

Omer  
Fast

Interview by  
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Omer Fast

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**TINA KUKIELSKI:** We are standing here in the Whitney's installation of your most recent work, *Nostalgia* [2009]. Over the past several years, you have been using the interview as a central motif in your work. The narratives you have chosen to explore build on personal experiences, sometimes anecdotes or remembrances from the recent past. In this instance, you are dealing with a story you were told by a Nigerian asylum seeker, which took place in London in 2009. *Nostalgia* uses that interview as a jumping-off point. The work is arranged in three parts in three separate spaces at three different points in time, unfolding across a series of discontinuous events and exchanges between characters. Beyond that 2009 interview, you also told me that there was a literary influence for the project, a book by Georges Perec?

OMER FAST: There were two books that I was interested in while thinking about the project. One book that I had read beforehand, and that I knew was important for me, was Aleksandar Hemon's *Lazarus Project*. And the other book, which was suggested to me, was Georges Perec's *W, or The Memory of Childhood*.

These two books are very similar in that they both alternate from one story to another, so chapter one is about one thing, chapter two is about another thing. And it goes back and forth, developing two narrative strands at the same time. What they're also doing is taking the

format of a memoir and weaving it alongside a fictional tale.

In the case of Perec, it's very much about a traumatic memory and absence. Perec grew up in France and lost a father in World War II and had relatives deported. He was sent to the mountains, where he spent the war years in sort of idyllic, happy circumstances. But, of course, his mother was also murdered during this time. His book is constructed so that, in the absence of a memory for this trauma, it gives you these little window views, little snapshots, of the life that he's had or that he can remember having in those mountains, almost like memories from an Alpine camp, as banal and beautiful as that sounds.

And then they alternate with an almost do-it-yourself mythology that details the history of a place called W—a fictional island in South America where there's a community that has its own strange, sadistic rules. And so you have these two portraits that are intertwined in the book. At some point while making *Nostalgia*, I was reading both of these books and poaching them, I suppose, for ideas and also for inspiration.

**TINA KUKIELSKI:** This interweaving of two stories into one tale is certainly a motif in your work. You used a similar approach in *The Casting* [2007] by cutting together two discrete stories told by a U.S. Army sergeant. I think originally your idea for *Nostalgia* was to make two films, and it ended up morphing into three. Did that duality sort of break apart, or do you feel that it's preserved in *Nostalgia*?

Production still from  
*Nostalgia III*, 2009.  
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Beer, Berlin









OMER FAST: It probably got refracted—broken—and this happens very often. The reason for that is almost a personal confession: I have a hard time deciding. Any time I have an option, I'm always thinking, "Well, what if." And it's almost an infantile way of thinking about things—basically, "No, not this. The opposite." That's what my daughter does now: everything that I suggest to her, I get back a "no." So I'm still caught up, I guess, in that two-year-old way of thinking about things; as soon as something suggests itself, its opposite comes up also.

A lot of what I do as an artist is try to reconcile—and maybe *reconcile* is not the right word—try to simultaneously explore both options. Very often the projects do take on this kind of hybrid form, and I've started to relax about this and accept that this is a way of thinking. It's not dialectics, but rather something that tries to look at a subject or a story from several different viewpoints at the same time.

**TINA KUKIELSKI:** That segues into a discussion about time, because it seems that you further fracture *Nostalgia* through your multifarious approach to time—time of the past, time of the present, and time of the future.

OMER FAST: *Nostalgia* is very much an example of that. You have an individual recall something about his life, and so the work is, from the start, retrospective. It's in the past tense, and it's a memory, and it's addressing a time that's already past.

Having said that, since I'm using a camera, and since I'm recording a voice and speaking to a person, there's obviously also the time of storytelling, the time of the interview, the time that exists when a person is just telling his story, and where I get a chance to interject and also to play a role in the development of that story.

So for me—and this is the case for every work that's narrative-based—there is the time that's addressed by the work, which is almost a literary time, a recollected time. There's the time that is articulated through the kind of recording equipment I use—the camera, or in this case, this little recording device. And that captures another slice of time. And then when you sit and you edit, you're making decisions that impact both of those stories, but you're also imposing, almost, another sense of time over those two layers.

**TINA KUKIELSKI:** Right—editing time.

OMER FAST: What, for me, makes the work kind of rich and complex and rewarding is the fact



that these three narrative strands, these three layers of time, very often begin to break in on each other in ways that pass information from one layer of time to the other.

