hilde Teerlinck Switzerland is known to the world as a so-called neutral country, something of an atypical and peaceful, idyllic and isolated zone in the heart of Europe. It seems to me that as an artist – in such a specific environment – you very often make statements of international significance and reach that are surprisingly unambiguous in their social criticism and are not exactly disengaged. Could this have something to do with your frequent travel and stays abroad, with grants in Paris, New York, Cairo and Bucharest? Or is it possible in a so-called globalised world today to observe the world from one’s house, while sitting at one’s desk in the office or studio, and maintain the necessary distance?

Thomas Galler Here in Switzerland, one called it being “hemmed in”, a feeling of getting no air and suffocating. If you couldn’t stand it, you left and, in many cases, never came back. The images of some of these people are reproduced on our bank notes. I, too, left, but I always returned. Being between places interests me. I do not need the exoticism of foreign lands to develop my interests, or to be productive. I always try to differentiate between what I see on television in the evening and what I witness on the street the next day. That is the controversy – the two levels, the two realities. As an artist, I can be active between these levels. I can explore a new field, or, even better, several fields, and so open up a field of multiple realities.

Hilde Teerlinck How do you explain your interest in accumulating things and compiling lists: film titles, pictures, terms and concepts? What role does the act of collecting play in your work?

Thomas Galler To place things, objects next to each other, to display pictures, to list titles. For me these are, firstly, unbiased, open displays which usually absorb everything that I add to them. My intention here is to generate interfaces. A practice that does not pass judgement, that allows me to look between the things in order to examine fragments, and to then situate these in new semantic fields.

Hilde Teerlinck One of my favourite works is a text piece with instructions for kamikaze pilots to prepare themselves for suicide attacks. It borders on poetry. Where did you find that? How does it relate to your other works?

Thomas Galler BEFORE THE COLLISION (2008) uses detailed instructions for kamikaze pilots during the Second World War. I found them online. The technical instructions are coupled with psychological support and philosophical reflection in order to free the pilots from their fear of death. I shortened the original text drastically and only four sentences remain as a "poem". The manner in which it is presented makes the work a sculptural element in that it is placed in the room as a stack of 2000 pamphlets. The original instructions are formal, and in terms of content, virtually identical with the instructions used by radical Muslim jihadists in preparing for a suicide attack.

IMAGINE, THERE IS A WAR AND NOBODY TAKES ANY NOTICE—Ostentatious gestures and the circulation of images in the collective imagination

Margrit Tröhler

Like many of his earlier photographic and audiovisual works, Thomas Galler's video installations titled WEEK END (2008) and INCHES (2005) are based on found footage, on "found" image sequences taken from the universally accessible stock of images circulating in our media society. Galler takes these pictures out of their original contexts, combines them anew, and redisplay them in a different environment. Be it trash, junk, antique or an archaeological find, everything can be accommodated in this "musée imaginaire" (Malraux) and then recycled. The found-footage artist fishes his set pieces out of the sea of images stored in the ever-changing and rapidly growing audiovisual archive that defines the collective (inter-subjective) memory images of an era. Stored here are also a diversity of images and sounds from the past, like layers of sediment in which documentary and fictional materials collide, while images of historical events mingle with staged image and sound events.

To work with found footage means to work with images about images and sounds (language, voice, sound, music). For Galler this means essentially recontextualising individual elements and fragments through a collage. Not only does this process analyse and deconstruct the content and its form of expression, but also questions the evidence status of cinematically analogous images. By combining image with sound and images with image sequences, the artist's view and standpoint are inscribed in the collages of audiovisual fragments and in the spaces in between: in the fields of tension, the dynamics, the rhythm. The individual elements, on the other hand, are left untouched by Galler (in other words he does not scratch, colour, burn or distort them like other found-footage artists). And so, as is the case with ready-mades, everyday images lose their actual function, their direct functional value as objects for information or entertainment, while retaining traces of their referentiality. In the context of the museum as a venue for exhibitions, they are foreign bodies, yet those that relate to the world; given their direct or indirect references to historical events and to other images, the dust of (film) history still clings to them. Simultaneously, the new museum environment functions like a cheese cover under which these image-objects begin to sweat; presented on a pedestal (INCHES) or on a stage (WEEK END), taken out of the circulation of images in society and alienated from their primary socio-cultural function, they exude their materiality and mediality. They draw our attention to their forms of expression, to the way in which they have been made, to the quality of the material, and to the spaces in between that are opened up by the collage.

