

# Displayer 03

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## Back to the Present



Photo taken by an extra during production of the Steven Spielberg film *Schindler's List*, 1993.

Film is the medium of storytelling par excellence. Like its historical precursor photography, its referential character is tricky: As a technique of recording it has the quality of documentary. At the same time it's the appropriate medium for fiction. The Israeli artist Omer Fast challenges this double nature of the filmic medium by provoking short-circuits between reality and fiction. In some of his most significant works this play with ambivalences unfolds within an oral narration. Fast utilizes the documentary format of the interview and underscores the authenticity of the personal accounts while undermining it at the same time by re-editing the text of the script. With a sophisticated technique of montage, fictional and real stories (such as historical events and their popular re-enactments) are conflated in a new narration. Not surprisingly, even the following interview with Omer Fast has run through a similar editing process by the hand of the artist who refers to editing as 'a matter of an obsessive compulsion.' Fast recently advances his equivocal strategy using wholly fictional narratives. He plays the narrative space off against the production space behind the camera in which that narrative is performed and recorded. However, in cinema this educational 'Brechtian' gesture of questioning the conditions of storytelling gains a new circularity due to the transformative effect of the camera. Which spatial questions arise in the area of conflict between reality and fiction—between 'site' and 'set'? How fictional is the encounter with the real?



**DISPLAYER** 'Örtlichkeit' (locality)—a German word you mentioned once in a talk—seems to refer not to a concrete place but rather to an ambiguous spatial texture. In **The Casting**, for example, the setting of the film-casting studio intertwines with the place of the date between the soldier and the young women. In your new work, **Looking Pretty for God**, too, there is a constant oscillation between the sites of the photo shoot and the funeral parlor. In both works, it is the oral narrative that connects these heterogeneous sites in an associative way. What do you take 'Örtlichkeit' to mean?

**OMER FAST** Let's start with the site: I understand a site to be the place where a particular event or activity takes place, like a building site or the scene of a crime. This implies both spatial and temporal aspects. The way a site is differentiated from just any old place is often achieved through signage and demarcation, for example a fence enclosing a building site or police tape sealing off the scene of a crime. These markers temporarily detach the site from its surroundings, restricting access to specialists who then come in and perform certain prescribed tasks for a given time. When the specialists are done, the site is usually reintegrated with its surroundings; the signage is removed and the space can resume its everyday functions. These characteristics of the site—its appropriation and demarcation, the specialization of the actors who enter it and the rehearsed, interim nature of the actions they carry out—are shared by another type of space, which is associated with ritual, storytelling and performance. We can call this other space a 'set' (like a movie set, of course, but also a theatrical stage, a musical venue, an amusement park, a circus, etc.) In contrast to the site, whose connection to the real is immanent and consequential, a set typically involves an imitation of the real, which functions

extraneously to it, if not transcendently. (My understanding of public space and performance is indebted to Erving Goffman, particularly his notion of front and back regions.) Furthermore, no matter how authentic an imitation on a set might feel to an observer or a participant, much of the pleasure (or horror) it arouses has to do with knowing that it isn't real. Being on set requires suspending this knowledge or suppressing it. Anyway, a lot of what modern art's been about—particularly performance, happenings, situationism—is deliberately mistaking the site for the set, creating a new experience of space by confusing the two or conjoining them. I've been interested in looking at such hybrid spaces through the camera and in talking to the people who perform in them. For Spielberg's *List*, I visited an abandoned film set of a concentration camp outside Krakow, which was left behind after the production of *Schindler's List*. The deteriorating state of the set and its proximity to the site of the actual camp perfectly illustrate what I'm trying to talk about here. Together they form a kind of super-space—which one could describe in German with 'Örtlichkeit'—that conflates historical events with their later representations, relics and souvenirs with props and monuments. Although Spielberg did not intend this, what he left behind in Krakow is literally a site-specific piece of land art with a strong post-historical resonance! (I was told the company responsible for demolishing the set simply pocketed the money and ran.) For *Godville*, I visited the living-history museum of Colonial Williamsburg in the US state of Virginia. Essentially, the museum is a huge open-air theater created by appropriating and renovating the historical center of a colonial town. During museum hours, turnpikes seal the town center off from its surroundings. Colonial characters in period costumes inhabit the houses, working in the streets and fields, while hordes of tourists mill about, taking pictures and interacting with them. The few leftover town-center residents who have not sold their homes to the museum (the actual authentic actors



