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AN IMPECCABLE STATE

BY

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ABSTRACT

An Impeccable State is a multidisciplinary installation drawing on found and constructed archives; a meditation on the concept of social deviance within the context of an imperial, homogenizing globalism. Working in photography, video and sculpture, I embark on a wide trajectory of research and production concerning the nebulous histories of social deviance and control. From Theseus' defeat of the Minotaur and civilization's 'triumph' over 'barbarism'; the leprosarium to the asylum; McCarthyism to modern-day deradicalization programs with their claim of a 'cure' for violent fundamentalism, *An Impeccable State* reflects on the attitudes, architectures and apparati manifested in response to the sometimes 'undesirable' plurality of the human condition.

The support paper that follows is organized into three chapters: a brief tracing of the historical trajectories that inform and propel the installation; a detailed methodology; and the contextualization of the work in relation to contemporary documentary and artistic practices.

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CHAPTER ONE: HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

In the summer of 1989, just months before the Berlin wall fell, *The National Interest* published Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History?", a contentious essay in which he declares Western liberal democracy to be the triumphant final step in humanity's historical evolution, citing the "total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives."¹ He positioned this concept of a "universal history" in direct opposition to philosophies which suggest that political history is a carousel of triumph and disaster, rule and revolt.² Drawing on a number of thinkers before him who also searched for order in the chaos of human events, Fukuyama's thesis was that the plurality and conflict of human history has been, and continues to be, a march toward relative peace in a world united under one political and economic system. Forty-one years earlier, in an exchange with Leo Strauss, the philosopher Alexandre Kojève points to the tyrannical roots of this desire for hegemony:

Hegel says that the political man [sic] acts in terms of the desire for 'recognition,' and that he can be fully 'satisfied' only if he has completely satisfied *this* desire [...] this desire is by definition limitless: man wants to be effectively 'recognized' by *all* those whom he considers capable and hence worthy of 'recognizing' him. [If citizens of a foreign State resist him] he will therefore want to extend his authority over them [...] so that in the final analysis, the head of State will be *fully* 'satisfied' only when his State encompasses the whole of mankind.³

Kojève asserts that the political (hu)man (read: tyrant) desires to be head of a *universal homogeneous state*, representing the "collective labor of all and each".⁴ By way of aligning themselves with this state, which is to be the pinnacle of humankind's political and social evolution, they seek to justify all actions undertaken in its name; including the killing of resisters to their rule. This intolerance for dissent – and ultimately, for the Other

¹ Fukuyama, Francis. "The End of History?". *The National Interest* (Summer 1989): 3-18

² Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press. 1992: 56

³ Kojève, Alexandre, and Leo Strauss. *On Tyranny*. Rev. and Enl. ed. New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963: 145

⁴ Ibid.: 146

– is common among ideological systems, with the goal (explicit or implied) often being the universalization of social, cultural and political authority.⁵

We are presented, then, with a dichotomy of us/them, inside/outside, whereby the State and its (loyal) subjects structure their identities in contrast to the non-adherent, the non-believer or the dissident. If Benedict Anderson is correct, and we imagine our communities and nations into existence, then we also imagine and implement systems for the exclusion, suppression or expulsion of the political and social deviant who threatens that order.⁶ It is this imaginary that in part forms the basis for *An Impeccable State's* polemic, recognizing the concept of social heterodoxy as a powerful channel for the exercise of political control. What develops is a bifurcated architecture (physical and internalized) for the inclusion or exclusion of populations from the body politic.⁷ As we'll see, which populations find themselves the subject of exclusion is in flux, rotating in or out according to the current political and cultural climate.⁸

Late-medieval Europe provides one prescient example, when the focus of these “formulas of exclusion” began to shift from the victims of contagious disease to the newly stigmatized mentally ill.⁹ In *Madness and Civilization*, his historical survey of insanity in the West, Foucault traces the shift in attitudes toward mental illness after the decline of leprosy; from accepted part of the social fabric, to its newest threat.

Leprosy disappeared, the leper vanished, or almost, from memory; these structures remained. Often in the same places, the formulas of exclusion would be repeated, strangely similar two or three centuries later. Poor vagabonds, criminals, and ‘deranged minds’ would take the part played by the leper, and we shall see what salvation was expected from this exclusion, for them and for those who excluded them as well.¹⁰

Leprosariums became asylums, and the madpeople, once tolerated in the public sphere, were rounded up and either sent to languish in the institution or to exile in the no-man's-land between settlements.¹¹ What “salvation” awaited, if any, was in the medicalization of “nervous illness” and the subsequent attempts at therapeutic or surgical

⁵ Philippians 2:10-11 reads: “...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord...”

⁶ In his book *Imagined Communities* (1983), Anderson claims that the concept of the nation, and of any self-identification with groups of otherwise unconnected individuals, is a socially constructed fiction.

⁷ For a particularly depressing example of this state-imposed internalization see Michel Foucault's concept of “biopolitical state racism” as developed in his lecture series *Society Must Be Defended* (1971-1984).

⁸ Subversion ideology, often used in association with the “satanic panic” of the late-80's and early-90's, refers to the scapegoating of (sometimes invented) groups or populations in response the destabilizing effects of rapid social change.

⁹ Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization; a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1965: 7

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.: 9

cure. In his painting *Cutting the stone* (1494), Hieronymus Bosch presents a strange scene. Three figures - a doctor, a monk and a nun - stand around a seated man as the doctor performs trepanation, the purported medieval practice of cutting a sizeable hole in the skull in order to access the brain. The painting's title references the widely held belief that insanity was caused by a 'stone of madness' lodged somewhere in the body, most often the head, and that by locating and surgically removing said stone one could be cured of their lunacy.¹² The painting is a potent comment on the physician (Bosch paints him as charlatan, wearing a funnel as a hat), the hubris of scientific thought, and the suggestion that one might extract the 'nervous illness' as simply as one removes a bladder stone.

In tandem with the reinscription of the 'deranged mind' as an affront to social order, the field expands to include any number of mental or behavioural deviance from the status quo. In the decades following the decline of leprosy, in addition to the mentally ill the institution would house the homeless, the homosexual, the heretic and the delinquent. As the social and political power of the 'formulas of exclusion' are refined, they are expanded by the State, extending to the dissident who challenges or refuses the 'recognition' Kojève's tyrannical political (hu)man desires – a new "stone" is institutionalized.

Starting in Europe around 1524, with the Protestant Reformation and the accompanying Wars of Religion, there begins a growing emphasis on social deviance of the ideological sort. In an article for the May/June 2015 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, John M. Owen IV outlines the Wars of Religion as a struggle for moral as well as political influence, and suggests that this may provide keys to understanding our present turmoil:

Early modern Calvinism – like Catholicism, Lutheranism, and other Christian isms of the time – was a political ideology as much as a set of religious doctrines. It emerged in an era when Europe's socioeconomic order was built around, and partly by, the Roman Catholic Church, and it defined itself in *opposition* to that order [...] As ideologues vied for influence, *dissent was brutally suppressed*, religious massacres broke out periodically, and outside powers intervened on behalf of the rival parties [...] when that crisis ended, two other ideological battles followed: between monarchism and constitutionalism in the eighteenth century and between liberalism and communism in the twentieth.¹³ [emphasis mine]

¹² Palmer, Jessica. "The Stone of Madness." Bioephemera. August 25, 2008. Web. Accessed November 19, 2015.

