huwwara - anybody, looking

a participative dis/play

by knowbotic research

initial scene

The work restages a situation from 24 March 2004, when the 14-year-old Palestinian boy Hussam Abdo from Nablus appeared in the international head- lines. Hussam Abdo had entered the Huwwara checkpoint in the West Bank with an explosive belt strapped tightly to his body. Carrying a detonator in his hand, he ran towards the Israeli soldiers who immediately pointed their we- apons at him. Terrified, he lifted his arms without detonating the bomb and screamed that he didn't want to die. The soldiers then used a bomb-disposal robot to offer him a knife so that he could defuse the belt. After removing the bomb, the boy had to undress down to his underpants and was taken away by the soldiers who covered him with their oversized uniform jackets.

This scene, which was first shown and interpreted on Israeli Television - Chan- nel 2, vanished from the headlines, to re-appear a short time after that in the amateur archives and social networks of the internet (Youtube). There it has been commented upon and interpreted for years (1). knowbotic research use the internet archived TV-material as the starting point for this work.

possible scene

huwwara _ anybody, looking re-narrates the showdown between these two an-
tagonists: the Palestinian boy sent with the promise of attaining paradise and
the Israeli bomb-disposal robot, both of them acting, in a wider sense, remote
controlled.
However, this piece of work considerably changes the way the scene goes. In
this virtual re-staging, a 3-dimensional computer animation, both figures lose
sight of the logic of their actions which had given rise to their encounter in
the first place: The assassin does not defuse the explosive – he does not ac-
complish to grasp the knife handed over to him by the robot so that he can
cut off the belt.
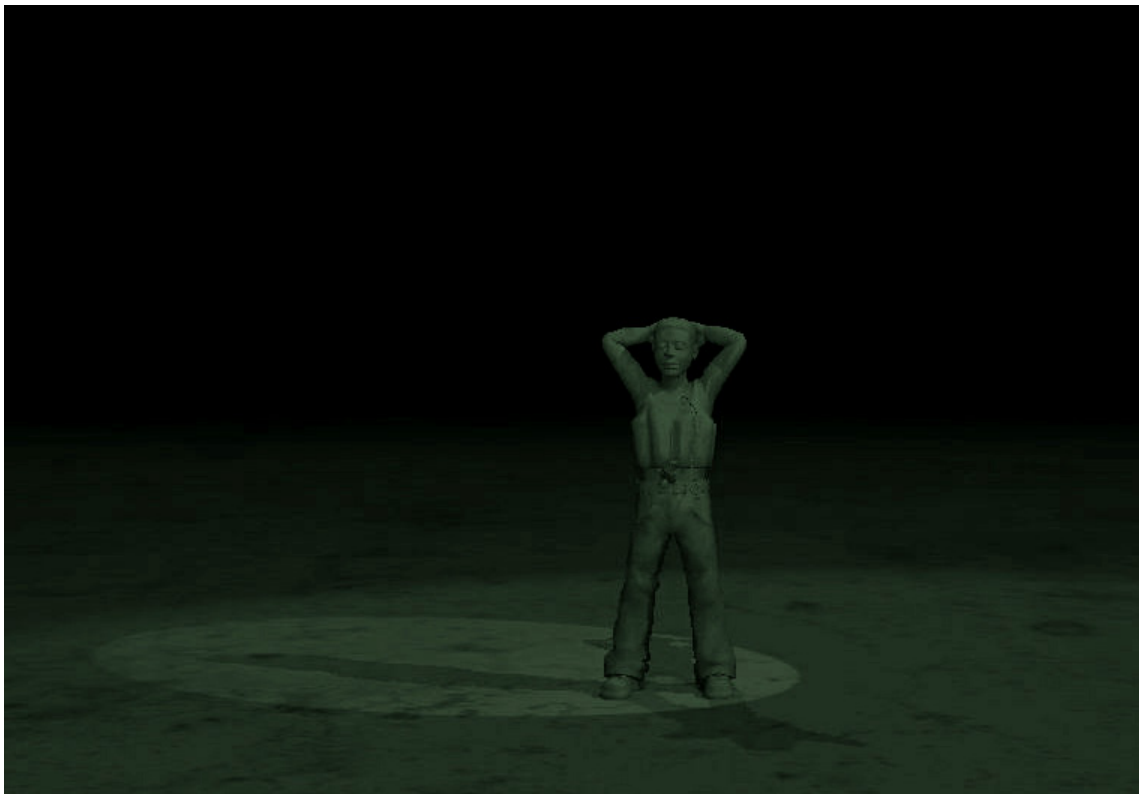
modified narrative

