

Max Pinckers Interview: On Speculative Documentary

Posted on [July 28, 2018](#) by [Sunil Shah](#)



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In today's altered conceptions of representation and self-representation, reanimation of analogue methods and accelerated digital technologies, platforms and cultures, within an information universe where truth and non-truth coexist, our understanding of image culture is being tested at full throttle. It seems nowhere in this field has been subject to as many tensions and conflicts arising out of the medium's evolving landscape as in the areas of photojournalism and documentary photography. Max Pinckers is a photographer and academic who has chosen to take the challenge of understanding this shifting terrain head on. His work, both in his personal projects and in his academic research, is an attempt to advance our grasp of the genre and develop a new critical language, visually and through discourse. I am honored to have had a chance to talk with him about his work and his latest self-published title, *Margins of Excess*. In my opinion, Pinckers is not only pushing boundaries, experimenting and testing theories but leading a way forward in doing so.



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SS: When looking at an overview level of your work throughout the past decade or so, I see there is a sustained interest in challenging modes of documentary and storytelling. It is something I have a personal interest in and I would say your work adopts a ‘post-documentary’ approach. I know labels can be confining and reductive but

feel free to correct me and describe how you might define your work.

MP: I prefer to use the term 'speculative documentary' instead (I have recently created 'The School of Speculative Documentary', together with three other researchers at the School of Arts / KASK Ghent, which is an interdisciplinary space dedicated to the discussion of the documentary attitude). I think the documentary attitude, critical method, or gesture, is a way of coming to terms with reality – a way of doing, engaging and creating that embraces the multiple and mutable realities of our world. I've always experienced the documentary space as a hybrid one, where different approaches can come together in different forms. Where the creation of an image can shift fluently from a performative or theatrical act into a sculptural intervention, contextualized by found documentation, embedded into a socially constructed narrative, ultimately brought together in the form of a book, and so on. Above all, a space in which images are conscious of their own deceptive nature and have the ability to critically question themselves. The documentary should openly embrace its limitations and continuously challenge them, doubting and speculating over our mediated relationship to reality when attempting to (somewhat clumsily) represent it through images and narrative.



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Haunted by a crisis of faith in its authenticity, the documentary genre is continually trying to re-position itself in relation to today's excesses of a post-truth ideology and blurred frames of realism. How can we re-think the documentary gesture conceptually, formally and methodologically in the optic of perpetual uncertainty, contamination and contestation? How can we be inspired by the paradox of attempting to approach reality with a documentary attitude while it continuously mutates and evaporates? How can we pry the documentary approach away from the classic demarcations of genres and categories, removing it from a formatted market-mentality? How can we engage in critically questioning

inherent documentary power-structures? How do we undermine the authority of documentary's truth-claims above those of the spectator's or subjects'? How do we take up our responsibility for the mechanisms that define what can be seen, heard, said, thought, made or done? How can documentarists deal with their own positions and pareidolia?

SS: I really think you have super succinctly articulated some very important questions and challenges inherent in the mediation of documentary, also enveloping much wider issues about the integrity of information in our post-truth world. If on one end of the scale we have raw citizen reporting and broadcasting, uninflected by serious attempts to stylise or format, operating on social media platforms and at the other end of the scale we have new and experimental approaches to address the problems of antiquated or state and corporate sponsored media. What are the challenges to creating any real purchase with the forms of speculative documentary you are working on? For example, sophistication of language and communication can be a barrier to uptake as well as a challenge to well accepted semiotic or encoded visual paradigms. Does art provide an experimental playground for this very purpose?

MP: It's indeed a very interesting time in terms of contemporary visual culture; social media, advertising-powered news, image manipulation, staged events, disinformation campaigns, citizen journalism, continuous live-streaming, AI driven image analysis and production, GANs and neural networks,... all in which photography still plays a crucial role. I think both ends of the spectrum

that you've mentioned deal with how we perceive images as either an attempt at complete transparency – a window onto the world – by forgetting that we are looking through images at reality. On the other end images are like an opaque mirror, continuously revealing their own constructions and limitations towards representing reality, and never quite shine through onto reality, often obscured by conventions, tropes and standardized formats. To me, documentary as a critical attitude finds itself somewhere in between. In a space where photographs can't really claim to be factual, but neither are they lying to us. It seems to be much more about embracing a form of 'realism' instead of representing reality itself. Maybe instead of experiencing images as objective representations, we should see them as proposals, or little arguments, that change their meaning over time, depending on the fluidity of contexts they appear in.



