CounterIntelligence, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto, 24 January to 16 March 2014

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The rich-text title CounterIntelligence that introduces an exhibition, writings, workshop, and film screenings considers two cultural nodes and production modes – art and military activity. The project’s formal and thematic eclecticism befits the Berlin-based Canadian curator, Charles Stankievech, whose own work traverses the fields of sound and visual art, writing, and publishing. Connections between the realms of art and war are well known: Leonardo’s designs for bombardment and defense technology; Marinetti’s Futurist enthusiasm for war as “the world’s only hygiene,” made concrete in his poem that sounded gunfire; and the CIA’s Cold War presence within the Museum of Modern Art and its ideological capture of avant-garde art.

Stankievech’s project springs from these instances into an intricate web of espionage, surveillance, military strategy, and multiple art forms. Invitations for sub and meta levels of interpretation are also suggested, through poststructuralist spatial theory and the politics of information gathering and archiving, curation, and the production of meaning in general.

To the curator’s credit, not only do more than a hundred documents and artworks fit comfortably into the modest JMB galleries but they do so with thematic elegance. In the first two rooms, four videos work together to clarify the contradiction between simulated and real war. In Harun Farocki’s two-channel video, Serious Games IV: A Sun with No
American soldiers use video game simulation to first train for, then recover from, real war. In the adjoining room are two video games produced by the U.S. military (America’s Army, 2002–05) and Hezbollah (Special Force, 2001). Though the production values are different, the works share the representation of male bonding through guns and the goal of recruitment. As the gunshot sound caroms around the room, viewers can access, in a fourth video, what is absent in the others — reality. A disturbing counterpoint to the polished game simulations is reality. A disturbing counterpoint to the values are different, the works share

The earliest document here is a letter of this exhibition. It is hard not to perform the very subject of this exhibition. An IDF training camp modelled after Arab villages is named “Chicago” after that city’s bullet-ridden fame. Adam Bloomberg and Oliver Chanarin photographed the site, and their large photo mural of a concrete wall with pre-formed hole covers the gallery wall (Chicago #5, Tze Elim Military Base, Negev Desert, 2005). In tight and traumatic conversation, Gordon Matta-Clark’s photograph Splitting figures a domestic home anarchitecturally severed through its middle (1974/2001).

Wooden display cabinets sweeping through the gallery hold bookworks and other paper documents. Joshua Simon and Stankievech’s Tahrir Square Lasers (2013), an iPhone-displayed video, is also installed here. The green laser light activity popular during the Tahrir Square protests shows the coupling of battle strategy and visual delight. The protest-welded laser lights provided signalled solidarity through pop art entertainment, but also identified snipers and confused helicopters overhead.

One of the most successful pieces that sutures the division between dry documents and visual aesthetics is Stankievech’s model interrogation room complete with a mirrored window, a table holding ten binders, and two chairs, allowing it to double as a comfortable reading room. In this small library, readers can find the plans used to construct the room itself—a CIA Human Resource interrogation room. The collision that may be frightening, but other perils of this exhibition. Jill Glessing is a writer, artist, and teacher of art and cultural history at York University and Ryerson University.

CounterIntelligence, 2014, view of the exhibition, photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery