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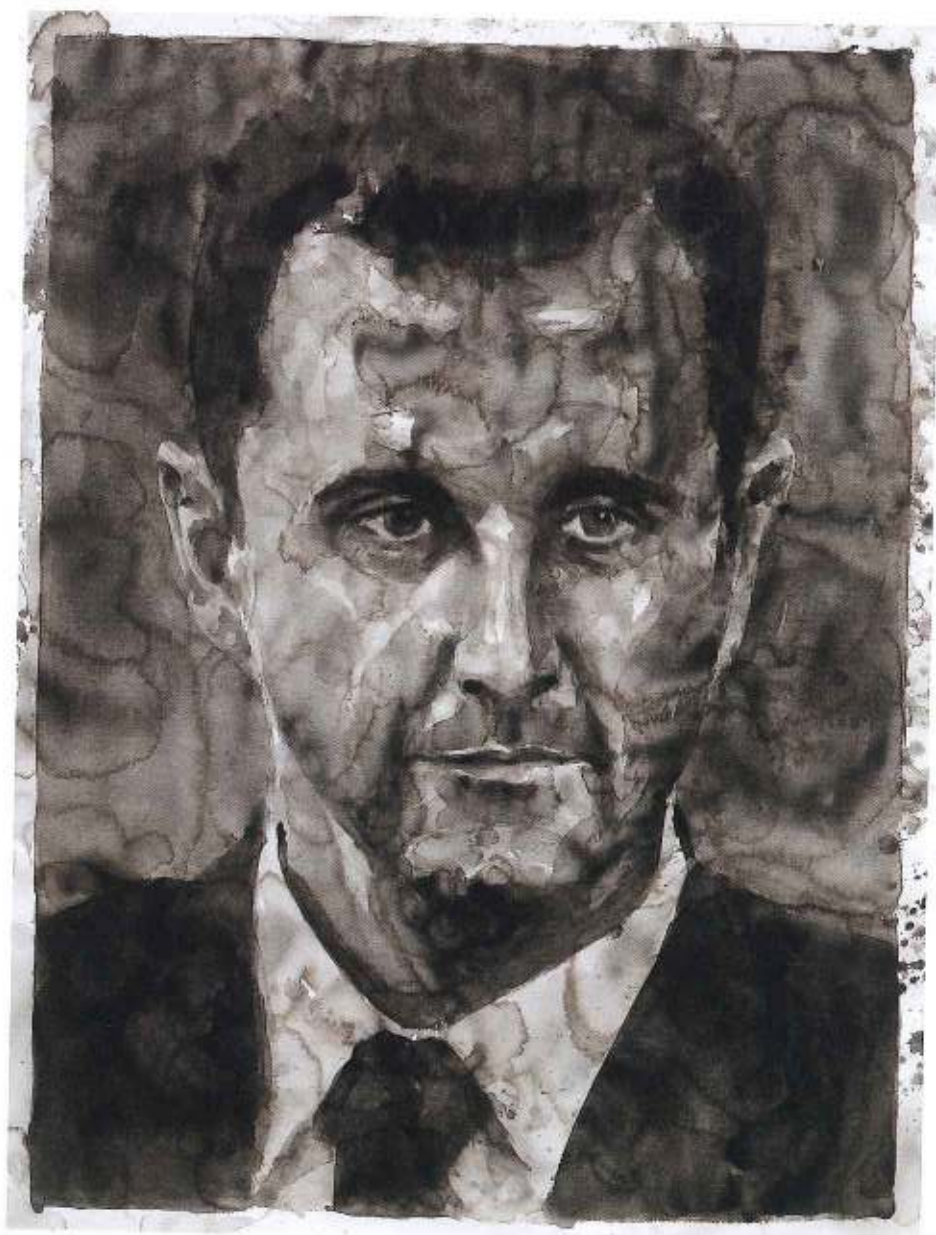


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**Yes, But,  
or Maybe,  
or Perhaps,  
or Probably**



Yan Pei-Ming, detail  
of *Asma and Bashar  
al-Assad* (2012),  
watercolour on paper,  
diptych 149 × 113.5cm





Ambiguity relies on uncertainty. All art is uncertain in that it has no definite meaning, and one person's interpretation can vary wildly from another. What seems apparent at a glance, or on the surface, can hide or mask something else entirely.

Uncertainty relies on ambivalence: the inability to decide one way or the other, or the existence of conflicting feelings or opinions. To be living is to be uncertain. Particularly today, where contemporary life is a drive to be everything and have everything, all at once.

