

# review the art



Julia Meltzer and David Thorne have turned their focus from the politics of the past to the anxieties of the future with a series of videos from Damascus. Kaelen Wilson-Goldie reports



Rami Farah (centre) in a still from *Not A Matter Of If But When*; Shots from *We Will Live To See These Things* (outside). Courtesy of the artists

# Capturing Syria

During the first four years of its existence, the Speculative Archive for Historical Clarification epitomised the subversive streak in contemporary art. Established in 1999, it swept individual identity into the collective effort of a group that bore an anonymous, pseudo-institutional and irresistibly mysterious name.

Through installations of text, image, sound and video, the Speculative Archive delved into the mechanisms of state secrecy, security and intelligence systems. It produced works on the role the United States played in Guatemala's 36-year civil war and the Chilean military coup of 1973. It tracked down documents that American officials had frantically shredded – and Iranian students had fastidiously recomposed – during the 1979 seizure of the US embassy in Tehran. It explored the visual and linguistic rhetoric of some 50,000 leftist political posters preserved in a research centre in Los Angeles.

For art enthusiasts with a fondness for radical chic, Michel Foucault or the idea that aesthetics and politics are inseparable from one another, the Speculative Archive was a hot project. It fused together style, substance, political intrigue and literary flair. It embodied the so-called “documentary turn” in art, but it did so with a formalist eye and an arch sense of humour. The works blended fact and fiction without coming off as clever or cute.

But at the precise moment when artistic engagements with history and memory nudged up from the underground and into the mainstream – where they were feted in high-profile exhibitions like *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document* in Contemporary Art at the International Center of Photography in New York earlier this year – Julia Meltzer and David Thorne shifted their focus from past to future and

dropped the Speculative Archive moniker to author a spate of new works under their own names.

Meltzer and Thorne, who live and work in Los Angeles, travelled to Damascus eight years ago as tourists. At the time, Syria intrigued them. This was the year Hafez al Assad died, ending 30 years of iron rule, and his son Bashar took over as Syria's president. For some, this signalled the ever-so-slight possibility of democratic reform in what was then, and remains today, one of the most closed off countries in the world.

They returned in 2005, when Meltzer got a Fulbright grant to teach in Damascus. The intervening years, however, had not been kind – September 11, the Axis of Evil, the war in Iraq, Abu Ghraib, the war on terror, extraordinary rendition – and right after Meltzer and Thorne arrived in Damascus, Lebanon's former prime minister, Rafik Hariri, was killed by a massive car-bomb in Beirut. Then Syrian troops were forced to withdraw from Lebanon for the first time since 1976. With the regime in retreat, ever more isolated and under seemingly imminent threat from the US, the so-called Damascus Spring of 2000 was dead.

Before travelling, Meltzer and Thorne had taken an interest in the concept of pre-emption; specifically, what it was like to be on the receiving end of a possible pre-emptive strike. How would it feel to live in a place waiting to be destroyed on a date as yet undetermined? This was what they wanted to discuss with the people they imagined they would meet.

But in Syria they found it was hard to get people to talk – about anything, let alone politics or projections of the future. It was hard just to get things done – even simple tasks, to say nothing of the 10 hours of video footage Meltzer and Thorne recorded in preparation

for what became a brief, seamless 30-minute video.

“Syria has a very particular mind-state and it subsumes you immediately upon landing at the airport or crossing the border. After spending eight months in Syria in 2005, we returned home for a two-month break to review everything. In this time,” says Meltzer, “we were able to identify the emotional register that we wanted to capture. We realised ... that if we could convey this odd combination of psychic states – stasis and uncertainty – then we would be able to achieve something of what we set out to do.”

Though they describe their time in Syria as difficult, it triggered a rush of productivity. In just under two years, Meltzer and Thorne have completed five videos and screened them at festivals and exhibitions across the United States and Europe, in Beirut and, informally at least, in Damascus itself. Several pieces are still in progress, and Meltzer returned to Damascus this week to scope out another one.

