



Exercise (Djibouti) 2012

John Gerrard

Exercise (Djibouti) 2012

Curated by Baden Pailthorpe

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SCREEN SPACE

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Introduction

Baden Pailthorpe



If there can be one crucial insight that the work of John Gerrard offers us, it is that the world can no longer be easily distinguished from its simulated iterations. Gerrard's medium of choice underpins the global networks of industry, military, entertainment, education and science that generate our contemporary state of being, where modelling, analytics and so-called big data are harvested from our past in the aim of deviating our possible futures. It is the fundamental element in the society of control, where bodies, politics and *body politics* both produce and consume behavioural information which, when sculpted into meaningful forms and proposals through mathematics, is re-entered into the ever compounded feedback loop of the contemporary subject and its *Umwelt*. This is the under-acknowledged thing at the heart of the dehumanised grammars of global capital that Gerrard ultimately distils in his works: that all of the interactions, simulations, and analytics of the contemporary military-corporate-political-cultural complex are, quite simply, *choreography*.

The process of curating this work for Screen Space was in itself a choreographic *exercise* involving the same global networks of bodies, disciplines, transport, technology and communication infrastructure that Gerrard's work interrogates. Architectural drawings, government institutions, special economic zones and various forms of labour were all employed, deployed, traversed and negotiated in order to assemble all of the elements required to show this work, over a period of about two years.

It is fitting that this work, *Exercise (Djibouti) 2012*, was commissioned to coincide with the ultimate marriage of politics and bodies, the 2012 London Olympic Games. Unlike the often hyper-sexualised treatment of the sculpted male military body – Claire Denis's homo-erotic film *Beau Travail* (1999) comes to mind – most of Gerrard's works are 'clean', sterile even (as Holland neatly points out in his essay). His intricate and laboured process conceals as much as it reveals, it presents no more or less than the surface of the real-world-time events that it simulates. Yet the more time you spend with and around Gerrard's work, the more its propositions percolate. Both essays in this catalogue offer specific perspectives on the *operations* in *Exercise (Djibouti)*. Timothy Holland delves into the various spatial considerations of Gerrard's work, which "actualises a potential from within, from the inside", as James Der Derian continues his trajectory into the myriad theatres of contemporary American MIME-NET (Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network) in Gerrard's *Exercise (Djibouti)*. Like all challenging works of art, Gerrard's work asks more questions than it answers. It holds up the proverbial mirror to us and what we see is at once unsettling and beautiful.









Desert Theatrics

Timothy Holland



"What is it, Major Lawrence, that attracts you personally to the desert?"

"It's clean"

"Well, now, that's a very illuminating answer."

-Jackson Bentley (Arthur Kennedy) to T.E. Lawrence (Peter O'Toole),
Lawrence of Arabia (David Lean, 1962)

One is perhaps initially struck by the cleanliness of John Gerrard's *Exercise (Djibouti)* 2012 which, following the reasoning from the dialogue above, may be attributed to the principal space that the work simulates. Is there something inherently clean about the desert? What are the properties of this cleanliness? Can someone or something be said to be clean like *it*? If so, *Exercise*, in its entirety, is comparable through simile to the desert: *Exercise* is like the desert. Of course, *Exercise* also portrays, illustrates, composites, and takes or has its place in an actual desert; like all of Gerrard's site-specific simulation-portraits, this place is cited parenthetically in the title of the work (Djibouti, Africa) and serves to draw attention to real human interaction with it. *Exercise's* desert and *Exercise* like the desert. On one hand, the choreographed movements of its figures, its unhurried orbiting frame, its highly structured composition, and the setting's relative stillness, measured light, and colour palette make *Exercise* a study in sterility, smoothness, and clinical precision.¹ It is clean like the desert because nothing in it seems wasted or excessive—everything is ordered, in its proper place. Both *of a desert* and *like the desert* then, *like a clean desert*: summoning the rejuvenating, torrid spaces of shamans, tuberculars, and yuppie spas; the desert and its unsullied, diffused sunlight, its blue sky faded from the sun's blinding white, its delineated lines. Salubrious are its arid warmth and light. And yet, the desert has another side that is just as clean, or more specifically, a side that makes its cleanliness possible. For a sinister, oppressive, prohibitive, and potentially lethal force always conditions and guards purity; it is there, lurking, keeping watch, and imposing order. The desert is exemplary in this respect because occupying forms of life must be adaptive on an incessant or pathological scale—one *must* surrender or succumb to its conditions. This cleanliness is predicated on divisions without remainder. The desert, the figure of the clean desert, polices its subjects through the physical thresholds of the body and the struggle for life—there, in the clean desert, everything is a subject, everything is subjected. Cleansing in its militant and decisive

