



huwara\_checkpoint.exe  
knowbotic research

### Initial scene

The work reenacts a situation from 24 March 2004, when the 14-year-old Palestinian boy Hussam Abdo from Nablus appeared in the international headlines.

He had entered the Huwara 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 weapons 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 bring 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 on Israeli television channel II, vanished from the headlines, to re-appear a short time after that in the amateur archives and social networks of the internet (Youtube), where it has been commented upon and interpreted for years.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The barely 3-minute 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.

### Reenactment

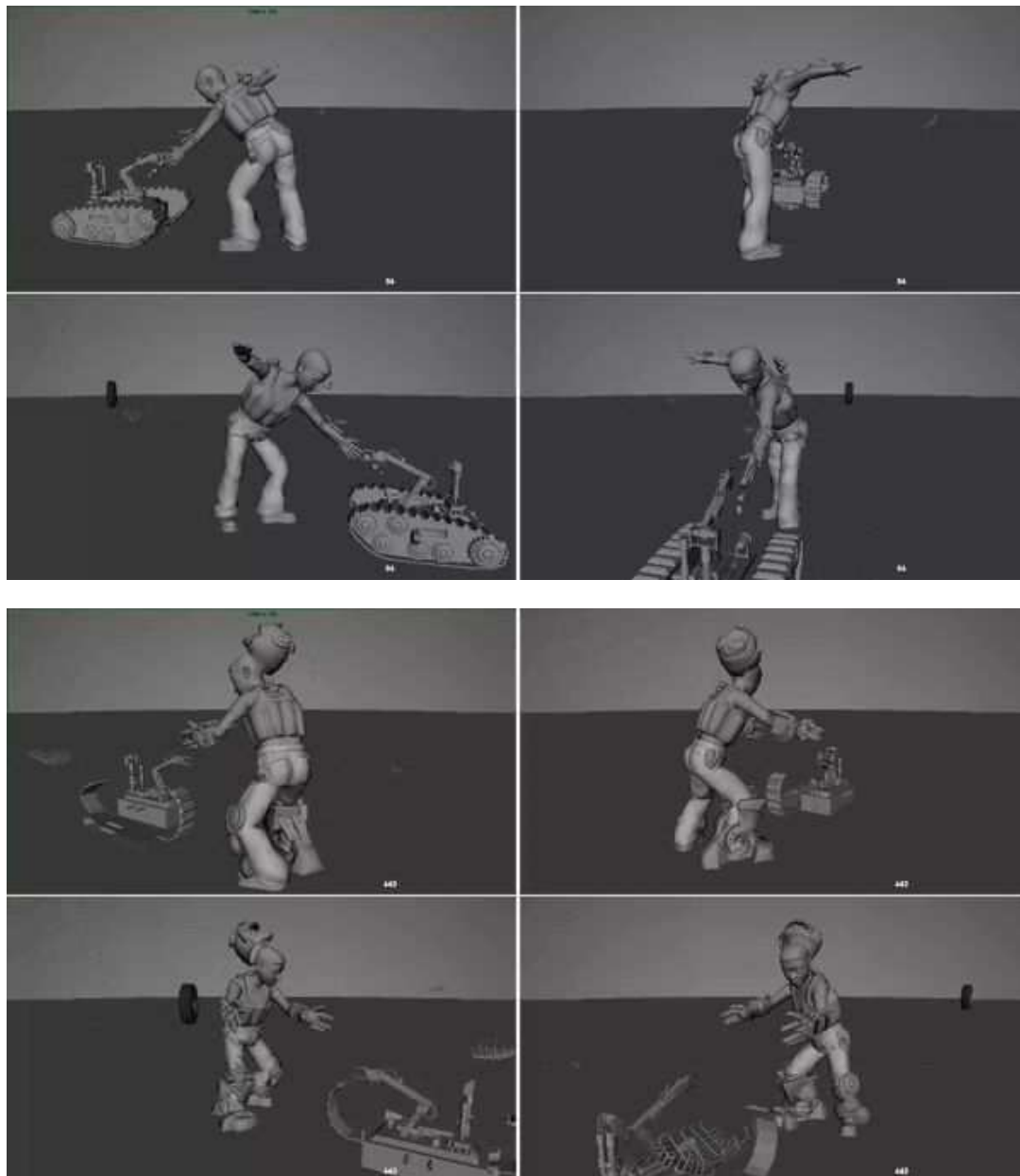
huwara\_checkpoint.exe re-stages the showdown between these two parties – the Palestinian martyr sent with the promise of attaining paradise and the Israeli bomb-disposal robot, both of them acting in a wider sense remote controlled.

However, this piece of work has considerably changed the way the scene goes. In this virtual reenactment, 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 grasp the knife handed over to him by the robot so that he can cut off the belt.



### Modified scene

Just as the knife is being handed over, these two interdependent opponents transform and become one. Their two machinelike bodies – a libidinous killing machine and a military bomb-defusing machine – merging into an over-dimensionally large, artificial new being. This being brings together the elements of the robotic vehicle: a crawler-type undercarriage, grippers, claws and motors with the elements of the explosive belt: pockets to hold explosives, cables, detonators and tapes. What is more, the mutant creature which then materialises also consists of objects that have broken out of the security architecture of the checkpoint, things like concrete blocks from road blocks, turnstiles, car tires, supply canisters, soldiers' helmets, but also rubbish bags that have been lying around and similar objects left behind by those who have passed through the checkpoint. The disoriented and paradoxically chimera-like being thus created, a homunculus as it were, divests both of the actors in this scene of their operational logic and leads the scene into a suspended emptiness that lacks identification.







