

Psychology of a Pawn

PARTICIPANT INC, New York, USA

The figure of the pawn is, for some, the ultimate image of compromise. American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton coined the term 'psychology of a pawn' during his 1961 study of human behaviour in extreme cases of re-education, such as cults or the Chinese under the Cultural Revolution. In such cases, the implementation of a group ideology causes the individual to relinquish personal freedom in favour of servicing the greater cause. Curated by Mari Spirito, 'Psychology of a Pawn' at PARTICIPANT INC goes on to examine much more than just extreme behavioural models, as the exhibition advances into a general study of behavioural modification created by society. Behaviour in any group situation always constructs itself through the subordination of individual aims under a common group goal. Exhibiting works by Shai Azoulay, Gianluca and Massimiliano De Serio, Alex Israel, Linda Post, Kevin Schmidt and Corin Sworn, Spirito traces these behavioural codes into the realm of the everyday: from education to self-adjustment, traditions, subliminal messages and popular psychology.

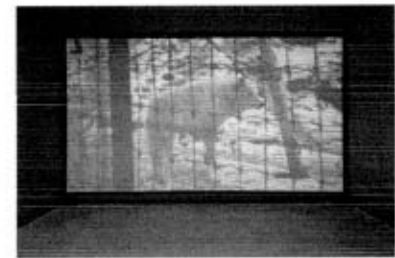
The idea of correcting an outside perception through self-correction is examined in Linda Post's sculptural video installation *Glean* (2008), comprising two monitors facing each other like mirrors. As if in conversation, the videos expose the intricate negotiations of an individual relating itself to the outside world. These studies consist of intense personal observation paired with constant re-adjustment - a learning scenario in a loop.

Kevin Schmidt's video projection *Sad Wolf* (2006) depicts an arctic wolf in captivity. The video is projected from a homemade video projector encased by a dilettantishly put-together plywood construction. The video carefully follows an omega wolf which has been shunned by the rest of his pack, the survival of which depends on a sense of unity created through designating a single outsider. Yet the pack itself is captured in a zoo, an artificial construct created so as to mark otherness and grant a sense of unity to the viewers.

About this review

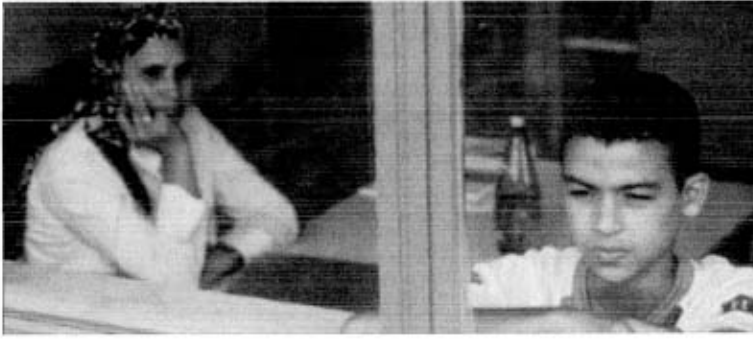
Published on 02/12/08

By Anna Gritz



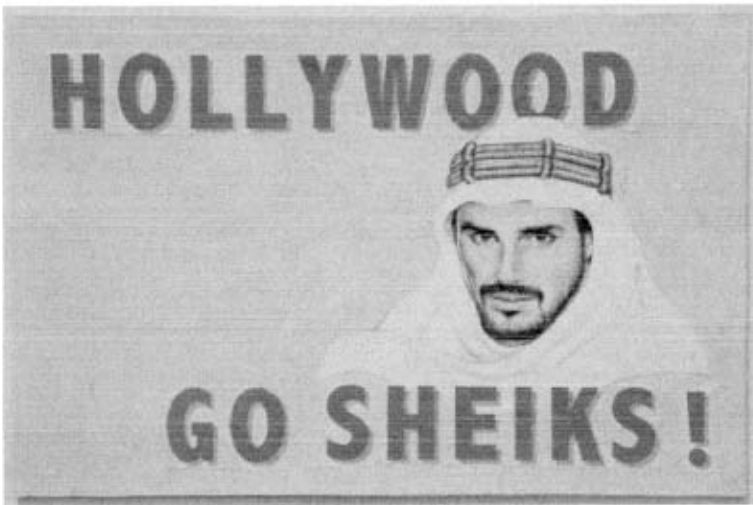
Kevin Schmidt, *Sad Wolf* (2006)

[Back to the main site](#)



Gianluca + Massimiliano De Serio, *Arabic Lesson* (2005)

The centre-piece of the exhibition, Gianluca and Massimiliano De Serio's film *Arabic Lesson* (2005) offers the viewer a very different view on the study of the Koran than is generally shown by the western media. Through repetition and imitation a young second-generation Moroccan boy studies in his Turin home. Mediated though Italian, the Arabic language becomes awkward while his movements in the mosque feel clumsy and strange; words, meaning and movements do not yet move in unison for him. The film reveals the difficulty of the preservation of traditions and culture in a world of multiple, overlaying cultures.



Alex Israel, *High School Mural Study (Hollywood Sheiks)* (2007)

Alex Israel's collages oscillate between propaganda and school pride. The small works in the style of building-size high-school murals advocate messages such as 'Go Sheiks' and 'Praying hands'. Israel's clever play with size and content reveals the effects that subliminal messages can have on its surrounding despite the message they carries.

'Psychology of a Pawn' offers a sinister vision of human group behaviour. It exposes the dangers of being part of societies, which gain their strength through a collection of communally agreed on truths, which if in question would eliminate the

very basis of its existence. Without offering an easy way out, the exhibition leaves the viewer with the question of how to best preserve a sense of individualism while remaining part of a community, how to maintain a position of distance that allows for critical reflection and oppositional thought.

Anna Gritz

Frieze

3-4 Hardwick Street, London EC1R 4RB, 020 7833 7270