

Truth Bends & Decays As It Travels

OMER FAST

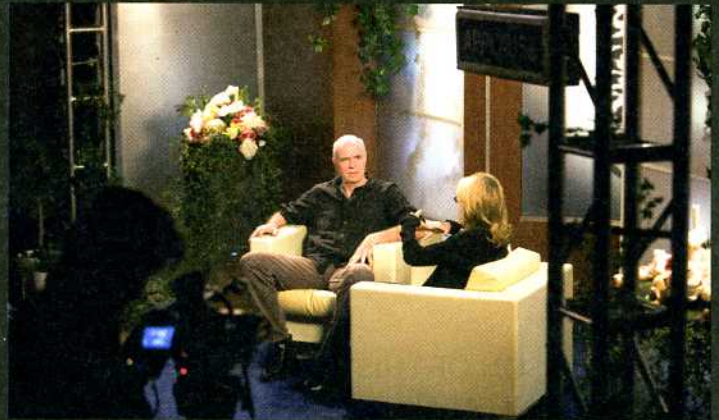
By James Trainor

This is not a media critique: Omer Fast hasn't got a bone to pick with the mass media. Nor does he have any coy postmodern gripes with the machinations of Hollywood or the motion-picture industry. Contrary to some of the persistent conventional wisdom about his work, he doesn't have a particular problem with media manipulation—we are all conscious of how media constructs what we see and hear and shapes representations of the real, and Fast respects his audience enough to assume that basic awareness as a given. As he himself says, in typically understated and matter-of-fact fashion, at the conclusion of his breakthrough film *The Casting* (2007), "I'm more interested in the way that experience is basically turned into memory, and then the way that memories become stories, the way memories become mediated as they get recorded and broadcast."

Fast speaks these lines on camera, as himself, or perhaps playing a certain rendition of himself as an artist/director, while he interviews an American veteran of the Iraq War and attempts to explain how his films deconstruct and distort the stories that his films' participants relate. Surrogates and proxies for the artist, played by actors, appear repeatedly in his work, his doppelgängers acting not only to insert some sort of authorial focal point for what is taking place, but also to account for what the artist admits may be his own sense of guilt in appropriating someone else's real story and pulling it completely apart. It was *The Casting*, which grafts together the soldier's personal recollections of two separate disturbing and violent incidents—one in Iraq, the other in Germany—and uses that material as the entry point for a multilayered and ambiguously nuanced meditation on the slippages of memory and the unstable representations of narrative, that won Fast the Whitney Museum

1. TALK SHOW, 2009.
Actor Tom Noonan listens to actress Jill Clayburgh recount Lisa Ramaci's story about the murder of her husband in Iraq.

2. TALK SHOW, 2009.
David Kaczynski (2a, right) tells a story about his brother, the Unabomber, to Jill Clayburgh. The story was retold six times.



1.



2a.



2b.



2c.



2d.



2e.



2f.



2g.

of American Art's Bucksbaum Prize in 2008 and gave the 37-year-old Jerusalem-born, Berlin-based artist a new level of notoriety.

This past November Fast made his first foray into the realm of live performance. Invited to devise an event for Performa, the New York-based performance art biennial, Fast came up with the idea of presenting a talk show, which he simply titled *Talk Show*. Staged inside the Abrons Art Center auditorium in front of a live audience, *Talk Show* was partly a conventional television confessional and partly an elaborate grown-up version of the children's game of "broken telephone." On three consecutive nights, three different guests were invited to tell a personal story to one of six well-known American actors—Jill Clayburgh, Lili

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Taylor, Dave Hill, David Margulies, Rosie Perez and Tom Noonan. After recounting their stories in great detail, the guest would join the audience and watch as another of the six actors appeared from offstage, took their place and listened to the first actor retell the story as their own—a process that was repeated alternately with all six actors. With each iterated version, the narrative drifted, some details dropping away or becoming fuzzily transmogrified, other elements taking on disproportionate significance, while completely new narrative threads and digressions would be inserted or emerge.

