



FORESIGHT INTO THE NEW AFRICAN CENTURY

Reverse the terms of Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film Children of Men, and you'll get an idea of Israeli artist OMER FAST's last video installation Nostalgia, which portrays a dystopian future where European migrants long for a better future in Africa.

words by NAV HAQ



ARTIST'S BIO

OMER FAST (b. 1972) is a Jerusalem-born artist. He received a BFA from Tufts University and an MFA from Hunter College. He lives and works in Berlin. In 2008, he was awarded the Bucksbaum Award, endowed by Whitney Trustee Melva Bucksbaum and her family, and in 2009 the prestigious Nationalgalerie Prize for Young Art. Fast has had solo exhibitions in institutions and museums such as the Frankfurter Kunstverein, the Carnegie Museum (Pittsburgh), the Museum Moderner Kunst (MUMOK, Vienna), the Kunstverein Hannover and the Kunsthau Baselland (Basel), and has shown his films and video-installations at Manifesta 7 (South Tyrol) and at the 2008 Whitney Biennial (New York). His monographic book *The Casting* was published by MUMOK and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.

Nostalgia, production stills, 2009
Photo: Thierry Bal
Courtesy: the artist, gb agency, Paris, Postmasters, New York, and Arratia, Beer, Berlin

The visual representation of possible future scenarios has become one of the most powerful and politicized tools in global society today, used as a means to sanction everything from terrorism to ecological catastrophe. The general and collective sense of impending doom that this generates is rarely challenged, and its apparatus seldom reconsidered in a more speculative way in order to counter the hegemonies engendered by these visions of the future. Omer Fast's video installations over recent years have developed a number of structural methodologies, including self-reflexive filmmaking, the complication of cultural representations, and the intricate scripting of non-linear narratives, often through utilizing the mechanics of the filmmaking process. Fast rigorously treats each video project as a brand new investigation of these methodologies. His most recent installation, *Nostalgia* (2009), presented this fall at the South London Gallery, has its basis in Fast's performativity in producing the work, thematizing the economies of his own experience in the encounter between an artist and his chosen subject. His installation is a complex mystification of a discussion between the artist and a West African man seeking asylum in the UK.

Judgment Day struck in 1980 and the world has been mired in a second Dark Ages since. Northern Europe is a wasteland and Britain has become a barren backwater where nomadic tribes roam across the dunes and raid one another for depleted resources. The only steady export from this once fabled island are migrants, who desperately stream across the European mainland in hope of a more peaceful and prosperous future in Africa.

The press release for the exhibition opened with the legend above. The prospect of a dystopian future in the UK, back around the time of the Thatcher-era recession of the early 1980s, was certainly not unimaginable. In considering this period, Fast adopted the method of the particular genre of science fiction that imagines alternative consequences for major events in the past, investigating extreme-case scenarios for society and the

world at large. *Nostalgia* is an installation of moving images that unfolds in three stages. It uses sequentially the three formal languages of documentary, video re-enactment and lastly, full-blown dramatization—the same order as that in which the artist presumably made the works. Beginning with the initial format of documentary, the installation moves on to distribute the grammar of the narrative between past and future tenses.

The three stages of the installation take on consecutively larger scales, both in terms of physical space and relative video format presentation, but also with successively longer durations. *Nostalgia* begins with a wall-mounted monitor screening a short documentary-style video of Fast's first meeting with the asylum seeker. The artist asks him various questions about his life and his subsequent crossing to Europe, and the unnamed asylum seeker talks about his journey as well as his previous existence and means of survival in Africa, an account that includes an elaborate description of how to construct a trap for partridge. The description of how to produce the trap is the central motif in the work. It surfaces over and over again in the different sections of the installation with an oblique set of purposes, made to multi-task in the different segments of the work—behaving as a narrative device, metaphor and looping referential all at once. This first stage of the installation is filmed with a green backdrop, like those used for producing films where the background is added digitally afterwards, providing the sense that the given context of the interview could have changed during editing at the push of a button.

The second stage of the installation is a re-enactment of the discussion with the asylum seeker. As in Fast's previous works such as *Take a Deep Breath* (2008), which portrays the story of the artist making a documentary about a suicide bombing, an actor is cast in the role of Fast himself, asking the questions to the character of the African man, embellishing their discussion and even talking about the possibility of making a film about his story. With one character on a monitor and the other projected onto a screen of equal size, the formal difference between the two formats is evident. The two images allow the "artist," who is now in front of the camera, and his subject to have an equal presence in front of the camera. It is at this stage of the installation, and only at this stage, that the asylum seeker finally gives his name—William—, a piece of information however undermined by the name used in the script presented in the South London Gallery's newspaper—Peter.

The third stage of *Nostalgia*, the dramatization, is presented on a more cinematic scale. A near-unimaginable reversal of the imperialist gaze, it depicts white Europeans attempting to reach the continent of Africa through clandestine means, looking to offer themselves in any employment role necessary in order to survive, subjecting themselves to the brutality of ideological patronage from a more dominant society. A small group of Europeans make their way wearily through a tunnel that they initially enter via an abandoned London Underground station, embarking on a precarious journey to find salvation in "fortress Africa." At one particularly uncanny stage, they pass unnoticed behind the back of a man sitting silently on an armchair watching a film on television, on which we glimpse a scene from Chris Marker's *San Soleil* where a giraffe is shot through the neck, blood gushing from the entrance and exit holes of the bullet. A group of African guards have also found their way into the network of tunnels, and their pack of dogs, kitted out with light bulbs, soon catch the scent of the European migrants. Fearing capture, they run, but one is rapidly caught by the hounds. By the time the guards catch her, she is lying unconscious on the floor. Next to her is a trail of her vomit, which the camera follows, depicting its gradual metamorphosis into a bountiful arrangement of tropical fruits and flowers. The object is transformed into the



Nostalgia, production stills, 2009
Photo: Thierry Bal
Courtesy: the artist, gb agency, Paris, Postmasters,
New York, and Arratia, Beer, Berlin



Nostalgia II
video still, 2009
Courtesy: the artist, gb agency,
Paris, Postmasters, New York, and
Arratia, Beer, Berlin

profuse and outlandish, a filmic sublimation of the desire for another, better life elsewhere.

Outside of the tunnel, the setting is retro near-future Africa, not intended as a reference to afro-futurism, but rather as a speculative fiction of a parallel world. In a domestic interior with modern-style furniture, patterns and lighting, a black, middle-class man and woman are talking, occasionally flirting. She talks about a trip to the ravages of Europe, and he looks with astonishment that she had even considered going there. Again the description of the trap emerges, which is overheard by a young girl and retold at school in a lesson about the capture and preparation of food in foreign cultures. The lady, it turns out, is the headmistress of the same school, and is visited by the authorities after the discovery that one of the school's cleaners is an illegal immigrant. The subsequent scene depicts the lady along with the authorities meeting together with the cleaner, attempting to negotiate leniency with him in return for information on the location of the tunnel through which he, and presumably others, have secretly arrived. In a moment of solidarity with other Europeans, he withholds the information. The whole thing loops undiscernibly, in a narrative cycle that deliberately thwarts resolution.

Nostalgia is a science fiction about counter-hegemony. It imagines a paradigm reversal of one of the grand allegories of modern sci-fi—the demonization of foreign invaders and the other—but without recourse to cinematic stereotypes. The black box traditional for video and film is used unashamedly and uncompromisingly throughout *Nostalgia*, despite this format's now outdated feel. It denies architectural space and the outside world, suggesting another, more metaphorical form of displacement from one's location. It is a multifaceted work, formally and conceptually, like much of Fast's work, and pushes his artistic relations to contemporary political subject matter in new directions. The three sides to the work act like a prism, refracting and polarizing the simplified media representation of significant issues, and underlining the necessity for an apparatus whose purpose it is to break up the monolithic consideration of political subject matter into a broader spectrum.

CURRENT & FORTHCOMING

The three-part film *Nostalgia* was co-produced by the South London Gallery, the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and the Verein der Freunde der Nationalgalerie, Berlin. It has been shown at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, at the South London Gallery, and at the UC Berkeley Art Museum, San Francisco, and is on view until February 14 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Currently, Omer Fast has an exhibition at his New York gallery Postmasters.

AUTHOR

NAV HAQ is the curator at Arnolfini, Bristol. He has edited numerous publications and artist's books, and has contributed to periodicals including *Bidoun* and *Frieze*. He is an editor of the bi-annual journal *Concept Store*.



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