

## CASTING DOUBT On Omer Fast at the MUMOK, Vienna



In his video installations, Omer Fast undertakes the deconstruction of the established view on media images. By hanging the projection screens into the exhibition space, counter to cinematographic conventions, the viewers are activated as they have to dupli-

cate the complex montage of pseudo-documentary sequences through their own movement.

An exhibition at the Vienna MUMOK now presented two of the Berlin based artist's recent works. The complex connection of image and sound tracks not the least raises the question as to how traumatic history may be reconstructed and depicted without abiding by the representational logics of current "image wars".

For anyone familiar with Omer Fast's practice, it will come as no surprise to learn that what a viewer hears someone says in one of his videos is not necessarily what this person uttered when Fast taped or filmed them. That's because Fast works by interviewing or recording speakers, dissecting their dialogue into separate words and phonemes, and then splicing these together to form sentences and word chains of his own conception. This process worked most spectacularly in "CNN Concatenated", where various newsreaders were made to intone a narrative about how news generate fear, and most self-reflexively in "Godville" when Fast recorded an actor working in the "Living Museum of Colonial Williamsburg" and made the actor accuse the artist of bending his words. Towards the end of "The Casting" — one of two new works shown this autumn at MUMOK in Vienna — Fast is heard to declare that "I'm not so much interested in the political angle", a claim which is made after we have seen a reconstruction of the unintentional but brutal killing of an Iraqi citizen by an American soldier. Appreciating Fast's previous tactics we might want to take this statement less as an honest disclaimer, or transparent declaration of intent, and more as a challenge: is there really no "political angle" in this work? And if there is, what is its degree?

"The Casting" is shown on two screens suspended from the ceiling, parallel to each other, one set back by around half a metre. On the screens that face the viewers as they enter the space, a series of scenes unfold. Some show a casting studio occupied by a bearded actor, a director and his crew; others are scenes of and around a Barbarian town in winter; third, there are shots which show a desert road that appears

to be in Iraq (though Fast shot this footage in California). The three settings inter-cut whilst a voiceover is heard, a narration told by a soldier with occasional comments by Fast. The viewer can pass around the sides of the hanging screens, or through the gap in between them to find two more projections cast onto their versos. One screen has several head shots of the soldier; the other has head shots of Fast, apparently listening to him.

In some sequences, the soldier (whom Fast recorded whilst he was on leave from active duty) wears a blue T-shirt; in others, he sports a checked shirt. Fast also changes clothes, wearing an identical checked shirt and sometimes appearing in a brown jacket. We understand very quickly that two interviews were conducted and two stories told, corresponding to the two settings we saw on the other sides of the screens. The first story concerned the soldier's date with a girl he met whilst stationed in Germany. Discovering that she scarred herself apparently to help her recall certain events, he insisted that they left the nightclub where they were partying, but found himself being driven home by her at dangerous speed. A major road accident was narrowly avoided and the date came to an awkward end. The other story also concerns a road incident. During his time in Iraq the soldier would drive with a crew down a desert road every day. One day his vehicle was hit by a remote controlled bomb and shortly after he saw a civilian car speeding towards him. In an attempt to make it stop, he shot at the windscreen and then realised that he had killed an innocent civilian passenger in the backseat.

These two narratives constantly intersect. Both reach their climaxes at the same time and (as we realise only when watching the side showing the interviews) some spoken passages that seem to refer to the Iraq story were constructed from segments of speech taken from the German story. Fast thus confronts us with the task of connecting and disconnecting the two narratives, provoking us to unravel them, to discern formal and thematic similarities. Most obviously both

stories involve pairs of traumatic moments—the moment the soldier realised his girlfriend was a self-harmer, then the near car-crash; the roadside bomb, and then the shooting. The question we end up asking is whether the inter-cutting of the stories is an adequate means to represent their traumatic contents? If traumatic events are those which are not properly represented by coherent and linear narratives, could it be the case that the only way to witness them is to represent them in this scarred form? After having related the shooting incident, the soldier says that he cannot be certain to remember accurately the order of events that day, just their outcome. Fast's edit respects the shattering effect of trauma on memory. Importantly, the work refuses what Eric Santner, in another context, called "narrative fetishism"—the desire to disavow the effect of trauma by imposing a sense-making narrative onto experience.

