

apexart
291 church street new york, ny 10013
t: 212.431.5270
info@apexart.org www.apexart.org

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cover image: Rudolf Steiner, *Pictures of me, shooting myself into a picture*, 1998, Fujichrome RDP II Diapositive, 8 x 10 in.

Death of a Cameraman

Organized by **Martin Waldmeier**

On view September 13 - October 26, 2013

Featuring work by:

Broomberg & Chanarin
Harun Farocki
Rabih Mroué
Hrair Sarkissian
Rudolf Steiner

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*All stories are told for a reason.
And all narrators have a stake
in the story they're telling.*¹

- Junot Díaz

On July 1, 2011, in the neighborhood of Karam Al Shami in Homs, Syria, a young man stands on the balcony of a residential building. He uses his cell phone to document gunfire taking place in the streets below as his camera suddenly catches sight of a gunman on an adjacent balcony. For a brief instant, the cameraman and the gunman directly face each other. A single shot is fired. The camera falls, and with the cameraman's death, image and reality collapse into one.²



Still from found video footage of Syrian conflict in Karam Al Shami, 2011

Death of a Cameraman is not an exhibition about the killing of a young man, or about the civil war in Syria. It cannot be. It is an exhibition that acknowledges the presence of a new kind of image in which everything is at stake for the ones who make them. For more than two years, a steady flow of first-hand amateur footage such as this has come out of the increasingly devastating conflict in Syria, giving fragmentary evidence of an unfolding tragedy of enormous proportions. While hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, wounded, displaced, and deprived of their livelihoods, an equal number of video documents has since been uploaded to various online platforms by civilians, activists, and militants alike. A small fraction of them is aired by global satellite channels, although interest in them is currently on the decline. Nevertheless, the global "understanding" of this conflict — if such a term is appropriate — is mainly based on those images, which have become the material of a highly politicized media discourse, with visual evidence used in selective ways to convey different narratives about the situation.

While many have recently celebrated the advent of "citizen journalism" and rejoiced over the supposed "democratization" of image making and reporting, the easy availability of those images has hardly served to raise a more critical consciousness of why they are made and what they mean. Bassam Haddad, an author and scholar of Middle Eastern Studies, has noted how detached the discussion on the ongoing events in Syria has become: "Syria is a game now," he writes, "played by states, institutions, analysts, activists, journalists, bloggers, tweeters, and artists who are often only remotely connected to the real lives of real people enduring real conditions there."³ While watching such videos in the news or on the internet, we, the spectators, are tragically "divorced from the cumulative history of pain and experience that have led to that reality."⁴

The detachedness of watching war has been described by Susan Sontag as "a quintessential modern experience."⁵ The playing field of journalism — once firmly in the hand of reporters, press agencies, and media corporations — is a rapidly shifting ground today. With journalists almost completely absent from the battlefield,⁶ individuals — anonymous cameramen and -women — have entered the field of representation *en masse*. Not press photographers, not filmmakers, not artists, these men and women document the condition that surrounds them as a means to act. The images they create are not souvenirs: they film in order to communicate with fellow Arabs and the world at large about their cause, seen through their eyes and their lenses. Their images not only depict violence, but, as Hito Steyerl argues, express it; they are manifestations of it.⁷ In other words, the appearance of

these images points to a condition where the camera becomes the weapon. As a consequence, the anonymous cameramen and -women often carry the biggest stakes in the telling of their story. In some cases, the ultimate consequence of this form of expression has been the appearance of videos in which their makers capture their own death behind the camera. They have been “shot” while “shooting.”



Rabih Mroué, *Shooting Images*, 2012, Still from Video

We might assume that a mobile phone camera is a poor device when faced by a real weapon. However, in Syria and elsewhere, that power balance appears to be shifting. While a weapon has a limited reach, an image can travel and multiply practically endlessly.

A YouTube video can potentially be seen the world over, shaping people’s understanding and imagination of a conflict elsewhere. And in the moment when one side of the conflict is unable to mobilize enough domestic forces to advance their cause, images and narratives become their most powerful weapon. In his video *Shooting Images*, which references his previous work *The Pixelated Revolution*, Rabih Mroué (1967, lives and works in Beirut) explores the deadly encounter between a sniper and a cameraman — and calls it an act of *Double Shooting*. In order to better understand the nature of these images, he argues, we need to bring the individual behind the camera — located *hors-champs* and yet at the center of events — back into the frame. But how?

Susan Sontag has also drawn attention to this eerie analogy between the “shooting” of cameras and weapons, including the acts of “loading” and “aiming” the device.⁸ Lewis Bush has noted how camera and weapon technology have largely developed in parallel, increasing their ease of use and “rate of fire” thanks to their mass production and increasing consumer-friendliness in the 20th century. The dividing lines between both devices have also been blurred. Not only have pistols been developed to function as cameras for police use, cameras have also been fitted to act as assassination weapons.⁹ In his series *Pictures of me, shooting myself into a picture*, Rudolf Steiner (1964, lives and works in Biel/Bienne and Rondchâtel, Switzerland) demonstrates this parallel: by firing bullets at black box cameras, he creates holes that, in return, generate the image — revealing the optical causality between puncture and exposure: one “shot” causes another.

In the resulting photograph, the viewer’s gaze, the punctured photograph, and the artist’s rifle align, with the resulting photograph depicting a fraction of a second that remains frozen in time — the moment of the shot; the moment of death.