Adding another layer of complexity to the project, the three guests were in a sense anonymous celebrities, chosen for being people with personal stories that had significance in some larger historical or social context: Bill Ayers, the founding member of the radical 1960s Weather Underground group, who lost his lover, fellow Weatherman member Diana Oughton, in the accidental explosion of a secret bomb-making workshop in a New York townhouse in 1970; Lisa Ramaci, whose husband, journalist and art critic Steven Vincent, was kidnapped and executed in Iraq in 2005; and David Kaczynski, the brother of Ted, the infamous Unabomber, who was instrumental in helping FBI investigators capture the domestic terrorist. With a transparently mannered theatricality reminiscent of 1960s and 1970s talk shows and game shows such as *To Tell the Truth*, *What's My Line?* and *I've Got a Secret*, none of the three guests were openly identified—either to the audience or the performers—and they told their stories within the framework of private tales of family trauma and loss, downplaying details of the broader context.

By the end of the grapevine process of six back-to-back recollections, each story had become distorted beyond recognition. If "language is a virus" (as the junkie-poet laureate William S. Burroughs once observed), then the three evenings at the Abrons Art Center were controlled epidemiological experiments, with words, emotions and memories mutating and adapting as they passed from one host body to the next. In conversation with *ArtAsiaPacific* in March, Fast—who emphasizes the importance of the physicality of bodies to his work—also likened this sequence of alterations to a rapid Darwinian process of evolution and devolution, in which the audience was put in the privileged (if somewhat uncomfortable) position of apprehending the whole, with an almost omniscient overview, as it plays itself out across six generations.

What occurred each night was unrehearsed and unscripted, and the actual narrative facts, the details of his guests' confessions, were unknown to even Fast until each participant took the stage. Fast's structural brief to the performers was simple: they were to listen and

then faithfully convey what they remembered of the story they had just been told to the next performer, internalizing it in some way and allowing for involuntary alterations and some liberties to be taken in introducing improvised embellishment or associative digression as needed to keep the story personal and alive. On the final night, for example, David Kaczynski's poignant personal remembrance of an older brother who was both unusually intelligent, observant and compassionate, as well as increasingly detached and ultimately estranged from his family, was slowly but steadily transformed. A story of sibling empathy turned into a laundry list of resentments and festering jealousies, which despite (or perhaps because of) its fictionalizing transgressions somehow

The instability of both narrative and memory, and a sense of constructed realities undercutting themselves, are constants in Fast's work.

amplified the real strain of domestic angst underlying the original tale. On the second night, Lisa Ramaci's harrowing chronicle of her husband's brutal abduction, beating and murder by an Iraqi militia left few audience members unaffected. Yet despite the sensitive and subtle alterations made by subsequent performers, the story was turned on its head and effectively sideswiped by comedian Dave Hill's self-reflexive jaunty interpolations, which recast the traumatic events as a tawdry tale of lust and marital infidelity in the Iraqi desert, a distasteful farce complete with water-park weddings and jetskis. This evolving "freak show," as Fast refers to it, was created not with the intention to damage his guests' dignity or cause offense to his audience but to illuminate an awareness of our own conditioned responses to the stories of others and the array of personal associations that we reflexively and unconsciously call upon while digesting narratives. We all of course do this with our own memories as well, telling and retelling accounts of real experiences that often ultimately become mere anecdotal husks through repetition and the retroactive workings of our desires, turned into recalibrated and burnished parodies of themselves.

At times, the exercise made the audience distinctly uneasy and discomfited, the spectacle of seeming cruelty and disfigurement unraveling before their very eyes (and their own voyeuristic involvement in it) eliciting polite but audible grumbles, murmurs and occasional boos (as in the case of Hill's excesses on the second and third nights). The proceedings undercut cherished assumptions about what kind of catharsis—both for the solitary "confessor" and for the collective of the audience—is socially acceptable. On the latter point, Fast's experiment offered no easy answers, yet his inclusion of a comic, a literal wild-card Joker given a tacit nod to lead the evening away from the tastefully reverential, seemed to suggest that the safety of mere empathy and commiseration is not enough. For Fast, watching the whole process unfold each night was a strange alternating admixture of horror and pleasure. For an admitted control freak such as himself, the lack of editorial control once the parameters were determined and the proceedings set in motion produced an unaccustomed sense of vulnerability that he appreciated—"a feeling," he says, "that I was responsible for it morally, but in some sense I wasn't responsible for its content." Freed from the obligation, or even the ability, to determine the trajectory of the evening or shape its outcome, he had created an autonomous and self-sustaining system of colliding and interacting bodies. As to the ultimate success or failure of *Talk Show*, Fast is noncommittal, unsure of what success would actually look like, but happy that "nothing really bad happened" and more importantly that