Back round to the other side of the screens: On those sides, as mentioned, we see scenes in which an actor is being cast to play the soldier and in which his two stories are re-enacted. Whereas in earlier works, Fast worked with pre-existing re-enactments of major historical events (Spielberg's "Schindler's List" and Colonial Williamsburg's reconstruction of 18th century life), here he created his own re-enactment of a previously unrepresented story. Yet Fast did not simply film actors playing the events that the soldier described. Instead, he asked his actors to freeze at key moments of the dramas and hold their gestures and expressions for some ten seconds at a time. It was these "frozen" passages that Fast then used for the work. In capturing the actors mid-pose, Fast draws attention to the artifice of acting and targets the conventions of "narrative film", one traditional mode of historical representation. At the same time, as Sven Lütticken pointed out in a conversation to be published in the catalogue, Fast addresses the tradition of the *tableau vivant*. In the *tableau vivant* key historical figures are shown as waxworks in the midst of a momentous event. In Fast's *tableaux*

vivants, however, the characters fail to keep absolutely still—they breathe, blink and sway in the wind. These scenes do not so much therefore bear witness to the soldier's story, but rather evidence the contingencies and climactic circumstances of the day on which they were filmed. In their failings the scenes thus suggest the flaw in the cultural desire to re-create the past as if it were a self-enclosed world that can be represented authentically and accurately.

A secondary effect of Fast's deconstruction of the "tableau vivant" is to underline the very real gestures and expressions of the soldier whose face is visible on the other side of the screens. As he tells Fast about killing the Iraqi, the soldier closes his eyes; in the next passage he is unable to look his interlocutor in the eye. These gestures bespeak a real attitude of shame; but across from the soldier's screen, the adjacent image showing Fast is far less trustworthy. Fast appears to be listening to the soldier, but from time to time he dons headphones which indicates that he filmed himself in the edit suite, looking at his recording. The artist—this is to say—presses us to view him as the unreliable witness, the untrustworthy listener.

Most of the components in "The Casting" come in pairs—two screens, two sides to each; two stories; there are also two main sets of casting—an actor is being cast to play the soldier; Fast is holding a casting session to see if the soldier's story is worthy material from which to make a new work. But if every casting is a kind of test, are we, as Fast's audience, not being cast too? Spatially and temporally, this is already challenging territory to navigate as a viewer, as we need to make decisions about how, from where to watch the work; whether to spend fourteen minutes to see the loop through once, or double that to watch the entire footage from each side. We become more aware that we are being tested when we attend to the phrases that are audible at the beginning and end of the interview. As it all starts, Fast asks the soldier if he would be comfortable improvising—a question which throws

everything we hear thereafter into some doubt. At the end of his meeting, Fast (or rather the edited Fast) rejects the soldier as a suitable subject for a work, saying that his stories are too long and exceed most people's attention span. Hearing this, we ask ourselves whether the work has been too long for us—are we attending carefully enough? It may sound from this as if Fast is being didactic, but this certainly is not the tone of the work.

At the end of the interviews, after announcing "I'm not so much interested in the political angle", Fast continued, "I'm more interested in how experience is turned into memory and the way memory becomes stories, the way memories become mediated, recorded, broadcast." The politics of "The Casting" evidently are not so much about the rights and wrongs of the government that placed the soldier in Iraq, less still the soldier's activity on the fateful day. However, there is certainly a "political angle" in Fast's attention to the mediation of memory, an angle located in his resistance to the urge to turn experience into consumable narrative, in his fidelity to the fracturing impact of trauma, in his critique of conventions of historical reconstruction. This political angle is all the more acute—and urgent—when we consider the tendencies to turn Iraq into a simple story either of a divinely justified "War on Terror" or of an imperialist misadventure all of whose protagonists are equally barbaric. In its attention to the politics of mediation "The Casting" might well turn out to be one of the most astute artistic responses to the Iraq war.

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