

Time to Speak

Translation and political subjectivity in the work of Julia Meltzer and David Thorne

As they tell it, Julia Meltzer and David Thorne have been collaborating (formerly working under the name Speculative Archive) since 1999 on two bodies of work. The first, which they relegate to the past tense and which is best represented by their video *It's Not My Memory of It:*

Three Recollected Documents (2003), focused on the complex bureaucracy of governmental obfuscation in order to consider how memories and histories are produced in accordance with shifting categories of what is and is not permissible speech. The second, the origin of which they trace to 2003 and the US-led invasion of Iraq, takes leave of the past to focus on competing visions of the future in a time of geopolitical uncertainty. Despite the shifted temporality apparent in their project, the two bodies of work are united by a careful attention to the compendium of textual, visual, filmic, bodily, aural and architectural artefacts that Meltzer and Thorne describe as 'documents', and which they both produce and analyze. That they produce such 'documents' has given critics licence to lump them into the recently fashionable genre of art that obsessively dwells on confusing the line between fact and fiction. This is too bad, as the work and the issues it addresses exceed this limited and limiting duality.

In particular, the body of work produced about Syria after a year-long stay in Damascus deserves to be understood in terms of the complex system of language and speech it mines, mimics and interrogates in relation to the very possibility of knowledge or even experience. In Syria the artists had hoped to explore the US administration's doctrine of pre-emption – the Bush doctrine – and its impact on the material and spiritual lives of those who were most vulnerable to the conjectural future conceived as always already having taken place. As international pressure mounted to enforce Syria's overdue withdrawal from Lebanon and the fear of Sunni-Shia civil conflict spread from Iraq across the region, Thorne and Meltzer spoke to a number of Syrian intellectuals and opposition figures about democracy, citizenship and faith. The resulting body of work – which they are still producing and which so far includes several videos, a series of web-distributed QuickTime projects, and both digital and print-based photo-text essays – explores what might be called a politics of temporality, not from the hegemonic centre but from what many perceive to be a tangential perversion of modernity more properly realized elsewhere. But, rather than dwell on this well-rehearsed staging, Meltzer and Thorne turned their attention to the

About this article

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Julia Meltzer and David Thorne with Rami Farah, *No a matter of if but when: brief records of a time in which expectations were repeatedly raised and lowered and people grew exhausted from never knowing if the moment was at hand or was still to come* (2006)

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Al-Assad government's own manipulation of the Bush doctrine.

This allowed them to make their status as foreigners especially fruitful, as translation and attribution became crucial components of their work. How – we are instructed to consider throughout the multiple voice-overs and metaphors animating the almost compulsive repetition of themes and subjects in their work – does the articulation and attribution of an idea across linguistic orders structure not only political subjectivity but also the experience that forms it? The question is explicit in the translation of the interviews distributed in the QuickTime video version of *Not a matter of if but when*: brief records of a time in which expectations were repeatedly raised and lowered and people grew exhausted from never knowing if the moment was at hand or was still to come, which circulates online as part of Rami Farah's performances in the video-projection version that the artists released in 2006. In the first work, which the artists consider something like a working draft but which nonetheless enjoys a public life, the content of each subject's statement seems less important than the manner in which it is articulated. Hesitations and contradiction mark each utterance, as the speaker struggles to distinguish his or her desire from the dominant narrative of public speech. In the subsequent video projection of the same name (which most viewers know from the 2008 Whitney Biennial) Meltzer and Thorne emphasize this performative aspect by eschewing the actual interviews in favour of the Syrian performer Farah's interpretive rendition of what each subject meant to say. The closely cropped footage of Farah as he winks, smiles and kisses his way through several short allegories and mini-narratives somehow reproduces the ideational content of the interview, without recourse to any of its linguistic burden or historical specificity.

As compelling as this collaboration is, it is really in conjunction with the five-part single-channel video *We will live to see these things*, or, five pictures of what may come to pass (2007) that the richness of the whole enterprise comes to light. Although ostensibly concerned with five conflicting visions of Syria's future, this work is equally a reflection on different types of public speech. Sumptuously visual and thick with formal references engineered by the talented cinematographer Raed Sandeed, each segment is stylistically and compositionally different from the other four, reminding us of the artists' long-standing concern with the problem of crafting a history outside history's narrative structures.

The video opens and closes with scenes documenting the degree to which the pervasive narrative of the Ba'ath revolution and the Al-Assad family triumvirate (jokingly referred to in Syria as the 'father, son and holy ghost') clutters public space to provide a model, as the political scientist Lisa Wedeen has observed, of public speech and a way of belonging to the nation. Fittingly, in the first segment – which also circulates under the elegiac title 'Take into the Air my Quiet Breath' – the vision of a Syrian future is grounded in architecture and the public debate to which it gives form. A single voice narrates the chronology of a massive unrealized concrete building planned for Damascus' Martyrs'

Square. The sing-song lilt of the Armenian he speaks represents a composite of both the words of the projected building's architect and the rich public chatter regarding the building's future, a dialogue that also makes permissible a conjectural conversation about the future of the nation: what will it be? Is it sinking? Will it be a memorial to 9/11?

In the final section of *We will live to see these things ...* English text is translated into spoken Arabic by a voice that narrates a vision from afar, 'from America'. Sardonicly and effectively intercut with everyday images of public life in Damascus – here a doe-eyed boy having his hair cut, there a pedestrian confronting the camera with something like contempt – the voice underscores the prophetic undertones implicit in neo-con rhetoric. 'I see', the voice intones, 'freedom's potential released. I see that all who walk in my words shall live. I see force and faith dissipating in every imminent threat. I see the past renounced and the bright future embraced. I see history being kind.'

In fact, it is in this final section, and its uncanny rhyme with an earlier prognostication that a perfect leader will come at last, that we most clearly understand the significance of the intersections of time and language in Meltzer and Thorne's work. Throughout is the persistent concern with different temporal unfoldings and the processes ensuring that our experience of time and reality is only as expansive as the language that presents it to us. It may be for this reason that Meltzer and Thorne's own language is as careful as it is. These are not artists who choose their words lightly. Their interest in process, wherein one single document is repeatedly mined for multiple interpretations, demonstrates a consciousness that even their own practice is a kind of public speech encountered at a particular moment in time. As a result, Meltzer and Thorne offer us a densely textured and layered exploration of the nature of discourse and its possibilities for control and communication. In this sense, the so-called 'Syria works' provide not only a document about a place called Syria; they are also a message that travels back to tell us something about our own anxiety in the midst of a period dominated by the politics of fear; a time when our expectations have been repeatedly raised and lowered and we have all grown too exhausted from never knowing if the moment is at hand or still to come.

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