by a coalition air strike, but through ISIS' highly effective recruitment propaganda, his audio-recorded messages continue to spread. Just as Allah is unrepresentable, al-Baghdadi fosters in a presence beyond sight. Michel Foucault, writing on disciplinary power, notes that 'this power must give itself an instrument of a permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of rendering everything visible, on the condition that it rendered itself invisible' (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1975). He continues: 'It must be like a gaze without a face that transforms the social body into a field of perception, thousands of eyes posted everywhere...'

Using different strategies to propagate their image online, today's political leaders are definitely exploring social media as a tool to 'befriend' voters. Or, at least to let their message come across powerfully via tweets that summarize public opinions loud and clear without any need for politically correct explanation. Others seem to almost use their imagery on social media as a self-justification, a form of make-believe that is hardly approved by anyone but themselves. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's method of an online invisible presence harks back to the historical example of the almighty emperor that is hardly ever seen by the people. Instead, the emperor appears on coins like a symbol, and his presence is felt through forces of power that reign society in his name. If any conclusion can be drawn at all from political leaders using their online image differently, it is that – at least at first sight – they seem to undermine the autonomy of artists by shaping their propaganda. Even without photographers daring to make actual statements, it's worth considering the different positions Pete Souza, James Nachtwey and Nadav Kander took up in the assignments discussed above. With increasing frequency, political leaders are choosing social media over official portraiture, taking back control of their own image.

Mirjam Kooiman
(b. 1990, NL) is a curator at Foam, where she has worked on shows including Harley Weir – *Boundaries*, Ai Weiwei – *#SafePassage* as well as the *Foam Talent* exhibition. She holds a BA in Art History and an MA in Curating from the University of Amsterdam, with a special interest in postcolonial approaches in the arts and museum studies. She previously served as a curator-in-training at the photography collection of Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. Mirjam lives and works in Amsterdam.

Signs and Symbols

Image from the series *Find Fix Finish*, 2015
©Clément Lambelet, courtesy of the artist

By Hinde Haest

Since its very invention, the medium of photography has been avidly mobilized for propaganda purposes. Although the contemporary propagator has since changed character, the premise remains the same: the visualization of an ideal reality. The inherent realism of photography makes it the perfect tool to envision an alternative world as if it were the status quo.

Propaganda and photography have always been the best of friends and the worst of enemies. Photographers have used the medium to undermine the very propaganda it serves. The visual idiom of contemporary propagandists is increasingly scrutinised by contemporary artists, who are investigating its role as a catalyst of power.

For this reason they have been widely mobilised by governments, the corporate world and individuals to present a desired reality as though it were the status quo. It proved the ideal propaganda tool for socialists and liberals alike, and it was the quintessential medium for modernists to formulate a perfectly designed reality that was to shape society instead of vice-versa.

Choreographed masses, waving flags, raised fists, guns or other hardware: similar tropes have informed propagandistic imagery of both left- and right-wing regimes. Whereas the contemporary propagator is not confined to the nation state – it includes the corporate world, humanitarian organizations, the advertising industry, etc. – some stereotypes have hardly changed: The mother-and-child is a much-loved icon propagating the most contradictory ideologies. The farmer and his corn field that once served a socialist agenda and signalled the nationalization of agriculture now underwrites the corporate imperialism of companies such as Monsanto.

Propagandistic topoi are therefore at once universal and highly contextual; an ambiguity that is semiotic at heart. The discipline of semiotics developed from Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of language as a communally shared system of conventional signs. Charles Sanders Peirce further elaborated this the-

ory, arguing the signifier (for instance the word or image of a dog) to stand in an iconic, indexical or symbolic relation to what is signified (the actual dog). It is the simultaneous indexical and iconic function of photography that makes it the quintessential medium for propaganda. Its inherent realism implies a truthful representation of reality and an indexical proof of the very existence of the depicted. The photographic record traditionally implies a real situation to have predated the image (the index). However, the farmers and flags used in propaganda are inherently concerned with the imagination of an ideal that is yet to be realised. As such, photography allows the documentary to conflate with the futuristic and the imaginary. The image no longer stands in an indexical relation to that what is represented, but precedes it. It is by its power to invert the indexical that the photographic image becomes political.

The power of the image in the constitution of otherwise abstract concepts such as the state has been elaborated by Michael Taussig. In his book *The Magic of the State* (1997) he describes a fictional state called 'The European Elsewhere'. The only way to define this territory is through its material manifestations (in the form of a sacred place, the police force, national heroes, monuments). The dissemination of such iconic embodiments of power through words or images (i.e. propaganda)

lies at the very heart of its existence. For Taussig, inherently abstract institutions such as 'the state' and 'the church' are a play that is ritually and collectively performed. In theatre, the props are omnipotent. A crown makes a king, a habit a priest. In semiotic terms, it is the signifier that constitutes the very signified. The imaginative potential of photography hereby becomes a powerful mythmaking tool.