¹³ Owen IV, John M. "From Calvin to the Caliphate." *Foreign Affairs*. April 28, 2015. Web. Accessed June 3, 2015.

Owen goes on to contextualize the modern Middle East in relation to this continuum, characterizing the violent contest between political Islamism and secular democratic ideals as a “legitimacy crisis” not unlike the one Europe underwent centuries ago. But in the late-20th and early-21st centuries, things are different: advanced communication technology, easy and accessible international travel and the interweaving of global trade interests ensure that regional struggles for political and moral legitimacy rarely remain regional (if they ever were at all), and small conflicts inevitably fold into wider-reaching conflicts of narratives. At present, the most visible example is the clash of Jihadist Islamism with the influence of a seemingly omnipresent Western neoliberalism, riding high on its ‘defeat’ of other 20th century contenders.

Globalization is often seen as the monolithic, unified process of a “universalizing Western civilization battling the parochial forces of nationalism, localism, and tribalism”,¹⁴ a view supported by writers like Francis Fukuyama, Benjamin Barber and Samuel Huntington whose narratives of inter-national/cultural/civilizational conflict heavily influenced post-Cold War foreign policy in the West. However, if we look beyond these dichotomies we see that globalization, as a political and economic process, is in fact fractured into distinct competing *globalisms* driven by a handful of opposing and often interchangeable ideologies. These are *market*, *jihadist*, and *justice* globalisms.¹⁵ For my purposes, I want to focus on the clash of market and jihadist ideologies (ie. religious fundamentalisms versus the neo-liberal/colonial policies of the secular Western state), while speaking from a position in line with the ideals of justice globalism, which by definition rejects the simplicity of this binary, and instead pushes a global agenda for the “establishment of a more equitable relationship between the global North and South, the protection of the global environment, fair trade and international labour issues, human rights, and women’s issues.”^{16 17}

Where market globalism has at its core a drive for the universal application of free-market neoliberalisms, jihadist globalism aspires to the mobilization and expansion of the global *umma* (Muslim population) in response to a perceived erosion of fundamental Islamic values and systems by the exportation of Western political, economic and cultural values.¹⁸¹⁹ At present this contest takes place on a regional and

¹⁴ Steger, Manfred B. *Globalization a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003: 1

¹⁵ Ibid.: 99

¹⁶ Ibid.: 113

¹⁷ I point to this association to emphasize what is a major implication of *An Impeccable State*, which is that any society (or globalism) whose identity is underpinned by the definition and exclusion of an Other is fundamentally unjust, going on to consider (and imagine) how this injustice can and does infect the so-called humanist endeavours of that society.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Clearly, it would be a mistake to equate jihadist globalism of the Al-Qaeda [or Daesh] variety with the religion of Islam or even more peaceful strands of ‘political Islam’ or ‘Islamist fundamentalism’. Rather, the

global level in the form of small wars, domestic and foreign terrorism, as well as in the realm of the internet and media. It is a truly post-modern conflict where instances of physical and virtual violence are historical remnants, symptomatic of its ideological core.

The belligerents in this conflict are two opposing systems that, given their ideological foundations and global aspirations, have little to no allowance for significant dissent within their bounds, and that at the same time (re)produce each other by way of this opposition. Of course, market globalism and the liberal democratic societies it sidecars often guarantee their subjects a right to religious freedom, and even the strictest interpretations of Islamic law allow for the protection of the *dhimma* (non-Muslim citizens) so long as they pay a specific tax to the Caliph.²⁰ But again, the concept of the state is founded on a cultural and (often) ethnic unity defined by opposition to that which exists outside the boundaries of its rule, and both liberal democracy and Islamic law function only when their subjects display a base level of compatibility with the social, economic and political values of the state. In the West, the naive hope has long been established that a person of non-Judeo-Christian or Catholic faith, once steeped in liberal democratic values, will naturally abandon any meaningful commitment to those moral and social tenets of their religion which might be deemed contradictory.²¹

One needn't look far to see remnants of this general contempt for the values of immigrants and colonial subjects in the globalisms of today. It is most visible in the language used by each side to describe the other: jihadism aspires to 'rid the world of infidels', as well as reinstate and expand a global Caliphate, the citizens of which are subject to strict interpretations of Sharia Law; whereas the West has aims to rid the world of the 'scourge of violent religious fundamentalism' and winning the 'war against terror' all the while championing the rights of moderate Muslims, by which it is often meant Muslims with Western, capitalist values. What we are presented with is the overreach of two neocolonial globalisms in their pushes against true plurality, spelled out for us in the West as a project for the 'modernization' of world civilization in the face of threats from a resurgent, 'barbaric' tribalism.²²

What emerges is the concept of a *borderless* theatre where the "enemy" is demarcated not by the uniform they wear to battle or status as a (non)combatant, but by

term 'jihadist globalism' is meant to apply to those extremely violent strains of religiously influenced ideologies... [and also] applies to the ideology of those violent fundamentalists in the West who seek to turn the whole world into a 'Christian empire'." - Ibid.: 124

²⁰ Glenn, H. Patrick. *Legal Traditions of the World: Sustainable Diversity in Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000: 218–219

²¹ In 1836, on the setting up of an English educational system in colonial India, British Secretary at War Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote: "No Hindu who has received an English education ever remains sincerely attached to his religion. It is my firm belief that if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolater among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence."

²² Harootunian, Harry D. *The Empire's New Clothes: Paradigm Lost, and Regained*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004: 33

the character of their political and cultural self. Awareness and paranoia of the ideological Other seeps into the fabric of public life, as it did in the early 20th century with the first and second “Red Scare”, helped along a second time by the fear-mongering Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy. A language has developed around social deviancy of the ideological variety that is not unlike that used to describe infectious disease, with radical ideas often being referred to as ‘viral’ long before the internet popularized this usage of the term:

The rise of virology as a field in the 1950s, for example, coincided with an increase in the perceived threat of Communism [...] as scientists learned more about this strange, newly identified entity, they came to understand that viruses worked by taking over the mechanism of a cell and causing it to reproduce the virus [...] as anxieties about Communism came to focus on its propagation by internal agents, Communism increasingly became “viral” [...] the agents of infection metamorphosed rapidly from viruses and ideas into human agents: carriers and spies.²³

Today the virology analogies only increase in relevance, given the sophisticated use of the internet and social media by groups like Daesh, its global affiliates, and the governments and organizations who struggle to beat them back. This application of language comes hand-in-hand with the incorporation of political radicalism and processes of radicalisation – like late-medieval ‘madman’ – into frameworks designed for the classification and control of the physical and mental illnesses it is so frequently compared to. In Britain, schoolchildren as young as nine years old are made to fill out questionnaires (modelled on tests for the detection of schizophrenia and early psychosis) designed to evaluate whether or not that child has, or is at risk of developing, early signs of radicalisation.²⁴ Also in Britain (whose PREVENT and CHANNEL Programmes comprise the “soft” arm of a heavily criticized counter-terror initiative) a recent police study found, and published, a correlative link between individuals at risk of radicalization and those suffering from mental illness.²⁵ This medicalization of ideological radicalism – as part of an attempt to understand, and therefore stem, its spread – sidelines strategies which employ reconciliatory, interpersonal means to inclusive, pluralist ends, instead favouring the development of psychiatric treatments designed to return subjects to a

²³ Magnusson, Bruce A. *Contagion Health, Fear, Sovereignty*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012: 106

²⁴ Taylor, Diane. "Fury after Primary Pupils Are Asked to Complete Radicalisation-seeking Surveys." *The Guardian*. May 28, 2015. Web. Accessed July 10, 2015.