manner, this clean wasteland pardons nothing, there are no exceptions. Everything is absolute and unconditional, only totalities defined in advance. *Exercise's* desert and *Exercise* like the desert: rigorous, arresting, terrorising.

The figure of the “clean” desert, taken from David Lean’s 1962 biopic, *Lawrence of Arabia*, a movie feasibly about the real-life military exploits of British officer T.E. Lawrence, opens up a cluster of themes and correspondences throughout Gerrard’s works, but most notably in *Exercise (Djibouti) 2012*. To begin with, *Lawrence’s* clean desert, like *Exercise*, reaches us through a complex web or economy of invention and reference, leaving in its wake nothing but traces, illusions, and allusions of authenticity. Did Lawrence really utter these words to Lowell Thomas, the actual American journalist who documented and sensationalised Lawrence’s role in the Sinai and Palestine Campaign, and who is portrayed by Arthur Kennedy as the character “Jackson Bentley”? Or was it a fabrication by the films’ writers, Richard Bolt and Michael Wilson? In sum, just who or what is the source? Is there an origin, and therefore, destination? *Exercise* captures and (re)presents these same questions through its play of locality and its engagement with an ostensibly “real” place and the activities that occur there. As with *Dust Storm (Dalhart, Texas), 2007* and *Dust Storm (Manter, Kansas), 2007*, *Exercise*, according to Gerrard, began with found fragments and floating indices, including an unusual online image of American troops involved in military exercises in Djibouti, Africa.

While the Republic of Djibouti may not be frequently mentioned in the American news media or culture at-large, this small African country houses the US Naval Expeditionary Base, Camp Lemonnier, which figures prominently, if not centrally, in the US military’s escalating drone campaign and presence in North Africa and the Middle East. Blending the warm waters of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, a lone narrow strait named the Bab-el-Mandeb is all that separates its eastern shores from west Yemen and the epicentre of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, widely considered the network’s most active affiliate. Djibouti is clearly a “strategic location near the world’s busiest shipping lanes and close to Arabian oilfields,” as the CIA’s public “World Factbook” suggests.² Gerrard’s research image is an artefact of this “strategic location” (used for training? What official purpose does or did it serve?), a type of production still plucked from the spectacle commonly known as the “war on terror.” As the CIA blurb implicitly reminds us, the roots of this “war” can be traced to



the abiding Western economic interest in the region and the persisting conflicts because of it. For the detective in Gerrard, the image is a clue that amasses these references and leads to his embedded, almost forensic investigations of actual, physical spaces. The evidence that he collects there—in the form of digital photos of the environment—is sent to Vienna, where it is meticulously rendered using 3D real-time computer graphics to re-create the real landscape.

It is easy to see why this particular image caught Gerrard's eye. There is something at once beautiful and farcical about it, something, in a word, theatrical. The soldiers and landscape are classically lit and composed, the sky a brilliant shade of turquoise that neatly contrasts the gold, dried ground; a background hill ribbon almost perfectly intersects them. These striking but rather orthodox aesthetics are juxtaposed and augmented by the soldiers' seemingly bizarre actions (or lack thereof). Just what exactly is taking place? And what is the US military's investment in such an adorned image? To an untrained military eye, the troops appear utterly vulnerable, gazing at the horizon, searching for imperceptible threats. Without shelter, camouflage, or cover, the soldiers are left exposed and impotent inside an ideal kill zone, a literal no-man's land. Swallowed and showcased by the desert world, their guns, armour, and other technical supplements are cumbersome and weigh them down; they have no place there, or rather, they are *in space* and *out of place*. There is no place, locality, or specific territorialised area in the image, only an excess of space, an abyss. They are engaged in emplacement, the transfer of space into place, and a simulation of their own, otherwise called exercises or drills. The military understands that the clean desert is an ideal theatre, an open, violent, and spectacular stage for staging and rehearsal.³ What we see is "military theatre" *par excellence*, the launching point for a "theatre of operations."⁴