3. TAKE A DEEP BREATH, 2008, still from a two-channel video, showing a paramedic tending to a suicide bomber in a café in Jerusalem.



4. TAKE A DEEP BREATH, 2008, still from a two-channel video, showing the production crew that is filming the suicide bombing.



5. TAKE A DEEP BREATH, 2008, production still showing an actor playing a caricatured version of Omer Fast as the film director.



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5.

“none of my guests were hurt terribly by what I did . . . and aren’t going to come after me with the nearest sharp object.”

The fluidity and instability of both narrative and memory revealed in *Talk Show* is a constant in Fast’s work, linking this experimental project (a Berlin version is planned for May) with the narrative confusion that slowly unspools in *The Casting*. That sense of constructed realities undercutting themselves is also what drives his 2008 two-channel video *Take a Deep Breath*, which presents itself as a film about a terrorist bombing at a café in Jerusalem and the ironic paradox of a paramedic faced with the moral imperative of saving the life of the sole survivor—the suicide bomber. However, the film quickly pulls back to reveal the whole scenario as a movie set within a movie set, in which an actor playing a caricatured version of Fast as the film director frets nebbishly about soundstage trivialities while his crew makes grade-school jokes about whether the actor playing the dismembered bomber has an erection (while failing to note that this low-wage extra has perhaps experienced a real-life conflict that is only obliquely referred to)—all of them apparently inhabiting a world less real or grounded than the fiction they are trying and failing to endow with a sense of authenticity.

Confusion about what constitutes the authentic, whether it is the authenticity of the artist’s intent or that of the truths we expect from various forms of documentation, are there in Fast’s other well-known film, *Spielberg’s List* (2003). This two-channel video installation—often mistaken as a critique of Hollywood filmmaking—patiently revolves around a series of interviews he conducted with residents of Krakow, Poland, who had been hired as extras to play concentration-camp inmates (and occasionally Nazi guards) in Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993). On adjacent screens, Fast shows footage of both the ruined set of the Auschwitz camp built by Spielberg’s production company, and talking-head shots of the interviewed extras, who speak in Polish with English subtitles. Fast hired two translators to produce the subtitles and the film often shows identical moments from the monologues concurrently, allowing viewers to see that the same statements have been interpreted faithfully but nevertheless subjectively and therefore with sometimes inconsequential but strangely resonant disparities in meaning. One woman begins her recollections by saying either “Sometimes there is an *emptiness* because you want to say everything at the same time . . .” or “Sometimes there is an *echo* because you want to say everything at the same time . . .” The gap between the two renditions forms its own echo, like the space between the real concentration camp and its double, the real victims and those hired to reenact their suffering. It permits a slight crack of doubt, allowing the true meaning of even the most minor comment to be called into question.

Some of the individuals Fast interviewed were alive during the Holocaust, while others have only heard stories about it and approximated an experience of it through its reenactment on film. Yet for all, their recent memories of being chosen to participate in the film, their visceral experiences of playing the roles of victims or perpetrators, the disputes over payment or the discomforts of their work conditions are as real as the traumatic historical subject matter. Fast’s editing in *Spielberg’s List*, which dispenses with conventional documentary cues that situate the context of a particular piece of testimony, confuses and muddies the various experiences, just as memory does. Memory is not an immutable entity, it is an organic and transitory phenomenon, a continually updated and corrupted process of editing.