But the medium has also been used to interrogate the very institutions that use it to manifest themselves. For her series *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007), American photographer Taryn Simon identified institutions that constitute the national and political DNA of the United States and infiltrated them with her camera. Among her subjects were the CIA headquarters and the John F. Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, both bulwarks of power and figurative muscle flexing dating back to the Cold War. Instead of reaffirming the iconic imagery of space ships or telescopes, she photographed the CIA art collection and the NASA beach house, where astronauts spend final moments with their families before launch. She searched for trivial manifestations of such mythical bodies, that themselves reference abstractions such as power, progress, or war.

Tellingly, the one institution that refused to be demythologised was Disney World in Florida. Simon's attempt to photograph the staff as they removed their Mickey Mouse head while on break were dismissed with a: 'After giving your request serious consideration, even though it is against company policy to consider such a request, it is with regret that I inform you that we are not willing to grant the permission you seek. Especially during these violent times, I personally believe that the magical spell cast on guests who visit our theme parks is particularly important to protect.'
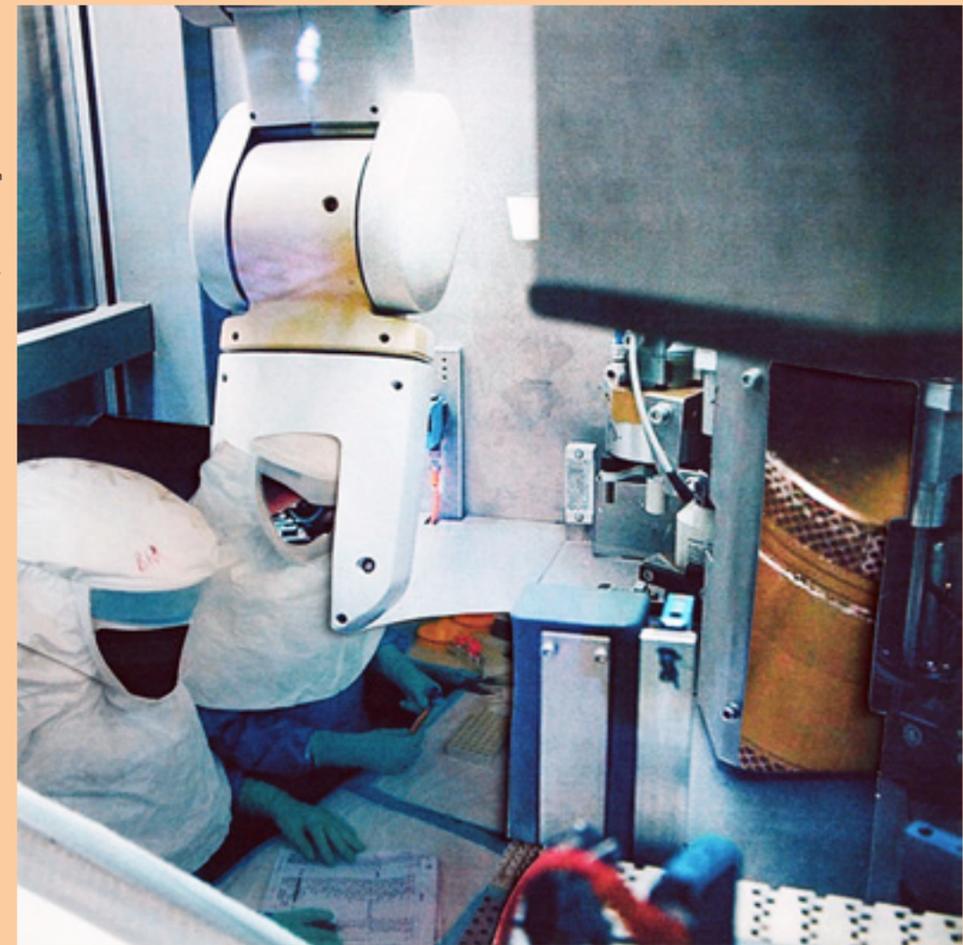
For Simon, 'the written response was better and more revealing than any photograph I could have taken.' Following this remark it is unsurprising that image-text combination is pivotal in her work. With a degree in semiotics at Brown University, Simon uses both verbal and visual language to dissect abstractions of power and identity. For her series *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* (2015) she reconstructed and photographed flower bouquets used for decoration during the signing of major power treaties. The images are accompanied by botanical samples of the various flora, as well as an explanatory text describing the treaty in question. According to Simon, 'together with their stories, the photographs underscore

Screenshot Montage nr 05, #EVIDENCE, 2015
©Anouk Kruithof, courtesy of the artist

how the stagecraft of political and economic power is created, performed, marketed, and maintained.'