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The space that art provides for images is in my opinion one of the few areas left where there is room for experimentation, critique and self-reflection. Where we can consider images and objects to represent something greater than mere objects. Where we can think about how they come to be, the currency they have in today's world, and how they relate to it. This is why socially and politically engaged 'straight' photojournalism never really seems to work in the form of an exhibition presented in such a context, because it often cannot critically question itself without undermining its own position. This becomes especially apparent when the work falls short of bringing about any real 'change' to the current status-quo, other than privileged exhibition goers relieving themselves of their guilt-burden through the mere acknowledgement of suffering in the form of aesthetically pleasing photographs. The same world-problems that are caused by the West are re-consumed in the form of empathic imagery that circulates back in the form of so called 'concerned photography', cutting out the very victims themselves from the loop. There's a pretension of critique, albeit with good intentions, but which never becomes truly radical by transgressing into the real world. Just as we're now used to contributing to charity or a 'greater good' within the very consumerist act itself. Cultural capitalism, as Slavoj Žižek illustrates with a Starbucks ad campaign: "It's not just what you're buying, it's what you're buying into". Žižek remarks: "you don't just buy a coffee, you buy, in the very consumerist act, your

redemption from the burden of being only a consumerist. You do something for the environment, you do something to help starving children in Guatemala, and so on.” An artwork that addresses this problematic masterfully is Renzo Martens’ ‘Episode III: Enjoy Poverty’, along with his more recent projects with the Institute for Human Activities (IHA), which has been one of my greatest influences.

“Particularly with photography, which is a small, self-sustaining subculture with little space for real critique and a relatively low bar in terms of the quality of work produced and celebrated, largely because of the lack of self-reflexivity and its own insecurity. The most interesting photography-based work appears to distance itself from this exclusive ‘photo-space’ (look at Dirk Braeckman, Alfredo Jaar, Thomas Demand, Richard Mosse, Taryn Simon, Trevor Paglen, John Baldessari,...) and perhaps for good reason.”



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SS: I want to bring up the subject of responsibility, you touched on this earlier. What responsibility does the producer of images have in this post-truth world? I am asking because the production, dissemination and valuation of images/artworks relating to social contexts

has on the one hand a responsibility to the subject and on the other hand is to some extent determined as a moral value by the market or the structure which uses the image as cultural capital, and I don't necessarily mean only in its incarnation as commodity form but also in its circulation and validation. When we can just imagine images as images devoid of their relationships to audiences, how precarious is the role of the documentarian or image producer in a climate that equally sees images as valueless in their multiplicity and reproducibility and poignant in their relations to certain social events and circumstances? How do these concerns affect the way you work?

MP: There's a responsibility that comes with the privilege of being able to make documentary work, or art, which I think should be incorporated in one way or another into the practice itself. Again, it's a question of self-reflexivity and the incorporation of critique into the practice itself. In terms of the confusing 'post-truth' age we live in today, it seems to me that the responsibility of image makers and visual artists is to sift through the muck and figure out how the economy and currency of images is (mis)used for ideological, economic and political intentions. Intrinsicly intertwined with its subject matter, documentary bears both an accountability towards the subject as well as the public, the market it ends up in, and ultimately the integrity and intentions of the artist and the work itself. It's very much about finding the right balance and positioning oneself in such a way that these don't have to cancel each other out but rather harmonize in a way that grants the work a position of its own. It has always been difficult for me to deal with a so called 'industry' after the work has been created, and to face the reality of the harsh

circumstances of where it sometimes gets presented, such as at commercial art fairs for example (as John Baldessari put it boldly: “going to an art fair as an artist is like watching your parents fuck”). Particularly with photography, which is a small, self-sustaining subculture with little space for real critique and a relatively low bar in terms of the quality of work produced and celebrated, largely because of the lack of self-reflexivity and its own insecurity. The most interesting photography-based work appears to distance itself from this exclusive ‘photo-space’ (look at Dirk Braeckman, Alfredo Jaar, Thomas Demand, Richard Mosse, Taryn Simon, Trevor Paglen, John Baldessari,...) and perhaps for good reason. For example, I recently came across the advertising video of 1854 Media (of which The British Journal of Photography is a subsidiary), which reduces photographers to ‘content providers’ in an age of an ‘attention economy’ driven by ‘content marketing’, making their millions of so called content creators ‘kings’ in the eyes of companies who create ‘venture capital’, ‘equity’ and ‘future growth potential’ in order to ‘earn income from brands’ to generate profits for its investors. It’s terrifying for artists to acknowledge that this may be the purpose and final destination of their hard work in the current tendencies of today’s ‘business models’.