Everything starts with a conversation: Fast’s work is intrinsically collaborative in that the kernel of each piece begins somewhere in an exchange with another human being. The interview, the eyewitness account, the interrogation, the cable news broadcast, the TV talk-

6. NOSTALGIA, 2009

still from a single-channel video, (the first part of the installation), showing a man laying a trap made from sticks and twine.



6.

show conversation and confession—these are the storytelling forms of the modern age. As humans, we have always been addicted to stories and narratives. We are born to generate them and hardwired to detect meaning in the realities that shape our experiences. We have developed conventions and rules for finding narrative patterns and categories that give form to those experiences, replete with all their inherent contradictions, ambiguities and paradoxes. Fast's most recent work, *Nostalgia* (2009), a three-room film installation shown at the Whitney Museum this year, began when the artist conducted a series of interviews with African asylum-seekers and refugees in England. One detail from one of those interviews, a digressive aside told by a former child soldier about how he was taught by one of his guerilla captors to make a rudimentary trap from sticks and twine for ensnaring partridges in the bush, became the core of a succession of increasingly convoluted narrative elaborations.

In the first of three episodic looping chapters, we see a man, dressed like a hunter or survivalist, demonstrate how to make the trap while we hear a Nigerian refugee describe in a voice-over the instructions for its making. The second chapter, presented on two adjacent screens, is a reenactment of Fast's interview with the asylum-seeker, which plays out as a straightforward question-and-answer session that grows tense and uneasy as a shifting dynamic emerges between interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer seems suspicious about the man's presentation of facts, skeptical about the purpose of the trap, interrupting to point out inconsistencies or misstatements, and yet cowed by the refugee's experience with bushcraft skills and local customs about which he knows nothing. The interviewee, for his part, seems eager to recount the parts of the trap story he likes, keen to tell the interviewer what he wants to hear and adjust details accordingly to produce a favorable outcome, subtly aware of his position of power—the simple seductive power that comes with the possession of a story.

The final chapter of *Nostalgia* is an even more fantastical elaboration. Costumes and props suggest the film is set in the 1970s, but gradually the work reveals itself to be a science-fiction thriller depicting an alternative reality in which England is a failed state whose refugees desperately attempt to gain illegal entry into the prosperous promised land of an unnamed African nation. Here the story of the trap continues to morph and mutate, having become a metaphor for any number of possible meanings. In one scene it is the solution to a child's grade-school homework assignment, "How Things Were Made"—implying a future state of lost knowledge and faint collective memory of increasingly forgotten survival skills. In another, it becomes the validating shred of information that a captured English asylum-seeker offers his interrogator as proof that he comes from an impoverished place called England

7. NOSTALGIA, 2009

still from a two-channel video, (the second part of the installation), showing a refugee describing the trap to an interviewer.



8. NOSTALGIA, 2009

film still (the third part of the installation), showing an English refugee describing the trap to an immigration officer in Africa.



9. NOSTALGIA, 2009

production still from the third part of installation, showing an English refugee captured by African soldiers.