²⁵ Dodd, Vikram. *Police Study Links Radicalisation to Mental Health Problems*. *The Guardian*. 2016. Accessed June 07, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/may/20/police-study-radicalisation-mental-health-problems>.

standardized “normative” state. Like Bosch’s funnel-topped surgeon, we forget the body in our search for the stone.

In this context, the technocratic tendency in fact makes up one dimension of the overall conflict outlined earlier. While the imperial societies of the West claim superiority over the “backward Oriental”, the same supposedly “enlightened” values are the basis for an oppositional critique of the Western mind:

The mind of the West in the eyes of the Occidentalists is a truncated mind, good for finding the best way to achieve a given goal, but utterly useless in finding the *right* way. Its claim to rationality is only half true anyway – the lesser half. If by rationality we mean instrumental rationality, fitting means to ends, in distinction to value rationality, choosing the right ends, then the West has plenty of the former and very little of the latter.²⁶

While acknowledging its rootedness in hatred, I can’t help but agree with the premise: the Western heart is dampened by an unbreakable faith in reason and discursive thought. Though, to this I would say that this confession is less an admission of an inhuman, morally bankrupt West than it is the acceptance of this dichotomy as fundamental to the resolution of a long-standing disagreement. So long as we continue to meet one another on diametrically opposed terms, we are beholden to a limited understanding of the Other as the aberrant thorn in our side.

This want for a technological, medicalized procedure by which to “cure” the “ideological Other” has long been present in reality and fiction: denazification after the second World War; ‘reeducation’ camps in Maoist China, post-war Vietnam and present day North Korea; modern experiments in deprogramming (the CIA-funded work of Dr. Ewen Cameron at McGill University being particularly well-documented); and countless tales of brainwashing in cinema and pop-literature. More recently, we have seen the proliferation of ‘de-radicalization’ programs popping up in Western and Western-aligned countries around the globe: examples include the UK’s aforementioned CHANNEL Programme; Saudi Arabia’s Mohammed bin Nayef Center for Advice, Counselling and Care; and Montréal’s Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence, opened in March 2015.^{27 28 29}

A relatively new phenomenon, these programs are multi-pronged efforts to identify, institutionalize and transition ‘radicalized’ citizens back into society by way of

²⁶ Buruma, Ian, and Avishai Margalit. *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*. New York: Penguin Press, 2004.:76

²⁷ "Channel Guidance." Government of the United Kingdom. Accessed June 01, 2016.

²⁸ مركز محمد بن نايف للمناصرة والدرعاية. مركز محمد بن نايف للمناصرة والدرعاية. Accessed June 02, 2016.

²⁹ Home - Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization. Accessed June 07, 2016.

medical and psychological treatments designed to bring them back into alignment with moderate, Western patterns of behaviour and belief. Here again the problem of radicalization is viewed as analogous to mental illness, to be identified and treated symptomatically rather than entertain the alternative: reassessment of historical and contemporary policies that create and sustain conditions favourable to the fomenting of radical opposition. While there is currently little consensus on how to effectively and permanently 'de-radicalise' a subject, much effort is put into experimenting with methods not dissimilar to the psychological "shock therapy" of the past:

[De-radicalization] implies a cognitive shift, a fundamental change in understanding. It is often triggered by a traumatic experience which 'challenges the coherence of the individual's worldview' and can engender 'post-traumatic growth.' A 'cognitive opening' which makes an individual receptive to new ideas, is then created. This can be seized upon by social and law enforcement services to engage with the individual and persuade them of the error of their previous ways. The language to describe the latter process varies according to the political sensitivities of countries, which often favor words like 'rehabilitation,' 'resocialization,' or 'dialogue' to describe such initiatives.³⁰

It is here where we must now adjust our gaze; up until this point we have traced a history of social deviancy in relation to the construction and maintenance of political and social control. We are now presented with the task of looking forward, to question how these narratives play out in the context of modern ideological conflict and the increasing sophistication of the military and civilian technologies that are leveraged in its name. As advances are made in the field of neuroscience and related technologies like functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) and optogenetics (the use of light to control cells and neurons), doors are opening that conceivably allow for the mapping – and remapping – of the neural pathways that determine who we are and how we think.

Dr. Emile Bruneau, a cognitive scientist at MIT, conducts research on the region of our brains that governs feelings of group identity and the associated empathetic response – the *medial precuneus*.³¹ An article for *New York Times Magazine*, describes his research as a mix of psychology and fMRI brain scans, with the intent of mapping the neural processes by which we empathize with others – or don't.³² In regards to his

³⁰ Chowdhury, Naureen, and Ellie Hearne. "Beyond Terrorism: Deradicalization and Disengagement from Violent Extremism." International Peace Institute, 2008.: 3

³¹ Interlandi, Jeneen. "The Brain's Empathy Gap." The New York Times. March 21, 2015. Accessed April 4, 2015.

³² Ibid.

motives, he offers the example of an enlightening discussion with a group of non-Roma activists demonstrating in support of Roma rights in Budapest:

... he would ask them why they wanted to help [...] he reasoned that something somewhere in their lives had overridden their implicit biases and moved them to behave with greater empathy toward the minority group. He wanted to know what that something was. "If we could figure out how it happens," he said, "maybe we could harness it somehow."³³

In the context of this paper, Dr. Bruneau's optimism can appear double-sided; on one hand it is the admirable search for empathy and understanding, and on the other, a reappearance of the cold, machinistic Western mind. The harnessing and control of our neurons holds endless possibility across a range of disciplines, but it is disconcerting in the context of non-medical deviance (by this I mean conditions of which the subject also wishes to be cured). Can we, will we, treat the political Other as we treat the mentally ill, bombarding the afflicted brain with the focused pulse of an electromagnetic coil? Given the extensive entanglement of warfare and medicine, I suspect an inevitable folding of these technologies into conflicts both physical and ideological in nature.³⁴ But we must also heed warnings about the costs of this technophilia:

[...] it should come as no surprise that the crisis of postmodern war parallels the decline of the nation-state, the collapse of European colonialism, and a growing critique of reductionistic rationality. TerrorWar, the rise of corporations, and deepening globalization are the latest manifestations of collapsing modernity. [...] Trying to use technology and force while ignoring politics and culture inevitably leads to defeat for empire.³⁵

Chris Hables-Gray, prescient writer on technology, cyborgism and the posthuman, describes what he calls the Perpetual Revolution in Military Affairs: the updated version of an old concept linking conflict and militarism to the ever-increasing pace of technological advancement.³⁶ If one goal of the techno-militarisms that birthed UAVs, target acquisition algorithms, and so-called 'smart bombs', is to make for an increasingly precise and bloodless warfare (for those at the helm), and the macro-conflict of our time is ideological, what are we to make of targeting the enemy *within* the Other –

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ On another end of the spectrum, the United States' Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) is currently experimenting with "Ultrasonic Brain-Machine interfaces" –essentially helmets embedded with ultrasound transducers which directly manipulate brain activity to increase the stamina and alertness of soldiers in the field.

³⁵ Gray, Chris Hables. "Postmodern War at Peak Empire." *Science as Culture*: 109-28. : 111-112

³⁶ Ibid.: 113

and ourselves? In our time, when apocalypse runs thick through the zeitgeist, will we again declare an end to history? What might it look like? Are we, as many predict, on the precipice of a self-imposed extinction? Or perhaps we're haunted by the spectre of a doomed plurality – the tyrant and the machine reigning over their universal, homogenous, impeccable state.

With my project, *An Impeccable State*, I make an attempt at referencing the histories, architectures and futures outlined in this chapter, while at the same time looking to avoid the adoption of a narrative, lecturing tone. The idea, in the exhibition as much as it has been here, is to trace the outline of these “formulas of exclusion”, framing the interior as a container, as the variable in an equation, and an empty space for the imagination of alternative present/futures.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

When I first started working on the subject matter that would eventually become *An Impeccable State*, I had a napkin. On it was a crude diagram of a microphone attached to a bottle, and scribbled next to it in blue ink, the words ‘device for the collection of pure ideology’. I had been thinking for a long while about the question of ideology; its influence, its elusiveness, and particularly its flexibility. By this I mean, how does, or can, an individually-held ideology form or change? Does an official of the Qaddafi regime bring the old Libya to the new parliament? Can a defected Taliban commander really denounce their previously-held views and enter the society of an Afghanistan under occupation? The intrinsically philosophical nature of this important question poses a strategic problem for Western systems that lean so heavily on certainty and reason.

The project of ideological ‘cleansing’ has taken many forms, from denazification after WWII, Chinese and Vietnamese re-education camps, and the “deprogramming” of cult members in the 1970’s, to the various deradicalization programs currently popping up in response to the threat of violent extremisms. Aside from these programs’ more glaring issues, one pressing question remains: “In a war of ideas, how do we know the enemy?”. I wanted to make a work that somehow addressed the historical, present and future implications of this question.

Sometime in 2013 I took the sketch from the napkin and slotted it into my *Centre for Global Inquiry* project. The *Centre for Global Inquiry*, as it stands, is essentially the skeleton of a research centre that I would like to one day bring to life, but for now acts as a sort of umbrella under which I can throw theoretical and future projects in the form of an annual report on the Centre’s activities. Flipping through this report during a studio visit, Kimberly Phillips, then incoming Director at Vancouver’s Access Gallery, expressed particular interest in the device and encouraged me to follow through on the thought. So then started the work of planning and research that would eventually see the project proposed in my application to the MFA in Documentary Media, submitted in January, 2014.

The initial plan was to make a film – a docu-fiction to be specific – following two researchers (working for the *Centre for Global Inquiry*) as they developed and tested a prototype for the device. The film would include archival footage (found and fictional) interspersed with documentary-style footage shot in the Middle East and North Africa. In the film, characters would emphasize the technology's promise in the fields of human rights and journalism, but the narrative of the film itself would point to the omnipresence of defense funding and the inevitable militarization of emerging neurotechnologies. The hope was that the film would spotlight the ethical implications of advanced research in neurotechnology and ultimately cast doubt on the Western expectation that technology can save us from ourselves. But the idea was half-baked and wishy-washy, lacked a clear understanding of what the subject of my inquiry *really* was, and early sketches were too bluntly didactic to properly engage with the spectrum of ideas I was trying to address. How could I make a film that points, effectively, to something as elusive as ideology, or as convoluted as the battles that have been, and continue to be waged in its name?

In the year leading up to the MFA I had accumulated a notebook with tens of pages of clippings, sketches, storyboards and thoughts. So it follows that the first year of my studies was a process of narrowing the scope of my inquiry, identifying the nucleus, and working to find the most elegant and effective way to engage with it. I lessened my focus on ideology and neurotechnology in favour of examining the umbrella concept of social deviance, the inside/outside dichotomy, civilization, and their respective physical and theoretical structures.

From here I began reconceptualizing the work from a narrative film – something I am unfamiliar with and that imposed a linearity that was incongruous with my thinking – into an exhibition format that could better reflect the nonlinear, ahistorical nature of my subject without compromising complexity in the name of narrative coherence. So I started working as I would to develop any other research-based exhibition: building a mental framework into which I could slot my materials. In this case that framework was temporal, dividing the project into past, present and future modes. Though I want to stress that these categories are strictly for the purpose of organizing my thoughts during production, and it is my hope that the exhibition itself will collapse time, making the past and future relevant to the viewer in the present. In the following paragraphs I will use this same framework as a way to discuss the exhibition components, their process, their purpose, and finally, how they come together in space to form a whole. These are:

Present

- 'Video notebook' showing testing of the device. Filmed in southern Turkey.
- Documents (real and created) contextualizing this video within the wider framework of the exhibition.

Past

- Sculptural arrangements of archival images, pertaining to the populations as well as social and physical structures of social deviance.

Future

- Ideological 'realignment' scene, filmed with actors.

And a fallen obelisk, which spans all three categories.

Starting in the present with the planning and filming of the video notebook, this was the most involved part of the process. Once I'd decided to no longer make a narrative film (but keep the device as a starting point) I began storyboarding to identify what sort of information I'd need to convey with the footage. Wanting the video to pose more questions than answers, I planned scenes that would resemble field-testing of some sort, but without direct mention of its purpose. Set in the recent past, the video is embedded with clues (*Centre for Global Inquiry* letterhead, off-hand remarks from characters, the device itself) that, when correlated with information present elsewhere in the exhibition, is intended to begin to shed light on what is happening, and its bearing on the whole.

Preparations for filming included the design and construction of props, specifically the device itself and associated materials, ie. physical supports, faux software, identification and paperwork. There was also the obligatory work of hiring a translator/assistant, remotely scouting locations, and booking flights and accommodations. Working alone, and on such a small budget, required that I plan and pack as though I *were* my character, bringing only what was necessary to conduct and make a record of my fictional testing. I was a researcher, my translator was his guide, and we were both a synthesis of our characters and our real selves. Rather than record with professional video and audio equipment, I shot on two consumer camcorders, as I imagined my character would. The second camera was a luxury. Sound recording was abandoned when it became apparent my translator/assistant would require oral direction during filming, making capture of audio while in character prohibitively difficult.

There were, of course, ethical and safety concerns. Much of the filming took place in or around the southern city of Gaziantep, chosen for its well-known reputation as a staging ground for Islamic State recruitment and the smuggling of fighters into

nearby Syria. The efforts of the Turkish government to locate and disrupt these cells closely mirrored the proposed use for the device we were testing: the location and excision of the radical, first from the landscape, and then from the mind. Closer to the Syrian border, we consulted local police and residents about the security situation before travelling, at one point scrapping visits to the towns of Urfa and Suruç after a handful of locals warned I was likely to be kidnapped along the D400 highway (they warned of either Islamic State or the PKK, depending on their politics). The decision was also made to only work with actors when filming individual subjects, after an initial experience left us feeling deceitful; and when pressed by authority figures or a persistent local, we would quickly drop character and present a slightly altered version of the truth (in modern Turkey, a science fiction film about a man and his rainmaker is a far less contentious proposal than one on political and religious ideology). All things considered, there was little we could do to avoid suspicion and much time was spent assuring local residents and police that our motives were benign.

Regardless of time and location, days spent filming followed a similar pattern. Most days we would rise early and drive in search of rural landscapes with clear views of towns and cities. Setting up our props in each location, we would film “tests” which would start wide and progressively become more specific: valley, town, neighbourhood, street, house. When we managed to find willing participants (and these were scarce) we would end the day with a scene of the device in use on an individual in their home. By repeated covering of the spectrum of shots needed, we ensured there would be plenty of material for editing while also invoking the repetitive nature of fieldwork. In the final installation, these clips are edited into two channels, projected from their own pico projectors (palm-sized projectors) in a vitrine with other materials designed to, at least temporarily, bolster their documentary “credibility”.