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This is why self-publishing books is currently the most interesting form for my work. Every documentary body of work is made with the intention of it becoming a book in its final manifestation. The book becomes the artwork, the object that I work towards as a final body of work. It is completely independently created, produced, funded, published and distributed. This process has now also become part of the artistic practice itself. Once it has been printed and bound, it eternally remains the same (or perhaps deteriorates over time), with every decision that was made in the artistic process being final (unlike a spatial exhibition installation in which the work often needs adaptation to variable spaces – unless you're

Wolfgang Tillmans). Self-publishing gives me the freedom to make choices and decisions that purely relate to the conceptual framework of the images, regardless of commercial or financial factors. It is a space on its own for the work to exist in, confined to its own structure, autonomous. A space that I see as the most logical and suitable for a collection of photographs; printed on paper, not too large, in sequence, provided with context and reproducible. Books are everywhere, yet rarely seen as artworks themselves. They are humble yet demand care and attention. They fit into almost any context and can infiltrate any kind of space, from being exhibited as a work of art in a museum to becoming part of toilet-lecture pulp.

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SS: Picking up on the former point, it is interesting how in documentary terms we might think of an expanded sense

of responsibility and in terms of art we might imagine that the 'work' has a responsibility to itself and to the vision of its creator. A tension exists here. Let's also move onto some of your previous works and your latest book, *Margins of Excess*, can you say something about how these projects relate to our discussion on documentary ethics and post-truth realities?

MP: Film maker Adam Curtis argues that it is our task as documentary makers to be critical about the agreed and accepted idea of how reality is portrayed, and to continuously find new forms of realism that are symbols of our times. Every age has a method of reporting reality to the masses, as painting perhaps once was in the Middle Ages. It's not about whether reality exists, but rather about whether the audience agrees with you that what you are showing them is an honest attempt to represent reality, or to reflect about the awkwardness of this attempt. Our so-called realism today is fundamentally born out of a political age, an age in which people believed that politics could not only understand the world, but could also change it. Documentaries were born out of that political ideal. This agreed frame of realism in today's world has deteriorated to the extent that there is no general consensus about what is real, what is fiction, half-truth, or opinion. With hyper-individualism as the central ideology of our time, people no longer trust the finger-wagging documentary telling them mere facts. They used to, but don't any longer. Audiences know, or sense, that the documentary makers, just like politicians, and just like everyone else, aren't quite sure about what's actually going on. Our job is to analyze and critically question the

individualism of our time and attempt to define a new frame of realism to which we can all identify.



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This is what makes the documentary mode so interesting: it tends to engage with the world in a different way than art for art’s sake, which is in my opinion often hermetic, high-brow, formal and too disconnected from the world around it. When documentary work is encountered within

an 'art' context, it takes on a hybrid form – equally undefinable and often interdisciplinary – in which traditional approaches are re-invented and no longer abide to the confines of formatted conditions, such as on television or in newspapers and magazines. Contemporary documentary practice departs from a certain freedom and independent character, which at the same time is able to connect with larger circumstances because it is not inherently produced for the art context itself, yet also questions its own conditions of production. A documentary mostly engages with other people who each have their own perspectives and perception on the world or a particular problematic. It demands a collaborative approach in which an attempt is made to understand reality from within while at the same time being unable to claim any form of ultimate truth.

In *Margins of Excess* this attitude is reflected in the choice of subjects and general thematic. When I work with someone like Darius McCollum or Jay J. Armes for example, I do this with consideration to his reality and truths in relation to mine. I try to find a mutual space in which our perception and symbolic fictions can meet and manifest into something that contributes to a greater understanding – one in which images transgress into reality – not the unveiling of the reality behind the illusion, but perceiving the reality in illusion itself. This is often the reason for choosing particular topics or people to work with; when they have a strong relationship to imaginary worlds, yet are rooted in reality, creating tension and contradiction between them, reflecting a philosophical duality. Just as we consider a photograph to have both an indexical descriptive character and dependency on what it

registers, but that simultaneously transforms into an image which disconnects from reality into the realm of projection and rituals of seeing.



