

Oh, Inverted World

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Responding to a pointed question about the blurred line between fact and fiction—document and imagination—in his writing, the much-lauded yet controversial Serbian-Hungarian fiction writer Danilo Kiš responded in a 1988 interview shortly before his death that “the dividing line between the two is also so obvious to me that I take the greatest pains to make the crossover as seamless as possible. I always begin with a document and subject it to what the Russian formalists called *ostranenie*, defamiliarization, making what is familiar strange. Otherwise, I’d be writing an essay. I’m incapable of writing a book out of thin air. Even as a reader, I have trouble with purely imaginative fiction: I see through its artifices and am left with a mist or void. The other danger is to give the reader nothing but records or testimonials, to become a historian or memoirist. I gambol between the two perils.”¹

An increasing number of contemporary film and video artists embrace documentary tactics similar to those outlined by Kiš, constructing narratives that readily shift the frame from document to fable and back with a seamlessness that perhaps signals the extent to which such patterns have become part of the social and political realities of contemporary culture. But has the process of “making strange”—so crucial to the worldview of certain artists, Kiš included, from what was often called “the other Europe” in the last century (in effect the dissident, experimental voices of the Middle East and Eastern Europe that contributed a parallel counter-history to the dominant twentieth-century ideologies of those same regions)²—effectively woven its way into the fabric of a wider contemporary aesthetic discourse? And, to continue more specifically, has the influence of crucial innovations in documentary film and video practice at the end of the Cold War—as with notable feature-length works by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica’s *Videogramme einer Revolution* (Videograms of a Revolution, 1992) and

Chantal Akerman’s *D’est: Au bord de la fiction* (From the East: Bordering on Fiction, 1993)—truly effected what prominent curators and theorists like Okwui Enwezor, Mark Nash, and Catherine David have termed “the documentary turn” in contemporary art of the past fifteen years? If the work of such distinctive contemporary artists as Matthew Buckingham, Amar Kanwar, David Majklovic, Rosalind Nashashibi, Deimantas Narkevicius, Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, and Artur Zmijewski—to name only a handful—is any indication, the answer would seem to be a manifold yes.

As the number of artists incorporating film and video into their practice exponentially increases and approaches to the documentary likewise multiply and fragment, distinctions between narrative, avant-garde, and documentary filmmaking are increasingly blurred. However, to consider three significant moving image works recently on exhibit is to underscore how many documentary film and video works within contemporary art contexts have come to rely on ready references to—and subsequent inversions of—such delimited documentary tropes as the in-the-field interview, eyewitness account, travelogue, and re-enactment. Recent works by Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, Yael Bartana, and Omer Fast reveal the influence of a previous generation’s expansion of the documentary frame while also demonstrating how its use within contemporary art is increasingly nuanced, sophisticated, and readily distributable.

Indeed, the “gambol between two perils” that Kiš speaks of is very much an accurate description for the recent work of Los Angeles-based artists Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, whose ongoing collaboration investigates specific rifts in documentary representation. Playing against the instrumentalizing tendency of conventional documentary film and video to portray locales of political turmoil and violence as capturing “history-in-the-making,” the artists recently completed a series of highly provocative works while living in Damascus, Syria that reverse and complicate the role of the witness. Both *Epic* (2008) and *Not a matter of*

if but when (2007)—featured in the most recent iteration of the Whitney Biennial—offer as “records” the highly stylized storytelling of Syrian performance artist Rami Farah. Shot in the ostensibly straightforward format used when journalists question witnesses to and experts on historical events or political struggles, the series of short monologues delivered by Farah in the two videos courses between retribution and forgiveness, curse and desire with a feverish, chilling intensity; rather than providing the compliant account of a native witness interviewed by a detached, off-camera interlocutor—a scenario commonly meant to convey what is really happening in political “hot-spots”—the collaboration between the three artists unsettles our understanding of how we narrate the present by continually addressing a near future through subverted modes of conventional address.

