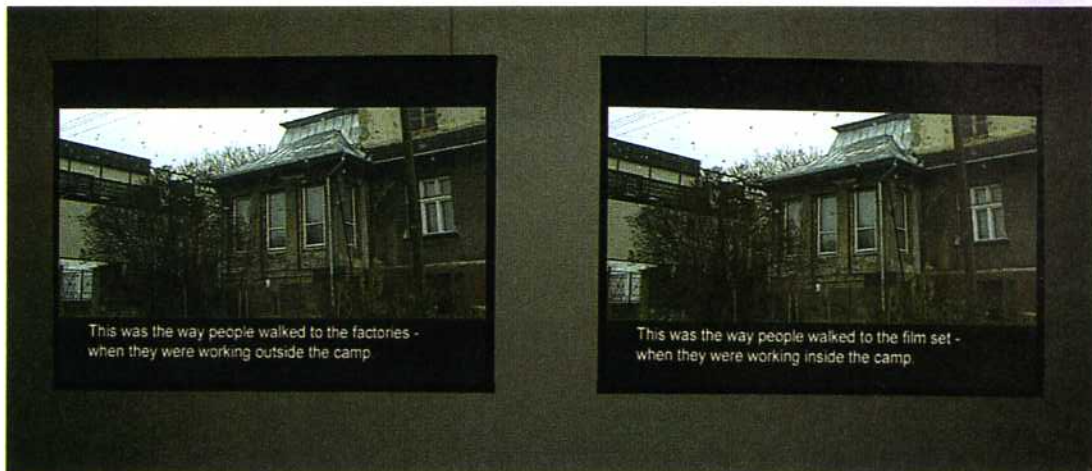


# Making History

FRIEZE #97, March 2006

Using sources as varied as *Schindler's List* and the CNN news, Omer Fast scrutinizes how history is presented and meaning is disseminated  
by Mark Godfrey





**Left:**  
*Spielberg's List*  
 2003  
 Photograph taken by an extra during production of *Schindler's List* (1993)

**Above:**  
*Spielberg's List*  
 2003  
 Installation view

Ten years after its release the Israeli-born, American-educated and Berlin-based artist Omer Fast travelled to Krakow to research the aftermath of Stephen Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and found a burgeoning tourist industry devoted to the film. As well as doing tours of Auschwitz, guides were driving mainly American visitors to the still intact concentration camp sets. Fast recorded some of these tours and conducted interviews with Poles who, ten years earlier, had played extras in the film. Some described the ways in which potential 'Jewish' and 'Polish' characters were divided during the auditions, while older extras mingled their memories of the 1940s with their recollections of the early 1990s. All of them, however, recalled the events of 1993, describing their motivations and experiences in acting out scenes in reconstructed camps and gas chambers.

Fast's footage addressed the Hollywoodization of the Holocaust, scrutinizing Spielberg's *magnum opus* by deploying tactics associated with filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, who had refused to use archival footage or to re-create scenes of the Holocaust when making his nine-and-a-half-hour documentary *Shoah* (1985); instead Lanzmann forged his encounter with history from interviews with Jewish survivors and Poles who had lived near the camps. The critical bent of Fast's project was in no way tempered by his acknowledgement that the extras' experience was real and deserving of serious attention; the artist allowed them to articulate the difficulties of reconstructing such a traumatic event in Polish history. Editing the footage for his two-screen installation *Spielberg's List* (2003), Fast made a crucial intervention. Working with a Polish translator, he was made aware of the contingencies of translation in the interviews he had conducted. Reflecting on this, he decided to play identical footage on each screen but to subtitle it with slightly different texts, one referring to the actual events of the 1940s and the other to the film. During some footage of the tour, for instance, one screen is subtitled with the words 'And the building opposite - there was one of the gates', while on the other we read 'And the building opposite - there

was one of the takes'. Fast even employed this device when the speaker is English, but when they are Polish it is often impossible to tell which period the speaker is referring to.

The subtitles further compounded the confusion of history and its representation, but it's interesting to note how the strategy operated for the viewer in the screening environment. With two screens illuminating fast-moving complex material, it was at first difficult to understand what was going on. At first, all that could be sensed was a flickering difference on the peripheries of the two screens, the contrast between the subtitles registering more in terms of divergent *shapes* than alternative translations. Only later, with repetition, could the viewer divine the tactic at work. Fast's device emphasized our incapacity to fully apprehend a work at the first encounter, while encouraging us to pay attention to the fickleness of subtitles - an aspect of the video image we might usually take for granted - and to choose between the two meanings.

*Spielberg's List* indicates the complexity of Fast's project, aiming to address both the information film and TV provides us with, and the manner in which it is delivered. By attending to aspects of the image such as the subtitle and the soundtrack, he sheds light on the subtle ways in which meanings are disseminated. Sometimes he has used tactics of insertion as well as interruption. In 2001 he hired copies of *The Terminator* (1984) from New York video outlets and, during some of the most brutal and silent scenes in the film, overdubbed sections of dialogue that he had taped, in which adults describe violent memories from their childhood. The videos were returned to the rental shops to await the next unsuspecting customers, whose Schwarzneggerian fantasies would be interrupted by a sour dose of the real. If his strategies here owed much to Cildo Meireles, elsewhere, in a mammoth act of manipulation, Fast updated Richard Serra's savage articulation of TV's commercialism *Television Delivers People* (1973). Through 2001 Fast recorded hundreds of hours of CNN presenters speaking directly to camera. He fed the footage into a computer and cut



All images courtesy: GB Agency, Paris and Postmasters, New York

