



Um... Russian gas su

A *CONVERSATION* IS A SOLO EXHIBITION BY ALEX HOBBA, BASED ON THE 2009 RUSSIA-UKRAINE GAS DISPUTE, LED BY PRIME MINISTERS VLADIMIR PUTIN AND YULIA TYMOSHENKO.

SUCH AN EVENT CAN BE EXPLAINED PRAGMATICALLY, HOWEVER, HOBBA OPTS TO INTERVIEW VICTOR, A FRIEND WHO HAS A GENERAL IDEA OF THE CRISIS BUT NO SPECIALIST INSIGHT. THROUGH THIS MORE PERSONAL RETELLING OF EVENTS, A CHARACTER STUDY IS REVEALED, HIGHLIGHTING THE WAYS IN WHICH WE CREATE ASSOCIATIONS USING OUR OWN NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES OF GLOBAL NEWS EVENTS.

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Alex Hobba
A Conversation, 2016
Installation view

ALEX HOBBA: A CONVERSATION

4 AUGUST - 26 AUGUST 2017

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Um... Russian gas supplies. Energy super



Tymoshenko. Putin. Um... Russian gas su



Alex Hobba, *A Conversation*, 2016, Installation view.

ACT NATURAL

Looks can be deceiving. Few people knew that the thirty-second President of the United States was paralysed. Most knew he'd had polio, but they remained unaware that he could not walk. Franklin Delano Roosevelt managed to hide the extent of his condition from most of the voting public with a simulated walking technique and a moratorium on photography of him in motion or in a wheelchair¹. His successor, Harry S. Truman, followed the opposite approach to publicity: for his first election campaign, he completed a train tour that covered some thirty-five thousand kilometres². At each stop, he would make sure that voters got a good, long look at him. Both Presidents lived before the era of televised debates and the constant presence of the media, but they intuited the exact same thing: when it came to voter support, physical appearance mattered.

Does this mean we should be suspicious that the reasons we vote for particular candidates could have less to do with politics and more to do with basic cognitive processes—specifically, with appearances? For some, there are physical attributes that a politician cannot escape through the probabilities of genetics. The former head of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev, for example, who led domestic reforms and nuclear disarmament deals that helped end the Cold War, adorned a prominent crimson port-wine stain birth mark on his forehead. The brown colouration that mark's his head also resembles a little-known archipelago, known as Durak Aprel located off the Siberian coast in the far north-east of the country. This in turn, prompted an influx of visitors to a particularly remote part of the country, setting a bucking new travel trend labelled as a “shapecation” in Russian tourism.

Physical traits can also be a product of simply being in office where damage itself visibly manifests. At the beginning of Barack Obama's second term, countless articles were published surrounding how the president aged over his first four years in office. Namely, heralding a link between stress and greying hair. A popular argument proposed that if presidents tend to go grey while in office, it may merely be because most normal greying happens during the same years in which presidents serve in office. It happened to Bill Clinton. Same with George W. Bush. And it kind of happened to Ronald Reagan too.

However, turning grey while holding the highest office in the United States isn't the worst-case scenario for a politician. Unfortunately, for some, they can also turn into the victim of a murder plot. In September 2004, during his Presidential campaign Ukrainian candidate, Viktor Yushchenko fell seriously ill following a dinner in Kiev. Doctors found dioxin levels in his blood more than 50,000 times higher than normal, which led to a significant facial disfigurement. Images of

1. On the Face of It: The Psychology of Electability, November 18, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/on-the-face-of-it-the-psychology-of-electability>

2. Ibid.

his face, the left side, paralysed, damaged by lesions and blisters were seen across the world. All amid Yushchenko taking steps towards the warm embrace of the European Union. The fact that the attempted assassination had taken place while he was in the running to be elected in a European state added to the sense of astonishment. The scars Mr Yushchenko bears have, to an extent, faded but never completely disappeared. They will always remain visible, marking quite literally his face and body but also last as a reminder of the serious consequences to upholding political beliefs.

But having such a distinct appearance as a politician can also be remarkably advantageous. Yulia Tymoshenko's braid, for example, curls around her head like a golden crown, a rococo flourish that sets her far apart from the jowly men she has challenged. A braid is not just a fashion statement. It is a calculated political tool. It has palpable cultural resonance that helped turn Tymoshenko into more than a candidate. To her supporters at least, she is regarded as a kind of Lady Liberty. A braid is a traditional Ukrainian hairstyle, and by adopting it, Tymoshenko, a former Prime Minister, has been able to underline her nationalist credentials, drawing a contrast with her main opponents, who are more closely linked to the onetime overlord, Russia.

What is important to address here is the presence of the camera. It is the tool that allows us insight into the appearance and idiosyncrasies to voices of power who dominate the never-ending news cycle. In the media, these faces are incessantly documented, we learn about their hobbies, their rational political abilities, judging them at least partly based on an impression of his or her face. However, the photographic image is deceptive as there is always the prospect of the frame being completely staged. Topless photographs of Russian President Vladimir Putin hunting, riding horses and fishing in the wilderness spring to mind. This preoccupation of having a political persona of the ultimate Russian macho man, skilled in every arena of masculine endeavour lays bare the desirable image of Putin. And without the aid of the camera, it is difficult to know how Putin behaves behind closed doors—he will always be performing himself.