Not a matter of if but when provides a characteristic example. Farah begins a direct address with the traditional phrase “May your life be long . . .” only to tack immediately to the inverse, “so long you will live to see the destruction of your family and your loved ones.” The collaborative documents that result weave together a tangle of similarly mixed messages delivered with a compelling fierceness complicated by the performer’s virtuosity—the ease with which Farah tacks between humor and rage has a controlled remove, mixing play and threat effortlessly—leaving the viewer unsure as to what is scripted or improvised, what is said in jest and what in earnest, left to grapple instead with the emotion and aftermath of the performed event. As Walter Benjamin observes in his 1936 essay “The Storyteller,” the immediate verifiable grasp of the informative is in direct opposition to the condensed, performative nature of telling enacted by Farah, in this case, where “it is half the art of storytelling to keep it free from explanation as one recounts it.”³

Meltzer and Thorne’s unease with the purported truth value of the document or documentary is clearly stated in the subtitle given to the piece: *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. Indeed, the *snoot-dine* of the subtitle mirrors the fitful style of Farah’s delivery—to know through saying—and recalls Michel de Certeau’s assertion regarding the spatial authority that the act of telling makes possible: “The story’s first function is to authorize, or more exactly, to found It even has distributive power and performative force (it does what it says) when an ensemble of circumstances is brought together. Then it founds spaces.”⁴

In this specific instance, the “talking head” trope so often exploited in documentary films and news broadcasts has in turn been exploited to entertain a different scenario; here, the position of the teller is not analytically contextualized but rather the dynamic of the exhausted “time” under consideration is intimately enacted, forcefully embodied, and extended directly to the viewer willing to remain and listen. The notes to *Not a matter of if but when* further explain that the production process included Farah responding to prompts or texts that are never shared with the viewer as the five triptych speech acts are composed “each with its own internal rhythm and logic” and generated immediately following a prompt, a description that further echoes de Certeau’s assertion of a specificity of discursive space that opens up only around a forceful telling.

This possibility to enact spatial relations through the act of telling is related to the built-in resistance within story forms that remains unruly and restless, and, to indulge de Certeau once more, is characterized by a propensity for re-inscribing limits: “If the delinquent exists only by displacing itself, if its specific mark is to live not on the margins but in the interstices of the codes that it undoes and displaces . . . then the story is delinquent.”⁵

Continued on page 7

IMAGE

Omer Fast, production still from *The Casting*, 2007. 35 mm film transferred to video, color, sound. Courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Continued from page 5

Delinquent, in de Certeau's understanding of the word, is an apt term to describe the form of address presented by Farah, Meltzer, and Thorne, as they have collaborated to find inversion tactics that both grasp at and dispel with convention, pushing further past prescribed boundaries of cultural dialogue and collaboration.

Israeli artist Yael Bartana's film *Mary Koszmary* (Dreams and Nightmares), commissioned in 2007 in part by the Foksal Gallery and Foundation in Warsaw, where it was first exhibited, confronts the heritage and persistence of European anti-Semitism with a direct, rhetorical salvo that underscores cultural antagonisms many would like to imagine as long past. Staking out contentious territory, a young man, played by Polish author, socialist politician, and art-world persona Sławomir Sierakowski, opens the film by emerging from a tunnel into an empty, decayed sports stadium. Accompanied by the sounds of the Polish national anthem, he mounts a makeshift podium and proceeds to entreat "the three million Jewish Poles who left Poland" to return to their homeland, referring, rather indirectly, to the deportation, exile, and murder of Jews from Poland during the Second World War. While he expounds with exaggerated gestures, a uniformed youth brigade of boys and girls stencil a message of reconciliation across the stadium floor in English, "3,300,000 JEWS CAN CHANGE THE LIFE OF 40,000,000 POLES." Shot on 16mm colour film, saturated green shrubs taking over the stadium give way to brooding grey skies overhead, bits of time-lapsed sunlight here and there, cheerful youths with red scarves listening intently, and the camera always peering up from below at the orator, all of which recalls not only the specific angles of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1934), but Eisenstein's renowned montage of attractions techniques as well.⁶

Moving quickly through an acknowledgement of Poland's past transgressions—"without you we can't even remember"—Sierakowski implores the Jews who have left to "return, and we shall finally become Europeans together." Written by both Bartana and Sierakowski, the speech veers toward arch at times—as with quips like "if you want we'll travel to the moon together"—while still satirizing the mood of an extremist rally. The virulent xenophobia of Poland's past is on display in the play acting at fascist youth brigades—as recent events in Poland have shown, such spectres are alive and well—as is the clear echo of Zionist propaganda that haunts the speaker's beckoning to come where "everyone will learn to be themselves." Nevertheless, the ironic tone of Sierakowski's closing argument—"We need the other and no other is dearer to us than you"—manages to also convey the longing

by the Polish Left for a sense of cultural difference that has been largely eradicated as Poland continues to hold the dubious distinction of having one of the most homogeneous ethnic make-ups in all of Europe.