**TINA KUKIELSKI:** I'm interested in the first part of *Nostalgia* – the fragment of the interview – and how that original interview morphed in your mind into the second part, which was a script that you wrote partly from the original transcript, partly from memory, and partly invented.

Opposite: Video stills from *Nostalgia I*, 2009. High-definition video, color, sound: 4:35 min., looped. © Omer Fast; courtesy gb agency, Paris; Postmasters, New York; and Arratia, Beer, Berlin

Above: Installation view, *Omer Fast: Nostalgia*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2009. Collection of the artist. © Omer Fast

**OMER FAST:** What happened with this particular piece is that I had talked to several people, and the more I talked to them, the more I realized that I had to stop what I was doing, to change what I was doing, because it was terrible. It was awful. It was unethical. It was a horrible, terrible, awful thing to do to people.

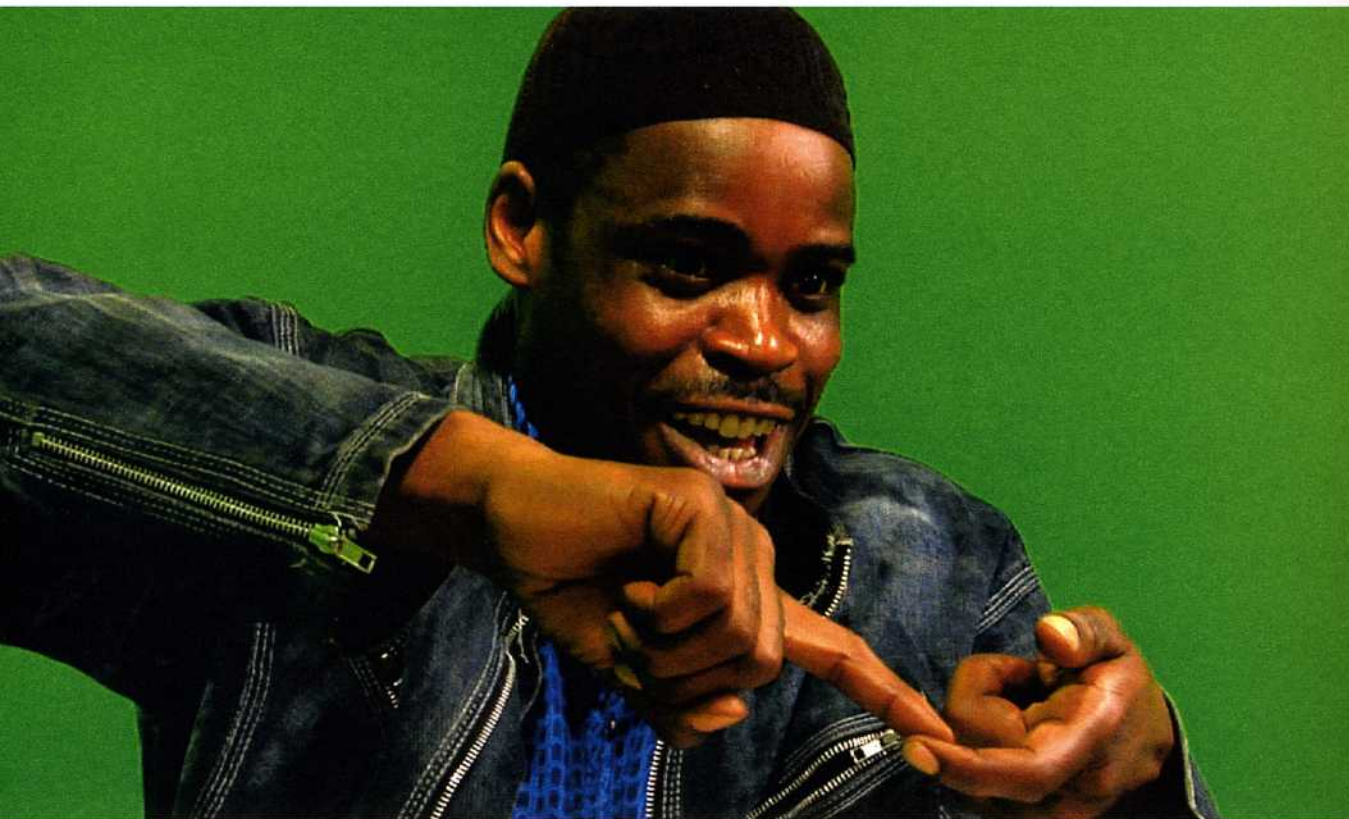
**TINA KUKIELSKI:** And the people you're referring to specifically were the refugees?