Just as the boy touches the knife, these two interdependent opponents ag-
gregate and become one. Their two machine-like bodies merging into an new,
over-sized, artificial being: This being brings together the elements of the ro-
botic vehicle: a crawler-type undercarriage, grippers, claws and motors, with
the elements of the explosive belt: pockets to hold explosives, cables, deto-
nators and tapes. What is more, the appearing mutant being also consists of
objects that have broken out of the security architecture of the checkpoint,
things like concrete parts of road blocks, turnstiles, the cupola of a watch
tower, car tires, supply canisters, soldiers' helmets, but also a cool box, a gas
bottle and a beverage can that have been lying around, and similar objects
left behind by those who have passed through the checkpoint.
The disoriented and paradoxically hybrid being thus created, divests both
actors in this scene of their operational logic and leads towards a tempora-
rily suspended, not yet identified actor, a fall out and remnant of action and
architecture.

scratching the time of narration

The huwwara _ anybody, looking project will be set up as an installation con-
sisting of different elements, media and viewing formats.

    - Element one will be a audio sequence, a sound manipulated voice
remembering and narrating the checkpoint incident in an in-between state
of testimony and fading, dream-like memory. At the end of this text sequence
the narrator merges, on the narrative level, with the protagonist in the scene.

    - Element two of the installation consists of a single-screen computer
animation, manipulated in its temporal rundown and in its camera movements
within the scene; slow motion and acceleration as well as different views of
observation are used to vary how the scene could be perceived and looked at.
In the end of the animation, the gaze of the hybrid being overlays with the
glance of the observer in the installation.

- In element three this hybrid overlay of views (the view of the animated being observing the scene, the view of the observer observing the installation) is presented and enacted in space as a manipulable video: an infra-red video sequence showing a night pan-shot over a Palestinian city silhouette can be scratched actively in its temporality. A kind of sound radar tracks the movements of the observers in space and translates them into parameters which manipulate the time flow and the direction of the video. The observers become part of a double screen projection, where the two projections present two slightly different positions in time of the video sequence.

In addition to this, all three elements appear in different, inherent temporalities. The observer "scratches" his/her intuitive glances, the animation runtime is explored regarding its various possible rhythms and perspectives, and constantly sways back and forth between reversible states, while the audio sequence shifts between documentation, testimony, and semi-fictive memory.What emerges is an explorative spatial narrative, in which the visitors are scratching the time of narration (repetitions, jumps in time, prolongations, slowdowns), on one hand re-enacting the show-down between the two protagonists, on another enacting a showdown between observer and his/her knowledge, pre-formatted by the media, about the "reality" of the Middle East conflict, questioning his/her "third position".

Contexts

superheroes

KR recognise this idea of a transformation into a superhero from child-rearing techniques; these have long used the image of the hero, as well as metaphors of good/evil and friend/foe to provide role models about how to act in conflict situations. Nowadays, such figures are more present than ever in blockbuster movies, mangas (here too often as ambivalent characters) and comics (as much in the West as in the Middle East - see the children's TV series of Hamas) and they are attractive not only to the teenage group of television viewers. Such figurations override the political narrative with speculative, often infernal action scenarios and thus over-affirm ideological constructions of good and evil, of justifiable and unjustifiable actions.

machinic phantasies

The aggregated hybrid computer being is reminiscent of imaginary human-like figures, the homunculi (for example, the homunculus in Faust 2 (2), Frankenstein's monster, the Golem). However, the construction which appears in the animated scene is not a catalyst for magical practices or a mere helpmate in the fulfillment of machinic phantasies of power. This figure provides an outlet of the lethal binary tension in the scene. The two protagonists involved (the boy as the walking bomb of his mission and the bomb defusal robot as an extension of the military apparatus are entrapped in their scope of action, blinded by ideological images of the enemy, driven by mythical promises. The new creature apparently becomes a dysfunctional figure that fails to live up to the expectations of an attractive superhero who could break through and solve this conflict like a kind of terminator.

hybrid representation

huwwara _ anybody, looking provides an experimental political visual representation. It comes up with an hybrid incorporation– the two extremely over-coded protagonists are replaced by an opaque narrative figuration displaying the emptiness inside the overcodifications. The work poses the question as to whether such hybrid forms lend a new potentiality in their readings and, as a result, could enable to extend political narratives and ways of self-reflection.

The observer's gaze and the looking space of a third position

huwwara _ anybody, looking provides the observer, "the third position", with the opportunity to carry out various tests on his/her ways of looking at the scene's imagery, and enables him/her to intervene in different ways into his/her own modes of perception.

knowbotic research are more interested in the gaze and the looking space of the observer than in the traditional reading of meanings of images. Looking as an open process has to be continuously questioned by the observer, enabled and provoked by the manipulated time and perspective changes in the installation's image flows. Such a reflective gaze does not provide an ostensible identification of the observer with media-formatted images but emphasizes the critical confrontation with them.