The research image shows that the cleanliness of *Exercise* is already present. Before *Exercise*, there is already *Exercise* in this image of cleanliness. Gerrard rearticulates the absence of the image's events in the world now: *Exercise* is an aggregate *re-staging* of a disappeared scene, a performative re-enactment of something actual that never properly existed, but still has its *place* in the actual. It presupposes no origins or ideals; peeling back layers only reveals folds, indices, and media, and Gerrard rifles back through them in order to (re)assemble and construct another. In doing so, he brings awareness to the theatricality of it all, the staging of the

world, the world as a stage. However, Gerrard's works are never simply about referencing. Nor are they "post-modern" in the uncritical sense of the term: they are never nihilistic, indolently cynical, cocky, or vacuous, never politically and/or socially disinterested or equivocal. It is precisely through *Exercise's* cleanliness, which extends to its uncanny realism, highlighted by a viewer's uncertainty whether the work is wholly photographic, not to mention its installation, its treatment of the gallery space as a stage-object, that it dissects the *production* of things in general. In other words, because Gerrard's works appear to efface their own technologies and labour, because they seem so flawless and *immediate*, they summon rather than *exorcise* the factors, forces, filters, and screens that generate the veneers of cleanliness. They show cleanliness to be a human creation, even a compulsion, obsession, or drive.⁵

Alongside the stunning desert landscape and the strange arrangement of troops, there is the disquieting reality of what this image *is*: the US military not just documenting, but aestheticising its own engagement with performance, simulation, and thus, virtualization, in a place that is largely unknown but increasingly meaningful within contemporary global geopolitics and the escalation of remote, mechanized warfare and surveillance. At once it displays the virtuality and mediation *exercised* by the actions of war and the actual foreign, unseen, or overlooked locales of current military intervention. Like the themes of concealed and sublimated labour in *Grow Finish Unit (near Elkhart, Kansas)*, 2008 and *Sow Farm (near Libbery, Oklahoma)*, 2009, *Exercise* tells us that the inhuman element and ensuing cleanliness often associated with drone warfare—the "new," virtual theatre of operations—mandates not just the actions of bodies or boots on the ground, but also a theatrical space of content production, a lab or theatre devoted to fashioning a type of spectacular visibility, *especially* if these actions are to remain hidden.

"My interest in these scenes relates to the relationship between what we imagine happens around the world and what is actually there," says Gerrard in an interview.⁶ *Exercise* suspends and is suspended between what is imagined and what is there, between fiction and fact, analogy and literalism, actual and virtual. It "relates to the relationship" by inhabiting and amplifying the thresholds and co-implication of these dichotomies; it does not, in the end, merely portray, expose, or depict



someone or something. Gerrard's mode of enunciation can be seen as inhabitation, which names a certain submergence, immersion, and radical intimacy with and within the subject that muddles the distinction between object and analysis, work and world. This saturation is what separates Gerrard's simulations from the more conventional practices of documentary didactics and/or feature-length filmmaking pathos, both of which may, from the outset, seem better avenues for his investments in political and social issues, along with the budget and labour involved with his projects. Perhaps more than any of Gerrard's simulations, the *Exercise* series, which also includes the collaboration with choreographer Wayne McGregor for *Live Fire Exercise (Djibouti) 2011* and *Infinite Freedom Exercise (Near Abadan, Iran) 2011*, implants itself with its subject, as its subject, through its recognition of its shared or similar technical conditions with the "Western," if not specifically American, military. To be sure, all of Gerrard's works are perversely indebted to military simulators and the massive amounts of capital and labour that have poured into developing virtual and computerised battle conditions. It is as if Gerrard has come full circle with the *Exercise* series to acknowledge his works' imbrication with military power and the forces behind it. Likewise, it is as if Gerrard's personal acceptance and admission implies that evading such an insidious economy of forces is impossible. "Critical" art, and particularly what is called "new media art," cannot be excused or considered completely apart from this consuming, all-encompassing system. This *positioning* is what makes *Exercise's* inhabitation acutely subversive: it represents one possible outcome from an infinite series of machinic combinations undergirding the language of these technologies. It eschews distance and dialectics by actualising a potential from within, from the inside. As such, *Exercise* is not just about the limits of virtual and actual in the world, but itself constitutive of the fragmented space between, engendering in the process a singular *relationship*, one might say, "to the relationship."

