

SEAN KELLY

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JOHAN GRIMONPREZ | *blue orchids* |

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In describing the indomitable corporations that shape the global arms trade, Riccardo Privitera, star of Johan Grimonprez's film *blue orchids* (2017), takes a long draw from his Merit cigarette, and shapes his stout fingers into a claw. Like an octopus, he suggests, Lockheed Martin dictates U.S. foreign policy by infiltrating all three branches of government. As an unrepentant arms dealer who speaks candidly of his experience in South Africa, Argentina, and Warsaw, he would know—we think. "The thing about politicians is that they are very much like prostitutes," Privitera explains, "but only more expensive."



Installation view: Johan Grimonprez, *blue orchids*, 2017. 48 min. Sean Kelly, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

In *blue orchids*—the name is borrowed from a brothel, another business venture of Privitera's—Grimonprez sets up a dialogue in which the numerous players (and victims) of the international arms trade are embodied in the voices of two contrarians. On one side is Privitera, the chain smoking, lazy-eyed, portly veteran who boasts of a flamboyantly successful career. Opposite him is Chris Hedges, a former *New York Times* war correspondent and prolific author. Hedges is ferociously intelligent—quoting St. Augustine alongside Julien Benda—and wears his scars from two decades of reporting in the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans on his sleeve. As a pair, these two witnesses may seem to be enemies: one perpetuates war through bribes, the other insists upon the need for sensorial truth. Yet it is their collective disillusionment—though starkly varied in its manifestation—that has propelled them into opposing roles. In today's interminable war on terror, Grimonprez reveals, only the monstrous corporations win.

Formally, everything in this forty-eight-minute film reflects the transcendent scale of the military industrial apparatus. Four decades of global conflict emerge as a web of corporate-fueled empire building; Privitera and Hedges speak of different wars years and continents apart, and footage from one battle easily slips into another across the globe. In one sequence, a visual reference to the Sandline affair—in which a British-based firm

secretly supplied the mercenaries and weapons to Papua New Guinea that enabled the invasion of Bougainville—bleeds into a security-camera feed of the Dubai hotel room assassination of Hamas leader Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh. Next, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair is questioned for his 2007 decision to suspend an inquiry of fraud into British Aerospace (BAE). Before answering, he giggles dismissively at the shorter man standing next to him—former President George W. Bush. Such visual sampling echoes Grimonprez's work in *DIAL H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997), an earlier film comprised of archival clips of airplane hijackings, the new “terrorism” so easily repackaged as living room entertainment.

At points, such narrative destabilization is paralyzing. In *blue orchids*, while Privitera pontificates on the “sell by” date engineered into all munitions, his callus words are overlaid with telescopic aerial footage, clearly recorded across a great expanse of space. We see five glowing figures, walking in slow motion across arid ground. Bullets fire off-camera in rapid succession, but still, the bodies continue to amble. Two excruciating seconds pass. “Bombs have a time limit,” echoes Privitera outside the frame, “they are like food.” Dust rises in sharp spurts, and all five bodies fall. All we can do, it feels, is wait for bullets to catch up to flesh.

Is that all we can do? An essential element in Grimonprez's practice is the space he insists upon for hope. Yes, the power concentrated within corporations like BAE and Halliburton is horrifically sublime; they are, for our immediate purpose, omnipotent. But as Rebecca Solnit has written: “Hope is the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand.” Solnit is a buoy for Grimonprez; he quotes her often in conversation, and though the aim of his work may seem Sisyphean, his films—like Solnit's searing prose—gesture towards alternatives and dissent.

In *Shadow World*, Grimonprez's feature-length documentary film from which footage was cut to comprise *blue orchids*, he interviews Muntazer al-Zaidi, the Iraqi reporter who swiftly, and infamously, threw his shoes at then President George W. Bush. “It was just a shoe, but it had a mouth,” al-Zaidi says. “So the world would wake up to the gravity of the perpetrated crimes.” And in the current installation, *blue orchids* is followed by *Raymond Tallis | on tickling* (2017), a short cinematic conversation in which the neuroscientist/philosopher argues not only for the vitality of love, but for tickling as a way to re-enter the mind-body problem. Taken as they are one after the other, each of the eight minutes of *on tickling* feels like a shot of oxygen in a chamber of darkness.

Recently, over bright matcha green tea, I asked Grimonprez about the concept of resistance, and if he felt his work was a part of it. Thinking for a moment, he spoke of the mycorrhizal network in the forest, an underground system of fungi through which trees and other plants can transfer nutrients to those in need. When one tree is dying, he explained, the others sense it, and come to its aid. “What if survival of the fittest doesn't mean survival of the strongest,” he asked, “but rather, the one who is able to cooperate?”

The alternative for Riccardo Privitera, it turns out, is a fate unseen by most corporate weapons executives—jail time. In his final interview with Andrew Feinstein, Grimonprez's collaborator and author of the feature film's eponymous book, *The Shadow World*, Privitera casually explains away his conviction of fraud as a case of mistaken identity. And as we learn in an interview with his ex-wife that opens *blue orchids*, identities are something Privitera has in spades. His stories untenable, his legacy toxic, Privitera, in all his shape-shifting deceptions, is the perfect embodiment of the global arms industry.