The flowers become at once soothing negations of, and metaphors for, potential violence or exploitation that such contracts may entail. Simon methodically scrutinises the very concept of power by dissecting the icons that constitute it, much like the board room tables photographed by Jacqueline Hassink in her series *Table of Power* (1993-95). By photographing the physical make-up of power, surveillance and other abstractions, both photographers analyse the visual grammar that lies at the basis of national and corporate mythmaking.

Whereas Hassink and Simon deflate propagandistic air castles by emulating their semiotic make-up, Anouk Kruithof absorbs appropriated national and corporate iconography into her own visual language. For her series *#Evidence* she went through the complete Instagram posts of twenty-seven corporations, fifteen govern-

ment agencies and eleven other institutions. 650 screenshots formed the basis of Kruithof's distorting compositions and sculptures. We still recognise obvious visual elements that make up the national, institutional or corporate images of NASA (astronauts, satellites), Transportation Security Administration (confiscated guns, the bar covering a suspect's eyes) and a variety of companies (rainbows, smiling employees, etc.). By raging against the material, she robs the original footage of its innocence. Where Simon circumvents the imagery of propaganda to expose the reality behind the facade, Anouk Kruithof incorporates this very idiom to question its benevolent nature.

For her *Neutrals* (2015) and *Concealed Matter(s)* (2016), she scoured the Instagram account of the TSA, extracting images of confiscated weapons and identity cards, blowing them up, printing them on PVC, vinyl and latex and draping them over security camera bracket arms and other metal structures. Kruithof's approach is more intuitive than systematic. Whereas Taryn Simon neatly organised TSA con-

A crown makes a king, a habit a priest. In semiotic terms, it is the signifier that constitutes the very signified. The imaginative potential of photography hereby becomes a powerful mythmaking tool.

fiscated items in her work *Contraband* (2010), Kruithof enlarges them beyond recognition and morphs them into abstract sculptures. Besides deforming the icon and distorting its original message, her work also raises issues of privacy violation that are disregarded in the service of surveillance. Behind the abstractions are the identities of real people that have been unceremoniously posted on Instagram.

The dangerous discrepancy between physical reality and its visual abstraction is at the core of *Find Fix Finish* (2015), a book by Clément Lambelet. It is entirely composed of leaked U.S. army documents analysing drone attacks on terrorist targets in Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. The graphic representations of people and places are rendered in aesthetically pleasing compositions. The book reads like a cartoon, and the colourful charts and code names resemble those in video games. A destructive explosion is reduced to a simple smoke puff, casualties are abstracted into isotypes. Through the abstraction of violence, what Lambelet calls the 'art' of war, the indexical relation of the depicted to its real-life collateral becomes lost in translation.

Following *Find Fix Finish*, Clément Lambelet studied drone strike videos produced by the U.S., Afghan and British armies that were disseminated online to propagate the war on terror. The footage of strikes on alleged terrorist targets coincidentally features signs of ordinary life amid the explosions. The book that is yet to be released takes its title from one such instance: *Two Donkeys in a War Zone*. Amidst a U.S. army attack on an ISIS camp, the infrared camera registered two donkeys quietly witnessing the violence. By zooming in on details, Lambelet's imagery inverts the abstraction that lies at the heart of war propaganda.

By singling out signs of normalcy in what was to be a carefully curated show of military strength, Lambelet looks for loopholes in the visual justification of warfare. Flipping through the book, we stop and ask to whom the vague outlines in the zoomed-in images belong. Whether it is indeed a terrorist, or a child with what looks a lot like a football? What happened to him or her after the moment caught on camera? By singling out the individual, the normal, the everyday in what would otherwise remain an abstraction of warfare, Lambelet unpicks the workings of propagandistic imagery simply by enhancing it to abnormal proportions.

Lambelet simultaneously reveals and makes use of the way in which technology curbs our understanding of things that can in reality not be reduced to algorithms or transcribed into digits. As theorised by Taussig and shown by Simon, Kruithof and Lambelet, visual language enables us to give form to inherently abstract concepts. Paradoxically, this requires the concept to be phrased in terms of abstractions. It is for its perfect ambiguity between the real and the imagined, between detail and abstraction, that the medium of photography has historically been both the enemy and quintessential tool for propaganda. By isolating, enlarging and contextualising visual information sourced from an ever-growing archive of images and text, the aforementioned artists uproot and interfere with the semiotics of contemporary propaganda.