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To briefly sketch how this has manifested throughout my work in the past: in ‘Lotus’ (2011) Quinten De Bruyn and I worked with transgenders – men who magnificently transform into women – seizing the photographic space as if it were a musical decor. In ‘The Fourth Wall’ (2012) passerbys in the streets of Mumbai spontaneously become actors in scenes reminiscent of Hindi cinema, momentarily

appropriating their Bollywood fantasies. In 'Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty' (2014) young Indian couples are confronted with their romantic fantasies when encountered by family traditions of honor, religion and caste.

The critique on the current status of photojournalism and its stereotypes, tropes and conventions is always incorporated into the various works I have produced: the application of staged over-aestheticized painterly images questioning the photographers' tic to always make beautiful images regardless of the subject matter in 'Lotus'. The use of image-sequences of the same moment revealing the need for selection and exclusion in 'Will They Sing Like Raindrops or Leave Me Thirsty'. The retracing of Robert Capa's iconic Falling Soldier in 'Controversy' (2017) and the analysis of World Press Photo tropes with the AI powered 'Trophy Camera v0.9' (2017). Most recently the collaboration with actors, or 'professional mourners' as we like to call them, in response to the emotionally charged close-up images of people we typical see in the media after a tragic event (such as the cover image of *Margins of Excess*, which was made on the day of Trump's election).



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“If the only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our time is that we always already doubt its veracity, then where does this leave us?”

In *Margins of Excess*, the recurring double-bind of reality and fiction is expanded into the realm of six individual subjects who share a similar experiential relationship in which their personal imagination conflicts with generally accepted beliefs. Every one of them momentarily received

nationwide attention in the US press because of their attempts to realize a dream or passion, but were presented as frauds or deceivers by the mass media's apparent incapacity to deal with idiosyncratic versions of reality, mostly because of its formatted structures. The work attempts to express a new form of realism in which hyper-individualism and representation take over; where images surpass reality, and create ambiguous truths of their own. Today's media realisms are sensational spectacle-driven, 24-second news cycles in which the distrust and doubt in its truth value are already embedded in their very construction, producing a habitual anxiety centered around the question of truth and manipulation, as Hito Steyerl explains in her text *'Documentary Uncertainty'* from 2011:

"Poststructuralism has taught us how 'reality', 'truth' and other basic notions on which possible definitions of documentary rest are at best as solid as the fleeting reflections on a troubled surface of water. But before drowning in the uncertainty and ambiguity that these paradigms prescribe, let us perform one very old-fashioned Cartesian move. Because, amidst all this ambivalence, our confusion is the one thing which remains certain and even reliable. And it will invariably, if unconsciously, represent our reaction to documentary materials as such. The perpetual doubt, the nagging insecurity –whether what we see is 'true', 'real', 'factual' and so on– accompanies contemporary documentary reception like a shadow. Let me suggest that this uncertainty is not some shameful lack, which has to be hidden, but instead constitutes the core quality of contemporary documentary modes as such. The questions which they invariably trigger, the disavowed anxieties hidden behind apparent certainties, differ

substantially from those associated with fictional modes. The only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times is that we always already doubt if it is true."

If the only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our time is that we always already doubt its veracity, then where does this leave us? Do we want the documentary gesture to move beyond representation and into mere detached, personalized abstraction? Is the only real essential truth that the documentary can bring across rooted in its own uncertainty? This is on the one hand the fundamental question since its creation, however, we seem to be moving towards a much more confusing, info-saturated, visually manipulated image-reality, which we all seem to be very much aware of. Does this relieve the documentarian from the burden of responsibility? Can contemporary artistic documentarism provide us with something more than just reconfirming our own disquietude? Maybe it's this uncertainty that makes the documentary one of the most innovative forms of contemporary art today; creating new interdisciplinary relationships between ethics, aesthetics, responsibility, fact and fiction, undermining power-structures, economic conditions and political entanglement.