The gestures involved in the process of creation and in the form of address are, therefore, doubly recognisable on the perceptible surface of the final product, yet more as questions than as answers. The authorship oscillates between the often anonymous origin of the images and their recontextualisation by Galler, whose interventions remain subtle, without forcing the interpretation of the image sequences in any obvious direction. In this manner, the set pieces appeal directly to our audiovisual memory, demand to be recognised by us as viewers, or to be associated with other familiar images and sounds. Through the form of the collage, the works call on us to seek meanings as in a rebus, and in turn to form new combinations ourselves.

In other words, what combines WEEK END and INCHES in terms of content, also with reference to the selection and compilation of the material, is the subject of war, or, more precisely, the metaphorical relationship between war and play. These two poles, which are infused with values and emotions, are linked to and confronted with each other via the camouflaged and yet manifest subject of manliness. Even if they explain nothing, but only show display and question the development and impact of the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (WEEK END) or in Guadalcanal (against Japan) in the western Pacific (INCHES), both Galler's works can be read as "anti-war films", as a demonstration of the senselessness of war. Vietnam, too, is indirectly present in WEEK END, be it in the title as a reference to the film of the same name by Jean-Luc Godard (1967) or in the reproduction of a drill scene reminiscent of the one in Stanley Kubrick's FULL METAL JACKET (1987).

The complex relationship between war, play and manliness is, however, more than an issue raised and questioned by the two video installations. Each installation for itself, and in its reference to the other in the exhibition space, focuses on the level of iconography and rhetoric, on formulas of cultural and audiovisual (self-)depiction, and on aspects of their appeal. It thus lays tracks for facilitating the analysis of the signifier, the perceptible, the media-related surface, so to speak; tracks for the analysis of *what* can be seen and heard in the films and on their sets, and *how* this has come to be depicted, as the act and process of creating, designing, conveying and addressing through body, voice, music, image, and sound. The sequences that Galler detaches from the audiovisual archive and recombines are, therefore, much more than simply "documents" referring to an earlier event (as an index or as something that "has been", *ça a été* in the sense of Roland Barthes); one can agree with Michel Foucault (from whom I have also borrowed the archive concept) and speak of "monuments" that testify to patterns of behaviour, viewing habits and their conditionalities, of what can be perceived today, and of what can actually be depicted. And so the monuments also bear witness to things that escape one's attention and perception (from a particular perspective), to those that are deliberately left out, or those that defy depiction, for example, the perspective of the "other" side in an inter-cultural conflict, the daily experiences of ordinary people in a war zone, or during moments when there is no shooting.

WEEK END is about the latter. The video shows the breaks in the fighting as experienced by (very) young American soldiers; for them these moments mean recreation, free time spent on dares, brawls, vandalism, karaoke performances or hip-hop interludes and practising the necessary dance steps. It is striking that all these games that are played to while away the time are performed as self-productions, alone or for a group of other soldiers (and a handful of female soldiers), and are always captured on camera; the postures and gestures put manliness on display, in which potency as a show of power, the propensity to violence, and pent-up sexuality find expression in an uncontrolled and uncontrollable mix. Here we see patterns of social and military group dynamics that shape the bodies and the behaviour of individuals, while transcending the individual who realises these patterns of behaviour. Between imitation and self-invention there is also the rap music scene (besides the drill scene already discussed) in which two black soldiers re-enact the ritual before a boxing match, just like the one with the young white soldier at the beginning who performs a rap song (by Eminem) about war, danger, valour and death, for which he poses directly in front of his (mobile phone-) camera. Like all soldiers' songs (an example being the Beresinalied), this gesture—one that here also adopts the rap pose of the political and cultural minority—oscillates between the lament about suffering, the incantation of solidarity or collective identity, and the over-glorification of the chosen one himself as the saviour of the nation.

