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Attention Span

TOM HOLERT ON THE ART OF OMER FAST

ENTERING A PITCH-BLACK BASEMENT GALLERY at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MUMOK) this past fall, visitors encountered two screens suspended from the ceiling, seeming to hover in midair. Though facing the same direction, the screens were on different planes, one set back roughly eighteen inches from the other. This gap engendered a peculiar spatial rhythm while also underscoring the confounding internal disjunctions of the work the screens were part of—Omer Fast's video installation *The Casting*, 2007.

The Casting is a visual feast of gory detail, charged expressivity, and compositional elegance, encompassing shots of US soldiers on patrol in a Humvee, a beautiful red-haired woman, Iraqi civilians on a roadside, a GI shooting, a screaming woman in a chador, a Bavarian townscape, a nightclub, a female arm scored with numerous cuts, a film crew in a studio, a landing strip at night. And yet for all the sheer cinematic splendor—the elaborate choreography, the hyperrealist polish—there is an intense strangeness as well. True, it's unclear how all of these shots are connected to one another, but many contemporary viewers will take such fractured narrativity in stride. What is really unsettling is the fact that the images inhabit a liminal space between stasis and animation. The actors are motionless, almost frozen, so that it seems at first as if one is looking at a series of stills. But then an occasional tracking shot, fabric or smoke billowing in the wind, a bird crossing a wintry sky, or, most startlingly, eyes blinking in an otherwise impassive face indicate that these are *moving* images. With growing discomfiture, the viewer of *The Casting* is forced to confront the question not only of what these pictures *show* but, more pressingly, of what these pictures *are*. Whatever narratives its imagery suggests, in other words, *The Casting* forces one into an ontological quandary.

The Casting in production, Mojave Desert, California, May 2007. Photo: Nicholas Trikonis.



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In a recent essay about Michel Foucault's philosophical conception of virtue, Judith Butler succinctly observes that "certain kinds of practices which are designed to handle certain kinds of problems produce, over time, a settled domain of ontology"—and this, she concludes, "constrains our understanding of what is possible." If extended beyond the ethical and political field in which Butler situates it, this argument about the inevitable ontological bent of practices "designed to handle certain kinds of problems" could initiate a "problematization" of art production, the likes of which is potentially generative in any discussion of Fast. For Foucault (who in his later writings held the concept in great esteem), *problematization* entailed the questioning of first principles—that is, the questioning of the unquestionable. And so to problematize art might involve asking: What is prohibited or excluded by the very conceit, and realization, of an artistic project? What can be shown and said, and what can't—and why? What are the norms and rules that define or diagram the sociocultural and aesthetic space in which art is produced, distributed, and experienced?

To transpose such a downright epistemological mode of reasoning to an entire stratum of contemporary cultural production, or to the work of a single artist, for that matter, certainly risks seeming pretentious. But, as a potential trade-off, doing so might also help to explain, on an almost axiomatic level, how developments in art assume certain shapes, implying particular ratios of possibility to impossibility. In asking why certain questions occur to us in the first place, and how problems in art are formulated and solved, we might come to understand how art produces its own norms and forms, which circumscribe and constrain our understanding of what can be done and what cannot.

SINCE THE LATE 1990S, Fast has established himself as one of the most active of a number of practitioners, including Stan Douglas, Harun Farocki, Aernout Mik, and Clemens von Wedemeyer, who use film and video installation to reflect and rearticulate the truth regimes regulating contemporary image production. Fast's practice might indeed be characterized as being "designed to handle certain kinds of problems," namely, the malleability of meaning in the interstices within and between recorded image and recorded speech. In this regard, *The Casting* is probably his most accomplished work to date. Over the course of its fourteen minutes, he succeeds once more at "unsettl[ing] the elements that make moving pictures move, from the sound to the subtitles" (to cite an article on Fast by critic Jennifer Allen that appeared in these pages in 2003).