The documentary seems to be a mode that finds itself somewhere in-between fact and fiction, or between realism and constructivism. It sometimes has the ability to rupture through the constructiveness of formatted knowledge, pragmatism and instrumentality that often accompanies it. It isn't necessarily just about the creation

process or production, but it also brings along the idea that you may learn something about the form, aesthetics and construction of how this information is presented to you and the structures it serves to uphold. A documentary has the tendency to combine reflexivity with an ethical stance. Here the question of responsibility is expanded across many different planes, where the main pivotal point is not just the author's position, but also encompasses general notions of truth, the validity of sources and references, the relationships between the subjects and how they are represented, the politics of aesthetics and vice versa, the changing contemporary visual landscape, hyper-formatted ideologically drenched news media, and so on. The documentary instantly plugs into a larger contextual framework to which it is responsible as becoming part of it, part of a mechanism, contributing and affecting to what lies outside of its own existence as an independent artwork. But let's face it: the more we try to pinpoint the essence of what documentary really is, the less we are able to comprehend it.





People Magazine, April 21, 1975

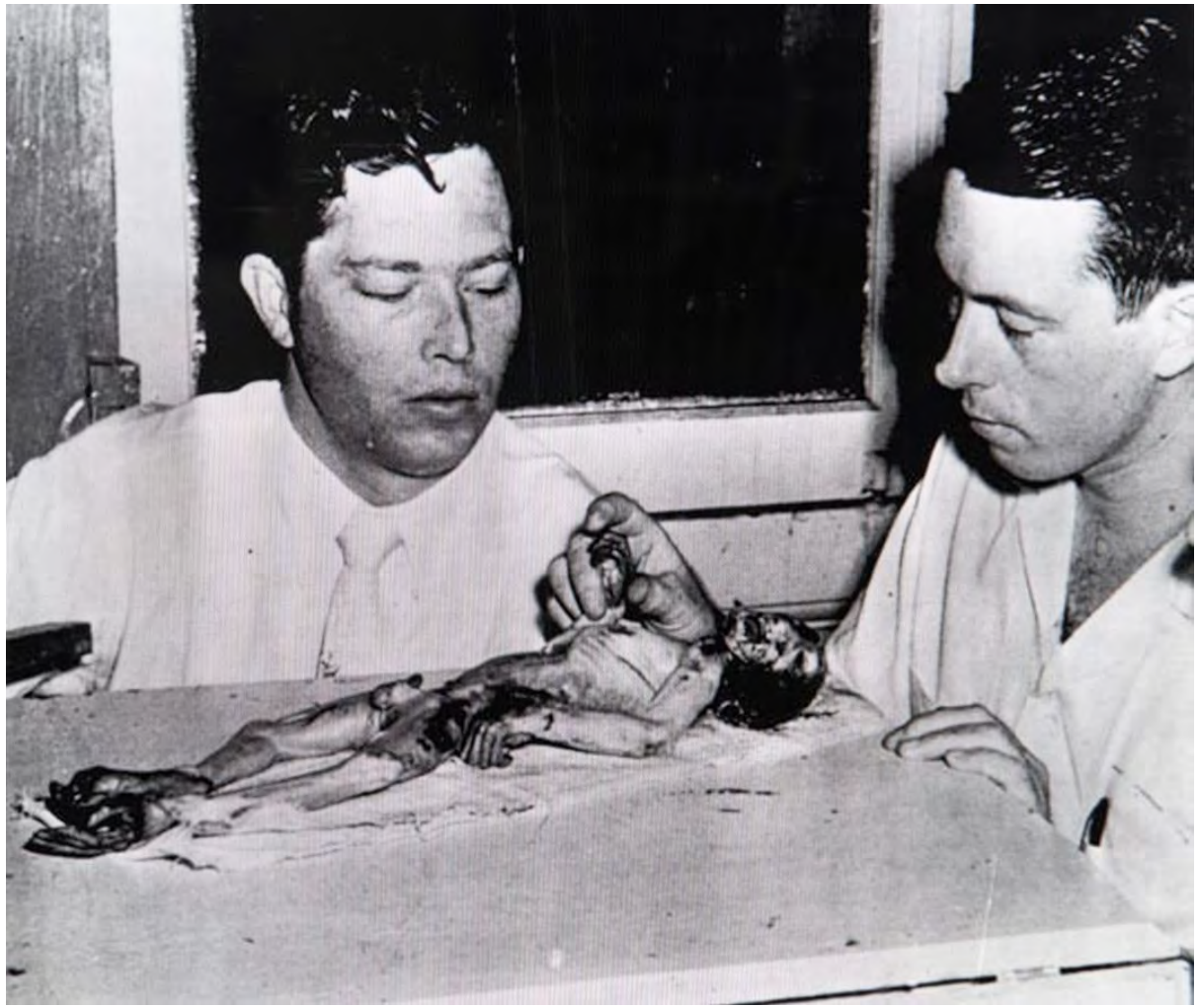
ARMLESS BUT DEADLY, JAY ARMES IS THE NATION'S TOP PRIVATE EYE

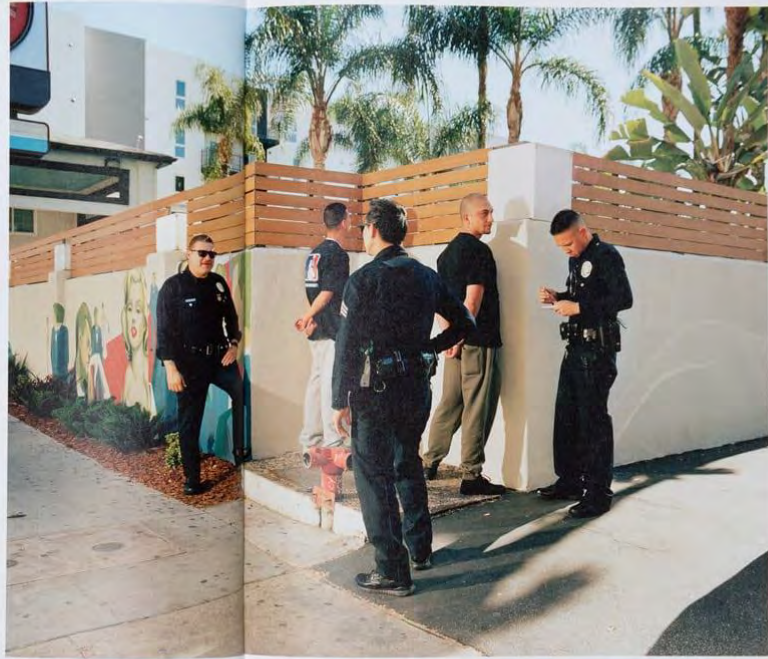
Despite the lack of both arms, the real-life private detective from El Paso, commands million-dollar fees, owns and pilots two jet helicopters, is a black belt karate expert, tools around in a Rolls-Royce, and has built into his artificial right arm a revolver that fires a .22 magnum shell.











The New Republic, December 25, 2008

THE GREATEST LOVE STORY EVER SOLD

Berkley Books, the mass-market division of the Penguin Group, is slated to publish a Holocaust memoir titled 'Angel at the Fence: The True Story of a Love That Survived'. Herman Rosenblat recounts his experience as a teenage boy during the Holocaust at Schlieben, a sub-division of the infamous Buchenwald concentration camp.