Thus, although the camera does not penetrate the world physically, it penetrates it symbolically. Its effectiveness lies not in causing physical harm, it lies in its power to make visible, and — in the case of war — to shock viewers and shape public opinion, raise solidarity and generate military support.¹⁰ The idea that images have the power to “penetrate” into reality was articulated in Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. Comparing filmmaking with surgery, Benjamin believed that, rather than creating a reality from scratch (which is what, according to Benjamin, painters do), filmmakers enter it “surgically” through their apparatuses. In order to create a film, reality is fractured by the camera and then reassembled in the editing room according to a new, different logic, under the power of the filmmaker.¹¹ This analogy between filmmaking and surgery is also drawn by Harun Farocki (1944, lives and works in Berlin), whose work, *Eye/Machine*, analyzes the role of images in contemporary warfare. He shows how the world’s largest military powers increasingly use non-invasive technologies to conduct surgical strikes, with violence administered from thousands of miles away — revealing new power relations in the field of the visual, where sophisticated high-resolution remote imaging technologies are pitted against cheap, low-resolution, “maximally invasive” mobile phone cameras and their users.

How, then, to respond to such images? Can we conceive of a form of critical spectatorship that challenges the assumed documentary evidence of first-person video footage? If images, as Susan Sontag concludes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, are indeed not of much help if we are truly trying to understand,¹² then we perhaps need to consider ways to “interrupt” our gaze and become more actively engaged in what we see. The work of Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin (1970 and 1971, both live and work in London) proposes such a tactic: based on an iconic press photograph taken shortly after the Iranian revolution in 1979, *Afterlife*



Broomberg & Chanarin, *Afterlife*, 2009, Collage, Glass, Lead, C-Type Print, 20 x 16 in

experiments with fragmentation and collage in order to disturb our reading of the original photograph, which depicts the execution of 11 blindfolded Kurdish prisoners by firing squad and was captured in the decisive moment the guns were fired. By tracking down the photographer — who had remained anonymous until 2006 — the artists shed light on the invisible presence of the person behind the camera. The resulting work reassembles different moments of the same event into sculptural collages, revealing that the moment of picture-taking is, above all, not a moment of truth, but an aesthetic process of composition, framing, and staging. They demonstrate that



Hrair Sarkissian, *Execution Squares*, 2008, Archival Inkjet Print, 23.8 x 33.3 in

in order to see images more clearly, we paradoxically might need to take them apart and reveal their inherent gaps. Rather than seeking to simplify, we might need to complicate them.

What remains is an inability to fully comprehend the tragedy that unfolds, despite a flood of images. An absence of certainty despite — or exactly because of — the rivaling interpretations and translations by insiders, outsiders, experts, and others alike, using the same images to tell one story or another. But we are also left with a lack of alternatives. Watching from afar, one rarely hears private and personal accounts that would offer a perspective beyond the propaganda that serves to further fuel conflict. *Execution Squares* is a work by Hrair Sarkissian (1973, lives and works in Amman and London) that predates the present-day conflict in Syria. Taken in 2008, his photographs capture scenes of capital punishment in Syrian cities, turning the relationship between photography and death on its head: rather than seeking to depict the intimidating sight of publicly staged death, Sarkissian uses the camera to evade it, to show “that there are no bodies

there,” a gesture both deeply personal and profoundly political. Rather than participating in the spectacle of violence, the camera becomes a tool to overcome it. If cameras shoot, if photographs are bullets, then — as Rabih Mroué recently argued — it is perhaps only when we stop looking at images of violence that the violence will eventually stop, too.¹³

-Martin Waldmeier © 2013
Unsolicited Proposal Winner 2013-2014

- 1 Meghan O’Rourke, “The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. Questions for Junot Díaz.” *Slate Magazine*, November 8, 2007.
- 2 Unidentified footage, “Cameraman shot by sniper (Homs 1 July 2011),” YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUEGK28QWVv> (accessed August 2, 2013).
- 3 Bassam Haddad, “The Triumph and Irrelevance of Meta-Narratives Over Syria: ‘Rohna Dahiyyah,’” *Jadaliyya*, December 17, 2012, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9070/> (accessed July 17, 2013).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 18.
- 6 Numerous journalists have been killed since the beginning of the conflict. It is exceedingly difficult for journalists to get to Syria, and their hosts — either the government or opposition groups — are usually interested only in coverage that promotes their point of view. Facts are often hard to check and global media interest is on the decline.
- 7 Hito Steyerl, *Die Farbe Der Wahrheit: Dokumentarismen Im Kunstfeld* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2008), 15.
- 8 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2005), 10.
- 9 Lewis Bush, “Camera-gun, Gun-camera: A Short History of Shooting.” *Disphotic*, April 27, 2013, <http://www.disphotic.lewisbush.com/2013/04/27/camera-gun-gun-camera-a-sort-kind-of-shooting> (accessed July 17, 2013).
- 10 The causality between the appearance of videos and the arming of the opposition is speculative, and needs to be further explored. However, there is no doubt that the opposition’s video footage has been central to their narrative of resistance, and as such has clearly served to legitimize military aid, even though other geopolitical motivations may lie behind this move.
- 11 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hanna Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 233. Originally published: New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.
- 12 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004), 70.
- 13 Mentioned in a public conversation with Rabih Mroué after his performance, *The Pixelated Revolution* at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, July 19, 2013.

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