Even the piece's figures, composed of two teams (blue and red) that convene daily to undertake an odd, ambiguously competitive ceremony under the billow of coloured military smoke signals—undoubtedly, making this piece the most abstract and enigmatic of the *Exercise* series— suggest this play of proximity, place, and actual-virtuality. On one hand, the figures were created by athletes who wore motion capture suits and were 3D scanned using hundreds of digital cameras; they subsequently only re-interpret or reenact actual, physical movements of the

living human body, including fatigue. As the work's main point of action, their ritual exhibits the theatricality, pageantry, and choreography that, while not often associated with military power, are undoubtedly inseparable from it. Gerrard asks his viewers to consider the limits and overlap of sanctioned, legitimised competition, and the labour, discipline, and manoeuvring that goes into activities that seem, if not natural, aligned with what appears to be a certain type of naturalness, or better, an essential distance from staging and aesthetics. Things are not so clean after all. It would be remiss to draw a one-to-one relationship between athletic training (or the Olympics) and US military intervention, and *Exercise* does not appear to make such a claim, nor does it invite its viewers to. Instead, it surveys the edges of worlds at the edge of the world and discovers there a dialogue of dependency fuelled by virtuality, performativity, and forms of visuality that project shadows. This is a relationship of smoke signals, of the opacity of illuminated bodies under the desert sun. Everything is captured by an array of cameras and processed by invisible machines at the speed of light. Figures are produced, exported, and (re)located in a world of continuous exchange, in a circuit of simile and discovery. *Exercise* is both a piece of evidence *and* an invention both model and signature. A clean desert is already there before it, a simulation waiting to be found.

1 My use of the word “precise” here draws a parallel and attempts to think along with Robin Mackay’s “Speculative Liter[e]alism” in *John Gerrard* (Madrid: Ivorypress, 2011), 19-43. Early on in Mackay’s essay, he links Gerrard’s works to Charles Sheeler’s “precisionism” through their shared use of photography, focus on industrialization, and varying forms of realism. This description also reverberates with Gerrard’s longstanding, albeit critical, affinity with Minimalism. For these comments, see *John Gerrard*, 131.

2 “The World Factbook: Djibouti.” Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), accessed January 28, 2014, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/dj.html> (my emphasis).

3 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word *theatre* comes from the Latin word *theātrum*, which has its roots in the Greek words *θεᾶτρον* and *θεᾶσθαι*. All of these words link back to the primacy of the visual, to acts of seeing and witnessing and beholding, but also to the *places* where these acts of looking occur.

4 In *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 314-315, Samuel Weber characterizes a “military theatre” as the transformation from a space in general to a place in particular that “often depends on the intervention of forces and factors external to the place under dispute.” Weber goes on to link this spatial transition specific to a military theatre to theatre in general because both depend on some “external intervention” originating from a relatively secure stronghold elsewhere. His point here is to establish that “[t]heatre signifies the *imposition of borders* rather than a *representational-aesthetic genre*.” Likewise, rather than implying the representation of content, the term “theatricality” signals “a *problematic process of placing, framing, [and] situating...*” Theatricality can thus be read as a spatial “problem” generated by emplacement, distancing, and the violence of encroaching frontiers.