### Participation of the observer

The `huwara_checkpoint.exe` project will presumably be set up as a participatory installation. It will be possible to modify the animation in its temporal rundown; prolongation and acceleration are used to vary how the scene is perceived and also allow for a reversal of what happens. (The technical interface of the observer has not yet been laid down in the current development stage, we are currently thinking about a kind of sound radar in the exhibition room).

`huwara_checkpoint.exe` does not take sides and does not offer any identification with either one of these two representatives of the Middle East conflict. Nevertheless, the work provides the observer with the opportunity to carry out various experiments and to intervene in different ways into the scene's encoding systems. It generates a new, but hybrid construction - a transformer - in order to provide access to altered points of view and "narrations" from the demonising imagery applied on both sides.

These experiments and intervention happen on several levels in the computer animation:

- at the visual level, that is, in way the transformation of the two opponents is visualised (scaling, opaque materiality)
- at audio track level (command activation, instructions, also to some extent the soldiers' voices and the young man's voice from the original material, the television presenter as well as off-screen directors' instructions pertaining to the re-staging) and
- at the level of interaction – the way the scene is looked at, the different perspectives of it, and of the parties involved in it and the checkpoint, which can be altered and turned around.

In addition to this, the transformation is given its own temporality. The action slows down – the observer "scratches" the course of events, the transformation searches for its own rhythms and sways constantly back and forth between reversible states.



### Outlook

The visual material in the animation is interspersed with documentary material from Huwara Checkpoint (the plan is to install a 360-degree panorama photograph onsite made up of individual photos, if the required military permission can be obtained), with current published or blogged material from the Internet (i.e. from Israeli human rights groups, checkpoint watchers).



## Contexts

### Machinic Phantasies

The transformed, chimera-like, mutant being is reminiscent of imaginary humanlike figures, the homunculi (for example, the homunculus in Faust <sup>2</sup>, Frankenstein's monster, the Golem). However, the hybrid Huwara homunculus which appears in the scene is apparently not a catalyst for magical practices or a mere helpmate in the fulfilment of machinic phantasies of power. This figure acts as an outlet for the lethal binary tension in the scene. The two people involved (the boy as the walking bomb of those who have him in their command and the military robot as an extension of a soldier) do not have any room for self-determined action; both are blinded by ideological images of the enemy. The creature becomes a dysfunctional reversible figure for both parties. The emerging mutant also fails to live up to the expectations of an attractive superhero (3) who could break through and solve this conflict like a kind of Terminator.

### Superheroes

We recognise this idea of a transformation into a superhero/transformer 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 blockbusters, mangas 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 under-16 age group of television viewers, but also to the ideologically seducible observer living without prospects. Such binary figurations override the political narrative with speculative, often infernal action scenarios and thus over-affirm the opaque differentiation between good and evil, between this side or the other side of a boundary, between justifiable and unjustifiable actions.



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<sup>2</sup> 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 the first scene when Faust has once again regained consciousness.

*"If this thing (Note: 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



### Hybrid representations

huwara\_checkpoint.exe provides us with an experimental, political representation in various forms of the inability to act and the inability to govern in conflict zones. It comes up with hybrid incorporations and opaque figurations – extremely overcoded protagonists such as suicide bombers and high-tech military equipment are replaced by narrative elements which are difficult to decode. The piece poses the question as to whether such hybrid forms - complex and not always obviously transparent incorporations of the underlying conditions lend a new potentiality in their readings and, as a result, enable the involved parties to extend the political narratives?<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>3</sup> Concerning zones of indifference and opaque subjects:

*It is as if all that we have experienced during these years has fallen into an opaque zone of indifference, in which everything becomes confused and unintelligible.*

*[...] But it is by starting from this uncertain terrain and from this opaque zone of indistinction that today we must once again find the path of another politics, of another body, of another word. I would not feel up to forgoing this indistinction of public and private, of biological body and body politic, of zoe and bios, for any reason whatsoever. It is here that I must find my space once again — here or nowhere else. Only a politics that starts from such an awareness can interest me.*

*Means without End, Giorgio Agamben*

*If the subject is opaque to itself, it is not therefore licensed to do what it wants or to ignore its relations to others. Indeed, if it is precisely by virtue of its relations to others that it is opaque to itself, and if those relations to others are precisely the venue for its ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it sustains some of its most important ethical bonds.*

*GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF ONESELF, Judith Butler*

### Temporal testimony

The use of participative elements like the observer's scratchings between very different temporal states in the animation also draws attention towards the quality of the temporality characteristic in the actions in this political conflict. According to the Israeli architect Eyal Weizman (4), the Israelis are deliberately no longer seeking to come up with final solutions at the present time, instead attempting to permanently maintain temporary, transitional "states of emergency for which it is impossible to find a solution".



## Appendix

Huwwara Checkpoint (Arabic: ) is the major checkpoint on one of the four main exits of Nablus city, it was established on October 2000 on the main road connecting Nablus and Ramallah city and it is named after the village of Huwwara and is located near the Huwwara military post.

A Israel Defense Forces checkpoint, usually called an Israeli checkpoint (Hebrew: מחסום, *machsom*, Arabic: حاج, *hajez*), is a barrier erected by the Israel Defense Forces with the stated aim of enhancing the security of Israel and Israeli settlements and preventing those who wish to do harm from crossing. Most of the checkpoints in the West Bank are not located on the boundary between Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, but rather throughout the West Bank. Many Palestinians, especially residents of the West Bank, claim that despite the checkpoints' intended use, in practice they violate Palestinians' rights to transportation and other human rights.

Checkpoint list: <http://www.machsomwatch.org/en/checkpoints>