Karaoke, too, is part of the culture of recycling that delivers the prototypes (in the mind and from the archive) for the activities indulged in by these young people: climbing into the skin of the other, in which one can “per procura” live out one's wishes, ideas and fears, between a subservient gesture vis-à-vis the prototype and an act of self-assertion in the acquisition of the other person's mask. It is not about parody or satire—karaoke fans are anything but critics of existing norms, and certainly no revolutionaries—but every bit of speech, each gesture, each act becomes a quotation, a drama and a display for others (who, as spectators, are often present in the pictures themselves) to view and for the camera to capture. This camera seems to serve as a prosthesis and helps the subjects express themselves, even if this is always according to a preconceived formula (one could thus say that the camera functions as “self-technology”—this, too, along the lines of Foucault).

With the posting of these pictures on YouTube (which was, in all probability, illegal following the events in Abu Ghraib), the poses that make up the repeatedly adjusted self-portrayal are nonetheless a statement; to speak of an actual message would be an exaggeration. As an act of externalisation and visualisation, the ostentatious gesture of their performance on the Internet draws attention to the hopeless, desolate situation of the young men who seem to be sublimating their loneliness and isolation in this manner. For, just *imagine, there is a war and nobody takes any notice*, or better: *... and nobody is taking any notice of us*, in a clean war—“where the camera says ‘hit’”, as in the first rap song. By “re-staging” and by “re-signifying” found

formulas, be they for patterns of behaviour, images or texts, the self-portrayal of soldiers becomes a performative act, as described by Judith Butler. In the ostentation, in the explicit and expressive acts of exhibiting and displaying, the figurative speech of infinite quoting results in the statement—I am somebody, a statement that enables one to emerge from anonymity and to invent an existence.

In a kind of “mise en abîme”, the endless repetition of the same figure, Thomas Galler’s found footage reinforces the ostentatious gesture of displaying through the process of selecting and reusing images that have been found and circulated worldwide. This gesture is underlined further when the monitor on which the audiovisual collage can be seen is on a stage in the context of the museum. In any case, his ostentatious gesture draws our attention to the creation of the images and the sounds and to their recontextualisation, and suggests the deconstruction of the soldiers’ macho manner to be an artistic and political act. The images do not, however, lose their original ambiguity, or even ambivalence. As members of the audience we are set a memory task, in which we are called upon to take the audiovisual fragments of memory as expressions of, and statements about, the actual world, and put them together as in a puzzle, to interpret the puzzle, and to produce an emotional response. The last mentioned is particularly difficult because, at least by the closing stages of WEEK END, we are reminded of the images of Abu Ghraib: how in the well-known torture scenes, some soldiers are scuffling and crawling on the floor in a narrow corridor, more or less backlit, before—almost as a continuation of what went before, though probably taken from different footage but with the same Arabic music—a soldier on the ground starts spinning around like a stunned insect. Is he practising a hip-hop dance movement, or imitating a mentally challenged person, or is he himself suffering from psychological problems? The expression of helplessness is unsettling, the opinions on the role of perpetrator or victim start to waver, and our emotional response is on uncertain ground...