5 These terms, of course, reference Sigmund Freud’s theory of the death-drive and the repetition-compulsion, as articulated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. C.J.M. Hubback (London and Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical, 1922). The affect of Gerrard’s works—the slowness and meditative-like qualities that often draw comparisons to Minimalism—as well as the “cleaning” that they explore throughout the world, can be seen as a desire to return to the womb, a space so complete and consuming that cleanliness has no opposition and therefore, cannot exist. There is nothing *there* to be cleaned, no excess, only complete fusion and immediacy—silence in fluid, everything before metaphor.

6 John Gerrard in *John Gerrard* (2011), 131.

























The Theatre of War

James Der Derian



Games of war and peace are being played across the multiverse. *War as game*, once confined to Go and chess board games, now appears on multiple screens in hyperreal and superviolent videogames (play *Call of Duty*) and training exercises-cum-Hollywood movies (see *Act of Valor*). *Game as war* has evolved from the crude sandpits of *Kriegsspiel* ('warplay' that preceded the Franco-Prussian War) to the systems engineering of the Schlieffen Plan (whose train timetables helped transform a Balkan war into the First World War) to the mathematical game theory of nuclear deterrence (the proxy war of World War Three) to the virtual immersive environments designed to alleviate posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). *War as peace* undergoes a quadrennial rebirth under the universalist banderol, nationalist medal-counting, and televisual spectacle of the Olympic Games. *Peace as war* morphs into new practices of humanitarian intervention, from 'bombing for peace' (Bosnia) to 'warring for democracy' (Iraq), to, most recently and ominously 'soft annexations' (Ukraine).

John Gerrard captures this convergence *and* captivates the audience in *Exercise (Djibouti) 2012*. His constructed simulation mounts a visual enfilade against the contemporary frontlines of war, peace and games. Creating a synecdoche of the video loop, the installation features former Olympiads in vaguely military garb as they execute precisely repeated manoeuvres in the desert. Set against the blank backdrop of the desert, the preferred topography of advanced military forces, repetition and imitation invoke the mimetic of war and game.

Gerrard's desert *mise-en-scène* of an infinite loop is significant and reminiscent. When asked if Iraq might become a 'quagmire', one American general famously responded with a meaningful *non sequitur*: 'We don't do jungles'. Lying under the general's remark, one can see, as Jean Baudrillard said in his hyper-romanticised account of a hyper-real America, 'the desert beneath, like a watermark.' The general's allusion is not just to past wars in Vietnam or Iraq but to the California High Mojave Desert where the US Army and Marines conduct their large-scale exercises at the National Training Center and 29 Palms, respectively. War as game as well as games of war play out much better in the emptiness of the desert: more transparent, less populated, a better line of sight.

Desert as watermark proves to be a felicitous oxymoron. Gerrard writes in the sand but he also wants us to read the writing on the wall, to see how quickly misbegotten war games and good intentions can go bad. With more than half of the global population

now living in cities, the desert might be fine for playing but not for winning a war, as the US Marines were to discover in the streets of Fallujah. 'OPLAN 1003 Victor', the war plan for the invasion of Iraq had three fewer divisions than recommended by the Middle East experts in the Pentagon or the State Department. The one-sided conflicts of the first Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo, as well as the first foray into Afghanistan had only served to reinforce the view of war as game, with mythic narratives, easy victories, and very few bodies (on 'our' side). From the decision to deploy troops to the daily order of battle, from the highest reaches of policy-making to the lowest levels of field tactics and logistics, war games, computer simulations, and command post exercises eroded the distinction between war and game.

It bears recalling the bizarre war of games that preceded Iraq 1, when General Schwarzkopf learned in 1988 that Iraq was using a software program supplied by an American engineering company to run computer simulations and war games for the invasion of Kuwait. Schwarzkopf then prepared his own war game, Internal Look '90', which was run in July 1990 at U.S. Central Command in Tampa, Florida. According to a Central Command news release issued at the time, 'command and control elements from all branches of the military will be responding to real-world scenarios similar to those they might be expected to confront within the Central Command AOR.' Not only 'real-world' but real-time: Iraq invaded Kuwait while the exercise was still running, and Schwarzkopf asked that a red stamp be used on all communiqués to distinguish the real invasion from the simulated event.