Within this constant struggle of uncertainty, more extreme versions of ambiguity generally occur at the margins; the in-between bits of society, where the uncertainty or ambivalence is so extreme that roles, ideologies or beliefs swap back and forth, passing for one another in a tussle of intense adoration and critique. As such, the artwork that addresses this feeling, state or situation often deals with forms of identification, be they social, political or sexual. To complicate matters, much of this work also lies in an area of "in-between" or liminal state, where it is uncertain if it is art or real life. Although art cannot exist outside of real life regardless of its mimetic role. Writer Susan Sontag stated in *Against Interpretation* that since Plato "considered ordinary material things as themselves mimetic objects, imitations of transcendent forms or structures, even the best painting of a bed would be only an 'imitation of an imitation'". So even the real is, perhaps, unreal.

Ambiguity in art is not a new thing, nor is the consideration of the real – one could trace a lineage of ambiguity within art over the past four centuries. However, the advent of television and advertising in the burgeoning capitalist economy of the 1950s and 1960s led to a radical shift in the way reality was constructed, performed, broadcast and disseminated. This provided inspiration for Pop Art, a movement that thrived on ambiguity by using the imagery and language of advertising as both a critique and celebration of the pleasures and pitfalls of consumer life. It also enabled some artists to address political or social issues. For example, in 1972 Andy Warhol made a *Vote McGovern* screen print poster for the Democrats' election campaign depicting Richard Nixon, his Republican opponent. Warhol also played with sexual ambivalence, creating the Polaroid *Self-Portrait In Drag* in 1980. With a full face of white powder, false eyelashes and red lipstick, he stares into the camera like a startled animal. In fact, the way he lived his life could be considered an artwork in itself – he carefully crafted every aspect of his persona, fashioning a product where everything was surface, but nothing "real".

Second-wave feminism and the radical politics of the late 1960s led to a series of exercises in ambiguity and ambivalence through performance and activist works. Cosey Fanni Tutti lived as a porn star as an artwork in an attempt to critique the "performed" reality of the "job" through "over-identification" – a concept of subversion via assuming the identity of the subject being explored that was developed by the Slovene philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek. In 1979 Sanja Ivekovic created *Sweet Violence*, in which she sat on her balcony in Zagreb drinking whisky and pretended to masturbate while a motorcade carrying Marshal Tito, the Yugoslav dictator, passed below. Within minutes a policeman – alerted by a colleague on a nearby rooftop – called on the building's intercom and interrupted her demonstration of personal freedom. In 1983 the multimedia group Laibach, part of the collective Neue Slowenische Kunst, took part in a television interview in Slovenia on the political programme

Sanja Ivekovic, stills from *Sweet Violence* (1974), video, black and white, sound, 5min 56sec







*TV Tednik*, entitling their performance *Trial By Television*. This provoked huge controversy, with many believing their Nazi costumes indicated they shared fascist ideology, rather than undermining the totalitarianism they were experiencing themselves by inhabiting it. The government subsequently banned live performances. Both Ivekovic's and NSK's actions show that ambiguity in the guise of realism can be incredibly powerful.

The use of realism in ambiguous form could be considered a performance, or façade, of the "real". This is a strategy that has gained new currency over the past decade, allowing artists across the globe to play out political, social and sexual identities in complex ways, where meaning is uncertain and conflicting ideas exist simultaneously.

Israeli artist Yael Bartana's trilogy of films *And Europe Will be Stunned* (2007–2011) focuses on the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMiP), created by Bartana specifically for this project and calling for 3,300,000 Jews to return to the land of their forefathers, which now exists in its own right, thus blurring the line between fiction and reality, and therefore art and life.

The first in the trilogy, *Mary Koszmary (Nightmare)* (2007), is set in a dilapidated sports stadium, using the sensibility of a propaganda film. A well-known journalist, Slawomir Sierakowski, delivers a speech in Polish urging Jews to come back and Poles to welcome them, addressing past and present anti-Semitism and xenophobia and the Zionist dream of returning to Israel. In the second film, *Mur i wieża (Wall and Tower)* (2009), members of the JRMiP go to the site of the Warsaw ghetto to build a traditional-style kibbutz – a version of the Israeli pioneers' original dream, lent complex political undertones by its placement in the Polish capital. The final film, *Zamach (Assassination)* (2011), depicts the funeral of Sierakowski, who has been killed by an unidentified assassin. Bartana

Cosey Fanni Tutti performing *Woman Roll* at AIR Gallery, London, 1976

Yael Bartana, *Zamach (Assassination)* from the trilogy *And Europe Will Be Stunned* (2011), RED transferred to HD video, 35min







states: "His assassination is a metaphor for the transition from fiction to real. I am working with the tools of cinema to allow the fiction to feel real. That goes back to my early practice when I was documenting real events and manipulating them so they looked like they could possibly be fictive."

