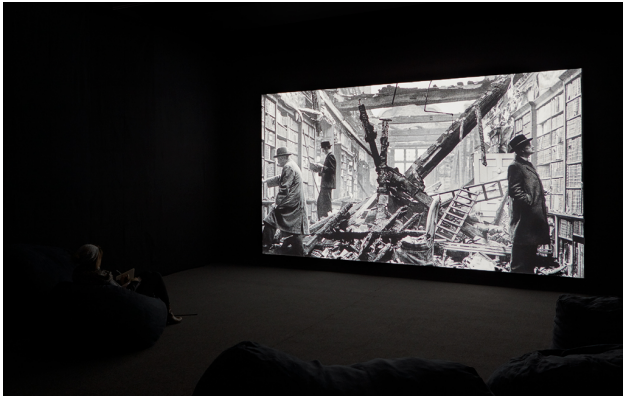


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ARTNEWS

The Uncertain Dependability of Truth: Johan Grimonprez's New Film Makes Clear It's One Thing We Can Count On



Installation view of "Johan Grimonprez: | blue orchids |," 2017, at Sean Kelly, New York.
JASON WYCHE, NEW YORK/COURTESY SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK

The question, possibly of the century: How did America end up with a reality-TV president? Might it have been Russian hackers or disenfranchised voters? *blue orchids* (2017), a film by the New York-based artist Johan Grimonprez showing at Sean Kelly gallery, proposes a virtually incontrovertible answer: the uncertain dependability of "truth."

The film itself is a shortened version of *The Shadow World*, a feature-length documentary that Grimonprez premiered at last year's Tribeca Film Festival. Based on a book of the same name by Andrew Feinstein, *The Shadow World* is a journalistic deep dive into the duplicitous international arms trade. *blue orchids*, by contrast, is a portrait of two men with stories that provide a dialectical backdrop to the film's underlying theme. The individuals are Chris Hedges, the *New York Times*'s grizzled former war correspondent, and Riccardo Privitera, a chain-smoking former arms and equipment dealer who traded through his now-dissolved company, Talisman Europe Ltd.



Still from Johan Grimonprez's *blue orchids* (2017), showing "Apache Target."
COURTESY U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

"If WikiLeaks had happened in 1968, we would have had a world upheaval," Privitera speculates in an authoritative manner, smirking behind his goatee as he continues. "When WikiLeaks happens today—tell me about it." By way of backstory, Privitera also tells the camera how he served with the South African special forces during Apartheid. This information turns out to be completely false. The last we see of Privitera, he's serving seven years in a Portuguese prison for crimes he claims never to have committed. By way of example then, Privitera has proven his point.

So, what has changed in our relationship to truth between 1968 and the present time?

"The problem," opines Hedges, "is power." Citing a passage from French political philosopher Julien Benda's *The Treason of Intellectuals*, Hedges explains how society can serve "privilege and power, or justice and truth." By making compromises for the first set, says Hedges, "the more we diminish the capacity for justice and truth."



Still from Johan Grimonprez's *blue orchids* (2017), showing "Riccardo Privitera."
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK

At one point, Grimonprez cuts to footage of Tony Blair being verbally attacked by a rogue filmmaker during a press conference. The interloper accuses Blair of war crimes, claiming that the former British prime minister accepted payouts from JP Morgan following the Iraq War. Call this conspiracy theory, if you will. In this day and age, Grimonprez is arguing, what couldn't be?

This is, in fact, a central tenet of his film. It is neither quite documentary nor fiction. Instead, *blue orchids*, like the work of British filmmaker Adam Curtis, exists as a genre unto itself. A philosophical approach to illuminating a reality otherwise shrouded in the darkness of capitalism and power. In that sense, it should be shown in schools, as well as galleries.

Not so incidentally, *blue orchids* is followed by a short film titled *Raymond Tallis | on tickling* (2017). In it, Tallis, a neurologist and philosopher, describes the act of tickling as being a sensation we can only experience through physical contact with another human. Tallis ties this idea to consciousness, which he argues can only exist in relation to other human beings. Based on that, he reformulates the well-trodden Descartes dictum *Cogito Ergo Sum*, with his own version. "We dialogue, therefore we are."