on set!) have little signs on their lawns that say: 'Not Open To The Public,' 'Not A Museum,' and my favorite 'This house is not a reenactment.' In both Spielberg's *List* and *Godville*, I tried to exploit my subjects' ability to effortlessly dip in and out of character and historical time. Furthermore, these subjects' comments about their experience on set are edited in such a way that their temporal context is often blurred or suppressed, again deliberately mixing site with set and foregrounding the unequivocal, first-hand nature of the accounts, their affective authenticity. In later work, like *The Casting* or *Take A Deep Breath*, I was less concerned with finding the site/set as a social readymade as much as with creating it inside a narrative. But that's a whole other can of worms.

Your characterization of a particular site is essential: signage and demarcation. In fact, these are also two very strong means to exhibit something. It seems, in *Looking Pretty for God* for example, the photo-camera, the headlamps and the artificial snow itself become a temporary signage of the appropriated site which also demarcates the situation, in fact articulates 'the set.' How would you describe the constantly blurring line of demarcation within the 'hybrid space?' What is the connection between the 'front' region and the 'back' region? It feels more that a different, a third space, evolves which somehow has nothing to do anymore with neither the site nor the set. Is that the 'whole other can of worms?'

It's a can of worms, a Pandora's box, a Noah's ark and a Plato's cave. The anxiety or suspicion that I feel towards the camera is very often projected onto the subjects of my work (unfortunately it can sometimes overwhelm as well!) This anxiety finds some historical foothold in the notion of the body as a trap, the prison house of the senses, from which it follows that the camera is merely an extension of the body, a prosthetic eye, and the images it produces are prosthetic images and memories. Sure a camera is also an enabling prosthesis when used as a memory aid or as a kind of crude

machine for time travel. But the camera ultimately disappoints where all technology does, namely in failing to free the soul from its prison and delivering the transcendence (immortality?) it so desperately longs for. Anyway, back on earth, what I try to offer in my work is certainly not a solution to this ontological mess but an articulation of its effects, the ways consciousness is impacted at a time when screens and cameras are very much part of our sensory/memory apparatus. This often leads to work that equivocates or blurs between the narrative space (what the camera sees) and the production space in which that narrative is performed and recorded (what or who is behind the camera.) Again, this goes back to the site/set subject. There is a nice circularity to doing this on film because once you turn the camera around to reveal the production space it immediately turns into the narrative space and vice versa. It's not a particularly novel idea but it's one I've been attracted to since I started using a camera.

Another way of pitting the front and back regions against one another is through editing. I briefly mentioned the fractured temporality that characterizes the taking and viewing of photographs. When dealing with film or video (as opposed to still photography) editing impacts the picture with yet another temporality, one that can be at odds with what the picture depicts or what the subjects within it describe. For me, editing is also a matter of an obsessive compulsion, a writing process that often produces narratives which were not a part of the script or what was said in the original footage. For example, for *CNN Concatenated* (2002) I recorded hundreds of hours of television footage in which news presenters speak to the camera and then cut the footage up into single words. These words (10,000 of them) were then edited together into a speech that is part poem, part confession and part harangue. The piecemeal editing not only runs against the temporality of the original footage (the news of the day delivered in linear fashion) but it establishes a competing temporality



in which speech is synthesized and an alternative consciousness or speaking entity is channeled. I've continuously returned to this technique in later works that involved interviews. The subjects are typically allowed to talk uninterrupted for a while and then I take over and use their words and image to channel my own thoughts and issues. Although the results still contain the documentary evidence of the encounter with the real (the same way a photograph does) through montage the concatenated footage can not only swerve into the unreal, into the past or an imagined future, but more importantly back to the present.

