

Omer Fast: Nostalgia

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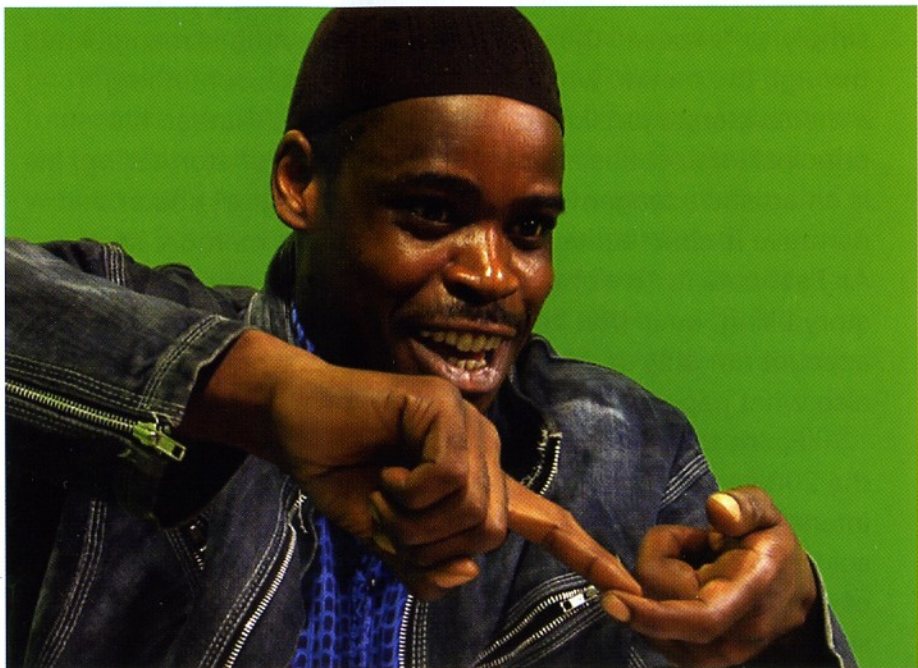
Three Sides to Every Story: The Art of Omer Fast

In the 2002 Whitney Biennial, Omer Fast exhibited the video installation *Glendive Foley* (2000), which consisted of two consumer television sets positioned facing each other. One screen showed suburban houses in Glendive, Montana; displayed opposite from it was a video of the artist in a recording studio voicing sound effects to accompany those views: whistling wind, chirping birds, whirring lawnmower, etc. The production of this amateur soundscape is essentially no different from the often simple means Foley artists employ to produce professional sound effects. A cracking watermelon, for example, is used to augment on-screen fistfights, and we habitually assume this is what a fight sounds like. In this way, Fast's early installation points to several related themes that have informed his work over the last decade: a preoccupation with the media and the ways in which it conveys information, and the essentially conventional nature of realism in television and cinema.

In ten moving-image installations completed since 2002, Fast has examined the slippery relationship between fact and fiction in media representation, often by exploring the role of the individual storyteller against the background of such historical forces as the Holocaust, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the war in Iraq. Over this period, his work has increasingly moved from using the tropes of documentary and news reportage to those of narrative film, although it is, in fact, the clear-cut distinction between the genres that he constantly calls into question. *CNN Concatenated* (2002) introduced a signature technique by editing new dialogue from small bits and pieces of footage. The work strings together a series of images of news anchors whose customary frontal address now uncannily implicates the viewer by saying things such as

"You're afraid of dying alone but you're even more terrified of dying in public." For *Spielberg's List* (2003), Fast interviewed Polish extras who had worked on Steven Spielberg's feature *Schindler's List* (1993). Their accounts at times have the horrific familiarity of documentary testimonials from the Holocaust, and yet they refer to movie dramatization rather than historical event, just as the images seen alongside are not of the actual Krakow concentration camp but its reconstruction for the film set. If Fast's works thus negotiate the sliding sands of historical record vis-à-vis its representation, his aim is not simply to "expose" the ways in which meaning is manipulated through the media, which is, as he contends, something a media-literate public has long understood.¹ Rather, his principal interest lies in investigating modes of storytelling; his is an artistic engagement with the psychological notion that narrative is constitutive to the structuring of memory itself. As Fast puts it, "It's about setting up simultaneous layers of storytelling, ones that hopefully contribute to a more nuanced account not only of what happened to 'him' 'over there,' but also what happens to 'us' later, in the process of retelling."²

