

# FAULT LINES

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Perhaps the intact, happy family has always been an unrealistic ideal achievable only in anodyne 1950s TV sitcoms. However, the happy home based on traditional assumptions seems increasingly fantastical. Today, “family values” as such are not only being called into question, but the very phrase is now code for regressive politics. The works in this exhibition address the complex set of relationships within the contemporary family. In each case, a family is physically, emotionally or geographically torn. Richard Billingham records with unflinching honesty his own severely dysfunctional family in *Fishtank* (1998). In *Pork and Milk* (2004) French artist Valérie Mréjen interviewed young Israelis who voluntarily abandoned their ultra-orthodox families in order to lead secular lives, whereas the separation of mother and child in Mona Hatoum’s video *Measures of Distance* (1989) is a result of the 1975 Lebanese civil war. The Russian collective Chto Delat’s comical video *A Border Musical* (2013) reveals differing cultural expectations of family life. *Untitled* (2009) by Israeli-born artist Keren Cytter features a backstage rehearsal that ends in a violent act against a family member. Ryan Trecartin, in one of his earliest videos, *Kitchen Girl* (2001), takes maternal frustration to hysterical extremes. Two evening screenings expand upon the exhibiton’s subject: *Continuity* (2012) by Berlin-based artist Omer Fast deals with the psychological ravages of war. The following week French artist Sophie Calle and Gregory Shepherd recount a failed attempt at a lasting relationship in *Double-Blind* (1992).

—Constance Lewallen, curator of *Fault Lines*

## SPECIAL SCREENINGS

**Wednesday, September 11th, 8pm**

**Omer Fast, *Continuity*, 2012, 41 min.**

Fast is a native of Israel and currently lives in Berlin. His video *Continuity* was one of the highlights Documenta 13, 2012. This intriguing three-part documentary style narrative unfolds slowly and becomes increasingly tangled. The basic storyline follows the return of a young German soldier to his home after fighting in Afghanistan. The narrative repeats three times with three different actors playing the role of the son. In each iteration, details change and disturbing, surreal elements appear (maggots moving in pasta, dead soldiers in a pit) until finally one does not know how to interpret this homecoming. Perhaps the parents need this repeated scene to assuage their grief at their son’s death. Fast’s insertion of Jeff Wall’s 1992 *Dead Troops Talk* (a vision after an ambush with a Red Army Patrol, near Morqou, Afghanistan, winter 1986) concurs with Wall’s light-box image that what is real is a construct. *Continuity* builds on Fast’s  *Casting* (2008), a multi-screen video also involving a soldier, and operates in the grey zone between memory and fact.

**Wednesday September 18th, 7pm**

**Sophie Calle, *Double Blind*, 1992, 75:68 min.**

Sophie Calle and Greg Shepherd, who hardly know one another, set out on a road trip from New York to the San Francisco Bay Area. Each has a camcorder, which they point at one another and record sights along the way—(Ant Farm’s Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo, Texas; Bruce Nauman and Susan Rothenberg’s house in Galisteo, New Mexico)—along with many diners, service stations, and rumpled motel beds. The soundtrack is the music on the car radio. Both Calle and Shepherd create their own journal as they speak private thoughts into their cameras. The leitmotif, “no sex tonight,” spoken by Calle throughout the trip indicates her thwarted desire to form a real relationship, while Shepherd’s ambivalence is revealed by his furtive calls and letters to a former girlfriend. A sort of rapprochement takes place at the end when Calle gets her wish—to be married in Las Vegas (in a hilarious drive-through chapel). Predictably, the marriage is short-lived. Was Calle really the happy bride as she seems in the video or was this simply a conceptual-art marriage? As in Omer Fast’s *Continuity* the line between fact and fiction in *Double Blind* is unclear and reveals a mix of voyeurism and self-revelation.

## ARTWORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

### Mona Hatoum

#### *Measures of Distance*, 1988, 16 min.

In 1975 Palestinian-born artist Mona Hatoum found herself stranded in London, unable to return to her family in Lebanon due to the outbreak of civil war. In this touching and poetic video, the artist reads aloud from letters she and her mother exchanged, translating them from Arabic into English. Calligraphic Arabic script rolls across the screen veiling the artist's mother in the shower who writes not only of the pain caused by their separation, but also of her sexuality and intimate feelings about her husband—a taboo subject in Arab culture. Hatoum wrote, “In this work I was also trying to go against the fixed identity that is usually implied in the stereotype of Arab woman as passive, mother as non-sexual being . . . the work is constructed visually in such a way that every frame speaks of literal closeness and implied distance.” (Mona Hatoum 1997). There are many kinds of distances implied in this statement—familial, geographical, emotional, and linguistic. Although very personal, the situation in which this mother and daughter find themselves suggests the untold numbers of families similarly ruptured by geo-political events beyond their control.