An Impeccable State addresses the ‘past’ through an aesthetic treatment of archival materials. The images and texts span histories of social deviance and control and are arranged so as to de-privilege any linear, historical reading. This arrangement went through a number of iterations. Initially, I had planned on scanning the materials and producing digital collage works that would then be printed as large-format banners and hung from the ceiling, but this felt like it may be too flat and aestheticized, destroying the “document-ness” of the materials and subsequently any claims they may have to authenticity.

I began thinking about ways to disrupt the conventions that have developed around the way we read archival materials, while also preserving their status as documents, each an individual part in a larger text. To this end, I started looking at more sculptural treatments, particularly influenced by Judy Radul’s use of plexiglass. A

number of iterations were imagined, tested, and rejected. Taking Wolfgang Tillmans' *Truth Study Centre* as inspiration, I began working with an arrangement of images that illustrates very little when taken piecemeal, but reveals an underlying logic when studied as a whole, and arrived at the present form of multi-levelled image sculptures atop a multi-levelled, low-to-the-ground table.³⁷ The refusal to display images on a single plane (expressed by the varying heights of both the images themselves and their table) serves to disrupt any methodized reading by way of sometimes arbitrary or erratic juxtapositions. The solution I arrived at involved having the images UV-printed directly onto sheets of plexiglass and then individually cut out with a laser, resulting in an almost seductive object. These images are then arranged, alone or in groups, atop polished acrylic columns of varying height.

Elsewhere in the exhibition is a large projection of the "realignment" scene, filmed in the studio with two actors. The purpose of this component was to offer a vision of the near future as an extrapolation of the narrative momentum of the show's other elements. Another function it needed to perform was to make the ethical implications of social engineering in the age of advanced neurotechnologies a pertinent question to the viewer in the present. Again, initial plans to envelop the viewer visually were also rejected. In the end I decided this would not only be too much investment in technology and construction, but that the wrap-around would be overkill and that the subject point-of-view would be enough to implicate the discerning viewer.

After having decided on a single-channel format, next came the processes of scripting, casting and rehearsals. With a script drafted, my colleague Alexandra Simpson was kind enough to connect me with two talented actors, both willing to work for next to nothing, which is unfortunately an important requirement. After a back-and-forth correspondence, fine-tuning the script, we had a first reading where we further refined the scene, identifying gaps and redundancies. A date was then set for filming in mid-April. While the performances were good, this first iteration had a set design that mimicked a medical facility – an aesthetic that distracted from the works symbolisms and otherwise felt flat. The final scene was filmed in black and white, with the actors isolated against a black background. They sit on either side of the frame, separated by a prop apparatus that has been placed in front of the lens, and perform a psychological questionnaire-cum-non-invasive operation. The therapist and technician wear a book and funnel on their respective heads, in reference to Bosch's charlatan doctor in search of the stone.

³⁷ The images themselves are UV printed directly to the back of 3mm acrylic and propped up by acrylic rod.

The final component does not fit neatly into any one of the temporal categories I set out earlier, instead it is intended to represent the power that structures and links them. The obelisk is an ancient Egyptian form, a monument reaching into the sky, linking the people (or more specifically, the nobility) to the gods who reside there. If we fast-forward a few thousand years, looted Egyptian obelisks stand in Rome, Paris, London, New York; and the form itself has been serially appropriated as a monument to the vaguery of a faceless imperial power. This power is the architect and beneficiary of the infrastructures examined in the exhibition, and for that reason I thought it needed to have a presence in the space. But since the show is (hopefully) a critique of the rationalist certainty that underpins that power, I wanted to disrupt the symbolism, to appropriate the obelisk without performing a reaffirmation of its acquired connotations, and did this in two ways: by depicting the obelisk as fallen and broken into three sections; and by constructing it of a translucent fabric stretched over a wooden frame – both intended to represent the obelisk while at the same time diminishing its presence. Another reference is embedded in my choice of colour for the obelisk. One of the first synthetic pigments, Prussian blue is the European equivalent of Egyptian blue, the recipe for which was forgotten after the Roman era.³⁸ For me, this is a nod to the colonial function of technologies as dealt with in the rest of the show, while also mirroring the process by which the form of the obelisk itself was appropriated.

At the time of writing (May 31, 2016) all content production has been completed. What work remains involves the construction of the installation itself. For the past three weeks I worked in the wood shop to build the multi-level table, the vitrine, and obelisk. All of these components are constructed out of sheets of half-inch plywood and three-quarter-inch sheets cut into two-inch strips. By milling my own lumber from full sheets instead of buying pine board, I saved nearly four hundred dollars. When it comes time for installation, I also plan on painting all projection surfaces a neutral shade of grey to increase contrast and reject ambient light spill from the other components.

³⁸ Fessenden, Marissa. How Glistening Egyptian Blue Pigment Was Forgotten Then Lost. Smithsonian. August 31, 2015. Accessed June 03, 2016.

CHAPTER THREE: DOCUMENTARY RELEVANCE

An Impeccable State, as a project and as a strategy, sits amid a wide spattering of works straddling the ever-blurring lines between fact and fiction, between temporalities, between documentary and contemporary art. In the transgression of these boundaries, the artists sidestep the sometimes rigid frameworks which define these positions, gaining the sort of insight only available to the outside eye, viewing these categories, their subjects, and the power structures which contain them as imperfect and isolated systems. Some examples come to mind: Walid Raad and the *Atlas Group*, his fictional organization for the study of the Lebanese Civil War through an archive of 'documents', highlighting the collision (and collusion) of canonized histories with those of the messier, personal variety; or Iris Häussler's quasi-theatrical installations, employing tropes of authenticity to construct seamlessly convincing fictions which, after their reveal, cause us to question the very 'why' and 'how' of our belief. But what sets the projects I will discuss here (and, hopefully, *An Impeccable State*) apart is that they not only prompt a consideration of the project in relation to the positions themselves (fact/fiction, past/present/future, art/documentary) but of the possibility present in the interchangeable relation of their terms (fiction/past/documentary, fact/future/art, etc.). While some of these combinations are easier to accept, like the straightforward and uncontroversial fact/past/documentary or fiction/future/art, how do we reconcile the relation of fact/future/documentary? What would it look like, and by what standard do we judge its claim to fact and/or truth? With this in mind I'd like to start by considering the question, and necessity, of future-oriented documentary.

Of course, the fundamental question concerns how it might be possible to apply the documentary gaze – of thoughtful reflection on a present or past record – to a future that cannot be reliably imaged. To this point, Fredric Jameson offers an interesting thought:

The presumption is that Utopia, whose business is the future, or not-being, exists only in the present, where it leads the relatively feeble life of desire and fantasy. But this is to reckon without the amphibiousness of being and its temporality: in respect of which

Utopia is philosophically analogous to the trace, only from the other end of time. The aporia of the trace is to belong to past and present all at once, and thus to constitute a mixture of being and not-being quite different from the traditional category of Becoming and thereby mildly scandalous for analytical Reason. Utopia, which combines the not-yet-being of the future with a textual existence in the present is no less worthy of the archaeologies we are willing to grant to the trace.³⁹

Utopia, then, as the present image of a future (and interchangeable with dystopia), could be thought of as the sum of its existing preconditions. Future-oriented documentary, then, represents a co-option of the archaeological gaze, examining this “textual existence” to speak to histories both presently obscured, and of the futures they contain. The active nature of this relationship to the future is its defining trait – distinct, while not separate from the documentary canon.