We are similarly disturbed by INCHES. The visibly weary soldiers—whose pictures Galler detaches from the anti-war film THE THIN RED LINE (1998) by Terrence Malick and then re-assembles—appear increasingly haggard and disillusioned during the course of the film that lasts approximately four minutes. In contrast to this, there is the soundtrack accompanying the chain of images: as a voice-over we hear the stirring “inspirational speech” by Al Pacino from Oliver Stone’s ANY GIVEN SUNDAY (1997). In his role as a coach, he is trying to motivate his football team before a crucial match by evoking the team spirit that should help weld the players together and fire individual ambition. Carried along by the rhythm of emotional music, his raw voice gains increasingly in forcefulness and fervour: “Inch by inch, play by play, till we’re finished. We’re in hell right now, gentlemen, believe me. And we can stay here, get the shit kicked out of us, or we can fight our way back into the light. We can climb out of hell.” It is not just the contrast between the image and the soundtrack but also the countermovement in the development of the image and the

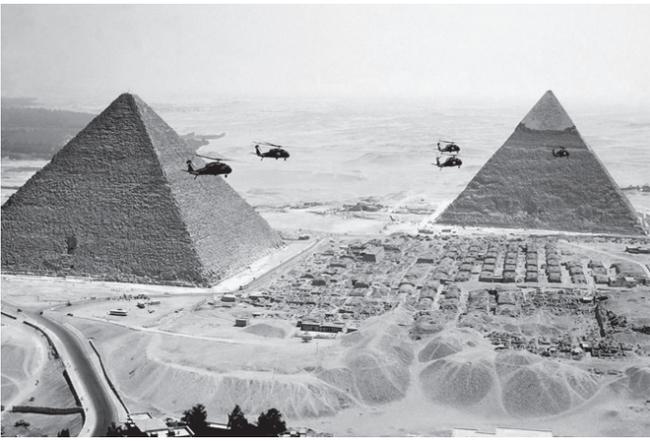
soundtrack that allows the metaphor of the game as a battle and a war to appear as sport (even if constructed as a riddle at first glance, as we get to know the titles of the two recycled films only at the end). Yet this is a question of life and death: “Life is a game of inches, and so is football. Because you need a game. Life or football, the margin for error is so small. I mean, one half a step too late or too early and you don’t quite make it...” The absurdity of the metaphor in turn pillories manliness. Nevertheless, we can hardly avoid the high emotional drama of the scene. It is, however, also disrupted by the black screens that are rhythmically interspersed between the image sequences, as in WEEK END, reducing us to our own views and blueprints of perception. Devoid of the context of the images from Stone’s film, Al Pacino’s speech seems like an incitement to war, using American football to put the collective identity of the team or the troops above everything else: “Either we’re here, now, as a team or we will die as individuals.” Yet nothing can now arouse the enthusiasm of the broken soldiers whose individual portraits we see while listening to these words... Irony and sarcasm begin to surface, opening up a field of tension between image and sound that raises questions about American culture, about a culture that knows how to measure everything (“inch by inch”) and one that appeals to us to boot. This is because the film culture that is currently debating found-footage work has long been part of the global audiovisual archive of the 20th century that dominates our minds today with regard to the images of war.

This audiovisual archive is not a storage place, not a warehouse, but contains the images that are circulating in the collective imagination of our western societies. Included in this kind of memory are the propagandist music videos of the National Guard that used the songs WARRIOR by Kid Rock or AMERICAN SOLDIER by Toby Keith in American cinemas to recruit young soldiers for the (peace) mission in one of the American war zones (it can still be seen on YouTube). Their metaphorical, rhetorical and emotional makeup is not very far removed from that of Al Pacino’s speech. Yet regardless of whether this link between the two installations is available to us as members of the audience, our associations are unencumbered, bouncing back and forth between the two works like a ping-pong ball. Thomas Galler’s ostentatious gesture, the act of exhibiting these images and sounds that are universally accessible today in the museum context, heightens the tension in the relationship between the two works—a tension that is inherent and is brought to the surface by the recontextualisation. It also adds to the confusion, the incomprehension, the feeling of being overwhelmed, and to the questions that crop up vis-à-vis our own images and emotions. Without being in the least didactic, Galler’s art guides us to a kind of media-based historiography that we must all conceive ourselves: a confrontation with history that does not build on the immediate memory of events, but works with images in our memory and with rhetorical and iconographic patterns that have been discovered, because a direct visualisation is not possible, neither of the past nor of the present.









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