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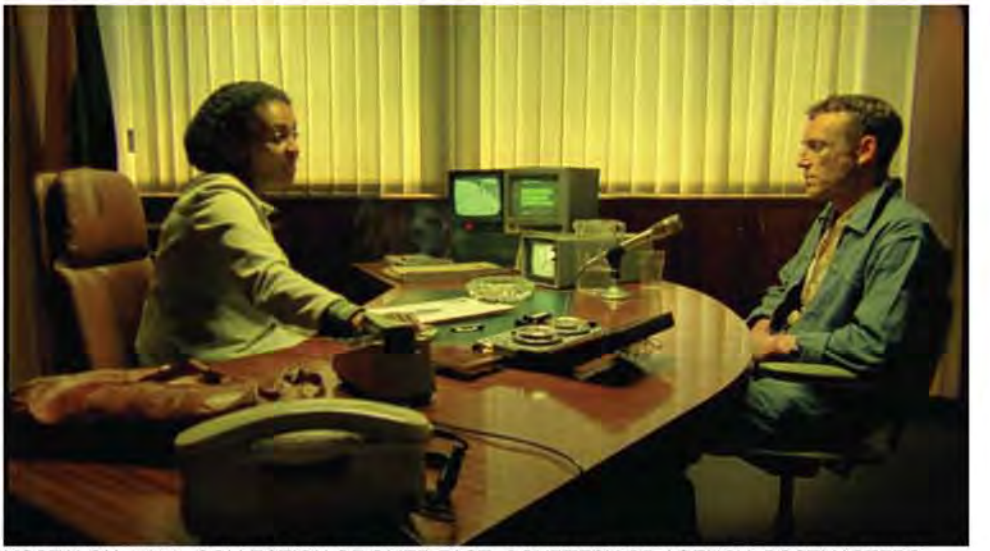
Dramatic Witness: The Art of Omer Fast

by kari rittenbach 12/15/09

It would not be amiss to think Omer Fast's work a touch Jungian, by way of Freud. The subject matter of his interview-based video work broaches the collective unconscious of cultural memory, and ranges from the politically potent to the more or less banal: the Iraq War, the Holocaust, Colonial Williamsburg (VA), the talking heads on cable news television. Unlike many documentary filmmakers (whose methods he appropriates, to documentary-aberrant ends), Fast is uninterested in distinguishing reality from favorable reenactment, *per se*. And anyway, "media-critical" is a too easy, and far too obvious tagline for his work.



NOSTALGIA, 2009. COLLECTION OF OMER FAST, COURTESY GB AGENCY, POSTMASTERS, ARRATIA BEER. STILLS BY THIERRY BAL.

Fast is interminably drawn to the figure of "the witness"—the individuals un/officially earmarked to repeat their personal experiences for something like the greater good. And it is precisely in these active, "acted" retellings, in which memory is vocally rehashed, that Fast encourages his protagonists to stumble. Rather than drawing a fine-tooth comb through their dreams à la psychoanalysis, Fast surveys their seemingly-scripted public stories, and from stilted syllables and logical missteps excavates flashes of that abstract notion of the "real." This is often achieved in concert with dramatic restaging, such as the *tableaux vivants* in *The Casting* (2007), for which the artist approximated domestic scenes in Southern Germany and highway checkpoints in war-torn Iraq. Perhaps because of this interpretive flair, Gideon Lewis-Kraus has called Fast a "reanimator"; in particular, it is his ability to imagine an interviewee's (beaten, dead) tale as something other than it is (alive). Trafficking in structural manipulation allows Fast to avoid the video artist's inevitable gambit of camera-as-confessional, leaving critical, and even ethical, space for the viewer to wallow about in.

Fast's latest, most ambitious effort is a tripartite affair, based on a slightly uncomfortable interview between the artist and a West African asylum-seeker in London. After debuting at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof in September (where it helped him to win the prestigious and hefty Neue National Galerie Prize for Young Artists), *Nostalgia* traveled to the South London Gallery and the Berkeley Art Museum before arriving in New York last week. In the ground floor gallery of the Whitney Museum, the story (as it were), unfolds sequentially, although each segment is edited into a perfectly seamless loop. *Part I* is a five-minute, high-definition video vignette: on a small screen, a fatigue-clad gamekeeper constructs a partridge trap from pliant tree branches in a wooded area according to instructions described by the audio track, which also happens to be an excerpt of Fast's interview transcript. *Part II* is a two-channel exchange between interviewer and interviewee, staged with actors, that picks up the self-referential visual register of *The Casting* and both contextually and ironically asserts the significance of the partridge trap within the refugee's narrative (Q: do you even know what a partridge is? A: Isn't it like a small turkey?).

STILL FROM NOSTALGIA I, 2009.

In contrast to *I* and *II*, *Part III* was shot on 16mm and consequently sees Fast at his most cinematic. A complex, richly colored live-action adaptation of the refugee's tale, the trap-trope is anecdotally recycled in multiple retellings: in an interview with an immigration agent; as a nighttime children's story (with "monster" substituted for partridge); and as an instructional show-and-tell in a middle school science classroom. The 30-minute film's most arresting feature, however, is Fast's reversal of racial roles: the uniformed students yawning over microscopes are black; the preteen refugee daughter tracked by dogs and beaten to death, is white. If the trick was a means to provide distance (for artist and viewer alike) from the original subject matter, as Fast claims, the result also places the burden of authorship more squarely on the artist than on the shoulders of his protagonist. A last-hour, spectacular switch, *Part III* bears the mark of 70s sci-fi apocalyptica, and feels almost like a tenable conclusion to First World catastrophe films like *28 Days Later*, as displaced Britishmen desperate to access the milk and honey of an unnamed, politically stable social democracy in West Africa.

The reversal also naturally calls into question the work's invocation of nostalgia, which is a trendily over-used and negative-coded term. Conceptually understood as homesickness, the title breaks down; when questioned on the shape and color of his childhood home in *Part II*, the asylum-seeker denies the ability to differentiate among his many temporary residences: "There was inside, and there was outside," he says, much to the consternation of the artist-interviewer. On this point, Fast alludes to Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*, which traces the transformation memories undergo in the transition from private to public:

"The work allegorizes the loss of homeland as a kind of loss of memory. One person's failing (or reluctance) to provide details from his past opens the door for a lot of productive re-imaginings. These re-imaginings hit a ceiling at some point, however, and begin to crumble as they succumb to a kind of genre kitsch."

Fast hides self-deprecatingly behind what he calls the "barren visual dimension" of his works, which reveals the traditional processes behind them, and perhaps his ultimately strange distrust of (or feelings of equivalency for) imagery. Because each segment of the *Nostalgia* trilogy might stand alone-none bears any visual clue to connect it to any another. What links the pieces instead is the couched repetition of the partridge trap device. To push the metaphor even further, it's as if the linguistic register of representation, of memory, is the partridge that Fast's work attempts to trap. Whereas the visual elements he employs are more or less disposable. But if retooling the trap-trope was meant to destabilize its narrative credibility, the opposite is shown to be true, as the partridge trap gains greater metaphorical value through each creative retelling. Subjected to cross-examinations and multiple permutations, Fast's aesthetic obsession with narrative—fragmented, augmented, hermeticized, undermined, or not—is testimony to the power of a good story.

OMER FAST: NOSTALGIA IS ON VIEW THROUGH FEBRUARY 14. THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART IS LOCATED AT 945 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK.

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