Until this point the relationship of (activist) documentary to the future has largely been one of expectation, elucidating past and present conditions in a plea for future change. As a fundamentally *reactive* genre, documentary in this vein expresses the desire for a future resolution. However, it is my belief that our present predicaments require a documentary language that is not only predictive, but *proactive*, engaging directly with the future it demands; a documentary that speaks in the present, both to and from the future. If we are to imagine a documentary form capable of affecting change in the present, it must play out on the same timelines as the power it interrogates.

Consider the corporate and state contingency plan. These are plans designed to allow an effective response to unexpected but catastrophic scenarios, ie. the death of a president, natural disaster, nuclear attack, market crash, civil unrest etc. More commonly created by governments and corporations, their purpose is, naturally, to ensure the ability of those entities to weather future complications while maintaining political, social and/or economic control. Already powerful institutions reaffirm control of the future(s) through a monopolization of the means to make arrangements in the present (ie. the Canadian government’s Privy Council Office, or the American forecasting firm STRATFOR). In response, critical culture, of which documentary is an important tenet, must empower itself to confront corporate and state potentials in their nascent stages; a counter-contingency of sorts, and an effort to match, in real terms, the imagination of corporate and state power.⁴⁰

³⁹ Jameson, Fredric. "Introduction: Utopia Now." In *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. New York: Verso, 2005 : xv-xvi

⁴⁰ In spirit, it is not unlike science fiction, which (when it is good) tells stories set in a future constructed of extrapolations on the present. George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), in retrospect, could fit the definition of future-oriented documentary in that it carried present trends to their logical conclusions.

In discussing documentary reenactment, Bill Nichols writes that the reenactment “forfeits its indexical bond to the original event”, instead generating a new “fantasmatic power” over the viewer by way of its failed attempt to recover the past.⁴¹ Just as reenactment ultimately fails to retrieve the image of the past, so too does the contingent documentary inevitably fall short of making available a faithful representation of the future. But where both might succeed is instilling in the viewer the “uncanny sense of repetition” of something historically (or futuristically) unique, establishing a link between the constructed image and the (in)authentic, (re)imagined event.⁴² Similarly, *An Impeccable State* seeks to *preenact* the near-future image, highlight its present preconditions, and open a space for preemptive criticism.

In the presentation of a near-future technological possibility, *An Impeccable State* engages with the future in a manner not unlike the projects of the Bureau of Inverse Technology (BIT). The Bureau consists of Natalie Jeremijenko, Kate Rich, and Daniela Tigani, whose names, while originally anonymous, are still seldom listed in relation to the Bureau. Working with current information technology, their projects reconfigure and reimagine the application of these technologies in order to question “the safety of the corporate imagination and its design upon our technological futures”.⁴³ In one such work, *B.I.T. Plane* (1999), the artists attach a small video camera to a remote control plane. This small craft is then surreptitiously flown over the campuses of Silicon Valley giants like Lockheed Martin, Apple, Xerox PARC, and Hewlett Packard. By videotaping these ‘no camera zones’ from above, the Bureau utilizes a combination of new consumer technologies in order to look beyond the same barriers of corporate secrecy from which they came. Viewing the project in 2016, beyond the obvious allusions to present-day consumer drones, the work explicitly confronts the now-pressing issues of surveillance/counter-surveillance, public versus private knowledge, and the legal frictions that have accompanied the increasing democratization of these tools. At one point in the work, an unattributed quote (by American computer scientist Alan Kay) appears onscreen: “The best way to predict the future, is to invent it.” That the Bureau could so accurately engage these forthcoming issues speaks to the value of their future-oriented approach, an influence and foundation for my work on *An Impeccable State*.

It should be acknowledged that the cross-pollination of documentary and (conceptual?) artistic practices is nothing new – over the decades, a self-reflexive documentary has developed, embracing the postmodern strategies of re-enactment,

⁴¹ Nichols, Bill. “Documentary Reenactment And The Fantasmatic Subject.” *Critical Inquiry*, no. 35 (2008): 74.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Kate Rich. Video Data Bank. Accessed June 07, 2016.

performance and outright fiction in the pursuit of elusive “truths” – however, I aim to locate my project specifically within what’s been called the “documentary turn” in contemporary art, the beginnings of which could be traced as far back as the politically and socially critical art of the 1960’s, but which is most often associated with Okwui Enwezor’s Documenta11 (2002)⁴⁴, and the subsequent proliferation of globally-focused, politically-oriented exhibitions, festivals and biennials.⁴⁵ While the practices that comprise this “turn” resist succinct definition, they borrow liberally from the methods and aesthetics of journalism and documentary, though often set apart by a built-in reflexivity; a suspicion of their own claims to knowledge or authenticity, and a languishing in contemporary art ambiguity – a means to which the question is often the end. The artist, by playing ‘fast and loose’ with documentary elements, is then able to engage viewers in a conversation about the real world while at the same time being unbound by any expectation of veracity:

Inverting the question (whether a documentary might be telling a possible truth rather than a possible lie) helps to understand the genre of constructed ‘real’ narrative: it primarily depends on the viewer believing its hypothesis [...] It does not try to convince the viewer of the truthfulness of the image by increasing its credibility; rather, it urges the audience to question the content, and the language used to address it. Thus, the fundamental question becomes: *could that be true?*⁴⁶ [emphasis mine]

By referencing documentary language and mixing the authentic trace with those of an inauthentic future/present, *An Impeccable State* asks the viewer to consider the possibility of its proposition as the outcome of an illustrated trajectory. And so, in a roundabout way, the project points to a present condition (the classification and treatment of the Other as deviant) through the conjuring of its future symptom (neurological deradicalization).

Having located the project as “future-oriented” documentary in the context of the documentary turn, I would now like to consider a handful of projects that either employ similar strategies or deal with similar subject matter. After a brief introduction to their practice and/or a specific work, I will offer a reflection on how each is relevant to the development of *An Impeccable State*. In no particular order, these practices and projects are: the “narrative structures” of Mark Lombardi; the work of Trevor Paglen; the

⁴⁴While the seeds of this turn can be spotted in years prior, Documenta11 marked the first first large-scale international programme of artists whose practices referenced or engaged with the traditions of documentary or social action. These included Allan Sekula, Chantal Ackerman, and the collective Huit Facettes, to name a few.

⁴⁵Cramerotti, Alfredo. *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform without Informing*. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2009.: 38

⁴⁶Ibid.: 42

performative documentary films of Mads Brügger and Renzo Martens; and Goldin+Senneby's expansive and multidisciplinary project, *Headless* (2007-present).