The computer animation introduces a dark hybrid being – an interface and suture within the display of the TV mediated scene – and thus provides access to a "narrative of strangeness", an opaque extension to the existing imagery applied from both sides of the political antagonism in the Middle East.

After each cycle, the computer animation shifts towards an apparently inconspicuous, unmanipulated city silhouette at night, confronting the observer directly with his/her (preformatted) way of looking and his/her expectations in times of (image) wars.
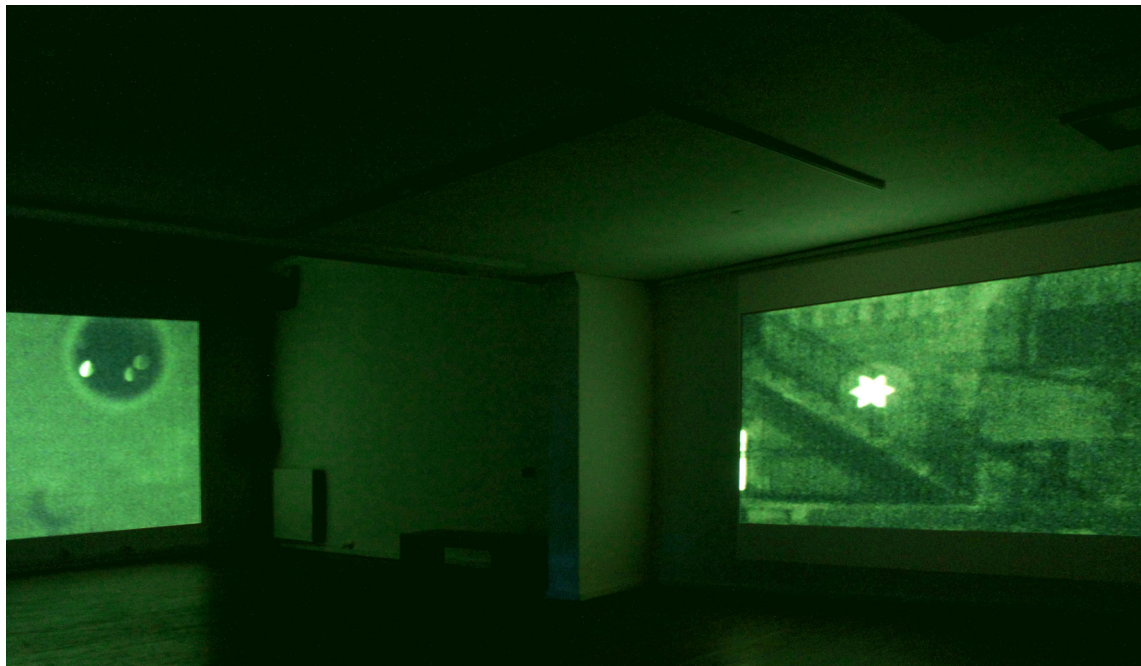
1 The barely three-minute long Israeli TV report was discovered on the Internet in Youtube, (went online on 18 July 2006 and clicked 2,143,117 times as of June 2009). The report shows an intimidated boy being ordered by a soldier who is off camera to remove his explosive belt. The commentary spoken in Hebrew by a TV presenter and the English subtitles convey the lack of understanding for youths who are sent into a war of terror, acting as living weapons, barely conscious of the consequences of their own actions.

2 In the second part of Goethe's drama "Faust", an unusual situation occurs: Faust, rendered unconscious by the explosion in the first act, is lying on a couch in his old study and, as such, is suddenly eliminated as the protagonist in the first scene of the second act. Mephisto too, who perhaps would be the most obvious candidate to become the replacement protagonist, cannot assume this role, as he is unable to help the unconscious hero and therefore seems to be unable to cope with the situation. In their stead, Goethe brings in a completely new, artificially created character, Homunculus. This fantastical being then proceeds to occupy the main role in the action, even after a later scene when Faust has once again regained consciousness.

"If this thing [Homunculus] does not indicate unremittingly a wanton state, if it does not even compel the reader to divine what lies beyond his own boundaries, then it is of no value at all; until now, I think, a good head and reason have enough to do if one intends to understand all that is concealed there within." J. W. Goethe on the Homunculus in Faust 2

[Translator's note: this is the translator's own translation of this quote by Goethe and does not correspond to any already existing translation thereof.]