



Take a Deep Breath

ART

## THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE AND IN OMER FAST'S DISTURBING VIDEOS, REALLY OUT THERE.

BY CARLY BERWICK

**A** NICE OLDER MAN in a faded green sweater is sitting on a stage rigged to look like a talk-show set. He is telling a story to a listener about his brother, who he fears has killed people. When he's done, he leaves the stage and the listener becomes the storyteller, repeating an improvised and embellished version of the older man's story to a new listener. Like a game of telephone, the rotation continues for an hour. One guy turns it into a hipster lament over his brother's status as the family favorite. "What do I have to do to get attention around here? Bomb somebody?" he whines to his listener, who happens to be actress Lili Taylor.

The piece, called *Talk Show*, was devised by the artist Omer Fast and ran for three nights at the Performa 09 festival on the Lower East Side in November. And here's the punch line: The older guy, the original storyteller, was David Kaczynski, brother of Ted, the Unabomber. Though this fact was never divulged to the cast or the audience, everyone gradually caught on. And that *aha* moment, when you realize what you thought to be true was not, is the crux of all of Fast's work.

In 2008, the artist won the Whitney Museum's Bucksbaum Award, a prize of \$100,000, for the most promising work in that year's biennial, a four-screen video piece called *The Casting*. The award gave him art-world renown, as well as a solo show at the Whitney, which opened last Thursday. Fast, 37, does most of his work in video and film, but "video artist" is too simple a moniker; his work is extraordinarily layered and complex. Fast is principally obsessed with how we process information and distinguish between real-

ity and fiction. "I don't deal directly with reality but with representations and stories," says Fast, who was born in Israel, educated in New York, and has lived in Berlin for the past eight years. "The truth basis of what I'm doing is not interesting to me. In an act of storytelling, there is a truth." He speaks quickly, in labyrinthine paragraphs that can be hard to decipher, the sentences like little boxes within boxes.

Each of Fast's works begins with an interview. The artist tracks down people who have a dramatic story or a tragedy to share—a U.S. Army sergeant, a mortician, a Colonial Williamsburg impersonator. He gets them to describe mundane details of their lives on film; he calls this the "reality testing" phase, the most delicate part of his work. He then takes the interviews and reconstitutes them with bravura technical fiddling—edits and cuts, spliced-in additional conversations, fictional asides, and elaborations—until the difference between reality and story has become tangled. The results make sense to a generation raised in a world where "fair and balanced" networks like Fox News offer no such thing, where fake news shows are as trusted as real ones and tweets are received as instant fact.

Fast's new Whitney piece, *Nostalgia*, was conceived during interviews with asylum seekers in London. "I'm always surprised at how eager people are to talk," he says with a laugh, clearly aware

OMER FAST:  
NOSTALGIA  
WHITNEY  
MUSEUM

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of the reflexive nature of what he's saying. The asylum interviews ultimately transmogrified into a retro-futuristic alternative history of the seventies that imagines refugees from strife-torn England trying to escape to the promised land of Africa.

His work—original, smart, funny, visually stunning—can also be brutal, as in his 2008 piece *Take a Deep Breath*, showing at the Postmasters Gallery beginning January 8. It essentially asks the question: If someone is funny at the wrong time, does that deepen or undercut a tragedy? The piece opens with a horrifying scene: An off-duty medic in Jerusalem is the first responder to a café bombing. He attempts to resuscitate the lone survivor. It turns out that the man was the suicide bomber, and the rescuer is revolted. But the video becomes even more disconcerting when pullbacks reveal that the scene is part of a fractious sitcom version of a film set, where the crew and hapless director are debating whether the bomber-actor has an erection and bickering over who stole whose iPhone.

"People get upset by his work," says Anne Ellegood, curator at L.A.'s Hammer Museum, who has shown Fast's videos in university classes she teaches. "They are very skeptical of the kind of manipulation that they think the people being interviewed have undergone. But if you say, what do you think happens on TV or the news, then it's a great way to talk about the media and what we think is real." No one is in fact manipulated, though interviews certainly are. Fast's attitude toward his subjects might seem cavalier to the viewer, but he is extremely protective of them.

Interviewing the interviewer himself, though, can be challenging. Fast easily dodges personal questions, like one about why his family moved from Israel to New York and back again when he was a child. I try to go at him in another direction: "What work did your parents do?" This launches a five-minute discussion about the nature of self-revelation in interviews, with no actual answer. (For the record, his father is a doctor.) "I grew up in a family and in a country that was very heavy with storytelling," says Fast. "And I was also involved in the instrumentalization of narratives in order to construct a particular reality." Is he referring to Holocaust-survival narratives, or family lore about the founding of Israel? Both, he eventually concedes, and of course neither. "For me, passing along a family history involves looking at the place where they can change, where the story could have been something else." ■