Over the course of his life, American artist Mark Lombardi (1951-2000) was an artist, archivist and librarian; and the works that he would eventually become known for embody the kind of disciplinary synthesis that defines practices of a journalistic or documentary nature. An example of the artist as investigator, he gained notoriety for his "narrative structures"; expansive drawings in graphite and ink that mapped the complex networks of power that make up world governance, finance, and crime. In an artist statement from the early nineties, Lombardi lists the targets of his inquiry and the process by which he makes sense of these shadowy worlds:

Thus far I have exhibited drawings on BCCI, Lincoln Savings, World Finance of Miami, the Vatican Bank, Silverado Savings, Castle Bank and Trust of the Bahamas, Nugan Hand Limited of Sydney, Australia, and many more. Working from syndicated news items and other published accounts, I begin each drawing by compiling large amounts of information about a specific bank, financial group or set of individuals. [...] My purpose throughout is to interpret the material by juxtaposing and assembling the notations into a unified, coherent whole.⁴⁷

In their mappings of disparate individuals, states, and companies, the diagrams made visible what were otherwise obscure networks of relation, of which the only indications might have been mentions of seemingly unconnected individuals in newspaper articles, continents apart. One of his most famous works, the drawing *George W. Bush, Harken Energy, and Jackson Stephens, c. 1979–90* (1999) is beautiful from a distance – a collection of swooping lines curve to connect a constellation of circles and names, either placed along one of three horizontal lines or floating in the space around them. Edging closer, the viewer discovers a logic to these nebulous arrangements: they outline the myriad interconnections of the Bush family, global oil, and political turmoil in the Middle East. In the upper left, George W. Bush sits at the nexus of six paths, while just three connections away, and at the end of his own arc, is Osama Bin Laden – two years before the events of 9/11 would further scandalize this juxtaposition. It's no surprise that these sorts of relationships don't leave much in the way of a trail of breadcrumbs, and the genius of Lombardi's work lay in his ability and tireless dedication to tracing them.

Lombardi's work collected what little bits of information were available in the public record, re-presenting them in arrangements and clusters that revealed the

⁴⁷ Lucarelli, Fosco. Mark Lombardi's Narrative Structures and Other Mappings of Power... SOCKS. August 22, 2012. Accessed June 07, 2016.

otherwise invisible power structures linking them. In *An Impeccable State*, the “constellation” aspires to a similar function insofar as it is the construction of a network from archival images and documents that, in its juxtapositions and as a whole, becomes a portrait of the invisible power structure that binds them. The strategies differ, however, in their treatment of the unknown. Where Lombardi acknowledges the limits of what can be verified or the complete unrepresentability of particularly buried connections – he often did this by inserting breaks in his lines – *An Impeccable State* treats these gaps in knowledge as a space for the extension of pre-illustrated trajectories and the projection of a hypothetical overreach of power. In the absence of its representability, some artists perform similar enactments of power – like Martens and Brügger, whose films I will discuss shortly – but the practice of Trevor Paglen deserves mention for its conceptual similarities to that of Lombardi, this time using photography to highlight and “image” the void of government secrecy.

Like Lombardi, Paglen’s is a research-heavy practice, investigating the operations of power that are intentionally obscured (or made invisible) by corporate and state interests. Unlike Lombardi, when confronted with the limits of public knowledge (in this case, of what can be observed), Paglen observes anyway, focusing his lens on the unavailable image. This surfaces in a handful of his projects. In the ongoing series *Limit Telephotography*, classified government sites – surrounded by restricted land and otherwise invisible – are photographed through a super-telephoto lens, producing images which are often so blurred by atmospheric diffusion as to appear abstract and painterly. Similarly, *The Black Sites* (2006) consists of photographs of two secret CIA prisons set up in the early years of the so-called war on terror; on the artist’s word, these images of dilapidated, though seemingly banal buildings around Kabul are haunted by the spectre of torture and rendition, presumably hidden behind their facades. The abstraction of government secrecy again rears its head in *The Other Night Sky* (2007-11), in which Paglen again turns his lens to state infrastructure hidden in plain sight; military reconnaissance satellites are rendered as single stars among many in the night sky, pricks of light that inspire awe at the wonder and expanse of the cosmos, and of the god-like omnipresence of the surveillance state. Here, as in *An Impeccable State*, the projects sit atop a foundation of empirical research in order to confront and image the perimeters of knowledge. With *An Impeccable State*, however, I am not content with viewing the borderlands from afar, as I believe it to be a position from which agency is limited to reaction, waiting for the next move. Two filmmakers, Mads Brügger and Renzo Martens, were greatly influential to my process of theorizing an *active* relationship between the project, its content, and a contingent future.

In his film *The Ambassador* (2011), Danish journalist Mads Brügger investigates the foreign business practice of buying grey-market diplomatic titles from diamond producing African nations in order to gain unfettered, unregulated passage for the purpose of smuggling. The film is a complex blend of (re)enactment, performance and documentary fiction – a strange but effective hybrid of investigative journalism, documentary and performance art. In the opening scenes of the film, footage from hidden cameras show meetings in the UK between Brügger and a number of “diplomatic brokers” where the two discuss, in an ominously roundabout fashion (“this conversation never happened”⁴⁸) the cost and benefits of purchasing an African diplomatic title. After securing a Liberian ambassadorship from a less-than-reputable broker, Brügger travels to the West African country to obtain his documents and the proper signatures before making the trip to his true destination; the diamond producing Central African Republic.

From this point, there is no going back. Here ends my life as a Danish journalist. What awaits me is a life where I can operate freely beyond all moral boundaries known to man, while still being a respectable member of society. A life where I can indulge myself in secret state affairs, enjoy red-carpet treatment, and travel the world with a suitcase full of diamonds. What I am talking about of course, is, a life as [a corrupt European] diplomat [in Africa].^{49 50}

What follows is ninety-two minutes of hidden camera, cinema verite, and research-based exposition on the ‘diplomatic’ practice of backroom bribery, extortion and diamond smuggling. Brügger’s on-screen personality is, for the viewer, simultaneously journalist, diplomat and criminal, a split role that is essential to the construction of the film’s critique. Rather than produce a traditional documentary about corruption, which is by its covert nature unavailable to the lens, Brügger engages in the corruption himself, materializing an otherwise hidden history. The film, by enacting the conditions of corruption, “reproduces the self-same patterns of capitalist inequality that it seeks to document.”⁵¹ One particularly telling scene shows a meeting between local Pygmy villagers and an Indian consultant Brügger has brought in to build a match factory for the purpose of bringing revenue to the area. In his narration Brügger admits an awareness that he is giving the people a false sense of hope, but reminds us that “diplomats do this everyday, on a much larger scale, all over Africa... it’s a part of the game.”⁵² His

⁴⁸ *The Ambassador*. Film. Directed by Mads Brügger. (Denmark. Drafthouse Films. 2011) 00:02:12

⁴⁹ *The Ambassador* : 00:03:00

⁵⁰ I have amended this quote to correct ham-fisted wording that could be construed as suggesting across-the-board corruption on the part of African officials.

⁵¹ Reestorff, Camilla Mohring. "Buying Blood Diamonds and Altering Global Capitalism. Mads Brügger as Unruly Artist in *The Ambassador*." *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 5 (2013). Accessed April 13, 2015.

⁵² *The Ambassador* : 00:60:13

performance of the corrupt 'diplomat' is as much a reality (real to everyone in the film but him) as the other faux diplomats before and after him – the “real” bad guys, as it were. Thus it becomes difficult to draw a distinction between the performance of the filmmaker, and the performances of the criminals he critiques. It is the re-enactment of an untold number of past performances; the typified performance in the present of a condition spanning historical space; and therefore the depiction of (if we do nothing) future exploitations. Brügger's fiction, inserted into present reality, offers up an otherwise concealed truth. In the film *Episode III (Enjoy Poverty)* (2008) Dutch artist Renzo Martens takes a similar approach to neocolonial condescension on the African continent.