Your thoughts are very interesting in terms of performance or land art—but you choose the camera for your work! And your work often incorporates a subtle reflection about the medium of film. To what extent does the camera itself have a transformative effect on the oscillation between site and set? Doesn't everything it 'touches' seem to become 'automatically' a staged performance?

Of course a camera transforms the space it is in as well as the persons around it who are aware of its presence. This effect is not only confined to the persons in front of the camera, who mutate into performers and actors while being photographed. Photographers and filmmakers are also transformed in relation to their surroundings in that they're distanced from them, as if being behind a lens signifies that what transpires in front of it is already part of a future photograph. (A transformation that might adversely affect the photographer in dangerous environments by increasing her courage to get close to the subject. Thus the mystique that surrounds being a photographer à la Robert Capa.) Interestingly though, with the popularization of cameras this distancing effect has become so commonplace that it can even occur in the absence of a camera. For example, eyewitnesses to disasters often relate their experience to a movie when making sense of what happened, as if their mind requires a phantom camera to comprehend

the event while simultaneously distancing them from it. In fact, when disaster actually strikes, persons in its periphery are very likely to reach out for their cameras in a gesture that arguably aims to insulate them from what's happening. In this sense, the camera not only furnishes the photographic evidence for having 'been there' but, somewhat contradictorily, it also dissociates the photographer from the 'there,' the site and the moment. And so, I would argue that the manner in which a camera transforms people has more to do with this forward projection in time (and thus space) than with a sudden perception of reality as necessarily staged or phony. (I prefer this explanation because of its association with visualization/projection as a psychological defense mechanism.) This kind of distortion in temporal perception also occurs when looking at photographs, not just when making them. With its rectangular framing, the photographic document reminds us that it is not part of our space and, more problematically, that's it's not quite of the present. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag revises her previous claim that we become desensitized to shocking images when we're continuously exposed to them. Her conjecture (no experimental data is offered) is that being unable to change the circumstances of suffering that are depicted in a photograph is what actually triggers the feelings of helplessness and paralysis in the person regarding it. It is as if the very pastness and distance of what the photograph shows compete with the photograph's material realness as a document. This paradox underscores the historical fascination with the photographic image and the many contradictory sensations it provokes, like nostalgia vs. uncanniness. It's a subject that's obviously been widely written about by Sontag, Barthes and others. But I think your use of the word oscillation vis-à-vis the photographic effect captures something that I've been trying very hard to articulate in my work, where the ambiguities of photographic documentation are actually symptomatic of a much more endemic condition



which is also characterized by anxiety, volubility, frayed narratives and subjects that are in continuous (temporal) motion.

Let's call it the 'Midas Touch of the Camera:' within the film there is no outside of the narrative space. In a way your media critical strategy—your suspicion towards the medium—reminds me of the 'epic theater' by Bertold Brecht: Brecht invented the 'alienation effect' to pull the theater viewer out of his uncritical, affirmative reception mode. The actors interrupted the play by addressing the viewers directly. But it seems to me that this self-reflexive strategy doesn't work out for the filmic medium. Because even if you show the production studio within the film, the reference to reality won't be intact—since it is impossible to show the 'production space' without making it immediately flip into 'narrative space.' Have you turned to physical manipulations of the filmic material to evoke such a Brechtian 'awareness of the medium' in another way? Through editing processes which leave the traces and cuts of your montages visible?

Although Brechtian effects have been long ago absorbed by mainstream entertainment (and in a particularly ironic twist they're a standard mode of address for the advertising industry) it still is possible to use them to at least allude to the production space in which a work is created and consumed, if not to challenge viewers' ground assumptions vis-à-vis what they are seeing and hearing. Having said that, it might be overreaching a bit to historicize the editing processes that I often apply to my documentary subjects by referring to Brecht's Epic Theater. Cutting interview segments into bits and pieces and then assembling them into new thoughts and sentences does allow me to switch between modes of address, between different temporalities, between voices and narratives. But this is actually inherent to editing. If anything it's yet another variation on Eisenstein's notion of 'dialectical montage,' which opened up productive alternatives to classical continuity editing. What's been relevant for me, especially in more documen-

