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Group Exhibitions

"Untitled" (Ross)
Untitled (History)
Untitled (Abstraction)
"Untitled" (Passport)
"Untitled" (Death by Gun)

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Untitled (History)

Although all five group exhibitions organized in the context of the 12th Istanbul Biennial take specific works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres as their points of departure, two- *Untitled (History)* and *Untitled (Abstraction)*-do not appropriate the exact titles of those works. This show, *Untitled (History)*, is inspired by a work simply called *"Untitled"*, made in 1988. It is one of Gonzalez-Torres's dateline pieces, in which groups of names, either historical or from popular culture, are written in white type on a black background along with the years they occurred or appeared. There are several dateline pieces, taking the form of Photostats or public billboards.

In *"Untitled"* we read "Patty Hearst," the young San Francisco heiress who was kidnapped by a left-wing guerrilla group and later converted to their cause; "Jaws," Steven Spielberg's blockbuster thriller film; "Bruce Lee," the Chinese American martial-arts actor; and "Jackie," the Bouvier turned Kennedy turned Onassis. They appear respectively alongside their dates of arrest (1975), release (1975), death (1973), and wedding to the famous Greek magnate (1968). On a more political note, Gonzalez-Torres also includes "Munich," where a massacre took place during the 1972 summer Olympics after the kidnapping of Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists on German territory, and "Watergate," the 1973 political scandal in the United States that led to Richard Nixon's resignation as president. Undercutting these events, "Waterbeds" appears as another pop reference, this time of a kinky nature, along with the year of the invention of its modern version in San Francisco (1971).

Another dateline piece that takes the form of a Photostat, a billboard, and a stack piece, *"Untitled"* (1989), lists a series of key events and figures in the history of the gay and queer movement in the United States along with a single 19th-century British literary figure's name inserted to interrupt the flow of historical narrative: "People With AIDS Coalition 1986 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1891 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969."

Our interest in these and other dateline works relates to how history can be rewritten according to a process of selecting and editing names of places, products, or events, and how with this seemingly simple gesture, the writing of history is brought into question. We are also interested in how the interpretation of the names may change from one reader to the next. "Jackie," "Waterbeds," "Munich," and "Oscar Wilde" will evoke different memories and meanings for different viewers. This is the consequence of bringing history into the artistic field, where economies of meaning and signification are accepted as more open and plural and may assume creative and idiosyncratic tones. Paraphrasing Gonzalez-Torres, we could say: "The [exhibition] is untitled because 'meaning' is always shifting in time and space." *Untitled (History)* questions history as a discipline, and as an all-encompassing, totalizing master narrative. The claim is not so much that artists are becoming historians, but more that art may offer critical and creative possibilities for the understanding of history. The theme of history is a wide, almost open-ended one. All objects in the world possess a history-the history of their creation, of their coming into being, of their making, usage, and circulation. *Untitled (History)* focuses on the writing of history, history's writing, and the history of writing.

The exhibition occupies an elongated room, calling attention to the formal relationships between the narrative of time and the experience of space. The work of **Cevdet Ereğ**, which plays a pivotal role in the exhibition, very much relates to the articulation of time and space. His collection of rulers, made since 2007, bears inscriptions of years in Latin and Arabic, as well as "0" and "NOW." A key piece in this series is *Ruler Coup* (2009), upon which he has inscribed "1923," "1960," "1971," "1980," and "2009," which for a Turkish person will stand out as the dates of foundation of the Turkish Republic, the three military interventions, and the date the piece was made.

A number of artists deal with government and public documents. **Voluspa Jarpa's** *Biblioteca de No Historia* (Library of No History, 2010) gathers into book format official documents on the Chilean dictatorship that have been declassified by the United States government. Two hundred copies of each of the six different volumes were printed for the biennial, and they will be distributed for free each day to the first 20 visitors. **Glenn Ligon** also appropriates government documents, this time from FBI files that have been declassified because of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). He came across them in his research on the civil rights and antiwar movements in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, and the *FOIA Drawings* (2011) bear the traces of a censor's heavy black pen. Ligon is interested in "how these documents' very existence in the public sphere is predicated on their

incompleteness, their visibility dependent on the pen of the censor." *Letters That Go Folded Into Shredder* (2008-11) by **Nasrin Tabatabai** and **Babak Afrassiabi (PAGES)** is composed of 11 different versions of a shredded, A4-size, two-page letter. It references a letter supposedly found in the American embassy in Tehran by Iranian students in November 1979. The letter is signed by Bruce Laingen, the chargé d'affaires at the embassy at that time, and it is dated November 1, 1979, three days before the student takeover that lasted more than 15 months. Perusing the different versions of the recomposed letter, one wonders which might be the true document. **Johanna Calle's** series of drawings *Versión Oficial* (Official Version, 2008) consists of handwritten yet illegible transcripts of official accounts issued by the Colombian government regarding the deaths of certain individuals, in which she finds various gaps and voids, signaling the manipulation of information.