Fast's four-screen installation *The Casting* (included in the 2008 edition of the Biennial and made the previous year) interweaves two stories recounted to Fast by an American soldier. The viewer enters the gallery and is faced with a series of nearly still images projected on two screens hung side by side from the ceiling. A voice-over of the soldier accompanies the projection, relating an episode of a fatal roadside-shooting incident in Iraq as well as his date with a German woman who deliberately harms herself by cutting. The two stories are edited together almost seamlessly: The soldier describes being in a speeding car with the girl and, mid-sentence, switches to talking about driving a Humvee through the desert. On the backs of the screens, the viewer encounters footage of an interviewer (Fast himself, or rather, Fast performing a



Video stills from *Nostalgia II*, 2009
Two-channel high-definition video,
color, sound; 9:49 minutes

version of the artist/director) speaking with the young man. The *verité* character of the talking heads contrasts with the high-production quality of the narrative scenes on the other side. The editing is jumpy, and both men are suddenly seen in different shirts: It becomes clear that the on-screen conversation has been pieced together from different interviews, presenting its own form of fiction. Throughout, Fast keeps the viewer suspended between absorption in the narrative and its constant disruption. The technique raises questions of documentary, narrative, and truth, as well as to what extent authors can distort their material. Fast's work is always concerned with making those mechanisms apparent unlike, for example, reality TV, which also creates continuous stories from often entirely separate parts. Commenting on *The Casting*, the artist has quoted film theorist Bill Nichols who claims in his influential *Introduction to Documentary* (2001) that all films are either "documentaries of wish-fulfillment" or "documentaries of social representation." Fast explains: "After all, both 'fiction films' and 'documentaries' present stories that ask for their viewers' beliefs, and both activate and suspend their viewers' judgment with regard to what they represent. As Nichols further points out, 'We can believe in the truth of fictions as well as those of non-fictions....'"³

If *The Casting* presented a logical leap for Fast, away from documentary towards dramatization, his subsequent works have further ventured into narrative territory. *Nostalgia* (2009), his most recent installation and formally most intricate work to date, is concerned with issues of immigration and political asylum, presenting three different adaptations of a personal story related to Fast by a West African refugee in London (one of several he interviewed). The first video, exhibited on a flatscreen mounted on a wall immediately outside a dark gallery space, contains recorded audio from the original conversation, in which the man describes how to build an

animal trap from twigs and twine. However, what we see is a British gamekeeper building the device according to the instructions on the soundtrack. The interviewee himself is only visible in one brief instant, his face unrecognizable, as he demonstrates the simple yet elegant trap he has constructed in front of a green screen. In film production, the green screen is used to stand in for a background, often digitally rendered, that will be substituted later; in the context of Fast's work, it gives a clue to a kind of figurative entrapment involved in his shaping of the narrative, which always counters the notion of a single truth or single point of view. Already, the material has been twice removed from the source, first by editing the original conversation to combine what were, in fact, two distinct recollections by the man into one seamless story, then by restaging it.⁴

After encountering the first video, the viewer steps into the dark gallery, where two monitors are mounted next to each other. Here Fast presents a reenactment of the initial interview using two actors, each filmed in a medium shot. In this scripted conversation, a reserved American director interviews a genial Nigerian man for an art project. In replacing himself as well as his original interview partner, Fast not only makes more overt the strategy of fictionalization that is operative throughout his body of work, but also testifies to the fact that any on-camera interview is to some extent performative. On screen, the director's distrust of the man's credibility is obvious at times when a description of his home village is vague and evasive, unlike the vivid tale of being taught how to build an animal trap (identical to the one recounted in the first video). However, the tables are turned momentarily when the director has to admit sheepishly that he has never been to Africa, or when the interviewee jokingly suggests that he could perform in the movie. The interpersonal dynamics are uncomfortable, a reflection, in part, of the unease that Fast says he experienced



