

How Two Berlin Artists Fooled American Media

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"We wanted to make sure that our videos would also take off," Berlin based artist Julian Charrière says to german sunday paper WELT AM SONNTAG

Quelle: Julian Charrière and Julius von Bismarck/Galerien Alexander Levy, DITTRICH&SCHLECHTRIEM, Sies&Höke/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2019

Two Berlin artists have produced videos of exploding rock arches and hoodoos in Utah – and fooled american media from CNN to Fox and even the FBI. Here they confess to their actions.

The FBI is investigating artists Julius von Bismarck and Julian Charrière. They have done nothing illegal, but the FBI does not know that yet. In fact, the German federal police has not even been informed that the two Berliners are behind the events currently being investigated. The target of the investigations is listed as unknown. In this article, the artists confess what they have done.

What did Bismarck and Charrière do? They spread videos that show attacks on what appear to be an arch and two hoodoos in Utah's famous Arches National Park. CNN, the Trump-supporting FoxNews (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hZkqXLiAHQ&app=desktop) network, and many other outlets, including the UK's „Daily Mail“

(<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6485291/Shocking-video-shows-ancient-rock-formations-Utah-exploded.html>) reported on these supposed

terrorist attacks. Yet despite what one may think, the artists did not simply create a media furor over a digitally created fake. The artist, both of whom studied under Olafur Eliasson, are certainly known for their extreme art interventions

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/17/arts/international/perception-and-experience-clash-in-germans-works.html>), but they did not make it that easy on

themselves. In a world where fake news on social media decides entire elections, and press agencies like Reuters train their reporters to recognize deceptively real deep-fake videos, the artists have staged a masterful object lesson in truth and reality in today's media.

Bismarck, born in 1983, has already built rockets to draw lightning from the skies

(LINK: [_Was%20man%20lesen%20muss,%20wenn%20man%20Blitze%20einfangen%20will](#))

and smuggled mysterious symbols onto tourists' snapshots using his Image Fulgurator gun camera. Julian Charrière, born in Switzerland in 1987, once tried to melt an Antarctic glacier with a hand torch. Their work always deals with humanity and its perception of nature from the Romantic era until now. Together they have now fooled the American media using a piece of "real news" that was first made into fake news by the media itself. Turning expectations upside down, their art shows us how hard it is to recognize what is truth, reality, or fact.

To find out what happened, we visit the artists in their Berlin Schöneberg studio, where they are busy preparing their new exhibition, "I Am Afraid,"

(<https://www.sieshoeke.com/exhibitions/i-am-afraid>) opening at Sies + Hoke gallery in Düsseldorf next week.

For "I Am Afraid," they sought out symbols that everyone knows, symbols that, if they were to be destroyed by terrorists, would spread fear – not just in the US. "The idea was triggered by the destruction of the Buddha statue in Afghanistan, Palmyra's temple in Syria, and the videos in which ISIS claims responsibility," Julius von Bismarck says. At the time, everyone was shocked that something so precious and irreplaceable was irrevocably destroyed. It almost seemed as though the resulting sense of shock was

more profound than after all the news about human casualties: “Humans are replaceable, Palmyra’s temple is not.”

At the same time, the artists wanted to destroy something that was not too familiar. “If you publish a video in which an atom bomb is dropped on New York City, no one will believe it’s real,” Bismarck says. “We always wanted to do something with the cult around Utah’s Delicate Arch – that stone arch is even on the state’s license plates.” Their idea to do something with “real news” gave them the ideal opportunity. The stone arch is a kind of natural shrine, now accessible to thousands of tourists a day via paved roads, yet it still triggers a desire for wilderness and freedom. The parks’ twenty biggest most famous arches and hoodoos (precarious, spire-shaped rock formations) are recognizable to many, but the two thousand others, spread out over thousands of kilometers only trigger associations. “There is no one who can place them all by heart,” Charrière says.