Akram Zaatari's *Untitled* (*Nabih Awada's Book of Letters from Family and Friends*) (2007) consists of photographs written to Awada, a member of the Communist Party, while he was imprisoned in Israel after taking part in military operations in the south of Lebanon. He was captured in 1988, at the age of 16, and sentenced to prison two years later, where he stayed until 1998. The letters, photographed as documents, date from 1990 through 1997; in this instance, the private and the personal become political and historical, all in the territory of art. **Aydan Murtezaoglu** gathers a group of works and documentation related to her *Blackboard* series, based on the famous 1928 photograph in which Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic, introduces to the people the new Turkish alphabet based on Latin letters. Here the theme of the writing of history is intertwined with the history of writing, along with the artist's own history. Another version of the work will be on view at the Istanbul Modern during the biennial. **Homayoun Askari Sirizi's** work spells the word "revolution" in Farsi, and its lengthy title is a citation from Jean Baudrillard's *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities: "They (masses) absorb all the electricity of the social and political and neutralise it forever"* (2008). In conclusion to this section, **Ali Kazma's** video installation *O.K.* (2010) captures the rapid and seemingly accelerated action of a government official fiercely stamping documents. Its mesmerizing choreography of bureaucratic precision creates a surreal effect.

Other works in this exhibition deal with "before" and "after" photographs. Sixteen copies of **Flavia Gandolfo's** book *En Otra Parte* (In Another Part, 2009) are on view, each open to a different page, showing photographs taken inside the Museo Junín, a functional yet seemingly abandoned museum in the interior of Peru. The spreads juxtapose similar views shot in January 2007 and April 2009. The museum's displays gather all sorts of objects of questionable historical relevance- all carelessly kept. **Antoni Muntadas** refers to *Media Sites-Media Monuments Budapest* (1998) as a project on media, memory, silence, and emptiness. It focuses on sites of events that have been explored by the media. The *Budapest* series (there is also one concerning Washington DC) juxtaposes photographs of nine landmarks related to the city's history. **Rula Halawani's** *Presence and Impressions* (2009) juxtaposes photographs made at the beginning of the 20th century with her own made some 100 years later, showing the destruction and transformation of the landscape in Palestine in villages that were depopulated in 1948.

There are a number of artists' books in *Untitled* (*History*). **Irena Lagator Pejovic's** *After Memory* (2007-8) is a book with 1,800 valid banknotes borrowed from National Bank of Serbia, which owns the work. The dinar was introduced in 2007, and the 200-dinar note bears the image of Nadezda Petrovic, one of the most important painters in the Balkans at the turn of the 20th century. **Shuruq Harb's** *A Book of Signatures* (2009) consists of a handmade leather-bound book containing 250 signatures of men named Mohammed in Palestine. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, approximately 13.5 percent of the Palestinian population living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are named Mohammed; it is the most common name there. The book is exhibited closed, next to a projection of the signatures, thus combining two types of archives: digital and handmade. **Milena Bonilla's** *Capital/Sinister Manuscript (Luxury Version)* (2008) consists of a copy of an unauthorized Spanish translation of Karl Marx's *Capital* written by the (right-handed) artist with her left hand, bound in cloth and gold.

Other artists in the show incorporate the books of others into their work in a more literal, physical way. **Claire Fontaine** appropriates the cover of Guy Debord's famous 1967 *The Society of the Spectacle* and replaces the contents with a brick. **Simryn Gill** appropriates the same book, but cuts the pages into thin strips and rolls them into small spheres to make necklaces. She calls this series of works *Pearls*. **Adrián Villar Rojas's** *La tecnología del silencio* (The Technology of Silence, 2011) consists of a group of history books in which he has made drawings and interventions, overlaying history with his own histories. **Julieta Aranda's** *There Has Been a Miscalculation (Flattened Ammunition)* (2007/2011) consists of a large Plexiglas cube containing pulverized books about 20th-century history. A computerized air compressor goes off occasionally, blowing the dust of history into a cloud of micro fragments.

Concluding the narrative of the exhibition, **Mungo Thomson's** *Untitled* (*TIME*) (2010) collapses time and history in a precise and concise way. The work is a video showing-in chronological sequence-all the covers of the American weekly news magazine *Time* since its first edition on March 3, 1923, up until the date Thomson made the work. The rapid succession and compression of hundreds of covers has a dazzling effect; almost a century goes by in two minutes and 30 seconds. In counterpoint, **Taysir Batniji's** *Suspended Time* (2006) consists of an hourglass laying on its side. Here, time has stopped. The outline of the hourglass recalls the symbol of the infinite, evoking another famous work by Gonzalez-Torres dealing with time, *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)* (1991). That work was made in the year his lover, Ross, died. Three years earlier Gonzalez-Torres had written in a letter to Ross, "We are synchronized, now and forever."

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