When the gamed expectations of a 'cakewalk' were not met in Iraq 2, the generals and defence department analysts experienced a similar cognitive dissonance. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Myers went into defensive mode against critics of what had become known as 'the plan'. At one of the increasingly acrimonious press conferences, Meyers denounced those who engage in 'a great sport here inside the Beltway' and 'criticize something ['the plan'] that they've never seen.' After uttering his trademark 'goodness gracious', Rumsfeld responded to one reporter's query by saying, 'I'm the boss, but I'm not the person who designs war plans.' Rather than designing war plans perhaps they should have been reading Helmuth von Moltke, the Prussian military strategist, who remarked, 'No battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy.' Instead, a reprimand was issued to the man on the ground, General William Wallace, Commander of V Corps,





after he declared in a rare moment of candour that 'The enemy we're fighting is a bit different from the one we war-gamed against.'

Gerrard's tableau of running loops and military rote actions begs the question Rumsfeld sought to duck: Who authors 'the plan'? Wherein lies intentionality? Responsibility? To be sure, the highly complex, scripted and automated nature of much of modern warfare suggests that the 'author is dead' (Barthes), has been supplanted by the 'author-function' (Foucault), aka 'the war machine.' Victory having many fathers, defeat so few, only compounds the problem. 'The plan' seems to take on a life of its own, where the past constitutes the future as a feed-forward loop of known knowns, leaving us all the more vulnerable to the unknown unknowns (*pace* Rumsfeld). When the present fails to conform, especially amidst the fog and noise of war, there is a predilection – or 'muscle memory' – to stick with the plan rather than adapt to a rapidly shifting reality. Repetition provides the illusion of continuity and predictability, that is, until it triggers a sense of déjà vu, which, as we all know from the black cat twice-seen by Neo in *The Matrix*, signals a serious glitch in the simulacrum.

Gerrard's art similarly sends a ripple through the simulacra of war: what we've seen before he forces us to see anew. We cannot depend on conventional reportage to do so, as we saw post-9/11 and in the lead-up to Iraq 2 when the White House, the Pentagon and the media became allies in the campaign to pre-empt the future under the guise of preventing terrorism. When the future becomes a feedback loop of simulations (wargames, training exercises, scenario planning, modeling) and dissimulations (propaganda, disinformation, deceit and lies), the traditional checks and balances between civilian and military power begin to disappear. Embedded journalists and Defense Department briefers became a combined information operation in a spasm of military exhibitionism and media voyeurism.

Baudrillard, looking back as he travelled through America, noted the warning in the outside mirror of his rental: 'Objects in this mirror may be closer than they appear.' Not quite as poetic as the Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, forced backward into the future by the storm of progress, the detritus of the past, caught in her wings. But nonetheless a message that emerges from Gerrard's simulation, and one we best pay attention to as we accelerate into an increasingly uncertain future. We look

back to the past through a variety of lenses to prepare for the future. We seek lenses of the highest resolution and communications of the highest speeds. Fidelity with reality becomes our gold standard. But these very efforts generate the paradox of simulation, one that Bacon, Borges and Baudrillard have all explored to great effect: the more 'real' the representation, model or theory, the more likely we are to confuse or even come to prefer the map for the landscape, the simulation for the real thing. And the better the simulation the higher the risk of confusing war as game.

This is not to deny the difference between war and games: people die in wars. True, fewer die than in past wars, especially when the casualty rates are being tracked by only one side of a conflict. 'You know', said General Tommy Franks early in Iraq 2, 'we don't do body counts.' But by making wars less lethal, precision munitions, drones, and surgical strikes also make wars more acceptable as a policy option. They also help to neutralise another impediment to war, what was once known as the 'Vietnam Syndrome' and is now mooted as the 'Iraq Syndrome' (public support declines as body-bags increase). The low risk, high yield, automated strategies of contemporary war has taken on a logic, space, and time of its own, seemingly outside the scope of public control. The human role is shrinking in numbers and significance in an increasingly robotic battlespace.