Two of the new videos were selected for this year's Whitney Biennial, portions of which remain on view through June 22. One of them, a striking, 47-minute study entitled *We Will Live To See These Things, Or, Five Pictures Of What May Come To*

**Syria has a very particular mind-state and it subsumes you immediately**

Julia Meltzer

*Pass*, won the award for Best New International Video at the Images Festival in Toronto. The other, a mesmerising, 32-minute collaboration with the Syrian performer and filmmaker Rami Farah entitled – brace yourself for this one – *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 Still To Come*, won first prize at Berlin's digital art festival Transmediale. Now Meltzer and Thorne are up for the prestigious Nam June Paik Award in Cologne. The jury is set to announce the winners on October 16.

*We Will Live To See These Things* has a decidedly literary bent. Structured in five movements, it speaks three languages – Armenian, Arabic and English – as Meltzer and Thorne delve into the stories and speech patterns swirling around a building, an equestrian ring, a writer, a religious school and a series of street scenes. Each set piece gives rise to a narrative that tempers deep foreboding with humour and desire.

*Not A Matter Of If But When* frames Rami Farah like a talking head against a white background, as he runs through dizzying rounds of visceral wordplay. Meltzer and Thorne gave Farah a series of pre-scripted prompts – including questions (“What would you say to someone who has promised you something for years and years and never delivered?”), creative commands (“Imagine your body in civil war with itself”) and loaded words (“Poison”). The piece consists of Farah's wildly inventive responses.

“Writing is a central component of the work,” says Thorne. “In these recent projects, the texts were developed with literary models in mind – Kafka, Ismail Kadare, the Quran. The humour is an element that we have been trying to push,

since without it the materials ... are somewhat depressing and dark. Humour also plays an important role in living in and through dark times, or living in a repressive situation, and we wanted to reflect that.”

*We Will Live To See These Things* opens with an architect ruminating on his involvement in a design scheme for a public square in Damascus. In the 1960s, he won not one but two competitions to transform the square into a luxury complex. In the 1970s, the architect was dropped from the project and a Mamluk-era mosque on the site was demolished.

In the 1980s, a new building began to rise, floor by floor, in fits of construction activity. Rumours circulated. The building was rising; no, it was sinking. It would be blown up and replaced with a park, a pilgrimage shrine, a civic centre, a September 11 memorial.

Meltzer and Thorne collected all of these stories, along with old photographs and video footage of the site as it stands now. The result is a form of art they term “emotional reportage.” They do research; they collect interviews. But the material they gather is less concerned with the veracity of facts than with the deployment of metaphorical language, the jokes people tell, the theories they construct and the scenarios they imagine. Dreams and fears fill the void of trustworthy information and a certainty that is never forthcoming.

It is worth noting that Meltzer and Thorne ditched the Speculative Archive soon after the Lebanese artist Walid Raad ended his work under the name of the Atlas Group. It will be interesting to see if other such collectives follow suit. Though it has generated interesting work, the collective guise appears to have outstretched its usefulness – it risks becoming a fetish, a fashionable conceit that reduces otherwise

urgent work to a guessing game or a bag of conceptual tricks.

“We dropped the name for a number of reasons,” says Thorne. “Our interests and concerns – and, as a result, the works – are shifting away from a focus on documents, the status of documents, the status of representation, in some sense, and a notion of archive as either site or source for a methodology and process. I don't want to say that we have suddenly become disinterested in these things ... [but] for the past year-end-a-half ... we have been feeling that there is no need to foreground this stuff.”

Of course, in averting one trap Meltzer and Thorne are courting another. As two Americans creating work far from home, their efforts will be inevitably scrutinised for indications of outsider status. For all the international success of their new works, responses in Syria have been decidedly mixed, and Meltzer and Thorne are still struggling to articulate their experiences in Damascus.

“Our understanding of politics in the region shifted tremendously,” says Meltzer. “We came to understand something very profound about speech – how people adapt and function in a place where there has been a permanent state of emergency for many years and one cannot say very much for fear of retribution or imprisonment. We had hundreds of conversations about art and why we do what we do ... There was very little context or understanding of this type of work [in Syria] and it made us wonder: Why do we work this way? We [came] to better understand the importance of continuously revisiting our premises and our approaches in order to keep the work open and at the same time tight and engaging.”

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie reports from Beirut for *The National*.