Bartana adds: "What if politicians could work with their imagination and use artistic tools? How can artists use political strategies in their works?" – questions that Cuban artist Tania Bruguera asks in her current project *Immigrant Movement International*. Rather than the quasi-fictional impulse that Bartana began with, however, Bruguera was interested in how art could create actual political situations. Her "behaviour art" inhabits social, political and cultural power structures in order to influence them from the inside.

Inspired by the riots in Paris and her own sense of displacement as a Cuban immigrant in the US, she began the movement as a project with Queens Museum and Creative Time, with the headquarters based in an office in an area where 46 per cent of the population were immigrants. Over time this evolved to encompass workshops – ranging from teaching English to advising on legal matters – music, film screenings, art actions, both locally and further afield, and other events addressing what Bruguera terms "useful art" might be. As such, the project is completely ambiguous. It functions on many levels: a community centre, which is very real and necessary to its users, and an artwork where the users are protagonists or performers.

Another investigation of identity and ambiguity, in which art and life are blurred in a strange form of conceptual realism, is a project called *Pretend You Are Actually Alive* (2008) by the American artist Leigh Ledare. He went to visit his mother, Tina Peterson, in Seattle more than ten years ago, and she opened the door to him naked – an act that he described as her announcing a new era in their relationship. Tina had recently begun living with a man in his early twenties, around the same age as her son. Ledare was asked by his mother to document her and her new partner's sexual relationship – which he proceeded to do over the next eight years.

The results, first published as a book and exhibited since in multiple formats, are both brutal and beautiful. The images are highly ambiguous; the relationships presented uncertain and unnerving. Pictures of Peterson having sex or posing as a porn star are interspersed with tender, sad shots of her pale and ill lying in bed. Alongside these, moments of Ledare's own sexual

relationship with his then wife Meghan appear, while snapshots from both his and Peterson's lives are dotted throughout. Particularly haunting is a picture of him as a young boy looking frightened, following directly after one of his mother at a similar age practising ballet in a pink tutu. A highly uncomfortable family portrait, it is uncertain as to what relationship Ledare really had with his mother: here, he identifies as a pornographer, lover, son and carer, while Tina performs equally schizophrenically. He destabilises normal familial power politics. Therefore, do we ever need to know what is real and what is not?

There are many other works made over the past decade or so that float in the ambiguous spaces between reality and mimesis, authenticity and performance, celebration and critique. Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003) provoked controversy as the video featured a collector who had paid \$20,000 dollars to have sex with her in a hotel room; Noline van Harskamp created a quasi-fictional scripted conference in *Any Other Business* (2009) in order to dissect the linguistic tropes of business today; Yan Pei-Ming's ongoing series of realist portraits of political figures including Mao Zedong, Barack Obama and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad are akin to Warhol's *Vote McGovern*; Christoph Büchel's *Community Centre* (2011) was presented by commercial gallery Hauser & Wirth, yet functioned as a working community centre; and Frances Stark produced the script for the video *My Best Thing* (2011) from virtual conversations she had in online chat rooms.

What does this mean for art? Allan Kaprow wrote an essay in 1983 entitled *The Real Experiment*, which asked the question: "If lifelike art doesn't resemble art as we have known it, but resembles real life, what makes it art?" The difference with these recent forms of performative or conceptual realism is that they interweave life and fiction, so any supposed truth or authenticity is indecipherable. Yet Kaprow went on to write: "But let's say art is a weaving of meaning-making activity with any or all parts of our lives... This definition shifts the model for art from the special history of the field, to a broad terrain embracing not only lifelike art but religious, philosophical, scientific and social/personal exploration." This relationship was astutely addressed by curator and writer Charles Esche when introducing Bartana's work: "Art is one of the only means today where ambivalence can still survive. Where we can still find the answers yes, but, or maybe, or perhaps, or probably."

Kathy Noble is a writer and curator who is currently artists and programme curator at Wysing Arts Centre, near Cambridge.

Leigh Ledare, *Mom with Hand on Bed* (2006), C-type print, 101.6 x 76.2cm

Nicoline van Harskamp, production still from *Any Other Business 3* (2009), single or multi-channel HD video, 228min