

Omer Fast: *De Grote Boodschap* (*The Big Message*)

MCA Denver

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by Kate Green



Omer Fast

De Grote Boodschap (The Big Message)

2007

Courtesy the artist

Production still: Erik De Cnodder

Omer Fast's single-channel video *De Grote Boodschap (The Big Message)* (2007), currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver, is the most luscious, complex and mesmerizing work the artist has made to date. For twenty-seven minutes, panoramic shots slowly shift between richly hued, interconnected scenes—think Isaac Julien—featuring various people in an apartment building in Belgium. The fragmented drama that develops challenges the notion of a single narrative truth, a fiction that the Jerusalem-born, Berlin-based Fast has productively explored over the last five years.

Fast's videos have ever more effectively capitalized upon our fascination with the lives of others to look at how events can be experienced and recounted in multiple ways. For his early sixty-five minute two-channel work *Spielberg's List* (2003), the artist interviewed Polish extras who had worked on Steven Spielberg's 1993 *Schindler's List* and then intercut their memories of the Holocaust with recollections of working on the film, which was itself a retelling of actual events. The resulting video pays equal respect to these first-, second-, and third-hand accounts. The artist's next major work, *Godville* (2005), more dramatically highlights the interpreted nature of storytelling. The

fifty-one minute two-channel video features actors from the historical recreation of Colonial Williamsburg describing their own and their characters' lives. Seamless editing of their narratives creates persuasive confusion between the past and the present, the real and the reenacted. In last year's *The Casting* (2007), a fourteen minute four-channel installation which won Fast the 2008 Whitney Biennial's Bucksbaum Award, the artist comingles documentary strategies with the more visceral conventions of film to dynamic effect. On one side of a screen a soldier recently returned from Iraq relates two different stories while on the other the tales are enacted in vivid cinematic tableaux. The mixture of straightforward words with bold film imagery powerfully entices viewers into thinking about the veracity of verbal and pictorial accounts.

In *De Grote Boodschap*, Fast breaks entirely with the documentary style used in earlier works and fully engages the tropes of cinema to consider what and who to believe, particularly vis-à-vis race. The looped video rhythmically travels back and forth through time between a handful of people in three adjacent apartments, affording us the opportunity to see the same situations from various perspectives. The glue that binds this loose, racially-charged narrative is the death of an elderly woman wracked with memories of the Nazi invasion.

Among several other characters, we meet her white grandson, his black girlfriend (also the grandmother's caregiver), and the next-door-neighbors—a flight attendant and her xenophobic husband. In one scene before the elderly woman passes, we see the grandson charming his girlfriend. The young man earns multicultural points by beatboxing and by berating his intolerant grandmother for believing his girlfriend is stealing, presumably because of her skin color. Minutes later, however, we see another side of the story. Now the young woman is checking in on the older one; their loving exchange betrays no hint of the racism alluded to by the young man. In fact, in a scene that takes place after the grandmother dies, the grandson betrays his own biases. While showing the now-empty flat to a Middle Eastern man, his nervous chatter reveals deep discomfort with “the other.” Yet just when we are ready to vilify the young man, the scene shifts to the other side of the apartment wall. Now the true racist appears to be the flight attendant's husband, whose eavesdropping on the Arabic spoken next door prompts him to consider calling the police. Before we are able to pinpoint who is the hero and who is the villain, the beguiling film begins again. Fast's point seems to be that there is hardly any difference between the two: no one is immune from telling lies, especially when it comes to race.

Kate Green teaches modern and contemporary art history at Trinity University and regularly contributes to Modern Painters, ArtLies and other publications. She has been a curator and educator at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Dia

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