

OPENINGS

OMER FAST

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Omer Fast really knows how to wreck a movie. His video installations—which may take their cue, if not their footage, from Hollywood fare—tend to unsettle the elements that make moving pictures move, from the sound to the subtitles. For an early intervention, *T3-AEON*, 2000, Fast smuggled his own tales into the sound track of *The Terminator* (1984) and returned the tainted videos to rental stores around New York. As the Terminator pulls the trigger on a victim, a male voice-over suddenly interrupts the scene with a recollection of being disciplined as a child by his father: “He slapped me. And then he slapped me again and again.” While transforming the blockbuster film into a public archive for private

memories, the parasitic narrative frustrates both the hero’s actions and the viewer’s pleasure.

“I try to resist catharsis in film,” says Fast, whom many will remember from the 2002 Whitney Biennial as the sound-effects man in the two-channel video installation *Glendive Foley*, 2000. “Catharsis involves a kind of movie-house communion where the individual melds into the mass.” The American-Israeli artist, who moved between the two countries before completing his MFA at Hunter College, CUNY, seems to set his own experience of dislocation against the unifying power of the screen. In Fast’s

work, there is no simple identification with a story on a screen, let alone a place, language, or culture. Indeed, *Glendive Foley* presents a tour through Glendive, Montana, on one monitor and, on the other, the artist frantically trying to mimic the language of the land—not English but a polyphony of suburban sounds, from bugs to lawnmowers.

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*A Tank Translated*, 2002, which was shown this spring at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, the Witte de With in Rotterdam, and Postmasters, New York, disrupts the process of identification with faulty translations. Returning to his native Jerusalem, Fast interviewed Israelis who did their military service together in a tank. The commander, gunner, loader, and driver appear on four separate monitors arranged in the same positions that the soldiers took when operating the tank in the Gaza Strip. As the young men relate their experiences in Hebrew, the English subtitles change, transporting us from the battlefield to innocent scenes of male bravado. As the loader boasts about shooting, the word “shells” in the subtitle is abruptly replaced by the word “stunts,” and the army recruit becomes a rising movie star. While effecting a metamorphosis, Fast’s stuttering subtitles point to other moments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict where less conspicuous errors of translation may occur: from the civilian to the soldier, from the occupied territories to the television set, from a war zone to the art world.

Displacement also marks *Berlin-Hura*, 2002, the video that Fast made after moving from New York to Berlin last year. Delving into family history, the artist interviewed his grandmother, who fled Berlin for Palestine in 1936 to escape the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Her family abandoned its flat in Berlin Mitte for what turned out to be an unusable plot of land in



Omer Fast, *Berlin-Hura*, 2002, four-channel video, 36 minutes. Top: Two stills. Bottom: Installation view, &: gb agency, Paris, 2002.

*In this ongoing series, writers are invited to introduce the work of artists at the beginning of their careers.*



They were normal barracks of wooden boards with gaps in-between - through which you could peek

And they turned towards me - to the square - by their narrow side because they receded into depth - right?

I was always hungry so I went through the garbage containers or behind restaurants to find some food

And this was actually water masquerading as slops - and we're all throwing ourselves on this food

the Negev Desert, occupied by nomadic Bedouin tribes. In addition to filming his grandmother, Fast hired an elderly male actor to tell the same story using her exact words. The work, which was shown at BüroFriedrich in Berlin and &: gb agency in Paris, is remarkably edited over four monitors. As the two echoing narrators move through history and geography, their words are punctuated with contemporary views of places they revive by memory: an empty plot where the apartment once stood in Oranierburgerstrasse, the open desert at Hura, a housing block in Tel Aviv. But it's not clear to the viewer whose memories are based on a lived experience and whose come from a script. Like the land, the story appears to be real, but no one can say who owns it. Fast's multiple layers unsettle the veracity of the documentary genre, but he edits footage in a way that manifests the experience of dispossession: A Berlin tram can be heard before it appears on the screen that the grandmother inhabits—that is, before it takes over her story. With its many moving parts, *Berlin-Hura* underscores the problems of passing on a cultural heritage for those who have a portable history, whether by force or by choice.

Fast's manipulations may seem heavy-handed. But by frustrating our desire to invest in a story, his disruptions serve as a potent reminder that we are indeed looking. Far from confusing the fake and the

real, Fast lends a visibility and a material presence to elements in a film that are typically taken for granted. Thus, his shifting subtitles are not so much falsified as "sculpted" in a way that plays on the optical unconscious. Here, looking is not neutral; every eye is haunted by what it has seen in the past. Watching *A Tank Translated*, spectators must realign their own sights and thus experience the visual dislocation that the men endure as they tell Fast, in the comfort of their own homes, what they saw as soldiers in Gaza.

The notion of the witness—in its historical weight and complexity—figures predominantly in Fast's most recent work, *Spielberg's List*, 2003, which debuted at Postmasters last spring. Giving a voice to another silent presence in film, Fast traveled to Kraków and interviewed Polish extras who played Jews and Nazis in Steven Spielberg's 1993 *Schindler's List*. In the two-channel installation, it becomes clear that the extras witnessed not only the

Top: Omer Fast, *Spielberg's List*, 2003, four stills from a two-channel video, 65 minutes. Bottom: Omer Fast, *A Tank Translated*, 2002, four-channel video, running time variable. Left: Two stills. Right: Installation view, Postmasters, New York, 2003.

film but also the real atrocity. As Fast combines their testimonies with scenes from the film, the set, and the city, history itself begins to stammer with visual slips of the tongue. A woman describes the "selection" process, at pains to explain why she was picked to play a Jewish prisoner; the street corner where the selection took place becomes a strange historical monument, at once banal and grotesque. An elderly man remembers looking at the work camp on his walks, but we're not sure if it's the real camp, which still exists as a ruin, or the film set, which Spielberg left behind. Again, it's not a question of fakes and reals; rather, the act of looking—whether at a camp or at the movies—creates its own history, accumulative, constitutive, forgetful, repressive. Exploring the cottage industry that serves American tourists who come to see the set, Fast demonstrates that *Schindler's List* has as much drawing power as the event it portrays. Here, Fast's layers of looking add up to a disturbing conclusion: The gaze can even repress the site of genocide and turn it into something magical, sublime. An extra puts it best. After describing the brutality of the counterfeit camp, she sighs, "These are beautiful scenes for me." □

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