The artists took advantage of this link between singular fame and unknown masses, between constructed nature and uncontrollable wilderness. For three months they secluded themselves in this desert, just a few thousand kilometers further south behind the border wall in a non-touristy, dangerous part of Mexico, and built their own stone arches and hoodoos. Julius von Bismarck points at a picture, highlighting the landscape behind one of their hoodoos: “There’s a garbage dump out there. Our desert wasn’t as idyllic as it appears at first glance.”

This, what they call their actual artistic work, took them three months. Months during which 35 people worked with them to schlep tons of local building materials of wood and clay up onto the rocks. All to create sculptures that, when completed, would be photographically documented and immediately blown up using dynamite from the local mining industry. “All the right permits were in place,” Julius von Bismarck states.

Enormous efforts just to play creator and destroyer? To the contrary, now the decisive, political work began: getting their work into the media. Yet how do you get videos of exploding stone arches you built yourself onto a major TV station? “We spent a long time researching, following the example of the Russians and their manipulation of the American elections. We wanted to make sure that our videos would also take off,”

Julian Charrière says. “We built up various accounts, breeding them, as they say. We followed social media, tried to understand how fake news spreads, and how it can stand up to ‘real’ news.” The artist were sad to find out that it is relatively easy. In the end they did not need to take any illegal measures.

“It’s just a question of money. A lot of hours went into this campaign.” But with a small office of perhaps ten people, working for six months, you can definitely reach millions of people and get any issue you want into the media spotlight. Ultimately most important for them was the Liveleak platform. “Someone posted one of our videos there, and that’s when it quickly blew up, without any kind of information to back it up,” von Bismarck says. It was hard to imagine beforehand, but audiences somehow really trust these platforms – “even though its sources are anonymous.”

A platform for civilian journalism, Liveleak was also in the news after the Christchurch mosque killings because it hosted videos by witnesses. It especially features videos from the warzones of Syria or Ukraine, but also accidents or other more common events. These videos make it into the mainstream media when their contents consolidate themselves across multiple channels.

Fox News, CNN, ABC – all of them covered it, wanted to solve the mystery of the exploding formations. The *Daily Mail*’s headline ran: “Shocking video shows protected ancient rock formations in Utah being BLASTED into pieces as park officials are now scrambling to determine if the clips are real or just a hoax.” And: “Utah park officials acknowledged the videos on Monday and are working on verifying their authenticity.”

At the Düsseldorf exhibition, a six-channel video installation traces the artists’ steps – and documents the reactions of shocked citizens, national-park experts, and journalists. Here, the media themselves are characters in a sorry story. It is teeming with experts who are bowled over by the quality of this fake. Especially those on Fox News. Fox 13 anchor Dora Scheidell shows the explosion and asks: “Are these videos real or fake?” A local visual effects supervisor – with “15 years of experience” – is then brought on. He says: “In the real world it doesn’t happen that perfectly.” Praising the quality of the animation, he estimates it would have taken at least two weeks of work. He claims to recognize the fake through a couple of mistakes: “It’s five frames before 2,

3, 4, 5, and then the explosion happens.” Julian Charrière says: “It was because we were afraid it was going to blow, because we knew that it was about to happen. We had a countdown after all.” The TV expert believes the protected rock formations were digitally constructed. He keeps praising the impressive quality, noting that he would definitely hire the computer wizards who created the video on the spot.

What is so interesting here is that the key question seems to be whether the footage is real or digitally faked. That the truth could lie between real and fake does not occur to a single person. Our relationship to media images is apparently so confused that there is no longer any trustworthy basis for them, no common ground between object, photography, and observer. The virtual-reality experts are paradoxically no longer capable of recognizing when a video is real. This leaves only one possible explanation: it must be an animation.

Clicking through the many news stories and speculations, you are left with one impression, a cynical one: what is cool about the era of half-truths is that you no longer even need to make the truth come true. Julius von Bismarck and Julian Charrière spent three months working with 35 people to create a reality that no one will believe is real.

Now they want to talk about what they have done. And inform the FBI.