tary works like Spielberg's *List and Godville*, was finding subjects that come ready-made with a built-in alienation effect, if you will, subjects whose personal stories float between historical events and their popular reenactments. And so, the Polish extras in *Schindler's List* are caught somewhere between the repetition of a trauma and the trauma of repetition. So are the museum guides of Colonial Williamsburg, particularly the black ones, who take part in the enactment of slavery. The manner these works are edited in often quickly cuts between their subjects' multiple personas, suppressing or blurring the markers that usually indicate whether the person speaking is in or out of character. Occasionally, the editing becomes so manic and fractured as to give the subjects a third voice, what Tom Holert likened to digital Frankenstein monsters. Indeed, in these moments, the interviewees often turn on their interviewer in a diatribe full of accusations and the entire project becomes very self-conscious and mannered.

In your very recent work *Take a Deep Breath*, you did not generate the script through cutting interviews into single segments that create a new story but you wrote rather your own a screen-play. Why? How does the oscillation between different temporalities, between voices and narratives take place here? The short answer is I needed a break. Right after making *The Casting*, I wrote a completely fictional script for *De Grote Boodschap*. The script was conceived as a loop with no beginning or end, which is of practical help when showing in art venues that are open continuously and do not have screening times like a cinema does. More interestingly, the loop structure also allows one to employ a circular temporality that goes against the linear time of most mainstream movies—and to some extent of mainstream life. The central character of *De Grote Boodschap* is an old woman who recalls a childhood memory of her father swallowing diamonds for safekeeping during the Second World War. The old woman is obsessed by the story and will repeat

it to anyone who will (or not) listen. One expects a trauma perhaps, but the story finds a happy end, or at least a proctological one, when the woman blissfully recalls her parents' groaning and moaning behind closed doors, in raptures at the re-emergence of the diamonds in the family toilet. Life goes on in the work but like the re-emerging diamonds (they are forever, after all) the woman and her story will return precisely at the moment in the plot when she is supposed to have died. The notion of circular time this suggests—of a past that is continuously recalled and consumed, perpetually haunting the present, indeed a past that eventually becomes the present when the loop repeats without a seam and the present restarts—is very much shared by previous non-looping works. It's a notion of time that is both dysfunctional and liberating. It's both symptomatic of the post-modern and arguably a relic of the pre-modern, a time of ritual and eternal repetition. It's also very nostalgic. To quote Svetlana Boym: 'Nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.'

Your artistic strategy seems to be marked by balancing acts: balancing between 'subjective' appropriation and 'objective' documentation—or on the border between

the inside and the outside of the film. An unsettling play with ambivalences?

I don't necessarily see it as unsettling, or as only unsettling. I derive lots of pleasure from playing with ambivalences. However, any strategy can get old and balancing acts can certainly get tiring, especially if they rely on playing off pairs and opposites. Ever since the recent birth of our first child, I've been waiting for new subjects and structures to evolve, which aren't dialectical or Manichean. After all, threesomes are more exciting than doubles. They require more nuance and diplomacy. They're also more messy and complicated. Unfortunately, although my daughter is growing up, I'm still waiting for my work to evolve. If I've learned anything, it's that life moves a lot faster than art does.

The interview is based on several email-conversations between November 2008 and February 2009.

Svetlana Boym: *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York 2001.

Aleksander Hemon: *The Lazarus Project*, New York 2008.

Elias Khoury: *Bab El Shams (Gate of the Sun)*, Beirut 1998 and Brooklyn 2006.

George Lucas: *THX-1138*, film, 83 min, USA 1971.

Sven Lütticken/Witte de With: *Life, Once More: Forms Of Reenactment In Contemporary Art*, Rotterdam 2005.

Matthias Michalka/Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (Ed.): *The Casting, Omer Fast*, Wien 2007.

Georges Perec: *W or Memory of Childhood*, London 1988.

Ridley Scott: *Blade Runner*, film, 112 min, USA 1982.

Susan Sontag: *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York 2003.





Omer Fast: Take A Deep Breath, two channel video, 2008 (stills by Yon Thomas).