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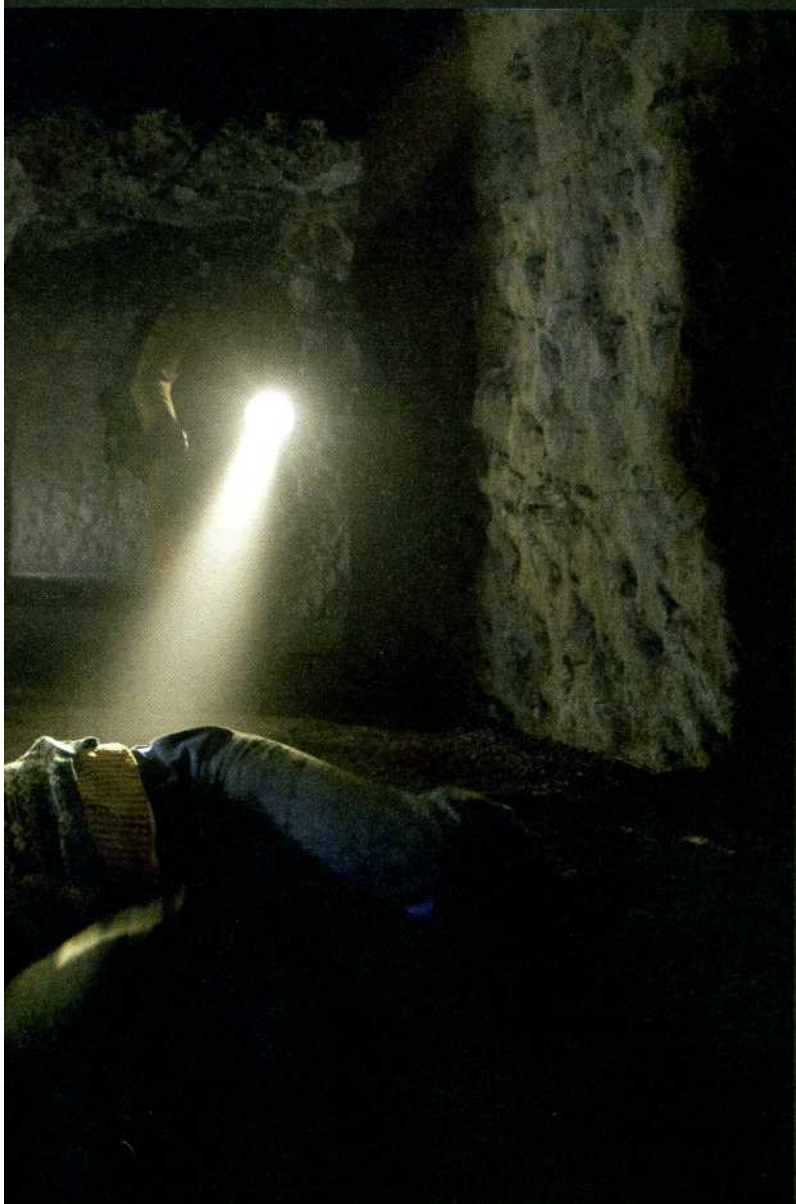
and has subsisted off the land there. In a third scene, the trap is used as an amorous metaphor by the interrogator and her married lover, while in another it becomes the story with which the lover soothes his nightmare-plagued daughter—the specificity of the trap’s construction now reimagined as a reassuring fantasy, a tool for catching the monsters that haunt her dreams. Throughout the sequence of intertwining chapters and scenes, the recounting of the instructions for a trap remains

The final chapter of Nostalgia appears to be set in the 1970s, but gradually the film reveals itself to be a science-fiction thriller.

inviolable and unchanged, but the meaning and context of its retelling are constantly shifting around it.

There is an undercurrent of dark humor in this high-production version of “broken telephone,” in which a seemingly inconsequential aside is the only element to survive a journey of fraught storytelling. As Fast told AAP, “the analogy is this fruit with a hard indigestible heart and the stuff that grows around it is the good stuff.” But that fleshy part of the fruit perishes quickly. The seed, however, “if swallowed, comes out the other end pretty much the way it started.” If you take this analogy to its logical conclusion, we are the colonized hosts for stories, carriers of informational genes that are determined to survive and be passed down through the generations. Fast prefers not to ascribe humor to his own work, which he says would be the height of presumption, but he is pleased and seemingly relieved if others do. But the flipside of this brand of humor is horror. Contained in those drifts and slippages, in *Nostalgia* and other works, is that same terror you find in the Alzheimer’s patient repurposing the vacated framework of one memory and confabulating it with another that may bear some formal or emotional similarity, the once intimate memory becoming strangely alien or gapingly public, the elaborately meaningful drained away to nothing.

As for whatever the original story was that began a particular project, Fast has no need to know anything about it, even if he could. He assumes, as we all must, in art as in life, that what he is starting with is itself a rendition, a constructed, practiced and reworked version of some experience that is already for the most part gone and inaccessible to us. That is just the way things are. If, as neurobiologists have recently theorized, the human brain craves that reliable fix of dopamine that is released not only as a reward for sex or sprinting 100 meters but also for the successful acquisition of information, then stories are indeed our drug of choice. And storytellers are our willing enablers.



9.