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STEFFANIE LING
 TOM RICHARDSON AT FIELD CONTEMPORARY
 April 12, 2017

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Tom Richardson's exhibition *Rehearsal for a Synthetic Theatre*, currently on display at **Field Contemporary**, is built on a composite of historical, biographical, cinematic, and musical sources that revolve around the life of T.E. Lawrence, a military liaison during Britain's Sinai and Palestine Campaign who was also known as Lawrence of Arabia.



Tom Richardson, *Curtain Call from the Ruin of High Hope*, 2017, video still

In Richardson's film for the exhibition, empty uniforms signify the characters: desert attire for Lawrence, military regalia for General Allenby, and a tailored three-piece suit for Mr. Dryden. Their dialogue is edited from Robert Bolt's screenplay for David Lean's 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia* and is performed by voice actor Mark Oliver. The scenes with all three at British headquarters in Cairo are interrupted by brief interludes showing Lawrence lounging under a palm tree and chilling on a dune, as well as a shot of a ringing phone (which refers to a passage in Lawrence's book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*).

Richardson portrays Lawrence's moral arc from a loyal agent of the British Empire to a man disillusioned with his post when he learns about the Sykes-Picot Agreement – "Not a treaty, but an agreement" wherein Arabia would be "emancipated" from the Ottoman Empire and then subsequently shared between their "liberators" the British and French. In reality, Lawrence was aware of this backroom deal the whole time, so this fictionalized element has served to generate moral tension between the man and his duty.

These uniforms-without-bodies depersonalize the perpetrators of this particular episode of imperialist greed and suggest that their roles are not unique to this particular military "experiment." Several more men have since worn the same uniforms. As comedian John Oliver put it on late night television, "Every global flash point can be traced back to a mustachioed British man drawing a straight line on a map and saying, 'There we go, learn to live with it.'"

So, what is synthetic theatre? We know that military arenas are often referred to, with rhetorical flourish, as "theatres," and we also know that theatre is inherently a fabrication or spectacle. However, in this work, there is no breaking of the fourth wall, unless a fracture can be found in some of Richardson's extremely embedded references to actual events. On the contrary, the film takes bureaucratic violence, re-enacts and dramatizes it again, adding to this layer cake of historical material. Rather than rearticulating what we already know, the work goes deeper into the construction. See how the threshold between actual political violence and the simulated, representational violence, often classified as "drama" or "entertainment," thins before our eyes?

Field Contemporary: <http://www.field-contemporary.com/>

Tom Richardson: *Rehearsal for a Synthetic Theatre* continues until May 13.

Steffanie Ling's essays, criticism, and art writing have been published alongside exhibitions, in print, and online in Canada and the United States. She is the editor of *Bartleby Review*, an occasional pamphlet of criticism and writing in Vancouver, and a curator at CSA Space. She is Akimblog's Vancouver correspondent and can be followed on Twitter and Instagram [@steffbao](https://www.instagram.com/steffbao).

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