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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

