

# Art

MONTHLY

OCTOBER 09 / No 330 / UK £4.40 US\$7.40

Omer Fast  
Interviewed by Marcus Verhagen

Art & Politics  
Mark Prince

Istanbul Biennial  
Teresa Gleadowe

Nasreen Mohamedi  
Coline Milliard



I don't know what to say.



Everytime I try to speak carefully



I fuck up and make



a big mess of it all.

# Pleasure & Pain

Omer Fast interviewed by Marcus Verhagen



Omer Fast Takes a Deep Breath 2008 video still

**MARCUS VERHAGEN:** *YOU REGULARLY USE THE FORMAT OF THE INTERVIEW IN YOUR WORK, for instance in pieces like The Casting, 2007, and Spielberg's List, 2003. Can you say a bit about how it works for you?*

**Omer Fast:** I don't always start a work with interviews but the interview is one possibility. When I sit at home and have ideas, very often they're contingent on some encounter and on seeing how an idea is activated by people who can start a dialogue with me about it. I've never been happy just making work at home or in the studio – that always feels to me like a navel-gazing pursuit – so there is a collaborative aspect to what I do, and that aspect doesn't necessarily stop with the interview.



I don't know what to say.



Everytime I try to speak carefully



I fuck up and make



a big mess of it all.

Omer Fast *CNN Concatenated* 2002 image sequence from video

**MV:** *That collaborative dimension is something that your work has in common with other forms of production, like film and TV, and you occasionally refer to reality TV in your use of the confession, for instance, as well as to the news media and, of course, to fictional productions. Can you talk about how you position yourself in relation to those forms?*

**OF:** Compared to reality, television is very attractive to me. I'm not at all put off by the reference to the talk show or the reality show, they're obviously very popular forms. But in terms of venue and format what I do is different. When you show work in a space you can play with the installation and the spatial coordinates. The other difference is that reality TV tends to develop and ossify into particular formats that are televisual and fairly generic. What I try to do is to articulate the confession on two levels. We take this encounter with a person, we call this person the real person – just like the TV shows do. They bring their guests in front of the camera and I do the same thing. But then the work also begins to narrate itself and to create its own confession, articulating for the viewer something about how it is constructed, the motivations and anxieties that underlie it. I present a kind of counter-figure to the confessing guest in the form of the confessing

host or confessing actor-creator-artist-interviewer, who is sometimes me and sometimes an actor playing me. It doesn't even have to be as theatrical as that. The work can also just turn on itself and create inside it a dynamic where the narrative of its own structure is part of the story that it tells.

**MV:** *So you make the confession confess.*

**OF:** In a way it is like articulating the dynamics of the confession. We're bracketing the confession, we're saying yes, there is this content that the work is trying to articulate and you can trace that content to events in the world. But things happen to narratives as they take shape, and those things are explicitly shown in the work to give people an understanding of what may happen to a narrative or a memory or an experience as it is adapted in a short film, say, or in the media.

**MV:** *You are constantly inviting the viewer to consider your technical manipulations, your sources, your groundwork and so on. Is that right?*

**OF:** This notion of manipulation is one that I don't care for. It implies a sinister operation and a cynical understanding of the media and I don't really have that because I accept that the media presents narratives – that is what it does – and in

order to present a narrative you have to form it. Of course there are political dimensions and commercial interests that shape narratives but I want to set the notion of manipulation aside. In *The Casting*, when you see the edits in the screens on the back, you become aware that the flawless, fluid narrative that you hear in the space or see in the front is made up of these different bits and bobs that have been stitched together. It is not about removing a veil from people's eyes and suggesting that what they see in the media is constructed. I think people know that, so for me the notion of manipulation is not very interesting, manipulation is part of what you do even when you talk, when you tell a story. When you're editing, you're manipulating footage even when you're trying to make it as linear and honest as possible.

**MV:** *I meant manipulation in a dispassionate sense.*

**OF:** Sure. It is just something I wanted to flag up because it is important to me. I keep getting asked, is this work media critique? As if that would help in any way: 'Oh yes, it's media critique, let's all breathe a deep sigh of relief.' But that is not what it is. Of course these critical analyses have been important in fashioning our understanding of the media, but I think all that talk tends to obscure something which is extremely important in the media, and that is pleasure. It took me a while to be comfortable with that and to say that I want to make things that are pleasurable, regardless of their relationship to social dynamics and to current events, to history and to the media.