Can we gain the same insights when we watch someone who isn't constantly documented in the public eye? Judgment is made based on intuitive responses to basic facial features rather than on any deep, rational calculus. It would make sense to as it has been shown just how quickly we form impressions of people's character traits, even before we've had a conversation with them.

These insights are also consistent with and exemplary of modern documentary film making which is rooted in performance, both cinema vérité or direct cinema in which film directors create a unified field in relation to their subjects. Although it isn't a matter of a fly on the wall behind which the director becomes invisible, on the contrary, these filmmakers provoke the responses of their subjects to the camera and we observe the transformations that are wrought by the presence of the camera by their own presence.

French for "film truth", cinema vérité was first developed by French ethnologist and filmmaker, Jean Rouch during the early 1960s and brought to documentary filmmaking a natural dialogue and authenticity of action. But unlike its direct counterpart, the philosophy behind this technique was that the filmmaker actively participates in the film as a subjective observer where necessary; combining observational and participatory filming in the same breath³.

Essentially, there is an awareness of the camera that is filming the scene, thus establishing a connection between the director, and those who are being filmed. It can also involve stylized and staged set-ups and the degree of intervention is greater than in direct cinema, with the filmmaker's subjective involvement evoking provocation—something critics point out goes against the whole foundation of documentary to portray uninterrupted truths.

In its defence, famous vérité filmmaker Dan Kraus once said

"no documentary can ever show you the truth, because there are multiple truths, but vérité can at least relay the truth as seen by a single observer..."⁴



Image: Alex Hobba, *A Conversation*, 2016, Still from HD video 14:26

3. Cinéma Vérité Vs. Direct Cinema, last modified November 20, 2015, <https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/cinema-verite-vs-direct-cinema/>
4. Ibid.

Similarly, Rouch's view about the camera provoking subjects was that provocation reveals people's true selves as the creatures of fantasy, myth and imagination, which he believes constitutes the most authentic self.

This is exemplary within the realm of documentary film. Whether it's the Maysles brothers revealing the stifled dreams of "Little Edie" Beale in *Grey Gardens* (1975)⁵, Shirley Clarke filming the aspiring and frustrated actor, Jason Holiday in *Portrait of Jason* (1967), Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin filming a Holocaust survivor, Marcell Redan in *Chronical of a Summer* (1960), or Alan and Susan Raymond filming thoughtful police officers in *The Police Tapes* (1977). Modern documentary film makers do more than present memorable people, they show these people turning themselves into characters projecting identities for the camera from the ones that they claim in daily life. The boundaries of fiction and non-fiction break down.

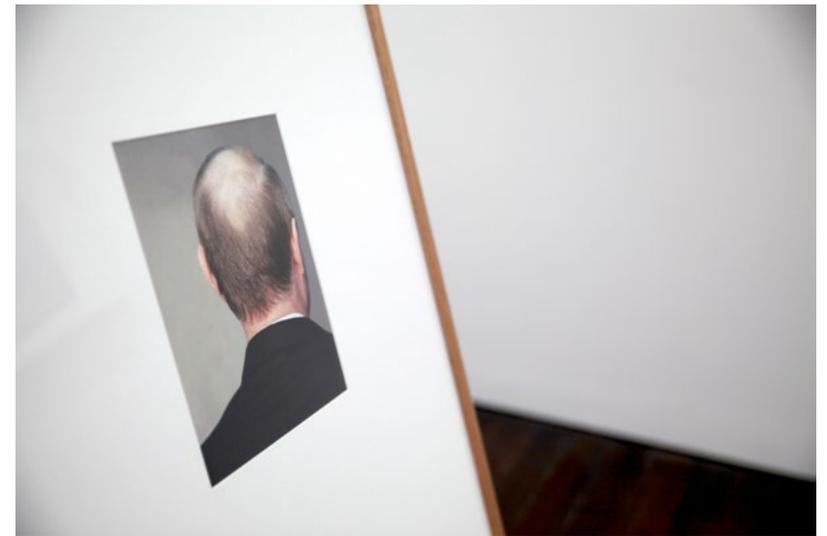
And here, at last, Victor plays the ultimate performance in the ultimate role as, himself. We gain insight not only on such a specific topic, we also witness a document of a person, an unembellished portrait of a man who is navigating his way between the camera, the film maker and unbeknownst to him, the viewer.

Chelsea Hopper

Chelsea Hopper is a curator and writer. Her recent curatorial projects include *HERE&NOW17: New Photography* at Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, and *I can see Russia from here* at TCB art inc. in Melbourne.

Alex Hobba is an emerging artist currently based in Canberra, having graduated from the ANU School of Art in 2016, majoring in Photomedia. With a focus on the interdisciplinary use of photography, video, and sculpture, Hobba explores the construction of stories, playing on devices found within cinema, theatre, literature, and music. Hobba is particularly interested in the use of language and genre as key devices for the communication and representation of information, blurring the line between real life and fiction. Hobba's work is rooted in the experiential world, drawing on various sources, be they personal or from a global context. Geopolitics and political economy figure in Hobba's recent work with a nod to 21st century New Materialism.

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Alex Hobba, *A Conversation*, 2016, Installation view.

5. Rather than planning a scene the Maysles brothers, Albert and David Maysles wanted to shoot, the brothers would let the story unfold organically as the camera rolled. They believed the documentarian was an objective observer, a completely invisible passivist as opposed to a director or participant—a noteworthy sentiment that sets the genre apart from cinema vérité.