The sense of ambiguity and, indeed, of unease—the sense that one is being fooled into a somewhat nightmarish limbo of just-not-getting-it—is tangible from the start of *The Casting* and grows throughout the experience of watching the video. Prior even to the realization that these "stills" are not really stills, there is the weird familiarity, or familiar weirdness, of the imagery, which is

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From the actors playing American soldiers in the presumably Iraqi desert (actually California's Mojave) to the disturbing shot of the mutilated arm (a fine example of the art of theatrical makeup), Fast's mysteriously galvanized "living statues" of violence, desperation, doubt, and fear point to their own status as enhanced yet ultimately bracketed and deflated action-images.



partly explained by the fact that Fast based much of it on pictures of the Iraq war that he found on the Internet. Iconology in the age of Google, Flickr, and YouTube is an incessant encounter with images' utter legibility, on the one hand, and complete obscurity, on the other. You know them; they are generic; but what about their authorship, their original context, their precise provenance? In particular, the availability and volatility of images of the Iraq war have provoked contradictory responses and resistances, from reenactments of YouTube videos (Brian De Palma's *Redacted* [2007]) to

an alternative, untimely documentary vision of the site of conflict (Paul Chan's *Baghdad in No Particular Order*, 2003). One might also cite the US military's own forms of resistance—namely, the severe restrictions it has placed on soldiers' blogs and e-mails and its banning of YouTube and MySpace from its networks last year.

Fast, for his part, opts to invoke the tradition of the *tableau vivant*, a mode of animating the still image that became popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as an entertainment of the nascent leisure class (e.g., the protagonists of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, who re-create famous paintings as "living pictures") and that was later enacted on vaudeville stages and in front of the camera. With *The Casting*, the artist revisits and inverts this pictorial mode, distilling stasis from moving images shot on 35-mm film and transferred to digital video and further hybridizing them through the use of montage, double projection, occasional camera movement, and a nondiegetic voice-over sound track. While viewing Fast's dekineticized images, one may recall *tableaux vivants* from films by Jean-Luc Godard (*Tout va bien* [1972]), Jack Smith

(*Flaming Creatures* [1963]), Derek Jarman (*Caravaggio* [1986]), or Gus Van Sant (*My Own Private Idaho* [1991]). From the actors playing American soldiers in the presumably Iraqi desert (actually California's Mojave) to the disturbing shot of the mutilated arm (a fine example of the art of theatrical makeup), Fast's mysteriously galvanized "living statues" of violence, desperation, doubt, and fear point to their own status as enhanced yet ultimately bracketed and deflated action-images. The *tableau vivant* mode, with all the micromovements undermining the illusion of immobility, emphasizes the semiotics and histrionics of every expression and gesture. As Fast puts it in an e-mail exchange with critic Sven Lütticken (published in the catalogue for the MUMOK show, which was curated by Matthias Michalka), he deliberately aimed at a *dramatization* of the documentary mode's supposed encounter with the real, thereby transgressing the boundaries of the genre.

By virtue of its deliberate recourse to the tropes of the still photograph, this is not film, exactly, though the images are clearly the *result* of filming, and as such are thoroughly invested in the whole apparatus of filmmaking. The tableaux appear on and vanish from the two screens in suggestive tandems that correspond to the voice-over. Like a comic strip or that outmoded literary form the "photo novel," the sequence illustrates a story—of sorts. A male voice recounts past events that seem to be interrelated, though precisely how is unclear. One thread of this account involves a deadly incident on an Iraqi road. The narrator, evidently a veteran, speaks of driving in a convoy across empty terrain. He remembers how, after the convoy was ambushed, he fired what was meant to be a warning shot at an approaching car and killed an innocent civilian in the backseat. This story is disorientingly interwoven with another tale, in which the same narrator recalls his "first Christmas away from home." In southern Germany—presumably stationed at an American military base—he spent the holiday with a young woman whom he found attractive but also alarming, due to her penchant for self-cutting and her suicidal driving style.

