

short circuits and gaps in the dialogue between discoverer and discovered, as well as the power structures within that exchange. In the words of one inhabitant: 'We never tell everything, we always keep something for the next anthropologist'. Thus, as Grimonprez suggests, the work 'becomes a reflection on my own condition as observer and my complicity with the telling of the story.'

**Maybe the Sky is Really Green and We're Just Colorblind** (YouTube-o-theque, curated by Grimonprez and Charlotte Léouzon, 2006–10) offers the viewer the opportunity to bring their own order to the work. While Walter Benjamin and Sergei Eisenstein defined montage as a revolutionary tool for social analysis, MTV and CNN have totally surpassed this. The commercial break and the remote control introduced zapping as a new way to relate to the world in the 1980s. But today with YouTube and Google we no longer zap, we now skip and navigate a reality zone defined in 'download time' and where images of Abu Ghraib, 9/11, and swine flu have become the new contemporary sublime, which has turned the political debate into mere fear management.

Grimonprez's works have already influenced contemporary art, and have profound implications for the history of art. His work is a response to the difficult times in which we live, when it becomes hard to distinguish between media-manipulated histories and reality, when the dominant powers of the mainstream media, the market, the State want to drown us in a sea of moving images and confound our own ability to make sense of it all. Johan Grimonprez's works empower the viewer, laying bare the repressed politics and desires that come back to haunt us as a look-a-like reality. As the artist suggests, 'all these things cross-intersect and it's that intertextual reading that reveals more than it actually obscures.'

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# Johan Grimonprez

**Exhibition** 22 May – 11 July 2010

Mon–Sat 11am–6pm, Sun 12–5pm

The Belgian artist Johan Grimonprez (b.1962) makes film, video, television and web projects out of different historic and contemporary sources, incorporating documentaries, news broadcasts, advertisements, home movies, fictional films, popular music and literature, to make new narratives. Central to his work is the complex and contradictory dynamic of the moving image, and its capacity for eliciting responses that range from shock and fear to humour or banality. Shown in cinemas, art galleries and on television, Grimonprez's work has received international acclaim at film festivals and art biennials for over a decade. His films convey a level of political engagement and seriousness that renders his historic subjects problematic and contested, always relevant to the troubled times of the present.

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Downstairs, two feature-length films capture this sense of contemporaneity, and critical and historical depth. It was **dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y** (1997, 68 mins) that first brought Grimonprez international recognition at Documenta X in Kassel, and it has since become an iconic work of contemporary art. The film presents a history of the media coverage of aeroplane hijackings to explore the recent history of mainstream media, and our complicit relationship with the imagery. Terrorists and writers play a zero sum game (a situation in which one participant's gains result from another participant's equivalent losses), where a novelist (in this case Don DeLillo) contends that bombmakers and gunmen have overtaken his role in society. But towards the end of the film, the narrative points to the fact that the hijackers might in turn be hijacked by the media accommodating the global political game.

*dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* reveals how CNN, MTV and Hollywood have exchanged aesthetic codes and how zapping with a TV remote control can turn into an extreme form of poetry. Its narrative is heightened and undercut by David Shea's soundtrack composed of samples of popular and classical music, and voiceovers featuring extracts from DeLillo's novels *White Noise* and *Mao II*. It is important to note that *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* was made several years before 9/11, yet in a strange way it seems almost to announce its coming. It also predates video-sharing websites like YouTube (founded 2005) and MySpace (founded 2003); it was made before the vast majority of society was able to access the news through web-based moving images and control their viewing experience in order to think things through.

**Double Take** (2009, 80 mins) Grimonprez's most recent work in the exhibition, mines similar territories, but more specifically takes into account the shift from zapping to skipping, from video right into the digital revolution claimed by the YouTube generation. Indeed, *Double Take* works almost as a companion piece to *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, the links between them made apparent by references to two real events: the quotation taken from a *New York Times* story about hundreds of birds crashing into the Empire State Building on September 11th 1948, and the opening scenes of *Double Take* which show an army aeroplane crashing into the Empire State Building in 1945.

Inspired by a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, the narrative of *Double Take* is written by the British novelist Tom McCarthy. Although the film's main subjects are the Cold War and the director Alfred Hitchcock meeting his double, *Double Take* uses the tensions and antagonisms between doubles and opposites to address adversarial politics – which continue to exist post-9/11. Like *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, *Double Take* is powerful because of Grimonprez's ability to plot the origins of the current world situation in a series of historic events, to see the present in the past. Different strands of the film may strike chords with different visitors: the Cold War might be familiar territory for some, whereas others might

be more at ease with the montage of moving images, unphased by the quick succession of radically different subjects as we skip between Hitchcock and his double, Cold War leaders Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev, and advertisements for instant coffee.

The building blocks of Grimonprez's aesthetics, documentary footage and contemporary film, can be seen upstairs in films from much earlier in the artist's career. **Kobarweng or Where is Your Helicopter** (1992, 25 mins) brings Grimonprez's interest in doubles and opposites to a different discipline. Between a BA in Media Art at the Art Academy of Ghent in Belgium (1986) and an MFA in video and media at the School of Visual Arts in New York (1992), Grimonprez visited the isolated village of Pepera in Papua New Guinea in Indonesia, where this video is set. Arriving at the village, Grimonprez was asked 'where is your helicopter?' because the inhabitants' previous encounter with visitors, a group of Western scientists, was shocking because of their descent from the sky. Indeed, as a result of this visit, one villager was named Kobarweng (which translates as 'the sound of the aeroplane'). *Kobarweng* proposes on the one hand a critique of anthropological methods and on the other a deconstruction of anthropological discourse. The work opposes discoverer and discovered, observer and observed, but also collapses these roles, with the artist himself acutely conscious of his own position on both sides of the opposition.

The oscillating roles of observer and observed are also key elements in the multichannel installation **It Will Be All Right If You Come Again, Only Next Time Don't Bring Any Gear, Except A Tea Kettle...** (1994-2004). Like *Kobarweng*, the work restages an encounter told mainly through a inhabitant narrative which reclaims the memory of a colonial past. Also set in Papua New Guinea, the work is based on Grimonprez's discovery that a missionary had organised a screening of *The Sound of Music* for a village in the area. The inhabitants identified the Austrian landscape as both aesthetically familiar and culturally foreign, an idea captured in the work's interwoven images of Hollywood's dream of Austria and archival footage of the Papua New Guinea landscape. Never neutral, the landscape here serves as a metaphor for the floating signifier (something with no single agreed meaning), representing two ways of approaching reality. Nowhere else is it more visible that the 'other' is constructed within a social, cultural and historical context as it is when two differing cultural perceptions clash. *It Will Be All Right...* critically considers the myth of objectivity, the pretence for a detachment maintained not just by the anthropologist, but throughout the discourse of Western science, where the observer finds himself caught in an alienated position of transcendence over his/her object. The anthropological discourse of discovering and objectifying the other often renders mute a differing local voice – a voice claimed by a Western writing of history. Switching the roles of observer and observed lays bare the