### Valérie Mréjen

#### *Pork and Milk*, 2004, 52 min.

In this film transferred to video, French writer and artist Valérie Mréjen interviews a number of young Israelis, mostly men, in Tel Aviv who abandoned their ultra-orthodox families to lead secular lives. Although committed to their new ways of life, each shares their doubts, their sadness at being cut off from family and community, in most cases a complete rupture, as well as the difficulties of adjusting to a totally unfamiliar way of life. Filmed in straight documentary style as a series of portraits, this work is particularly relevant at a time when Israel is struggling to integrate the ultra-Orthodox into society.

### Ryan Trecartin

#### *Kitchen Girl*, 2001, 3 min.

Trecartin's videos have roots in Andy Warhol's ensemble factory films—both feature casts of gays, lesbians, transsexuals, and other unconventional types but instead of being slow and improvisational like Warhol's, Trecartin's are scripted and manic. This early video by Trecartin has the earmarks of his longer, more developed works—a constructed domestic interior, frenetic pacing, transgressive behavior, and heightened emotion. Lizzie Fitch, Trecartin's long-time collaborator, who plays the hysterical mother in *Kitchen Girl*, tosses her ungrateful children (represented by stuffed animals) out the window. Here the kitchen, traditionally the nurturing heart of the family home, is the site of trauma and child abuse.

### Keren Cytter

#### *Untitled*, 2009, 16 min.

Cytter, who is Israeli by birth and lives in Berlin, has created a disjunctive narrative involving actors rehearsing on a bare stage in front of a live audience. Partially structured on American avant-garde filmmaker John Cassavetes' *Opening Night* (1977), Cytter's video is simultaneously humorous and sad. The jerky camera movements echo the repetitive, disjointed, emotionally charged narrative. Other actors include two young boys, a man, and a couple who speak furtively of running off to Las Vegas. The final deadly act was inspired by a boy's real-life murder of his father's mistress.

### Chto Delat

#### *A Border Musical*, 2013, 48:30 min.

Chto Delat is a loose collective of leftist Russian artists, poets, and musicians (or, in their words “cultural workers”) founded in 2003. They took their name, which translates as “what is to be done,” from the title of Vladimir Lenin's 1902 political pamphlet in which he calls for the formation of a political party. *A Border Musical* takes the form of

a Brechtian operetta whose main character is an accordion-playing Russian woman. She leaves her remote mining town to join her Norwegian husband across the border. Convinced that she will find a better life for herself and her son in Norway, she ridicules the macho bravado of the miners, a male chorus, who urge her to stay. As the scene switches back and forth between Russia and Norway, hopes for happiness unravel: her husband is shocked by her relationship with her son and she misses her job as choir mistress. She eventually accedes to the Norwegian ideal of a perfect society, which allows for children to be taken from their families to be raised in more politically correct environments. Despite its farcical style, *A Border Musical* critiques both Russian and Norwegian society and expresses pessimism about bridging cultural differences.

### Richard Billingham

#### *Fishtank*, 1998, 46:40 min.

Richard Billingham is one of the YBA (Young British Artists), a group including Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, among others, who emerged in the late 1980s. *Fishtank*, shot with a hand-held camera in home-movie style and distilled from 50 feet of video footage, takes a frank look at the artist's mother, Elizabeth, father, Raymond, and brother, Jason who live in the British Midlands. Billingham's is the definitive dysfunctional family beset by poverty, alcoholism, and obesity. Nothing much happens in this chaotic household; the TV plays constantly; the parents argue: “If you are drinking, Ray, I'll clobber you,” says Elizabeth; “Piss off and leave me alone,” he replies. Jason, meanwhile, spends a good deal of time killing flies, and a pet ferret pushes a ball around. A large, somewhat murky fish tank, through which Billingham shoots from time to time—together with extreme close-ups and occasional inversions of the camera—emphasizes a sense of disorientation. At the end of the film, a bit of tenderness remains despite the chaos: Ray and Liz recline side by side on the bed, speaking calmly, while Jason hums along to a rock n' roll song.