And per the work's title, we get the sense that what we are watching is, indeed, an audition of some kind. There are recurring images of a guy with a beard standing against a white backdrop in the film studio, like an actor at a casting call, and we surmise that he is the raconteur on the sound track. There is a second male voice as well, which at the start of the sequence kicks things off with the question, "So, how do you feel about improvising?" This voice seems to belong to a young man sitting in the studio in a canvas chair. At the end, this director, or whoever he is, brings the proceedings to a close by remarking, "I'm definitely not so much, you know, looking for a political angle." Instead, he says, he's interested in "the way that experience is basically turned into memory and then the way that memories become stories, the way that memories

become, you know, mediated." He ends on the old "I'll give you a call" note, acknowledging in a politely brusque manner that the audited man has been very generous with his time, but that "that's enough, you know?" So we are left to wonder what kind of audition this is, exactly. Is the man whose reminiscences we are hearing really a veteran? Are the memories really his, or is he truly improvising—making the stories up as he goes along? And where is Fast in all of this? On how many levels is the audition a fiction—a self-reflexive, and self-abnegating, spectacle of authorship into which the artist has obviously invited contending authorial voices?

AND THERE ARE YET more layers of complexity—since *The Casting* is actually a four-channel projection. Visible on one of the two channels projected on the back of the screens (and audible on the sound track), Fast performs as himself. Or, rather, he performs as what might be called his central persona: the artist-director searching for someone capable not only of authenticating episodes of a personal history but also of bringing transparency to the process of mediating

memory. Recorded by a static camera, he appears on the left-hand screen, sitting before a nondescript backdrop. Whether his mostly deadpan countenance bespeaks utter boredom, indifference, suspicion, or fatigue remains ambiguous throughout. He is clearly observing, and occasionally speaking to, a chubby blond guy on the right-hand screen, who talks directly to the camera. It is this man, we realize, who is recounting the stories about the Iraqi road incident and the Christmas adventure with the self-mutilating woman, and it is Fast who initiates the conversation with the



Opposite page: Omer Fast, *The Casting*, 2007, four-channel color video transferred from 35 mm, 14 minutes. Installation view, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MUMOK). This page: Omer Fast, *The Casting*, 2007, still from a four-channel color video transferred from 35 mm, 14 minutes.

question about improvising and brings things to a close with the laconic "I'll give you a call."

Standing before the back screens, the viewer has a rather different experience from the one that unfolds on the other side. Whereas the formal strategies of the diptych projection on the front seem to be resolved—we could even fairly call the work a tour de force of *tableau vivant* cinematography—here in the rear, as it were, everything seems sketchy, even sluggish. This is not only the effect of the humbleness of the footage as compared with the high production values on the front. It's also a result of the schematic manner in which the elements of the shot/reverse-shot montage (conventional in single-channel projections) are split apart and presented separately, and of the fast-and-loose way in which the filmmaker seems to have disregarded continuity. From bits of footage, some no longer than the duration of a single spoken syllable, Fast has spliced together pieces of at least two separate conversations. And so, for example, the blond man's memory of the approaching car full of Iraqi civilians segues into his memory of driving too fast on a German highway with the red-haired woman: "I aimed my weapon at him, hoping he would see it. I was thinking to myself, 'Come on! . . . Stop!' But he didn't stop. So I remember leaning over; I'm like, 'How fast are we going?' And she just kind of laughed and said, 'You don't know anything about love.'" The sutures between one conversation and the other are undetectable in the voice-over: It simply sounds as if the narrator—who, the catalogue discloses, is a sergeant in the US Army whom Fast interviewed in 2006—is telling an oneiric tale that switches irrationally between settings. But visually, the jump cuts are clear, creating the small, jarring shifts typical of the technique. (Moreover, both Fast and the sergeant appear in different shirts at different moments.) This seminar—on film techniques, on the production and mediation of memory—seems conspicuously untutored. A peculiar critical reluctance to pursue the analysis in a "productive" manner appears to beset Fast, who at times looks to be almost drowsing.

