

SEANKELLY

Neil, Johnathon T.D. "Johan Grimonprez |blue orchids| Sean Kelly Gallery," *Art Review*, March, 2017.

ArtReview

Johan Grimonprez | *blue orchids* |

Sean Kelly, New York 27 January – 11 March

There is a moment in Johan Grimonprez's short arthouse documentary |*blue orchids*| (2017) when Chris Hedges, former war correspondent and now well-known leftwing author and activist, describes the emotional toll of being exposed to the trauma of war – sleeplessness, nightmares, fatigue – but more than just these symptoms, Hedges explains how their aggregate effect makes it increasingly hard, and sometimes impossible, for one to connect with another human being. Exposure to the horrors of war creates a chasm across which love – love in the sense of being oneself by being with and through others – cannot reach. When faced with that radical alienation, not just from others but from oneself – from one's own humanness – Hedges confesses that it's understandable why the suffering choose suicide.

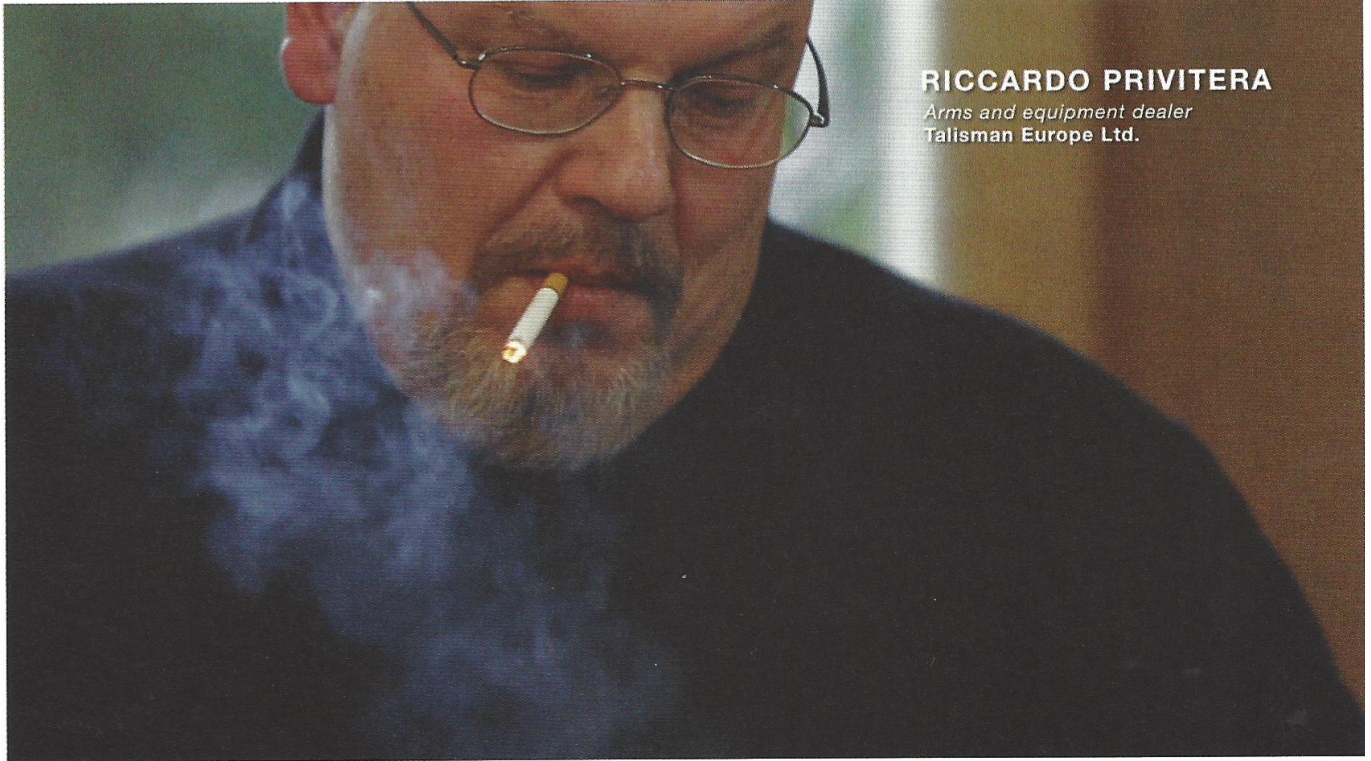
Through Grimonprez's camera, Hedges is a mesmerising figure. Deliberate, weary and earnest, Hedges describes the war machinery of modern states with a knowingness that suggests one is hearing about the internal operations of some secret society. And one suspects that this is very much the point, as the other character that dominates the screen is someone named Riccardo Privitera, whose credit in the film describes him as an 'arms and equipment

dealer' for Talisman Europe Ltd ('dissolved'). Privitera has the best lines – "politicians are just like prostitutes, only more expensive" – and spins titbits of conspiracy for the camera through what can only be described as a shit-eating grin. (At one point he pulls out a submachine gun as if to burnish his arms-dealer credentials.)

Grimonprez flits back and forth between Hedges and Privitera, who are talking about the same thing: the arms trade and state-sponsored violence. The interviews derive from *Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade* (2016), Grimonprez's feature-length documentary, but in |*blue orchids*| their juxtaposition is meant to take us past this editorial content, past the documentarian's favoured terrain of truth, falsity and revelation, towards something more intimate: Hedges and Privitera are interesting not for what they know and can tell us, but because they are damaged. They appear to need the camera, the audience, to reconnect them to themselves. In this |*blue orchids*| is a kind pornography of grief and denial (the title is lifted from the name of an escort service that Privitera supposedly used to help him close his deals), but it is also a labour of love, the kind of love that Hedges describes as the only saving grace for the traumatised.

Cut throughout |*blue orchids*| is CCTV footage compiled by the Dubai security authorities of a Mossad hit squad that assassinated Hamas military leader Mahmoud al-Mabhouh. In it we see figures identified as members of the Israeli security organisation arriving at the Dubai airport, arriving at the target's hotel, getting off the elevator on the target's floor, etc. One presumes that this bit of archival footage is meant to give us a picture of the true stakes of the global arms trade (al-Mabhouh was in Dubai to do an arms deal) and that all of the actors in this geopolitical theatre are bad ones, morally, but the effect is to distance the viewer from the upfront humanity, flawed though it may be, of Hedges and Privitera. Grimonprez cuts in other imagery as well, such as the famous photograph of three gents perusing the stacks of Holland House library, in London, after it was bombed by the Germans in 1940. But these appear as one-offs, and can be granted their claim to montage poetics. Not the al-Mabhouh through-line, however. There's no humanity there, no meaningfulness, just the unblinking eye of the security state, which, again one must presume, will never do itself in no matter what it sees.

Jonathan T.D. Neil



RICCARDO PRIVITERA

Arms and equipment dealer
Talisman Europe Ltd.

| *blue orchids* | (still), 2017, video, colour, sound, 48 min.
Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

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