**MV:** *Let's stay with pleasure. In your work you play a variety of different roles. You and your stand-ins figure in *Take a Deep Breath*, 2008, and *The Casting*, so you're a participant, but you're also a writer, a director and an editor – and it seems to me that the role of editor is really fundamental and that editing, in your work, is often a means of bringing pleasure.*

**OF:** I think editing is a beautiful way to approach a narrative and I do think of editing as writing, so all the writing I do before a piece is shot and made is a prelude to editing. Editing allows you to deal with words and images and sounds but also to give a temporality to the work – and being able to step out of the conventions of linear time or the time of the body is for me a very pleasurable experience. It

is similar to the way people talk about drugs; I mean they talk about being able to step outside of their bodies, being able to travel in time, being able to see themselves from another angle and so on. You have to reach a point where you communicate the high that you have in jumping around in time, in teleporting your way around the narratives you hear or the bits of reality that you record. Obviously the kind of editing that I do is manipulative, yes, but it doesn't try to conceal the fact that the work is edited, so there is a contract, there is an open gesture that is made through the editing. It is like saying, OK, you and I know that these bits have been edited, that they appear contrived, and now that we have got that out of the way, let's see what we can do with it. In order to deal with the pleasure there has to be some understanding of the rules, and for me the rules are acknowledged. They are the rules we use when we consume filmed stories or dramatic narratives or the news. So for each piece I try to look at these rules when I edit and there is a pleasure in breaking them, or at least in articulating them and tweaking them and playing around with them.

**MV:** *What is sometimes overlooked when people talk about your work is the humour. I'm thinking of CNN Concatenated, 2002, but also of the gallows humour in a piece like Take a Deep Breath.*

**OF:** Very often the black humour you are talking about is the humour of the labourer, the humour of the extremely bored operator of a machine. I certainly don't want to romanticise my job as an artist. *CNN Concatenated* involved recording hundreds and hundreds of hours of television footage and then storing it as single words spoken to the camera by news presenters on the Cable News Network. These are very boring self-assigned tasks, so there is a kind of masochism involved, and the masochist needs to have a sense of humour. The humour is in the desperation, the futility, the ridiculousness of the tasks that are carried out, and these tasks are acknowledged; in viewing a work like *CNN Concatenated* people immediately understand the amount of work that went into it. The work is asking an unanswerable question: why? Why do this? Why would you watch so much TV? Why would you give yourself over to these tasks when you could turn the thing off and take a walk outside and meet people and have beautiful relationships? So I think the

humour offsets the more serious desire to reach out to the world beyond the computer screen or the studio. It offsets the desire for reality to come crashing into a process that is obsessive-compulsive, very personal and often very tedious.

**MV:** *Talking about that sense of the real in your work, I want to ask you about the body. Many of the issues you look at – around violence, memory, intimacy, social stratification – get played out on the body. So why, in work that so clearly concerns itself with meditation, with degrees of distance and removal, does the body keep asserting itself in all its materiality?*

**OF:** That is the elephant in the room. As an artist I'm not making autobiographical work in the simplest sense. I'm not telling a story about something that happens to me. I always need someone else to feed on, so there is a vicarious pleasure to it that involves this parading of bodies. It is like a reliquary – you may need to present a body in order to articulate a fact or story and there is something very Christian about that. It is there in the story of Doubting Thomas – you need to touch something in order to experience and believe it.

But in talking about materiality, I'm not just thinking about the social aspect of the work, about my reasons for reaching out to people and talking about certain contemporary events through bodies; I'm also thinking about the loss of materiality that you have when you are working with recorded footage, found footage, film footage. It is not like sculpture, it is not like painting; it is not tactile, you can only refer to tactility. And that is a source of humour, too, because you can make it sexy but it is always going to be a picture of sex. OK, it is arguable that a sensual sculpture is also a transposition, but there is a direct pleasure in touching the material which is missing in the kind of work that I do, so through the editing, through the compulsive cutting that I do, I want to make something very sculptural out of the recorded footage and bring that to the

viewer's attention. And often I'm dealing with people who have experienced things in their bodies and are then forced at some distance in time to recollect those experiences. So the loss of the experience, the wanting to recapture its immediacy, this is articulated in the work, both explicitly and through the editing.

Also, of course, in *The Casting* or *Take a Deep Breath* you have a parade of bodies that demand attention through their scars, but that is part of the phantasmagoria of film, it is the work of the special effects department. In *The Casting* there is a moment when a woman begins to remove her clothes, and you're thinking, oh shit, what's going on? Then you see her scars and very quickly they become tokens, they become marks to meditate on. I think the scar is fascinating; it is a form of writing, a graphic expression of something that has happened. The scar is something that refers to the past, but by looking at the scar, by probing and poking it, you are releasing the memory, the story behind it and potentially the pleasure that is available when an experience – even a traumatic one – is mastered. I'm often working in that gap between the moment of pain, the moment of experience, and the later moment of capturing that experience by looking at the scar and finding the words to describe it.

