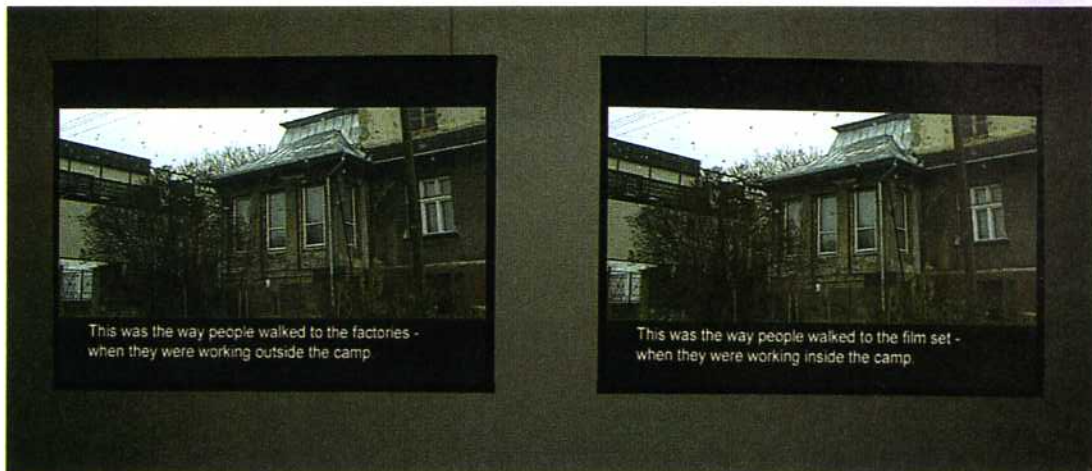


Making History

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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



Above:
Godville
 2004-5
 Production photograph

Left:
Godville
 2004-5
 Installation view

it up into words and syllables. From this database he constructed an 18-minute monologue, *CNN Concatenated* (2002), which is delivered by individual news presenters, in a fast, jolting fashion, word by word. Just as Serra's rolling titles spoke directly to their readers ('You are delivered to the advertiser, who is the customer'), so Fast's presenters address their viewer 'Look, I know that you're scared ...' - indirectly admitting the manner in which news programmes foster and feed off the neuroses of their audiences. As well as being incisive, the work is also very funny: the slick and slimy anchors are made to utter sentiments quite beyond their sensibilities but ap-

pear absolutely unruffled, their manicures and fake tans always immaculate.

Fast's most recent project is *Godville* (2004-5), made at the Living History Museum of Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, where visitors can talk to various staff members who are dressed up as 18th-century characters representing different facets of colonial American life. Fast interviewed and filmed the costumed staff in, but also out of character, speaking about their motivations for working and living at the museum. If such places can sometimes encourage what Fast called a 'pornography of the past', he disrupted the illusion by confronting the characters

Omer Fast's Brechtian interruptions provide space for critical thought.

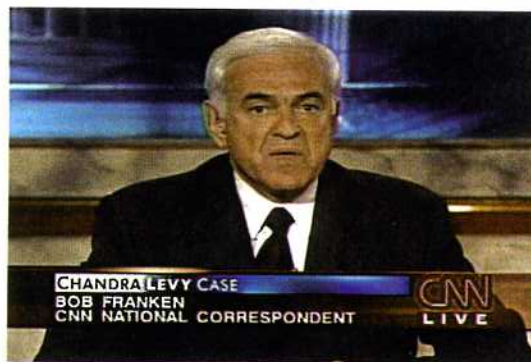
as 21st-century individuals. As might be expected, various other forms of disruption take place in the work. Fast chopped up the interviews and strung words back together again, making it difficult to know whether the speaker is talking in or out of character; after a while it is impossible to gauge whether the monologues resemble the actual recorded interviews at all. While such confusion is in some ways appropriate to the temporal confusion of the interviewees and museum visitors, what's exemplary about Fast's approach is that the final product does not gel into some spectacular reconfigured whole (think of Candice Breitz' recent use of splicing). His Brechtian interruptions genuinely interfere with the coherence of the subject matter, providing space for critical thought.

The installation requirements of *Godville* enact another cut: the work comprises two films projected onto either side of the same floating screen, as in Michael Snow's *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974). On one side we watch the chopped-up interviews; on the other Fast plays footage of the museum and of its employees' houses. At times it is hard to tell the genuine colonial buildings from the 21st-century dwellings, such is the actors' taste for period kitsch. The footage segues into shots of the recent construction of faux 18th-century houses, a passage that recalls a kind of updated *Homes for America* (1966) in which Dan Graham's 1960s' Minimalist forms make way for 21st-century traditionalism. While economically representing the human and architectural aspects of Colonial Williamsburg, the two films as much complement as interrupt one another. Watching either screen, the viewer can feel distracted, realizing they are missing the footage playing on the reverse.

Godville ends on one side with a medley of images of Southern churches, while on the other an actor is made by Fast's edit to intone countless sayings about what God means to him. Fast seems to view the increasing religiosity of the South as an end-result of the nostalgia often perpetuated by institutions such as Colonial Williamsburg, but his research indicated that the Living History Museum was not a monolithic entity. Indeed he discovered that there have been times when the museum has put history to work in an almost Benjaminian manner – as, for instance, when an estate auction was re-enacted one day and visitors to the tourist attraction encountered the sale of families of slaves. While conducting his interviews, Fast also discovered that some of the actors were inflecting their performances to reflect their criticism of the current American administration. Playing colonial subjects questioning their allegiance to the crown, they hoped that inquisitive viewers might draw parallels with the present situation of American citizens. Knowing that the employees had a range of political affiliations that weren't circumscribed by the museum's overarching ideology, Fast decided to complicate matters further. Some way through their fractured monologues, the interviewees begin to speak back to the camera, accusing Fast of manipulating their words. They complain that he is turning them into stereotypes and ask him what all his editing and studio trickery can possibly achieve.

Of course, we cannot know whether or not the employees did address Fast like this, but by twisting their words in this way he articulates within the project the most severe criticism *Godville* could possibly attract. Every bit as much as he questions the spectacular ways in which history is presented in the culture industry at the moment, he scrutinizes the facilities of his practice and the ethics of his own art's criticality.

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CNN Concatenated
2002
DVD stills