Production stills from *Nostalgia III*, 2009
 Super 16mm film transferred to
 high-definition video, color, sound;
 32:48 minutes

himself in making the work. While the role of interviewer/author always engenders an element of power in relation to the interviewee/subject, the situation was uncomfortably exacerbated in this case. Fast has said that he felt acutely aware of the fact that the personal accounts he heard initially—often distressing, occasionally dubious—were similar or identical to those recounted to the British officials who are actually in charge of granting or denying asylum.⁵

It is the challenge of grappling artistically with the kinds of stories that have the potential to decide someone's future that partly accounts for Fast's dramatic reversal in the final part of the installation, which is a short narrative film. Projected in a separate dark room, the film depicts a fictive scenario in which illegal immigrants from England flood a wealthy, unnamed African country. A series of scenes show a British immigrant being questioned by an imperious government official; a surreal, dreamlike sequence in which white refugees are hounded by guards with dogs; and a small African girl explaining how to build a monster trap to her elementary school class. The trap is the central motif threading the three parts together, and the work's structure itself is a trap of sorts that leads from the first video into two successive rooms and, gradually, into more elaborate forms of reenactment. Despite the story's futuristic overtones, the appearance of 1970s fashion and obsolete technical equipment ambiguously anchor it in the past. In fact, Fast takes recourse to narrative forms, even subtly referencing popular genres like science fiction and blaxploitation, because of encountering what he characterizes as "a certain limit to the imagination" when faced with the material.⁶ *Nostalgia* in the end dramatizes precisely the dilemma of reaching an artistic "dead-end" and, more generally, Fast's underlying suspicion of an artwork's efficacy.⁷ Throughout his body of work, he is concerned with aesthetic and narrative pleasure while resisting catharsis or pathos by

refusing to resolve in any conventional, linear way. His strategy throughout is perhaps best described in a term gleaned from literature: He acts as a sort of unreliable narrator who proposes multiple viewpoints, contradictory statements, and narrative fissures. However, as in making overt his project's inherent limitations, Fast's choice of pressing social and political issues might suggest that he is, paradoxically, restaging the contingent nature of any historical truth while urging for the importance to try regardless.

—Henriette Huldish

Notes

1. See Sarah Rosenbaum-Kranson, "Omer Fast: Interview with Sarah Rosenbaum-Kranson," *Museo* 10. <http://www.museomagazine.com/10/rosenbaumkranson/>
2. Ibid.
3. Omer Fast, annotation to Tom Holert, "Attention Span: The Art of Omer Fast. Annotated Version." In René Zechlin and Sabine Schaschl, eds. *Omer Fast* (forthcoming).
4. Omer Fast, conversation with the author, Berlin, September 21, 2009.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

Henriette Huldish is an independent curator based in Berlin. She was co-curator of the 2008 Whitney Biennial Exhibition.



Video still from *Nostalgia I*, 2009
High-definition video, color, sound;
4:35 minutes

Nostalgia is presented as part of the 2008 Bucksbaum Award, conferred on Omer Fast for his significant contributions to the visual arts in the United States. Endowed by Whitney Trustee Melva Bucksbaum and her family, the Bucksbaum Award is given to an outstanding artist chosen from among the participants of the Museum's Biennial Exhibition. The Award includes a grant of \$100,000 and an exhibition at the Whitney.

About the Artist

Omer Fast was born in Jerusalem in 1972; he lives and works in Berlin. Fast received a BA/BFA from Tufts University/School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1995 and an MFA from Hunter College of the City University of New York in 2000. Fast has exhibited widely, with recent solo exhibitions at UC Berkeley Art Museum; South London Gallery, United Kingdom; Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Indianapolis Museum of Art; and Museum of Modern Art (MUMOK), Vienna. His work was included in Performa 09, the 2008 and 2002 Whitney Biennials, Liverpool Biennial 2008, and Manifesta 7, as well as in group exhibitions at such institutions as ZKM, Karlsruhe; Centre Pompidou, Paris; and Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, among many others. He recently received the 2009 Prize for Young Art from the Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

Omer Fast, *Nostalgia*, 2009

Three-part film and video installation; looped
Collection of the artist; courtesy gb agency,
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Production still from *Nostalgia III*, 2009 (detail)
Super 16mm film transferred to high-
definition video, color, sound; 32:48 minutes

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