



**Núria Güell & Levi Orta**  
***John Rambo Project***

***John Rambo Project*** (USA, 2016) is the result of a collaboration between Núria Güell and Levi Orta, a project where the two artists' viewpoints collide. Based on Peter MacDonald's film, *Rambo III*, Güell and Orta find two incarnations of Rambo in the same military conflict: Mike Prysner and Ayyub Faleh al-Rubaie, a hero and an anti-hero.

Núria Güell focuses her work on the audiovisual recording of **Mike Prysner's** witness. Prysner is a 32-year-old Iraq war veteran whose traumatic experience led him to activism against the war. Güell organized an encounter between Prysner and a class of 8th grade students (13-14 years old) at a school in Manhattan. United States army recruitment at schools begins in the 9th grade. With promising acts of goodness and humanitarian aid, college funding (unaffordable for most of the country's citizens), access to a high-tech job, adventure and travelling, the US Army approaches schools to sell a magnified and embellished image of the activities carried out in the bosom of the military. The ultimate intention behind their attractive presentations is to recruit teenagers.

Prysner gives a talk to young students, reliving his experiences in the Iraq War. He threshes the elements of the ideological machine used by both the US Army and the State to draft their potential future soldiers. The veteran unmasks the rhetoric behind the images of military propaganda that appeal to humanitarian aid or US values, such as freedom. He also refutes the myths that are used as persuasion mechanisms. His spectrum encompasses not only the elements that conform the war apparatus of the United States, but the human consequences (post traumatic stress disorders, disabilities, suicide attempts, and so on) that the power structures neglect once the conflicts come to an end or the soldiers are sent home.

On the other hand, Levi Orta offers an audiovisual portrait of **Ayyub Faleh al-Rubaie**, known primarily as Abu Azrael (his war name) or the "Iraqi Rambo". Azrael is an extremely popular figure in his country: a major in Kataib al-Imam Ali, an Iraqi Shiite militia of the Popular Mobilization Forces fighting against ISIS in Iraq. The reasons he has become such an iconic figure of the resistance are his media influence and his ability to create affinity among possible recruits. Given his status as a cult figure, the Iraqi Army also uses his image for propaganda purposes, almost as a public relations campaign.



If Güell is presenting a soldier regretful of his war crimes, Abu Azrael represents the opposite. The brutality of his actions and methods have given him the nickname "Angel of Death". Since little is known about his real persona, his status has reached a near mythical dimension. His deeds sail on the Internet and expand among social networks at an incredible speed, taken sacrosanctly. According to the missive, Azrael has killed more than 1,500 ISIS militants in just one year: his popularity has reached high peaks of sympathy precisely because it brings symbolic alleviation to the population looking for anti-ISIS referents and defenders. His current media presence is ubiquitous.

Orta's project consists of an apology to Abu Azrael from the suggested position of a teenager in military drafting age. His objective is to analyze the construction of a hero, but also how apologies redraw his personality and his life. Therefore, in Orta's project, the references to videogames, documentaries, drawings, fanaticism, the desire of success and formation of ISIS –also Prysner's threshed topics– abound. The difference between Azrael and Prysner is that the US veteran does not let the embellished narrative eclipse the questions it arises. Prysner stresses the trauma, the false promises, the media spectacularization of the conflicts and the moral and cultural manipulation that threaten the same teenagers.

The presentation of these exercises in the artistic space generates a critical analysis. An important part of *John Rambo Project* are the plastic representations that Prysner's talk inspires in the students. The results show the particular ways in which teenagers channel information and set the great multiplicity of interpretations that ideological narratives are capable of producing. Through creation, and reviewing what they were told, the students comprehended what were their emancipatory chances and activated their critical potential. Thus, *John Rambo Project* establishes a dialectic between narration and reception, discourse and affiliation.

***John Rambo Project:***

3 drawings. Marker on cardboard.

18 plasticine sculptures made by students.

