ARTS & LETTERS

The Reanimator

Omer Fast

BY GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

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Omer Fast relaxes into a hard wooden chair and listens to a man tell a story about a suicide bombing. Other people have found this story interesting, even moving, and have encouraged the man, a medic, to repeat it often. It really ought to be a good story: It is not only about a suicide bombing, but turns on some mistaken-identity intrigue. But the medic tells the story in a hollow way, which makes even the hired camerawoman a little restless. Fast could easily have found someone, he reassures me later, with dramatic recollections of a suicide bombing—we are, after all, in Jerusalem—but he was drawn to the medic's anecdote. He's not entirely sure why.

Fast is here in the Katamon, an undistinguished residential neighborhood he hasn't been to since he was twelve years old, to see if he can inspire the medic to tell his story in a way he's not used to telling it. It's almost a hundred degrees outside, but all of the windows in the medic's apartment are closed so the riot of bird-chirrups outside doesn't come through on the audio track. