



Nothing But the Truth

Omer Fast's video installations – which employ everything from **The Terminator** to CNN footage – not only blur the distinctions between truth and fiction but question the way we tell ourselves stories and construct meanings → ANDREAS SCHLAEGEL

Images

Nostalgia

2009, three-part video installation

Still from Nostalgia II, two-channel HD videos (synchronized) with sound

All images are courtesy of the artist; gb agency, Paris; Arratia Beer, Berlin; Postmasters, New York

“Listen to me. I want to tell you something. Come closer. Don't be upset and don't get emotional. Just get near me and pay attention, please. Look, I know that you're scared. I know what you're afraid of. You mistrust your body. Lately it has been looking more and more foreign. It's been doing strange things. You suspect that it has been keeping something from you; that knowledge of your own death is already programmed inside it somehow; that it's stored in a primitive organ; that in between the crush of blood and digestion your appendix or spleen sits obliviously still like an overgrown traffic island keeping watch over a terrible secret.”

(From Omer Fast's CNN Concatenated, 2002)



Fast's work does not mourn the loss of meaning, nor is it a celebration of the absurdity of the elaborate fake. In allowing the images' meanings to blur he sharpens the viewer's vision. This strategy of clarifying by blurring is reminiscent of Gerhard Richter

I think we will see a full-feature film by Omer Fast soon. It's only logical, considering his ongoing fascination with filmmaking and storytelling – even though, at first glance, it might seem that the silver screen has little to offer this artist, whose sophisticated multi-screen video installations reflect the visual rhetorics of film and television in a way that cinema just can't. His video pieces tap into the sensory quality of moving images without investing in their glamour, but instead taking them into account as expressions of cultural meaning. Closely knit, his works reflect not only on the structures of the narratives being told, but also on the multilayered signs and the refined visual tropes with which they are told. Although he was born in Jerusalem in 1972, Fast is not a product of the Israeli art-school system: He was educated in the U.S., earning his undergraduate degree at Tufts University and then his MFA at Hunter College in 2000. In a recent brief telephone interview, Fast insisted that Hunter was an inviting place to study, despite being tough for a young artist interested in working with anything but painting or sculpture: At the time, the college boasted little if any video equipment and hardly any of the faculty was equipped to prepare students for work with electronic media. Still, its main attraction was providing central studios for the students – and as the courses ran for three years, it was much cheaper to study than rent a studio in Manhattan. This setting was beneficial for young artists who had already developed to a certain degree, and it gave them time and, more important, a space, in which to concentrate on their work. I first met Fast in his final year at Hunter, preparing a project for an ambitious group

show “Death Race 2000,” curated by sculptor Rachel Lowther and conceptual artist James Hunt. Fast had received some attention with a surprising video work titled *Breaking in a New Partner*, his graduate project at the MFA exhibition the same year. Back then it looked like a novelty act to me. Crammed in one of the derelict bathrooms of the New York nonprofit gallery Thread Waxing Space (run by Lia Gangitano), it consisted of two video screens: One played an outtake of *Lethal Weapon* (1987) featuring Mel Gibson as a young cop battling suicidal impulses after losing his wife. Hardly noticeable at first, it was shown without the original sound. In fact, it was the artist, seen on the second screen, who imitated every single piece of sound of the film with his voice: not only the lines spoken by the actors, but also the noise of rustling fabric, the click of metal as a bullet is inserted into a gun barrel, squeaking furniture, a Bugs Bunny cartoon running in the background, the sounds of cars, screeching breaks, doors slamming shut, gun shots, even the musical score plus other sound effects. The perfection of the simulation sounds was startling. I am sure more than one visitor who didn't look carefully never noticed this and never got the point. But what exactly was the point? Didn't it look just like a party trick, or something one could see in a cheesy television show, I wondered. Hadn't I seen several works about people who made sound effects? Yet again, the “trick” was made transparent visually; the artist himself looked anything but heroic, yet not exactly funny either. But there was also something else. First of all, there was a sense of *dérive*: The artist had hijacked the film and, by adding something, had turned key fragments of the interracial cop-buddy story of the action movie—cum—comedy into a reflection on the

way Hollywood films work. Showing the simulation of the sounds made the different layers of the film's sonic landscape visible. But it also proved how narrative, sound and image hinge on one another – each makes the other convincing and vice versa. Fast had opened a door for the viewer to slip into the film, looking not only at what constitutes it, but also at where it places the viewer. For example, when the character played by Mel Gibson contemplates suicide in the solitude of a dismal trailer home and puts a gun to his head while sobbing onto a photograph of his wedding, the viewer is simultaneously confronted with the deadpan image of the artist's many faces making the different sounds. He shows no compassion for the character's troubles, but he also hardly offers comic relief. It made the serious scenes that are particularly important for the plot much more interesting to watch. The original movie was still there, superficially, but somehow emptied out, with a vital part of it removed, mimicked (and ridiculed) and replaced, the bones of its construction laid bare.

Surviving the Terminator

Omer Fast produced another small piece of work in 2000, once again appropriating a classic Hollywood blockbuster from the 1980s, this time turning to John Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984). Arnold Schwarzenegger doesn't do much talking in the film, leaving plenty of space for violent action, but also for Fast's interference. Renting out several VHS copies of the film from video stores, he inserted snippets of personal narratives in the film by overdubbing the original sound. In the midst of the action, the viewer would suddenly hear an unexpected voice-over recounting stories culled from real life.

Inspired by a report about a man in Arizona who had secretly copied bits of hardcore porn onto rental movies for children, Fast started looking for the film he'd like to overdub. He found “something violent, stylized, even cartoonish” in *The Terminator*. “It was one of the first films I saw after moving to the States. The film is about a psychopath from the future who takes steroids, runs around killing people, cuts his own eye out, marries a Kennedy and then runs for office as governor of the world's eighth largest economy.”^[1] Dubbing four short interviews on four different points of the video had a remarkable effect. Incidents from the interviewee's earlier life, including instances of “being physically disciplined by a parent. Nothing traumatic, just the normal stuff that happens in families where hands, belts and a stick are used for disciplinary purposes” were described in the inserted voice-over. In scenes of extreme violence, as when Schwarzenegger rings the doorbells of several women with the same name and guns them down the instant they confirm their identity, the voice of a man suddenly interrupts: “He slapped me. And then he slapped me again and again.” Rather than destroying the flow of the narrative, elements like these introduce a separate but intimate layer of meaning to the film's story, but do not interfere with the general plot. These personal stories smuggled into the rental tapes constituted a “hidden record whose purpose is to communicate its content and survive.” Surviving, however, depended on the quality of the symbiosis of the artwork and the rental video it inhabited, and the way its audience related and reacted to it. The artist attached a little sticker with the title of the work, *T3-AEON*, to the tapes, so he could occasionally check on them. “In August 2001 I moved to Germany and

stopped checking. Within a year the entire inventory of videocassettes at all stores was replaced by DVDs.”^[2]

Pop Culture Schindler

Hollywood Films continued to hold a strong fascination for the artist – and two years later, he was at it again, this time focusing on Steven Spielberg's blockbuster *Schindler's List*, a Hollywood-style narrative dramatization of the Holocaust that won seven Academy Awards and three Golden Globes, and was a worldwide box office smash, in spite of its length of more than three hours. But Spielberg's film also courted controversy: When it premiered Claude Lanzmann, the director of *Shoah* (1985), a nine-hour documentary of collected and edited interviews with Holocaust survivors, criticized Spielberg for fictionalizing the Holocaust. Lanzmann had consciously renounced any fictionalization, instead focusing on the emptiness in the landscapes and the faces of those struggling with their memories, introducing a maxim that any discourse on fascism would have to be one of emptiness. Spielberg's film went took an entirely different path: While portraying events rather accurately, it quite effectively reduced the trauma of the Holocaust – “which defies human imagination as it distills a real hell from human evil,”^[3] as Theodor Adorno famously put it – to what was often perceived as a sensationalist, kitschy fairy tale. By violating what Adorno and Lanzmann considered the rules of representation of an ultimate disaster, the movie stirred up a debate on truth and representation in mainstream culture. It forced its audience to rethink the terms in which the Holocaust could be imagined, remembered and given historical meaning. If in *T3-AEON* Omer Fast effectively took

Omer Fast
Passport still

[1] Omer Fast in “Marc Godfrey: Playing the System” at <http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue14/playingthesystem.htm>

[2] Ibid.

[3] Theodor Adorno in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 86.

“The German woman the soldier meets turns out to be suicidal, and when he shoots at a car in a tense situation in Iraq, he involuntarily kills a young man he didn’t see. What the soldier can’t see – the young man, the woman’s state of mind – appears to be a symbolic reflection all the things the viewer believes”



over a film as a vehicle for personal memories, in his *Spielberg's List* (2003) he shows a film taking over the memories themselves. I saw his two-channel video *Spielberg's List* in the 2007 show “History Will Repeat Itself” at the Kunstwerke in Berlin. It consists of a series of interviews with Polish people, who appear to be discussing their experiences of the Holocaust. What strikes the viewer quite soon is that some of the interviewees are obviously much too young to have experienced it firsthand. But the casual sincerity is too convincing – could these be actors speaking in scripted words? Or are the subtitles are fake? When a woman explains how she experienced the “selection process,” it becomes obvious that she must be referring to the casting of the movie. It then becomes obvious that the subtitles are not quite sincere: On one screen they refer to either the movie production (casting) or to the Holocaust (selection). But there is also an old man who talks about watching [seeing?] the “camp” on his walks, where it is not really clear if it is either the film set, the contemporary memorial of the camp or possibly the concentration camp when it was operative. The viewer is required to notice the complexity of the situation and understand that this piece relates to two (or maybe more) events simultaneously. It is not only about the bizarre shift in perception that the Polish extras experienced. Their stories make for a rather heretic view of the Holocaust, but the film about them shows history absurdly shifting and retroactively confirming the narrative of Spielberg’s film. Or is this what the experience of being an extra in a big Hollywood production does to you? A by-product of *Schindler's List* was an absurd brand of tourism catering to people who came specifically to see where the film was

shot. One of the sites is a very accurate and detailed movie set of the concentration camp, built in close proximity to the site of the original concentration camp near Krakow, and since the set was not destroyed after shooting the film, regular *Schindler's List* tours visit both sites. Fast combined material from both, including the extras and the tourists, to create a work that consists of a juxtaposition of two channels, where personal memories of the Holocaust are mixed with accounts of the film. This way of reflecting historical experience as well as the relation between reality and representation renders history an unruly hodgepodge of memory and imagination, fiction and fact, where the lure of the film is as present as the historic reality. One could say that the Hollywood movie’s success even exceeded the concerns of Claude Lanzmann by factually turning the historic memorial into a pop-cultural curiosity. (In a later work, *Godville* (2005), Fast elaborated on the idea of the tour guide, this time by employing the costumed guides who impersonate historic personalities in Williamsburg, Virginia, in a “living history museum” of Colonial America. The guides explain history as a lived experience – not as participants in one they have shared but as “authentic witness[es] to a representation,”^[4] as Fast puts it.)

The Certainty of Death

Fast’s work does not mourn the loss of meaning, nor is it a celebration of the absurdity of the elaborate fake. In allowing the images’ meanings to blur he sharpens the viewer’s vision. This strategy of clarifying by blurring is reminiscent of Gerhard Richter and his painting of a black-and-white family photograph, *Onkel Rudi* (1965) in his Wehrmacht uniform. By blurring the subject’s

features, Richter erased his recognizability, pointing to the general fact that nearly everyone in Germany had a photograph of a family member wearing WWII attire in their photo albums. It made clear that the past was not as far away as one maybe would like to think, and that there is no way of pretending not being involved. It is a question of our focusing, adjusting the way we look; it implied that, as we look, we contribute to the creation of history by the forces of accumulation and repression – storytelling.

Before I delve into more current work by Fast, just a quick look at another early work that focuses on the present tense. It turns to the genre of the TV news channel. By isolating single words as articulated by the presenters and editing them to form complete sentences, the artist chose to make them say something quite peculiar, in a fascinating staccato of images and words, framed by the pompously reappearing bombastic CNN theme fanfare (“This. Is CNN.”) that lends a basic structure to what adds up to an increasingly paranoid rant. *CNN Concatenated* (2002) is interrupted by sudden deep breaths that puncture the anxiety-ridden, mechanically hammered-out words. The news presenters face the camera, and thereby the viewer, as if the news channel as a whole had something to say – a complaint about the self-absorption and hypocrisy of the viewer. The procession of their talking heads forms something reminiscent of the choir in ancient Greek tragedies, revealing the deeper truth that, in this case, is the bottom line of any news: the painful certainty of death. As Mark Godfrey suggested, this could be seen as an update of Richard Serra’s video piece on the commercialism of television, *Television Delivers People* (1973)^[5].

Image

Nostalgia

2009, three-part video installation

Still from Nostalgia II, two-channel HD videos (synchronized)

with sound

[4] See Joanna Fiduccia’s interview “Omer Fast: A Multiple 1,” *Uovo*, April 17, 2008, pp. 156-76.

[5] http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/making_history1/

“The very process of storytelling relies on two things: First, it establishes a distance from the world the story is told in. Second, it requires the listener to suspend his disbelief – as in the artist’s latest and most ambitious piece so far, the three-part video installation entitled **Nostalgia**”

“Look, it’s not happening at this very moment. Perhaps, not as long as you listen and watch. People don’t die in front of their televisions. In the meantime, we could probably do something about it together. I could tell you exactly what to expect. I could explain using precise words and heartbreaking imagery.”

(From Omer Fast’s *CNN Concatenated*, 2002)

Get Your Story Straight

But let’s move on and get to a piece of casting that is closer to now. In 2007, Omer Fast realized what has become his best-known project to date, the four-channel video installation, *The Casting* (2007). It is a double double-projection, with one side displaying a strangely artificial scene, obviously a casting for a theatrical performance – told, however, in what at first appears to be still images, but turns out to be videos of people trying to stand still, in tableau-vivant style, yet trembling, with eyes twitching as the wind blows, etc.

Asked to improvise by the casting director, the actor starts telling a bizarre story that flips back and forth between two ill-fated but not related experiences that are difficult to keep apart: Both deal with a street and a car – one a traumatic shooting of a civilian during the Iraq war, the second a disturbing romantic encounter in Germany. As we hear this story in voice-over, images from the two stories appear. The backside of the projection, however, shows the artist interviewing a United States Army sergeant. The process of sculpting the two stories into one hybrid is traceable by the editing, the changing light and private clothes of the soldier. On the second, slightly smaller screen we see the artist apparently listening intently, but here, again, jolting editing and strange lighting remind us that he maybe wasn’t there at all.

Once again the borders of documentary realism and fiction are blurred, not as much in terms of special effects, but in the way conventional forms are employed. It appears as if there were several levels of reenactment at play here, not only the front side of the installation with its double projection of pseudo-still photography (based not on details of the interview but on public-domain images found on the Web, and set, for example, in the Mojave desert), but also the interview and the artist, who may simply have been captured watching the testimony on a screen. The German woman the soldier meets turns out to be suicidal, and when he shoots at a car in a tense situation in Iraq, he involuntarily kills a young man he didn’t see. What the soldier can’t see – the young man, the woman’s state of mind – appears to be a symbolic reflection of all the things the viewer believes, but can’t see. What is hidden from our view? The scars on the woman’s arms are pure fabrication: Fast doctored the tape of the interview in the same way he manipulated the CNN video. The sergeant never even said the word scar – the artist composed it out of an “s” and “car.” Another recent work, again a two-channel video, even ventures into the comedic. In *Take a Deep Breath* (2008), which is based on a true story, we see the filming of a scene in a falafel restaurant that has been blown to bits. The storytelling and the realism of the scene are arresting – but just as we see the body of a man with torn-off limbs lying on the floor, he blinks and someone yells, “Cut!” Cruelly yanked out of the story, the film now centers on the film crew discussing the shortcomings of the actor playing the role of the suicide bomber, who is subsequently fired. The indecisive director, “Omer,” has difficulty making up his mind and the shoot comes to a standstill. Then the narrator picks up on

the story again, and the same scene continues with an older actor in the role of the suicide bomber. A medic comes in and performs mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on him. Once the shoot is completed, we’re back with the crew breaking for lunch, as the second actor playing the suicide bomber tries to chat up one of the extras, who was supposed to play another victim of the bombing, but was also fired (yet keeps hanging around the film set). They bitch about the director and the shoot, but, failing to make an impression, the actor claims to have really lost an arm. This agitates the younger suicide bomber-actor, a row ensues and the older actor is pushed to the floor. The commotion finally triggers the woman’s interest, but then she starts giggling and, once again, we hear “Cut!” Back with the story of the suicide bombing, we hear the medic reflecting on his recollections of the bombing and his attempts at and qualms about saving the bomber, when the shoot is again interrupted by two police officers entering the scene and requesting to see permits. As they inquire about the nature of the film, the crew and extras, being completely wrapped up in the different stories – what happened on set, the actors, their roles, etc. – struggle to explain what they are doing. One of the officers loses interest, offering: “When you guys get your story straight, just come down to the precinct and let me know, okay?”