President Bush responded to critics of his rush to war by asking 'How much time do we need to see clearly that Saddam Hussein is not disarming?' He then answered his own question: 'This looks like a bad movie and I'm not interested in watching it.' At a time when our leaders confuse war as game as movie, we best fight fire with fire, media with media, and watch Gerrard, closely, repeatedly, relentlessly.











Epilogue

Simone Hine

One of the pleasures of running an art gallery is the time one inadvertently spends with a work. There is the lead-up time of course, but after the opening, when the dust settles and one is left in the silent gallery, the work develops by virtue of the time spent with it. In a screen gallery, such as Screen Space, this usually entails repetition, with details being illuminated as the video becomes more and more familiar with each viewing. In contrast, the simulation that comprises *Exercise (Djibouti) 2012* develops and evolves alongside the viewer's experience. As a simulation, the viewer who returns remains constantly surprised. Ambiguous scenes unfold as exhausted figures lie scattered across the ground, colourful smoke at times veils the figures, forming patterns in the air that supersede the importance of the figures and, at the end of the day, these figures disappear after slowly walking into the distance, and we are left to wonder where they reside overnight.

While the simulation is ever unfolding, the actions performed remain broadly the same. A group of men run in a figure-eight formation as the virtual camera pans slowly around the action. A drill sergeant stands stationary in the centre of the scene, as the coloured smoke from the flares fills the air before dissipating. Counter to the idea of an ever-evolving digital environment, the act of training means that the same action is repeated continuously: a denial of linear progression, which is central to the ideology of war, for which they presumably train. The figure-eight, as the sign of infinity, replicates the logic of the program that gives them life, the act of training, and the cycles of war.

Stripped of context and, consequently, of narrative purpose, these figures appear more like dancers than soldiers. As they run endlessly in formation, attention shifts towards the play of bodies in space. Focus is placed on the discipline it would take, both physically and mentally, to run continuously in circles with the hot sun beating upon your back and then face. As I watched these figures evolve and yet stay the same, I was at times mesmerised by their hypnotic rhythms, at other times I was exhausted by the repetition and sometimes relieved to see them rest. To look at the figures without context is not to suggest that the work depoliticises the subject matter, in fact quite the opposite. As I watched these simulated men running in circles I felt their exhaustion and in that I felt an affinity with them, if only as a result of this time spent with them. In those moments it was hard to think of the figures as tools of politics. At a time when most of us experience war as images on screens, it seems

important to use those screens to remind us of the human toll, while accounting for the fact that these images are transmitted to us via highly constructed mediums.

Undoubtedly, the enormity of *Exercise (Djibouti)* lies within the complexity of the image and the extra-diegetic knowledge of the sheer volume of data required to construct and animate the work. Yet, paradoxically, what resides over my experience of this work is the silence. The complexity of the visual imagery feels as though it is there to emphasise the silence and to hear it more profoundly. For it is this silence that gives us the freedom to contemplate the images before us, without locking them down to the specifics of the location and particularity of the characters. These ghostly figures appear as a strange mirage. They exist as data, but by virtue of their role as simulation, and the time that can be spent watching their evolution, they act as reminders of the human in war as well as our distance from that humanity.

