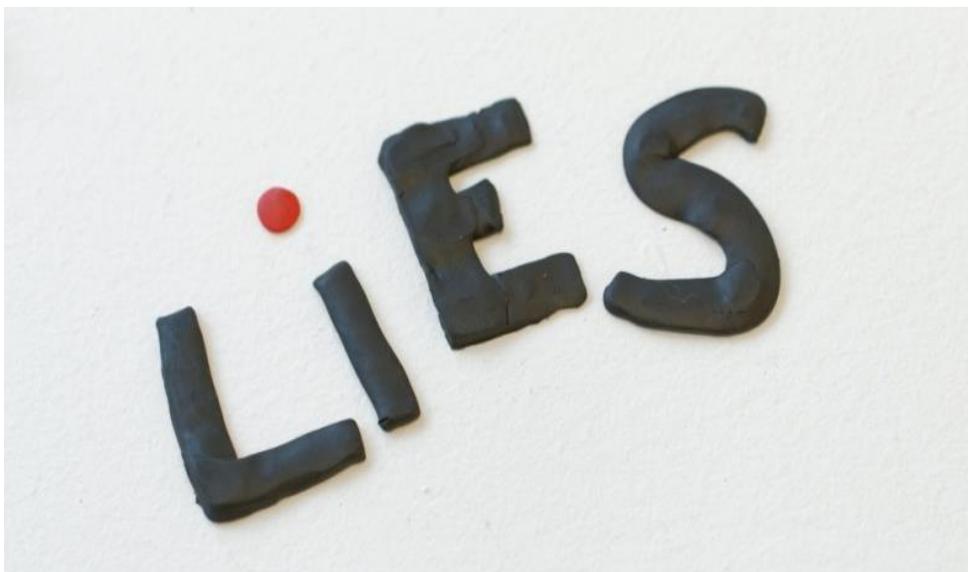
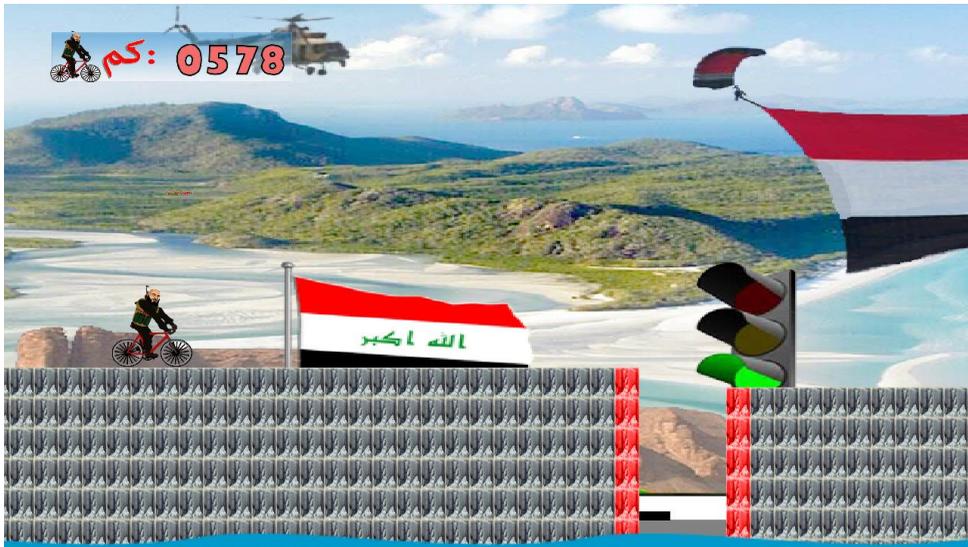
1 photo triptych.

*John McCain with ISIS members.* Archive photography.

*Mike Prysner.* Speech. Video. Length: 1h

*Abu Azrael.* Video. Length: 1 min in loop.

2 stills of *Rambo III's* final credits. Video.



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