

## Constructions of Truths

By Joselina Cruz

*“The world itself is now nothing but a series of images—the simulacra that constitute our very life — threatening to drown us in a fraudulent universe that suspends all ties to the real and dissolves the world in simulation.” (Philippe Dubois).<sup>[1]</sup>*

How does one know the truth of images?

In 2013, an animated video was shown at the Venice Biennale’s Austrian Pavilion. It was part of a large-scale installation that included a room full of sketches and some wall text. The video was like watching vintage Disney animation—the catchy song, the bright colors, the happy singing birds, the dancing donkey in a sailor outfit—except this video was a scant three minutes and ran on a loop. Entitled *Imitation of Life*, the work was by Mathias Poledna, and was one of the most exacting (and enjoyable) commentaries on the production and consumption of images in the 21st century. Eschewing the digital, Poledna breaks down the language of animation by collaborating with film studios in California to produce more than 5,000 drawings, sketches and watercolors, with the musical score recorded by a full orchestra in an LA studio. The artist made a Disney-like film with the original system of labour no longer utilized by the animation company itself, a “perfect recreation of something that never existed.”<sup>[2]</sup>

By producing something which we ‘feel’ to have been real through a work of art, the artist presents us with the troubling advent of ‘truthiness,’ wherein we believe in what we feel to be true rather than what the facts support. Sitting inside the installation of *Imitation of Life* watching a cartoon donkey dance and sing, we feel that the animation is an excerpt from a Disney film, and we try our best to remember which one. The sleight of hand produced by Poledna’s work is to present an ‘original’ construction/production of animation which, in light of our century’s remarkable technological advances, can only ever be possible through the digital process. The technological century we live in, together with the current global political chaos and climatic catastrophe has upended our belief systems, with “truths” unhinging our understanding and experience of what is real. For anything as visually stunning as a crisp animation of singing birds and a deer peering out of the bushes to be anything else other than digital, is quite spectacular.

The exhibition *Constructions of Truths* is a proposal to engage criticality from the audience, a way to negotiate the continually shifting perceptions of reality. We need to be able to parse truthiness which reveals to us how degraded the condition of truth is in media, government, nonfiction, and elsewhere. The image has come to represent what

is real, with unquestioning acceptance. In a time when the image is never more far from the truth than it is closer to fiction, we have to be aware of this shift in the 'truth' of the image. The 21st century's digital turn has blurred the media of photography and film, producing the post-photographic image so altered through its various layers that the 'original' is no longer a matter of concern. For what is now the originating image? When we are inundated with images everyday, what happens with our perception of the world and its realities? Are we able to distinguish realities from constructed ones? Are we able to reconcile what is believable and what is not?

"...what happens once photography no longer reproduces the world as we perceive it but as it "invents" it, once it makes us see things that are in their very definition outside the reference of our perception of the apparent world? Does the old idea of resemblance (mimesis), which was still superimposable on the idea of the index, remain a criterion compatible with the image-fiction, and if so, at what price?"<sup>[3]</sup>

These questions are not only important but necessary at time when the ubiquity of images such as still photographs or moving images have become part of our lives. All aspects of media are now mostly image, the digital turn having become the pervasive vehicle and norm of communication. The digital has "flattened , erased, annulled the difference of nature between the kinds of images, and sounds... now all lodged under the same undifferentiated digital label of reproduction... there is no difference between a text, an image, and noise...all data...encoded signals"<sup>[4]</sup>. Unlike Hito Steryerl's defense of the poor image, when it speaks of its obvious fractures and losses, the works in the exhibition present ways in which realities, i.e., things, images, acts can be interrupted not only formally, but content-wise. In each work there is a ghost, an echo, a tell that signals the artist's intrusion whether through narrative, the image or the media. In some, the ruptures are blatant, rough, a deterioration (Ramin Haerizadeh/Rokni Haerizadeh/Hesam Rahmanian, Atienza); there are those where the media itself is downgraded (Cuevas) or broken down to their most basic elements (Taniguchi, Wilkins), but imperceptible to the audience; in others, the very nature of transfer is embodied (Fadhil, Tzu Nyen), with no conceit to the construction and/ or re-construction of the final work. Internal contradictions, the absurdities in the treatment of narrative, breaking down the medium itself, the subtle slippages from the authentic, and the challenge to technology's control of how we access our realities, all come into play within the internal structure of the work, in its production or the final material. The world is revealed to be nothing but a series of images presenting various permutations of reality. **Maria Taniguchi's** *Untitled (crystal palace + gauguin)* (2009) are photographic images of the dinosaurs at the Crystal Palace Park in South East London which in turn are actual pictures of the giant statues in Dinosaur Court. The inaccuracies lie in the sculptures themselves, and the moment of history when the sculptures were built (1850s) based on imprecise information from dinosaur skeletons. The artist further