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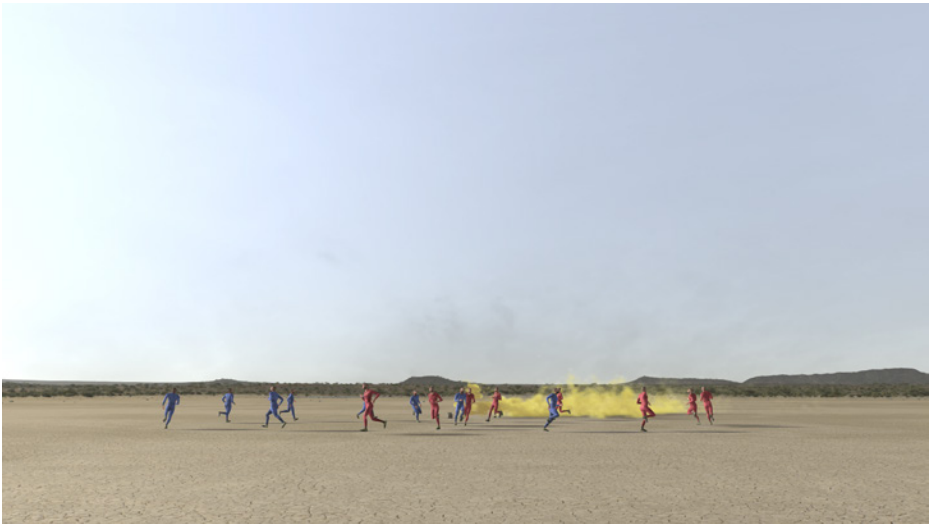
John Gerrard was born in Dublin in 1974 and studied at the Ruskin School of Drawing & Fine Art, School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Trinity College, Dublin. Since 2000 he has exhibited widely in numerous solo and group exhibitions. Gerrard's work was included in the Venice Biennale in 2009 and recent exhibitions include the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC, the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, among others. *Exercise (Djibouti) 2012* at Screen Space is his first exhibition in Melbourne. Gerrard is represented by Thomas Dane Gallery (London) and Simon Preston Gallery (New York).

Simone Hine is an artist and curator based in Melbourne, Australia. Her practice utilises performance, video and installation. Hine has exhibited in solo exhibitions throughout Australia including the George Paton Gallery, Brisbane Powerhouse, and the Institute of Modern Art. Hine was a founding co-director of Beam Contemporary, which, from 2010 to 2014, was an experimental commercial gallery in Melbourne. She is a founding co-director of Screen Space. Hine is currently completing a practice-led PhD in Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne.

Timothy Holland is a PhD Candidate (ABD) at the University of Southern California in the Department of Critical Studies, School of Cinematic Arts. He is currently the managing editor for *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*.

Baden Pailthorpe is an Australian new media artist. His work broadly engages with the politics and cultures of technologies. His recent works have focused on the re-appropriation and manipulation of military technologies, including simulators, cinema and video games. Baden Pailthorpe has participated in over fifty solo and group exhibitions, including Martin Browne Contemporary, Sydney, NIMk, Amsterdam, la Gaité Lyrique, Paris and the Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Pailthorpe is undertaking a PhD in New Media Aesthetics at UNSW, Sydney. He holds an MFA from l'Université Paris VIII and an MA from the College of Fine Arts, UNSW. His work is held in private and public collections. In 2013, Baden Pailthorpe was the inaugural artist in residence at the Australian War Memorial.

Screen Space is an independent not-for profit art gallery that opened in Melbourne's CBD in September 2010. The main exhibition space has been designed specifically to enable the gallery's curatorial focus on exhibitions that incorporate screen technology or which engage with screen culture, regardless of medium. The gallery program combines local and international, emerging and established artists.



John Gerrard
Exercise (Djibouti) 2012
2012
Simulation
Dimensions variable
Edition of 4 + 2 A/P

Image Credits

Digital Stills

John Gerrard, *Exercise (Djibouti) 2012*, 2012. Simulation. Digital Still. Detail.
Images courtesy the Artist, Modern Art Oxford, Thomas Dane Gallery, London and
Simon Preston Gallery, New York.

Installation Images

Pages 10, 18, 24, 38, 42, 46, 49: John Gerrard, *Exercise (Djibouti) 2012*, 2012. Simulation.
Installation view at Screen Space, Melbourne. Photographer: Kyle Weise.
Images courtesy the Artist, Screen Space, Thomas Dane Gallery, London and
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John Gerrard is represented by
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Actors: Somto Eruchie, Jordan McGrath, Julian Thomas

3D scanning, texture photography / character retopology: Sample & Hold

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3D modelling / animation processing: arx anima

3D modelling / animation processing coordinator: Christoph Staber

Motion capture editing / animation processing: Paul Pammesberger,

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**John Gerrard
Exercise (Djibouti) 2012**

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Screen Space

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