**MV:** *Yes, the body in your work is a source of both pleasure and horror, but then it is always on the verge of becoming something else, as it does when the scar becomes a form of writing.*

**OF:** There is a frustration, obviously, that is implicit in that. There is a heightened anxiety in the work around the body, around the fact that your body can betray you. *The Casting* is for me the perfect illustration of that anxiety. I had worked in film before but I had never worked with a team of actors, and my way of dealing with the stress of it was to say, well, I'm not going to be a director, I'm not going to tell people to act, I'll tell them to

>> The authority of the victim is very closely connected to a kind of pornography, to the operations of pleasure. There are psychological operations that are extremely suspect and this desire for authenticity is very complicated. It is a fine line.



Omer Fast *Nostalgia* 2009 production still

freeze. So all the acting happened before we shot and, as a director, instead of shouting 'Action!' I would say 'Freeze!' Of course there is the drama and the pathos of the experience that the soldier is recalling, and the horror of what he has done and what he has seen, but it is impossible – and this is clear in the work – to create a direct translation of that; it is not possible to represent it, and so the work proposes a game of substitution. The work is saying, instead of substituting the pathos of the soldier's story with the pathos of actors acting, I'm going to give you the pathos of the body under duress. The director commands the body to freeze, but the body is breathing and twitching and making noises and betraying you at the very moment when you want it to be still. It is like riding in an elevator: you don't want to move, you feel claustrophobic, and all of a sudden your stomach starts to growl. That kind of betrayal is what *The Casting* is about. And you can connect that to the soldier and his recollection (of killing an Iraqi civilian), to the idea that the soldier is obeying an order, but you need to find different ways of articulating that situation.

What I don't trust is when you set up a scene by saying let's find someone to play the role of the soldier and a few Iraqi-looking people and let's pretend to shoot them and let's see how realistically they react. For me that would have been an idiot's way of going about it. I wanted to find different ways

of subverting that desire for pathos and identification, but the work is also about finding a release, and funnily enough that release is in bondage, in making the body freeze. So what you get is the drama of the actors resisting the director's requests. Once they have internalised the order and they say, OK, this guy is going to ask us to freeze, then all sorts of weird things happen, people have coughing fits, people inexplicably fall over, the body betrays you, which is funny – unless it happens to you. It is a kind of slapstick.

**MV:** *My sense is that you are not so much concerned with the authenticity or inauthenticity of a narrative but with a taste or need for authenticity that exists in us, especially when we are considering a very loaded or painful topic. And then there is the moral authority of the victim; that is something you probe in Take a Deep Breath, for instance, when the amputee uses his injury to flirt with the woman.*

**OF:** Sure, and the authority of the victim is very closely connected to a kind of pornography, to the operations of pleasure. There are psychological operations that are extremely suspect and this desire for authenticity is very complicated. It is a fine line. On the one hand, you can be pushed into a postmodern cynicism that really does look at everything as a whirl of signs and then victimisation and the pain of others are just signs, narratives.

On the other hand, bad things happen

to people and injustices are a part of our society, and an articulation of that is a moral responsibility for people working in the media. It is not something you have to do every time you make something, but if you are going to look at contemporary issues you should at some point account for that, or try to. But when you do that you often see that the language you have is inauthentic: it is an acquired language. I know this from editing the piece that I'm working on now for the South London Gallery. There is a sequence where a woman is being attacked by dogs and I thought it would be easy to edit it, to come up with a language. But the stunt dogs don't make a lot of noise when they attack – and this just doesn't come across as convincing on film. Lived experience is often extremely disappointing when you film it, so you have to bring in these dramatic crutches in order to make it work, to make it communicate. And in that desire there is a risk, and my work is often an articulation of that contract, that translation and that risk. On the one hand there is the desire to experience, vicariously, someone else's pain and so to master it, but at some point there is also a desire to empathise, and these desires are all brought to bear when we look at horrible pictures. So very often my pictures resist that complex of desires; they say, look, the scars are peeling, the scars are falling off, they won't give you the pleasure that you want, and I think that the amputee in *Take a Deep Breath* articulates that ambivalence. It is about loss and pain, but that pain is denied. It is dangling in front of you like bait, and when you want to consume it, it is withdrawn or just falls off. So there is a bit of a tease there. And that is very much a part of the operations of pleasure. ■

**Omer Fast's *Nostalgia*** is on display at the South London Gallery from 7 October to 6 December and at Lunds Konsthall, Sweden until 15 November.

**MARCUS VERHAGEN** is an art historian and critic.