layers a false narrative description of the images. **James N. Kienitz Wilkins's** *This Act Lies* (2018) presents us with a single image of a Styrofoam cup and a 32-minute monologue that is both about the image, and not. The film's single image of an ordinary coffee cup, and the weaving monologue shows us the limitations of observation—of looking at something while listening to a sometimes connected and most often disconnected narrative. **Luay Fadhil's** short film *Scribe* (2017) also manages to produce a space where re-constructions can occur. A man writes to his absent wife via a sidewalk scribe, recounting deep insecurities, problems, and intimate thoughts while another man (ardahalchis found all over Baghdad) listens. As the artist says: the scribe knows all our secrets. **Ramin Haerizadeh/Rokni Haerizadeh/Hesam Rahmanian's** silent video *From Sea to Dawn* (2016 to 2017) shows an excerpt from VICE News, where immigrants escape on a rubber boat headed for Europe. The artists undercut the chaos by removing the sound and having subtitles 'narrate.' Through their distinct practice of unsettling the image via the disruption of figures through filling in and colouring in details of the news clip. By drawing over faces, erasing bodies, adding details, the news clip takes on the feel of a stop motion animation short film. The situation of 200 people traveling on rubber dinghies from the African continent to seek refuge in Europe take on a sliding gravitas as revealed by the subtitles, but are undercut by gaudy neon colours that outline and fill in the images.

**Ho Tzu Nyen's** *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (2016) is an ongoing project which amalgamates images from multiple sources into this dictionary of a region. A collection of images define a letter in the alphabet and these slip between fact and truthiness, what region means, and what it does not. **Thao Nguyễn Phan's** work *Becoming Alluvium* (2019) is a complex film that retells the cycle of reincarnation of two young children, and told within a composition of actual film footage taken by the artist, drawings, watercolours, and 18th-century lithographic illustrations. The film, whose script is taken from several sources (Lao and Khmer folktales, Marguerite Duras's *The Lover*, Italo Calvino and Rabindranath Tagore), moves between brief narrations in French and subtitles. **Minerva Cuevas's** *Le Venganza del Elefante* (2007) is a series of 12 vintage slides (ca 1897) drawn by German artist Wilhelm Busch. The images which show "bad behaving" animals (a common theme for Busch), places an elephant toying with a black boy who attacks and injures an elephant. The original images come with a text which is clearly racist as it equates the black boy with an animal, in this case the irritated pachyderm. Cuevas removes the text and shows only the slides, disrupting the narrative by mixing up the slides and thus complicating the storyline. **Martha Atienza's** *Man in Suit* (2009) is a comedic take on a suit and how a piece of clothing disrupts our reading and expectations of people through their clothing. Atienza films a variety of people whom she each asks to wear the suit when they go to work. The resulting video is ridiculous, funny, and telling at the same time: we see a farmer wearing a black suit as he plows his rice fields with his carabao; a chicken farmer dressed in the same suit

goes into his coop to collect eggs into a basket and even a tricycle driver in a black suit go about his day plying the streets and picking up passengers. **Shuruq Harb's** new commission *The Jump* (2020) seeks out the experience of a blind woman in various aspects of living in contested spaces in the Middle East. It might just be poetic to consider that a blind woman defies the urgency of the image at its most basic: vision.

Using the mediation of the moving image to speak about ways in which we inspect the world, we bring to bear the methods utilised by the artists in the exhibition to produce images and narratives that contemplate the realities of our times by purposefully bringing into stark focus the boundaries between fiction, systems that present truths, and the points wherein we distinguish between the two. Artistic production has become adept at copying nature. From 19th century *plein air* painting, hyperrealism, photography, HD, AI, clones, we have always sought to see beyond simulacra. The more we race towards copying reality, perfecting nature, the more we lose ourselves in the terrifying frame of a copied world, the more the flaws float to the surface. In Poledna's work, *Imitation of Life*, the donkey sings that "I got a feeling it's all a frame/ it's a well-known old army game/ fooling with me," again and again in that three minute loop; we realize that not only is the aesthetic form a critique, the content too now mocks the truth.

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[1] Dubois, Philippe. "Trace-Image to Fiction-Image: The Unfolding of Theories of Photography from the 80s to the present." *October* No. 158, (Fall 2016): 160

[2] Charlotte Eckler, trans. "Another Image, a different song: On Mathias Poledna at Secession, Vienna", accessed January 3, 2020, <http://www.mayrevue.com/en/another-image-a-different-song/>

[3] *Ibid*, p, 163

[4] *Ibid*, p 159