

## OMER FAST

If you draw a genetic line from Friedrich Nietzsche to Steven Spielberg, you'll run smack dab into Adolf Hitler. Nietzsche, during one of his innumerable rhetorical blowouts, claimed, "We possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities." Feeble humans have no grasp of truth—but, hell, who needs it anyway? Contra Nietzsche, Spielberg declared to the cast of *Schindler's List*: "We are not making a film. We're making a document." (Yikes.) How can a fabrication replicate reality? Entire curricula have been devoted to untangling this conundrum—the battle between representation and its supposed "limits." And Omer Fast, a young Israeli-born, Berlin-based video artist, provides an ingenious update to the eternally returning struggle.

Fast's recent two-channel installation had the substance and feel of something we've all seen before. Academics coined a word for it years ago that remains particularly apt: video-testimony. In quiet, comfortable settings, witnesses to horrific events recount indelible memories: herded like cattle, segregated by gender, crying while their hair is shaved in front of a gas chamber, etc. The statements are intercut and balanced by exterior images of abandoned Holocaust sites, now in decay, destitute-looking but nevertheless all-too-powerful reminders of atrocity. Claude Lanzmann, one of *Schindler's List's* most outspoken critics, claimed that this was one way to approach the irreproducible event. You can't show the catastrophe without somehow morally degrading it—but you can honor it through the praxis of memory. In a rather Nietzschean comment, Lanzmann ripped into Spielberg: "[The Holocaust] erects around itself, in a circle of flames, a boundary which cannot be breached because a certain absolute degree of horror is intransmissible: to pretend it can be done is to make oneself guilty of the most serious sort of transgression." But now, thanks to Fast, we've got a different nut to crack. The people in his video are not victims; they are extras from Spielberg's movie. Hence his title: *Spielberg's List*. And, to further the confusion, the images of Holocaust sites are not real either; they are the remains

of the *Schindler's List* set—remnants of a movie so famous people still come to see them on tour buses. Something has gone askew here. If you look closely at the "concentration camp" image on this page, you'll notice something problematic: some of the "victims" are smiling. "When I did the interviews," says Fast, "a lot of the extras had photo albums filled with snapshots, along with other mementos. Some of them had them arranged in what I would hesitantly call shrines." Does an image like this in some way equate two fundamentally different historical experiences? "This is certainly not to draw a direct line connecting the living labor of the inmates to that of the extras, but to allude instead to the body's potential for carrying a subversive message that might not jibe well with our handle on the historical record."

The closer you get to Fast's work the further you lose "our handle" on it—on multiple levels. Only a handful of the extras are old enough to have actual memories of the Holocaust, and in their testimonies you can sense a wavering interplay between film fiction and historical reality. "I remember more from 50 years ago than ten years ago," complains one subject. There are also moments when the dual screens show the same story being told, but with slight variations in the subtitles. "During the editing of the video I consulted with two translators and was struck by the different variations I would get on the same words. I decided to exploit these nuances by occasionally offering the translations at the same time, to reinforce the doubling that underlines the testimonies, the secondhandedness of an experience which is nevertheless real."

The same exhibition featured *A Tank Translated*, a separate but related piece. The four-man crew of an Israeli tank appeared on four separate monitors, roughly positioned in the posts they would occupy inside the tank itself. Each was asked, according to Fast, "to describe the spaces not seen in the work, the spaces defined by the thick skin of the vehicle, the interior protected space and the exterior terrain targeted by the tank." Both the Tank piece and the Spielberg video deal with collaborative visions, consciousness collected and then structured by the artist into some-



**The artist is represented by Postmasters Gallery in NYC. To read an interview with him, go to [www.filmlinc.com](http://www.filmlinc.com)**

thing far removed from any coherent state of standard art objectness. Repositioned in a nebulous space somehow not unrelated to the disconnected blur of metaphor of which Nietzsche despaired, the tank and the Spielberg movie nonetheless have been shaped within an absolutely new form of perception. —CHRIS CHANG