embassies and more than twenty-three security and intelligence apparatuses from Jordan and other neighboring countries, in addition to businessmen and affiliates with security companies like Blackwater and others. I had to face this all alone, no army nor government to protect me, other than some shy support from organizations and activists who defended me. In spite of all these difficulties, I managed to open an office in Jordan.

I started to contact every organization and everyone working on documenting the breaching of human rights in Iraq. I started to record all these incidents. In addition to contacting NGOs and media outlets, we were launching fairs and expositions. If an organization needed anything related to human rights violations, our office was the main provider of this information. I felt that I needed to expand my work by talking not only to Iraqi detainees but also to Iraqis in neighboring countries. We started to work with almost every country in the Middle East, but we faced huge battles with the security companies. I never accuse the Americans or even the American army. When I talk about 'those people', I mainly mean the security companies. I always wanted to denounce those companies and tell the American people that they are taking their money and that what they are doing will create revenge acts against them and a lot of innocent people. Those companies are nothing but mercenaries. They take American people's money and do not care about the repercussions of their actions on America and the West. On the other hand, I wanted to tell the Iraqi people that Americans are not as bad as they think they are. There is a different dimension to this. I want to tell them that we have friends who are ready to defend our rights.

For the record, I was told by some activists and people that I trust, that I was a target because I transferred the cause of the detainees to the public. To be honest, I had expected a bigger media campaign of discrediting me after the photos had been published. Most of all, it was the Americans who denounced these violations, starting with an American journalist and the presenter of '60 Minutes', who were an important part of making these acts public.









Max Pinckers
Margins of Excess

Self-published

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