**OMER FAST:** Well, I was talking to several people. I was talking to refugees, asylum seekers, and I was also talking to people who helped them in London.

**TINA KUKIELSKI:** Caseworkers?

**OMER FAST:** They're not necessarily caseworkers. They're often either volunteers or people whose job it is to help migrants. And out of these conversations, I realized that there were some things that made me leery, a little bit . . . wary.





One of them was the way that my project, my desire, as an artist, dovetailed with the project and the desire of the caseworker, who represents the state and the state's power.

So in my desire to pull these peoples' stories from obscurity and to authenticate their stories and to get at all the stuff that you need when you're writing a piece of fiction in order to pull it away from it being a cliché, on the one hand—stuff that you read about in the news—and on the other hand to keep it from being just a schematic outline that you can dismiss as a fabrication. You want detail, you want to know what color it was, what the voice was like, describe the dark to me, all these kinds of things.

**TINA KUKIELSKI:** Yes, like a journalist. But you're saying that you think that the caseworkers were similarly trying to pull out these threads in order to create their own narratives?

**OMER FAST:** In order to authenticate a person's story and to figure out whether the request for asylum has merit, there is this kind of truth operation that's all about extracting details. Of course, I'm not there to figure out whether these peoples' stories are true or not. But

nevertheless, I became more aware of how my project was, in some respects, very much like what I imagined the project of the home office or the INS to be.

**TINA KUKIELSKI:** In the second part of *Nostalgia*, you make reference to that: there is a moment when the interviewer, the actor who is playing you, is obviously uncomfortable. And I think that occurs when the refugee asks if he's ever been to Africa.

**OMER FAST:** Right.

**TINA KUKIELSKI:** I think that is you making a point about your own possible discomfort in that original moment. But it's also a point at which the tables are being turned in an interesting and surprising way. It foreshadows the role reversal in the third and final part.

*Video stills from Nostalgia II, 2009. Two-channel high-definition video, color, sound: 9:49 min., looped. © Omer Fast; courtesy gb agency, Paris; Postmasters, New York; and Arratia, Beer, Berlin*



OMER FAST: Sure, sure. This also allows humor to enter the story, and this is something that's important to me, not just as a way of sublimating that kind of tension but as a phenomenon that accompanies the tension. There is a possibility for humor to enter, especially when the tables are turned.

For me, the process is very much fictional from the start. The research that I do is not empirical research; it is much more about artistic subjectivity as a prism or foil for the real. So it's a lot to balance. There is a political, ethical dimension to it, but very often that slips and gives way to a subjective, playful, paranoid, worried dimension. And these exist for me very much as narrative elements.

**TINA KUKIELSKI:** Let's talk a bit about the final section of *Nostalgia*, which is the 30-minute film that becomes a narrative in and of itself. I feel comfortable with the temporal displacement manifest in the 1970s aesthetic that is projected into some postapocalyptic future, but I struggle to situate the film geographically. Can you talk about where you see this colony?

OMER FAST: You mean literally, on the map? I have no idea. I mean, the whole colony exists as a suggestion. It's obviously borrowed from notions of gated communities, walled communities, walled countries . . . And at the same time, it is playing with a notion of Africa and Africanization that is clearly a kind of fantasy and projection. I mean, there is nothing in the piece that situates it comfortably in the Niger Delta or in the Congo or any of the other places that were the context for the stories that I originally collected.

There is a sense of an imagined geography. The exchange between the so-called caseworker and the English refugee, when they talk about riding bicycles across the Mediterranean, is very much part of the science fiction genre. That is also a hot border region where a lot of human trafficking takes place.

There is, in the piece, a very loose and very fluid sense of place and geography. There are tunnels. There are interior shots. There is no outside. The most physical aspects of the film, I think, are given expression in underground situations. People are doing everything







underground—they're watching films, they're receiving some sort of sustenance, they're eating underground. They're obviously able to escape and to be caught and eventually to be executed underground. But it seems like the community aboveground regenerates itself through all these activities happening underneath it, and this is a very palpable psychological metaphor.

