The Cloud of Unknowing
By Maggie Dunlap

To an American audience, an image of a gun can feel as dangerous as the gun itself. The guns which appear in Ben Werther's When You Can No Longer Speak, Sing Me a Song are not real, and neither is the conflict. They are representations themselves, airsoft replicas, which fire plastic BBs out of orange tipped muzzles during a simulated military operation known as MilSim.

Any suggestion of violence that images of fatigue clad troops may conjure is just that; a suggestion. MilSim is a bloodless battle where carnage only exists within the imaginations of its participants. Despite the near perfect facsimiles of blood-drawing weaponry, no bullet hit squibs explode under vests, grenades are launched yielding no pink mist on impact. Even the United States Military (with which MilSim has zero connection, it is more akin to people play fighting in a park with foam noodles than an officially organized bootcamp) engages in its own version of Grand Guignol theater, contracting special effects makeup companies to supply fake blood for mass casualty training drills, and, in cruder exercises intestines are mimicked by Kool-Aid filled condoms (really.) The lack of imitation gore is one of many fascinating contradictions and ironies embedded in this subculture. Like the fetishisation of hyper-authoritarian aesthetics while simultaneously rejecting the authority of history; because MilSim is a complete simulation, not a reenactment. It's Live Action Role Play, or LARP, with no empirical record of a campaign acting as a guideline for the action. It is a world made and unmade in real time, its creation continuous and predicated entirely on the player's fantasies, memories, media references, and personal conceptions of violence.

Werther's definition of LARPing is that of an entirely new media, and the selling of the world back to itself. This packaging of identity, stripped down to its aesthetic experience and devoid of its stakes, could point to a new frontier for what a luxury commodity could become. The space it occupies is liminal, neither destructive nor productive. In this way, it is the exact opposite of a sport like hunting, which ideally culminates with a trophy in the form of animal carcasses. In MilSim, men spend time with each other under high pressure circumstances, planning and waiting and aiming and shooting –much like in a deer blind– but return home with nothing to show for it. There is more convulsive beauty to be found in this neutered violence. If speaking is the tedium of "real" daily lives, one rigid with fixed identity and little fantasy, then singing is a break away from this monotony, an expression of the self full of belletristic flourishes and unencumbered by insecurity. The figures populating Werther's photos are at once hopeful heroes on their respective journeys and sinister strangers coming to town. They are angels or demons with glowing red eyes, they are roaming a landscape fit to their specifications. They are at the center of the circular ruins, as both the dreaming stranger and the projection of another man's dream. In this anachronistic world of identity building, Wagner PMCs fight alongside British SAS fight alongside U.S. Navy SEALs fight alongside Polish GROM and so on.

Military fetishism is regarded as objectively indefensible, but this is not an objective project, and it does not require defense. Ben Werther is not a documentarian, although he borrows the visual language of one –closer to a mockumentary, or found footage horror film– to photograph in real time acts he himself participated in. The identity we as the audience embody is not that of an impartial third party, but the first person POV of the artist at the center of the action. The use of easily recognizable signifiers of realism (lens flares, pixelation, motion blur) both call to mind front page war reporting from any number of international conflicts, and create a slippage between fantasy and reality in their striking similarities to something like Call of Duty. The mist which creeps in at the edges of Werther's first person POV photos could be smoke from gunfire, or "distance fog" – an early video game design cheat to mask unrendered space. When presented with a familiar divine light leak obscuring the face of a soldier, one is left with a feeling of vertigo, unsure if the memory is real or not.

In When You Can No Longer Speak, Sing Me a Song, MilSim culture can be viewed through the lens of cosmic horror, as a more appropriate way to get at what is deeper, darker, and ultimately more interesting about it, rather than focusing on its ethics or lack thereof, or its existence as a deeply political or decidedly apolitical entity. The question of its politics is the specter that haunts the act and its subsequent documentation. Like Thomas Ligotti's "soft black stars", there is an undefinable and seemingly menacing system of control at its center, that is both amorphous and terrifying. The ambient expectation of sifting through the sludge of bloated meaning to uncover an absolute truth and its unassailable "right" or "wrong"ness is an equally horrific space for a viewer to inhabit.

MilSim is a Hydra, whose many heads represent the glut of meaning. There is an irony head, which speaks of the plausible deniability built into LARPing. There is the extreme political head. There is the apolitical head. There is the "secret third thing" head. There is the cultural production head, who argues for LARP as ready-made. There is a sincerity head, which emphasizes the role of fun, fraternity, and a healthy exorcism of aggression. There is the fetish head, who finds comfort in MilSim's ability to vitrine-ify violence. There is the hobbyist head, which compares itself to model train building. There is a head which hides its identity behind all the others, shapeshifting in the fog of war and unknown unknowns. All of these possibilities proliferate when clumsily hacked at with the "ethical" sword. Artists have an obligation to follow obsession and intrigue and no responsibility to present an audience with the salve of a definitive answer. In the anonymously penned christian mystic text "The Cloud of Unknowing," the decision to renounce dwelling in God's particularities and surrender oneself to the "realm of unknowing" is described as a courageous act. In the shadow cast by the d mand for political absolutes, it is hard to stop asking if something has a right to exist, and instead simply sit with, and accept, the fact that it already does.