Appetizing
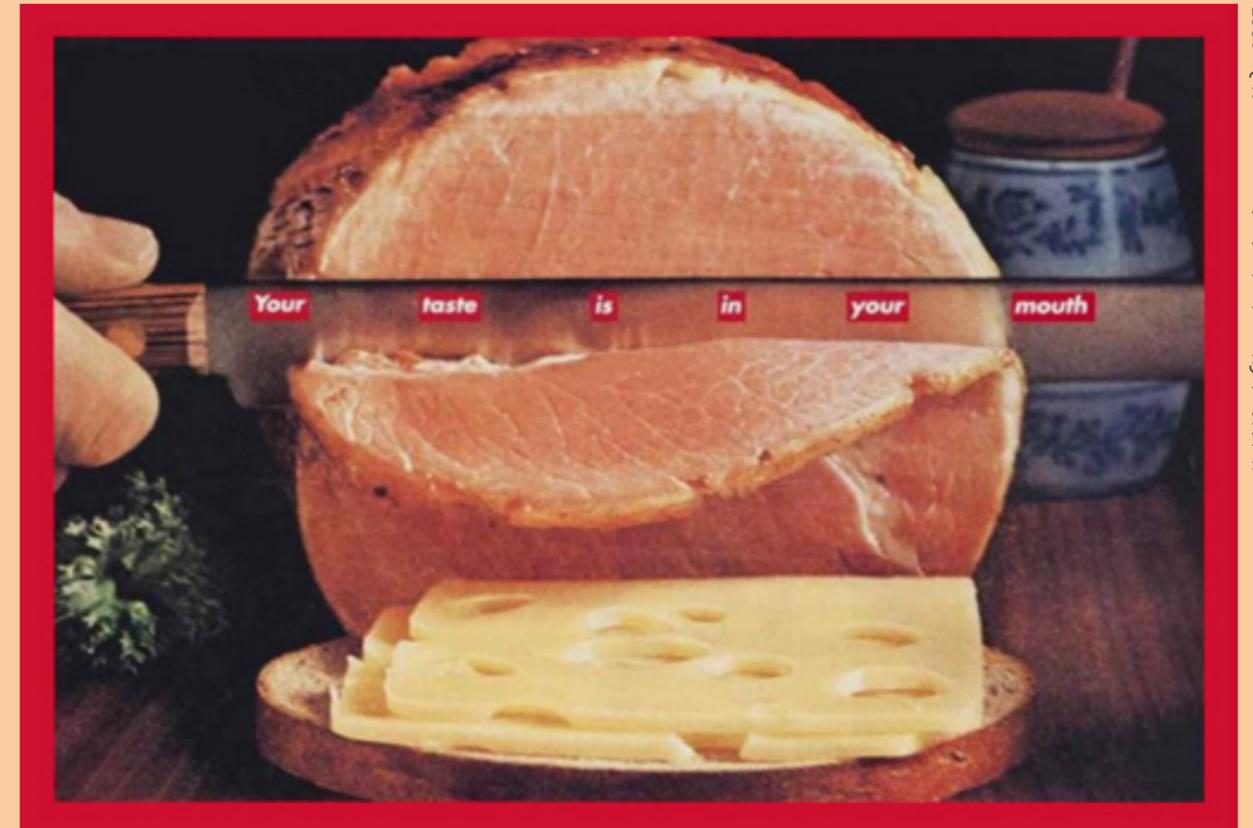
Untitled (Your taste is in your mouth), 1985
©Barbara Kruger, courtesy of the artist

Hinde Haest
(b. 1987, NL) is a curator at Foam who has worked on exhibitions including Hiroshi Sugimoto – *Black Box* **and Stéphanie Solinas** *– Dominique Lambert / Le Pourquoi Pas?.* **Previously, she worked on the Stephen Shore retrospective at Amsterdam's Huis Marseille and as assistant curator of photographs at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. She holds an MSc from SOAS, an MA from University College London, and has written for** *Metropolis M* **and** *Aperture* **amongst others. Hinde lives and works in Amsterdam.**

By Kim Knoppers

The rise of the multinational monopoly has seen food's nutritional value overshadowed by its aesthetic qualities. In recent years, photographs of impossibly perfect food have moved from advertisement billboards to the online profiles of 'foodies'; selling a lifestyle that erases the true complexity of the food industry, whilst simultaneously declaring 'authenticity'.