Laying the Trap

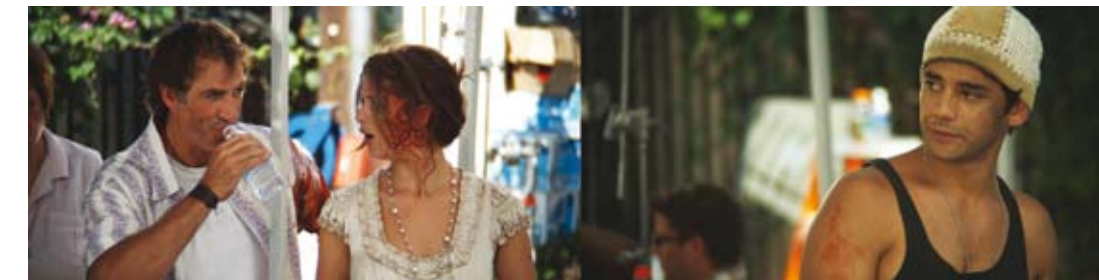
But it’s not okay, and we know it. Straight stories don’t exist – stories are told. And the very process of storytelling relies on two things: First, it establishes a distance from the world the story is told in. Second, it requires the listener to suspend his disbelief – as in the artist’s latest and most ambitious piece so far, the three-part video installation entitled

Nostalgia (2009), a story about a trap and trapped people. In the first brief part we see a man building a trap in a leafy forest, while the voice-over – by a man with a distinctive Nigerian accent – explains the construction, from “sticks and twine,” is made to catch partridges. When the trap is put to the test, we are suddenly inside a studio for a few seconds, hearing the narrator laugh at the trap snapping.

In the second part, the plot thickens. We see a two-screen interview situation, familiar from *The Casting*, with two actors who play out what could be a reenactment of the interview that led to the first part of the piece: A Nigerian refugee (and asylum-seeker) is interviewed by a British film director planning two films – one is a film that shows interviews (like the one we are seeing) with asylum-seekers; the other one is like “an old sci-fi film with props and actors” (apparently not the one we already saw). Asked to talk about his childhood, the Nigerian reluctantly complies, and talks briefly about having been a child soldier. To explain the construction of the trap seems to be an escape to neutral ground from a horrible story, but when he explains that the trap can also be used to catch monkeys, for food, he irritates the filmmaker. His jokes don’t help much to relieve the tension of the situation, but close the loop to the beginning.

All this, however, doesn’t prepare us for the complex fiction of the third part, a dramatization of events that slowly unravels to show an alternative world, where the racial situation is inverted. Here, Great Britain is a desolate desert state, and an unspecified African country has become the wealthy and safe destination for British refugees. The story of the construction of the trap is passed

on in each of the four episodes of the film. While being interrogated by a stern African official and urged to divulge the secret routes of the refugees, a British asylum-seeker tells the trap story in connection to his flight. When the official is at home, she again tells the story to her lover, as if it was proof that she once was in Britain as an aid worker (“...a proud ancient culture. They are great dancers, and they are not...cannibals!”). Then there is a night scene, when the sad and disturbed lover, tearfully, recounts the trap story – to trap ghosts and ward off nightmares – to what looks like a sleeping child but turns out to be a bundle of fabric on a bed, while his daughter looks on. And



finally, when his daughter is asked to give a report in class, she tells the story of the trap again, while the British asylum-seeker, now the school’s new janitor, secretly listens to his own story, while cleaning the waste bins. The episodes are framed by a story of a small group of European refugees, who slip through a derelict subway train, through a maze of tunnels, while being hounded by cruel African security forces and their dogs (German Shepherds). One young woman is caught and clubbed to death, and her vomit turns into large flowers and fruits. The guards spill gasoline on the corpse and when one strikes a match, its flame turns into the flame

lighting the cigarette of the interrogator of the beginning, and the story begins anew. Moving inside the different private parameters of the individual characters of the film, the story changes – but the situation of those telling it stays similar. They appear to be trapped in their own stories, proving, in a way, that knowing the way one trap is constructed doesn’t help to free you from your own constraints. *Nostalgia* could be seen as a fascination that rests with a bygone identification, one that enables the imagination of a naive perspective on a hypothetical historic subject. The undercurrent of the plight of the refugee, who is seeking asylum in a supposedly safe

but utterly strange world, reflects on the idea of the truth seeking refuge in a story. In this sense, Fast’s piece again reflects the medium of film as a storytelling device, but also on storytelling in general. In its repetition, the narrative questions the authority of the institution of the narrator, and the projection of power this invites. More than it focuses on a dialectic concept of truth or falsehood or individual truths, *Nostalgia* reflects on historical narratives as a collective construction of truth – of memory as only one element in a performative concept of storytelling. But careful, though, it may be a trap. →

Image
Take a Deep Breath
2008, two-channel video