Such stark, simple, inside-out inversions of proto-fascist, purist propaganda techniques keep *Mary Koszmary* from confusing the extremist stances it takes aim at, lampooning as it does utopian political schemas from both the left and the right. To this end, as the eleven-minute film closes, a glimpse of the upper ring reveals the stadium to be the location for actual vendors' stalls—blue tarps flutter in the wind and barely visible citizens peer down curiously into the arena at the spectacle under way—and the young, earnest politician and even younger followers begin a slow-paced, farcical victory lap around the empty stadium as the Polish national anthem revs up once more, for good measure.

Markedly different from the quasi-verité style of her earlier works—which focussed on capturing gestures associated with religious and secular rituals in Israel—Bartana's most recent project rehearses once again the limitations of modernism; an impossible return promises an equally impossible future, and the persistence of modernist and nationalist strategies is thereby identified and newly questioned. And while *Mary Koszmary* re-enacts these aesthetic and cultural boundaries quite effectively, it raises the question of whether new proposals arise from this return, and, similarly, whether such self-reflexive projects are not still overly enamoured with the failures of the past. Perhaps evincing an awareness gained through this kind of cultural co-authoring, Bartana has stated that a subsequent chapter where the Jews do in fact return to present-day Poland is necessary and already in the offing.⁷ And therein lies the risk that distinguishes Bartana's position in the project: acknowledgement of the limits of her previous practice is made explicit by engaging Sierakowski in a script that exposes and utilizes the contested cultural heritage of each of its authors. And so perhaps Bartana has offered a collaborative update on and potential strategy for answering Walter Benjamin's ever-resonant challenge to ask not "what is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?" but "what is its position in them?"⁸

Omer Fast's four-channel video installation *The Casting* (2007) similarly engages overtly political content via indirect narrative. As with past video installations dealing with Israeli army duty and World War II ghettos, the Israeli-born Fast repeatedly courts fraught territory with a post-structural brio that is seductive—entertaining even—yet, it must be stated, comes off as overdetermined in its stance. While Fast starts out with an acute self-awareness of what theorist Hayden White ar-

gues is the inevitably moralizing nature of narrative, the extent to which Fast's formally nimble work attempts to display critical awareness of its possible interpretation gives reason for pause.⁹ In *The Casting*, originally commissioned by the Museum Moderner Kunst Vienna (where it was also on show in late 2007), two stories told by a US Army sergeant in Iraq are edited seamlessly together in an effort to problematize the authenticity of the wartime record (again, in terms of both the first-hand account and the role of the impartial chronicler): here, the soldier's encounter with a young woman while on leave at a German military base slips back and forth Rashomon-style with the shooting of an Iraqi civilian. As the story of the soldier's downtime distraction turns increasingly bizarre—the potential German paramour reveals that she cuts herself for pleasure and would like the sergeant to physically hurt her if he really cares about her—the soldier's storyline speeds toward a conclusion as the convoy comes under attack along its daily supply route and he winds up firing at a civilian car approaching the scene of the incident, resulting in the "accidental" killing of a young man in the back seat.

The first encounter with the narrative is a two-channel projection of a slickly produced *tableau vivant* where actors awkwardly hold poses depicting the on-duty and off-duty scenes recounted by Fast's everyman soldier. What seems at first to be an off-screen recollection of wartime experience is further complicated by the opposite side of the two-screen projections where Fast is shown to be the interlocutor asking questions of a soldier for a prospective video project; the low-resolution rear projections capture the interview(s) upon which the re-enactments are based and stand in stark contrast to the rich luminosity of the other side of the installation.

There's no doubting Fast's erudite and succinct understanding of a Renaissance notion of the *tableau vivant*. The allegorical narrative that he enacts plays upon a historical notion that the significance of an incident appears only afterwards, depending upon events that follow. Fast's figurative depiction quite brilliantly takes up this complication by altering the crucial role of the commentator within the practice of history painting as described by Leon Battista Alberti's idea of *istoria*:

*In an istoria I like to see someone who admonishes and points out to us what is happening there; or beckons with his hands to see; or menaces with an angry face and flashing eyes, so that no one should come near; or shows some danger or marvelous thing there; or invites us to weep or to laugh together with them. Thus, whatever the painted persons do among themselves or with the beholder, all is pointed toward ornamenting or teaching the istoria.*¹⁰