In making the film, Martens spent two years living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country subject to ongoing conflict and where an array of international organizations broker aid in the form of money, services and resources for the country. Early in the film, Martens attends a conference for the World Bank in Kinshasa. There with press credentials, he poses a question to the panel about the 1.8 billion dollars in aid received annually by the Congolese government:

This 1.8 billion dollars, what share is that of the Congo's total revenues? And if it is a high percentage, I'd like to know whether the fight against poverty, for which the money is destined, may be an important natural resource for the Congo?⁵³

He is, of course, politely dismissed. But it is this idea – the doling out of international aid defining poverty, in a perverse way, as a national resource – that Martens pursues through the rest of the film. He interviews foreign journalists and artists about the pay they receive for images of Congolese poverty and suffering; he also interviews Congolese photographers making a living by documenting birthdays and wedding celebrations. Hearing about these two image economies, Martens identifies a troubling disparity: foreign journalists make decent wages (roughly 50 dollars per image, expenses paid⁵⁴) documenting suffering and blight, while Congolese photographers, who photograph for their compatriots and are themselves the subjects of violence and injustice, barely manage seventy-five cents per image.⁵⁵ The film goes on to follow Martens as he contacts a group of local photographers and begins instructing them on the techniques of conflict photography; the premise being that if there is money to be made from the image of their suffering, they should be able to participate in that economy. It, unfortunately, goes without saying that when Martens presents their images

⁵³ *Episode III (Enjoy Poverty)*. Film. Directed by Renzo Martens. (Netherlands. Inti Films. 2008): 00:09:20

⁵⁴ *Episode III (Enjoy Poverty)* : 00:42:45

⁵⁵ *Episode III (Enjoy Poverty)* : 00:52:00

to press officers at Médecins Sans Frontières, the images and their makers are denied access.⁵⁶

Episode III is a complicated and at times concerning film; like *The Ambassador*, it treads a fine line between the critique and the perpetuation of injustice and exploitation. It is also a complex implementation of fictional documentary strategies. In the film, Martens' (as a character) performs the white colonial pedagogue, imparting the "wisdom" of the developed world onto "disenfranchised" or otherwise "ignorant" locals in the hope of better integration in the global capitalist economy. Through his interventions with the local photographers, he constructs a fiction (however misplaced it may, in fact, be) oriented toward a potential future where a shift in political and economic structures might give the photographers agency over their representation and economic mobility. The film exists on the planes of past/present/future (or fiction/present/documentary) simultaneously, according to how the viewer positions their reading. In developing *An Impeccable State*, I was quite influenced by the approaches of Brügger and Martens; namely their performativity, functioning as both a critique of their adopted characters and what I perceive as a general dislocation of the works from any documentary perception of historical time. For the video diary (filmed in Turkey), I too inhabit that which I intend to critique; performing the white researcher abroad, testing new and insidious technologies on a far-off population – the inconspicuous "business end" of Western power, and heir to a legacy of social and political control.

The final project I want to discuss is the ambitious *Headless*, an ongoing work by the Swedish duo Goldin+Senneby (Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby). The project is essentially an investigation into the existence and operations of the offshore investment firm Headless Ltd., a shadowy organization registered in the Bahamas. It's many components – ranging from a three part documentary film, the pedagogical display of research materials, to a full-length investigative novel – are outsourced to writers, directors and curators by the artists who, always keeping a measured distance from the project, never personally appear to represent the work, always opting to instead send one of their many collaborators.⁵⁷ On the surface, the project is a thrilling tale (its tropical intrigue is, in a way, reminiscent of the late Elmore Leonard) about the hunt for one of international finance's elusive tendrils, but as one digs deeper into the content, the project begins to thrash wildly, contradicting and folding in on itself, inserting new "facts" only to cut down those it previously established. Soon the entire premise begins to come under question: Headless Inc.; its umbrella company, Sovereign Trust; the novel's author; the project's numerous public faces – does *any* of it really exist? Under scrutiny,

⁵⁶ *Episode III (Enjoy Poverty)* : 01:06:05

⁵⁷ "Goldin+Senneby: Headless." LeapLeapLeap. May 23, 2016. Accessed May 29, 2016.

Headless dissolves into a confusing weave of fact and fiction, as if the world of grey-market finance has infected it with its crypticism. This “bamboozling” on the part of the artists could be intentional as its effect mirrors the legal judo by which offshore finance is able to operate unchecked. It’s been suggested that the artists are more interested in this orchestrated chaos, and less with the real-world implications of offshore finance:

Goldin+Senneby spokesman tells Kim Einarsson, the curator, that they aren’t especially concerned with how money parked offshore tends to be used—drug cartels, terrorism, trafficking, etc.—but rather with the “mythology” created by such invisible corporations. “For them, an offshore company is a kind of dramatic fiction, acted out against the backdrop of the geographical places that the business is connected to.” Their interest in “offshore,” then, as they often call it, is above all formal. As Cameron wrote in a 2014 article in the *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies* describing his work with Goldin+Senneby, the artists seemed to view structures of offshore finance with “a certain degree of creative respect,” impressed by the ingenuity required to create such labyrinthine schemes.⁵⁸

But this supposed emphasis on the ruse alone could threaten to depoliticize the work, reducing it to an “art world parlor game”, with it’s politics liable to be subsumed by the deception of its aesthetics.⁵⁹ Given the similar approach I employ in *An Impeccable State* (the conjuring of an institution that resists inspection) it will be important to continually question the overall character of the work and avoid falling victim to the siren song of the dramatic fiction.

An important distinction between the projects of Brügger, Martens, Goldin+Senneby and myself lies in this question of the fiction’s relationship to its real-world stage. Where Goldin+Senneby perform fictions in an equally fictional space, the fictions of Martens and Brügger play out on a different plane, inserted into real economies, affecting real people, and intentionally provoking real moral and ethical indignation.

Goldin+Senneby wade in murky waters; *Headless* is, after all, a quasi-investigation into a subject of which “the true protagonists intentionally recede from view”. The mirage of Headless Inc., or the Centre for Global Inquiry, are in effect voodoo dolls, cobbled together from the materials at hand so that their elusive referents can be pricked in effigy. They embody a want for understanding, for conversation, and for inclusion.

⁵⁸ Wetzler, Rachel. The Reality TV Novel: Goldin Senneby’s ‘Headless’ Also Lacks a Soul, But That’s Probably the Point. ARTnews. April 5, 2015. Accessed June 07, 2016.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

At a glance, *An Impeccable State* is a survey of the deviant, the individuals and populations that find themselves subject to formulas of exclusion and control. But they are not the focus of my inquiry. Like a photo mosaic – a constellation of images whose true subject is visible only from an appropriate distance – *An Impeccable State* is a portrait not of the mind of the deviant, but of the mind of the state which so detests them. It is an image of neuroses, of megalomania, of indiscriminate paranoias that breed the asylum, the gulag, the centre for deradicalization. It is a returned gaze, looking back at those slow-moving, but relentless, methods by which the bracketing out and subjugation of the “deviant” other is legitimized, normalized, sanitized. *An Impeccable State* follows the trail of what I *can* know, and projects into the void. It is in this spirit – and I think it is one that spans my life and practice – that I offer a final quote. It is taken from a 2009 interview with Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby, where, in their typical fashion, they in turn quote their fictional author, K.D.:

“I know I almost don’t know anything, but I suspect a lot.”

11434 words

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