Puzzling this out, the viewer inevitably finds herself or himself mentally editing and recombining the material. But Fast does not seem to be interested in any kind of direct interactivity or audience participation. Quite the contrary, he emphasizes his editorial-authorial control by demonstrating the degree to which he is able to manipulate his footage. This method of recombining small text-image units to create alternative meanings has become the Israel-born, Berlin-based artist's trademark in recent years. His works are marked by the tension between his subjects' efforts to narrate, to recount specific histories, or to distribute ideological messages, and his own editing-room counternarratives. *CNN Concatenated*, 2002, for example, is a dense eighteen-minute remix of footage from the titular cable-news channel in which discrete words spoken by different anchors are

strung together to produce counterintuitively "personal" soliloquies. Particularly interested in excavating the desires underlying the talking heads' performances, Fast painstakingly compiled a database of their utterances and isolated their countless efforts to involve the TV audience ("Listen to me") and the rhetorical microtechnologies they deploy to spread paranoia, fear, and other states of ostentatious post-9/11 emotionality. An ideological performativity of a droller sort is explored in *Godville*, 2005. For this work, Fast interviewed resident-employees of Colonial Williamsburg, who spend their days in costume pretending to be eighteenth-century blacksmiths, founding fathers, and so on, at a Virginia theme park "where history lives." Here, he applied the same method of splicing to his own video footage; the resulting two-channel installation (which features his subjects in their workaday costumes and in their after-hours modern dress) deepened his engagement with practices of remaking history by reenacting it.

This historical engagement is also a central concern of the two-channel *Spielberg's List*, 2003, a documentary account of the Polish extras and locations featured in Steven Spielberg's 1993 Holocaust film *Schindler's List*. Deliberately

emulating (and exploiting) History Channel-style video testimony, *Spielberg's List* becomes more bewildering the longer one watches. In their interviews, the supernumeraries who populated Spielberg's film can't seem to separate their memories of the Shoah from their recollections of its blockbuster simulacrum. Fast had two translators create their own sets of English subtitles from the Polish original; the alternate versions are presented side by side, prompting the viewer to note subtle discrepancies and differing shades of meaning.

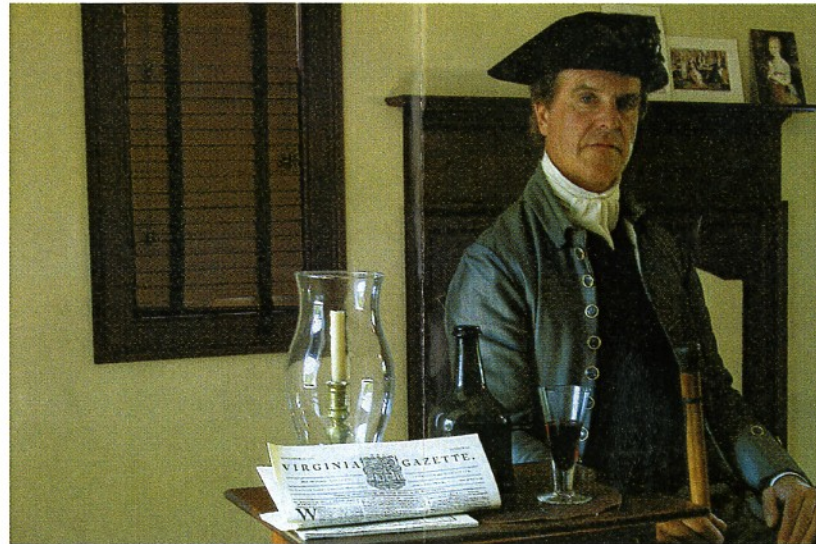
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historical documentation, they do the same with notions of identity and personality and the very idea of presenting a “face” to the world. His protagonists often appear to be digital Frankenstein’s monsters, assembled piecemeal from spare audiovisual parts. As anyone who has watched roughly spliced interview footage knows, rapid jump cuts may make the person on-screen look as if he or she has a facial tic. And a tic, interestingly, may be read as the exterior manifestation of a traumatic experience—an involuntary memorial in the muscles. The nineteenth-century neurologist Nikolaus Friedreich coined the apt term *Erinnerungskampf* (memory cramp) for the phenomenon: The recalling body translates the memory of past events into a nonverbal tremor. In *The Casting*, the ticlike twitches produced by Fast’s editing supplement the various registers of affectivity in both the staged facial expressions of the actors on the front of the screens and the seemingly “real” emotions expressed on the back—especially by the sergeant, whose ruddy skin and hesitant glances indicate the stress induced by Fast’s mediatic panopticon and by the compulsive recollection (or retroactive production?) of the two traumatic events. Pushing this reading a bit further, one might argue that the “tics” and the sergeant’s behavior metonymically address the general weariness that pervades *The Casting* and its open-ended monologue. The topology of the installation emulates the spatial metaphor inherent in the theatrical terms *onstage* and *offstage*, and viewers are called on to navigate the epistemological space of explanation, contextualization, and information within the interface embodied by the work’s architecture. However, any such navigation can only arrive at a dead end, as *The Casting*’s seamlessly looped presentation suggests.