Continued on page 20

For good measure, Fast himself plays the role of knowing commentator here. As the two stories hurl toward a breaking point—with jump-cuts effecting an uneasy parallel between the soldier's private and public sector crises—the wary interlocutor dryly intervenes, equivocating to the now vulnerable soldier that he is actually “not so much looking for a political angle. I'm interested in the way experiences become memories and the way memories become mediated, become broadcasted and things like this, so, um . . . you know, I'll give you a call. You've been generous with your time.” With the irony of the piece all but sealed up by this comment, a third layer makes the triangulation of the work even more explicit as brief “on-set” depictions of the interview itself (and the film crew behind) are slipped into the highly produced side of the installation toward the end of its twelve-minute running time. This unnecessary step undoes any potential uncertainty in the piece through doubling the casting metaphor. And yet, perhaps Fast has done a service not just for his own future works but other artists' in exposing the too-evasive nature of the multi-channel gambit and its tendency toward attempting a comprehensive self-reflexivity. Nevertheless, as with the work of Meltzer and Thorne and Yael Bartana, Fast does move productively between the perils of testimonial and allegory.

All three of these projects risk enacting and even re-enacting their own position within a hotly debated discourse of specific historical representation while also opening up noteworthy formal approaches to narrative and the increasingly pliable notion of documentary. And yet, the exhibition context for much new documentary film and video works made by artists too often betrays an art world preference for easily consumed moments of contestation—short in duration, abstracted in scope—leaving open the question of whether such experiments in collaborative agency suffer from being grouped under catch-all rubrics like the “documentary turn.” Emphasizing a generational shift away from appropriation techniques centred largely around the photograph, these works elaborate a re-imagined “making strange” that plays at telling history in circles far more inclusive and varied in point of view and place of production than a generation prior. As the tropes of documentary film and video—eyewitness, re-enactment, interview, travelogue, etc.—are overturned and evacuated by such delinquent manoeuvres, it is all too clear that terms beyond the documentary are needed for discussing the increased mobility between fact and fiction, document and imagination.

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NOTES

1. “Baroque and Truth,” in Danilo Kiš, *Homo Poeticus: Essays and Interviews* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,

1995), 265–66. Kiš once termed his own approach “ironic lyricism”—informed as it was by a literary tradition that extends back to Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, and Isaac Babel. He was hounded by politically motivated claims of plagiarism due in part to the innovative forms taken in his short story collections *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) and *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* (1983), where reference to and alteration of existing documents are enfolded into narratives that embrace a hybrid form between the short story and essay.

2. The influence of Russian formalists Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson's conceptualizing of *ostranenie* extends not only to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the “dialogic imagination” but directly to Bertolt Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*, or “distancing effect,” which, in various guises, plays a significant role in the increasingly theatrical exploration of the documentary in contemporary art.

3. Benjamin's example of a story “that does not expend itself” but “preserves and concentrates its energy and is capable of releasing it even after a long time” is taken from the proto-historiography of Herodotus' *Histories* and the author's tale of the vanquished Psammenitus, who stoically watches as his family and subjects are marched into servitude (he is made to stand along the road leaving the city by the victor, Cambyses) and loses his composure only upon catching sight of an old man who was one of his servants. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935–1938* (Boston: Belknap Press, 2002), 148.

4. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 123.

5. *Ibid.*, 130.

6. Eisenstein's first film, *Strike* (1924), followed his published manifesto “Montage of Attractions” in the influential review *Lef* (1923), edited by Vladimir Mayakovsky. Borrowing from photo-montage techniques of Alexander Rodchenko and recent stage experiments by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Eisenstein proposed a new form of sequencing: “The free montage of arbitrarily selected, independent (within the given composition and subject links that hold the influencing actions together), attractions.” See “Montage of Attractions,” translated by Daniel Geroud, in *Re: Direction, A Theoretical and Practical Guide*, eds. Rebecca Schneider and Gabrielle H. Cody (London: Routledge, 2002), 304.

7. As stated in the following quote: “Now I'm working on the sequel in which the Jews return to Poland and what happens then,” attributed to Yael Bartana in Aviva Lori, “Breaking the Walls of Indifference,” *Haaretz*, 24 April 2008, <http://haaretz.com/hasen/spages/977770.html>.

8. Toward the beginning of his address to the Institute for the Study of Fascism (in 1934), Benjamin argued for a more directly implicated form of authorship: “Rather than ask, ‘what is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?’ I should like to ask, ‘what is its position in them?’” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 220.

9. Hayden White's *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1988) tracks the relationship between narrative and historiography from medieval distinctions between “annal” and “chronicle” through to the pseudo-scientific nineteenth-century construction of the “real” in the newly founded field of historiography, and on through post-structural arguments in the work of Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson, and others.

10. Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, introduction and translation by John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University, 1966), 26.