**TINA KUKIELSKI:** In the underground is also where this idea of entrapment is really taken to its extreme. So maybe we can talk a little

Production stills from  
*Nostalgia III*, 2009.  
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**bit about the metaphor of the trap, which is obviously crucial to the entire meaning.**

OMER FAST: I think the literal traps that are set up, and then sprung, they're the ones that occur underground, and they're the easy kind of traps. And then what happens aboveground is the sustenance that the community derives from these migrants—namely, this rather dry set of instructions for how to build a trap that the migrants surrender to the community and that becomes part of what that community compulsively talks about, passing it along, repeating it. I think the sense of entrapment is therefore inevitably much richer aboveground and much more difficult to pin down.

These people are compelled to hear the story, to repeat it verbatim, but also to attach it to their own unresolved impulses and desires from the past, things that they aren't able to achieve on





their own. They need that story in order to sustain themselves. And at the same time, this notion of sustenance, this notion of literally feeding on another in order to make sense of oneself is demonstrated to be something that entraps the community. It still puts the community in a very ambivalent relationship vis-à-vis the figure of the migrant, who, although trapped by the state, by the police, by the interviewer is nevertheless able to import something new into the community, and the community cannot generate new stories, only recycle them.

**TINA KUKIELSKI: Can you think of an example from your own life of a narrative thread that's been passed down through one source or another—maybe it was on television, maybe it was something you've read, or maybe a family anecdote—that helps you uncover parts of yourself?**

OMER FAST: I grew up with the story of a Polish grandfather who was able to buy his freedom by putting a diamond into a hollow tooth that he had. And so for me, hearing this story over and over and over again, growing up . . . The story represented a sort of two-year-old's fantasy,

very anal. What happens if the diamond, which is this very hard substance that kind of captures light inside it, instead of buying your freedom becomes part of your bio . . . you know . . .

**TINA KUKIELSKI: Chemistry?**

OMER FAST: Right, it becomes part of your biological pathways to the extent that both story and substance, memory and time are trapped in the guts of the storyteller. And so eventually the storyteller must shit, or the constipation will be so, so, so severe that he or she will require hospitalization. And so the notion of escape through excretion, the notion of escape through expulsion, is something that accompanies, I think, a lot of my narratives.

And *excretion* and *expulsion*, you know, they're very rich, loaded words. They don't have

*Video stills from Nostalgia III, 2009. Super 16mm film transferred to high-definition video, color, sound: 52:48 min., looped. © Omer Fast; courtesy gb agency, Paris; Postmasters, New York; and Arratia, Beer, Berlin*



to be just gastric. They don't all have to emanate from the colon. If you look at community as a cesspool, if you look at community as plumbing or as a series of pathways and pipes and tunnels, then of course you start to find different ways of articulating that figuratively, metaphorically.

So all this is to say that the impetus or desire, the kind of energy behind this, is a very, very infantile, you know, anal and oral repressed sort of thing.

**TINA KUKIELSKI: One more question, about the Bucksbaum Award, which you were given exactly a year ago. It came with a \$100,000 award; did that help you to realize the new project?**

OMER FAST: Absolutely.

**TINA KUKIELSKI: Or maybe a bigger question: How has your recognition as an artist changed in the past year, or two years?**

OMER FAST: I think the nice thing that the award does is—it gives you a really nice way of connecting to the institution. Because here I am again at the Whitney, showing another project in a solo show, and it's a wonderful, wonderful opportunity, even beyond all the

money and whatnot. This is really the nice thing, I think, that comes along with the award.

And, in a sense, to get that award and to know that the show is coming up afterward gives you the thing that you need, which is an alibi to create, to crawl out of your tunnel and go play. But also to not worry about where that project is going to be shown, because you know that you have this kind of guaranteed relationship with the institution, regardless of whether the curators want to see you again.

Of course, the upside or the downside is that you don't enter the institution in the normal way, where a curator follows your work for several years and you have an engagement and you know that you're there for the right reasons. In a way, it's like being smuggled into the institution, which is a really, really nice, subversive way for an award to work. And awards are not usually subversive. The Bucksbaum was not necessarily conceived as a subversive award, but it does allow you to exist in an extra-institutional way with the institution. And I think that's a really nice thing for an award to do.



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