THE NARRATIVE, CONCEPTUAL, AND VISUAL ORDERS of *The Casting* share many characteristics with those of a screen test: It uses representations of a casting session in an installation that could be perceived as a site of assessment, just as an audition is. But what exactly is being assessed, or tested? Certainly, the viewers’ attention spans and their capacities to engage the kind of questions Fast is posing. Indeed, the screen test—or, as the work’s title puts it, the “casting”—might plausibly be referred to as the primal scene of mass-cultured modernity: the subjugation of the actor-worker under the technical gaze of the “testing” camera. Warhol clearly sensed this, as his *Screen Tests*, 1964–66, reveal. The very presence of a film or video camera instantly transmutes any social interaction into an assessment of sorts. Or, as Walter Benjamin put it, “Film makes test performances capable of being exhibited, by turning that ability itself into a test.” For Benjamin, the psychotechnics used to assess the qualifications of the individual worker bore a significant structural resemblance to the psychotechnics of filmmaking, wherein the recording technology itself assumes the role of assessor, taking the measure of an actor’s



Opposite page: Omer Fast, *CNN Concatenated*, 2002, still from a color video, 18 minutes. This page: Omer Fast, *Godville*, 2005, still from a two-channel color video, 51 minutes.

affective labor. Unlike the theatrical actor, Benjamin added, “the film actor performs not in front of an audience but in front of an apparatus. The film director occupies exactly the same position as the examiner in an aptitude test.”

In *The Casting*, Fast and his alter ego in the front projections embody the exacting attitude of the contemporary professional “creative,” assessing the exhibited ability to perform a story that may be, but doesn’t have to be, one’s own. In this case, the sergeant could be an actor auditioning for a role; he could also be someone who has lived through the

events he is talking about. We have no way of knowing which unless we consult the exhibition catalogue. The remembered events become tales told in the voice of the man who hopes to be “cast,” while at the same time providing the script for the visual tableaux. And by searching the Internet for pictorial equivalents of the stories he heard, Fast is also testing the very capability of being exhibited, as Benjamin would have it, of the performance itself.

The performance of authenticity is one of the primary imperatives of affective labor under post-Fordism, and the criteria for social and professional advancement thus depend less and less on manual and cognitive skills and more and more on the presentation of the self—often, of the traumatized self. In contemporary culture, the capacity to translate one’s trauma into a compelling narrative is a precondition for entering the public arena of reality TV or politics and is advantageous in the workplace, too. You may become a role model for your coworkers or your fellow “self-entrepreneurs” simply (or not so simply) by performing a credible rendition of yourself, and if that self is a “survivor,” or the possessor of some other inspirational backstory, so much the

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better. The extent to which the devices of authentication are used technologically and culturally, endorsing and policing behavioral repertoires that are encoded in visual and linguistic clichés, is a constant theme in Fast's work.

FAST CLEARLY ASPIRES to disavow the dominant truth games in which images are deployed as evidence and as seduction; for that matter, he wants to disavow the visual rhetoric and theatricality deployed by the powers that be—e.g., the ways in which the Iraq war is depicted and the attacks of 9/11 are memorialized to feed the dominant political imaginary. Venturing a problematization of his practice, then, entails a consideration of the range of ways in which artists have sought to accomplish these same goals. Fast, like Douglas, Farocki, Mik, et al., displays a telling confidence in the possibility of producing counterimages within contemporary aesthetic and political regimes. This faith in the “nonaligned image,” in the ability to maintain a degree of critical autonomy in the face of all-encompassing heteronomy, has by now given rise to an operative repertoire visible across the corpus of moving-image art: post-Brechtian estrangements, randomized structures, quasi-documentary modes, appropriations and revisitations of film history, and reenactments of mass-media productions. Yet this vocabulary needs to be constantly updated, since it itself is appropriated and conventionalized at an ever-faster rate and so risks losing its critical edge, or what is perceived as its critical edge. The anxiety of appearing outmoded may not be openly discussed by artists. But the nagging pressure to innovate, to modify one's means of critical operation, to ensure a certain effectiveness in one's art, clearly defines what is possible.

In this light, a problem arises, however, when Fast, speaking in *The Casting*, openly declares that he is mainly interested in “the way that experience is basically turned into memory,” in “the way that memories become, you know, mediated.” This is, frankly, a truly irritating statement. What is vexing is that it would appear to be a disclaimer, a kind of insurance policy meant to warrant a reading of the work that does not conform to the political one suggested by its own formal and referential architecture. One could argue that Fast is testing his own work by means of an installation using elements and representations of a “test site.” Specifically, he is testing it to see how much it is able to distance itself from its own presumed functions and meanings, its own “domain of ontology.” In some sense, of course, this might seem an impossible and even a megalomaniac project. However, *The Casting* bears plenty of signs and symptoms of anxiety in regard to the question of what it, the individual work, as well as the artist's practice at this point, is supposed to be—as opposed to what it might actually be taken for. One may ask

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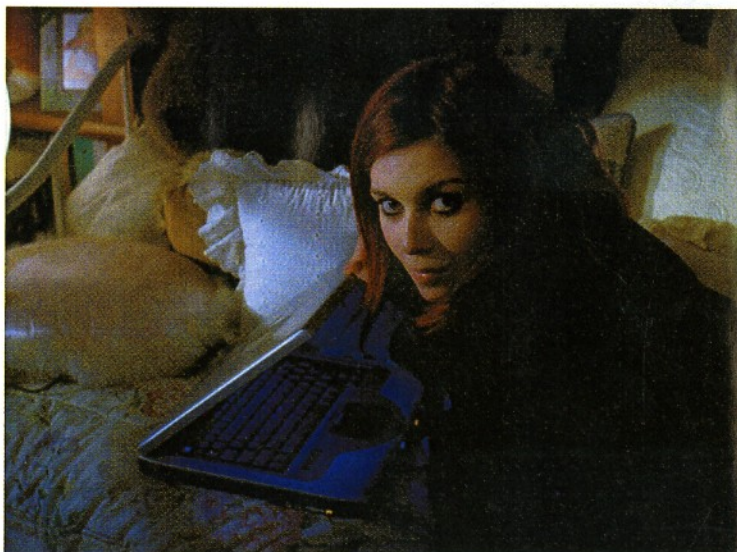


how Fast's overdetermined recombination of all the various modes of “postproducing” the audio-image—the way that he cross-weaves fact and fiction, and layers artifice on “reality” on artifice—functions to create fissures in the spaces of possibility of these modes. The vocal repudiation of the “political angle” seems significant here. Doesn't it underscore, by ostensible abnegation, the very political nature of Fast's endeavor?

The spatial partition of *The Casting*, its suggestive topology of truth that offers the viewer a window onto the manufacturing taking place “behind” the image,

seems to derive from the behind-the-scenes culture of the making-of documentary, of the DVD commentary, of Internet samizdat. However, in a way this remodeling of key features of the mass-media knowledge apparatus seems futile. Conventions of memorialization and visualization are surely targeted in *The Casting* by any critical means necessary, but the earnestness commonly associated with such criticality appears to have been replaced by a tangible urge to change the very politics of criticism. The scandal of this work may thus lie in its sophisticated refusal to enlighten, precisely while it performs unmistakable acts of instruction and criticism. In other words, *The Casting* not only intervenes in the controlled environment of mass-media meaning production and subjectivization but also intervenes in the space of its own practice. By changing the parameters of making and experiencing video and film installations that investigate the rhetoric and politics of image production, Fast effectively problematizes the aesthetic conventions that he inhabits. □

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Opposite page: Omer Fast, *The Casting*, 2007, four-channel color video transferred from 35 mm, 14 minutes. Installation view, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MUMOK). This page: Omer Fast, *The Casting*, 2007, stills from a four-channel color video transferred from 35 mm, 14 minutes.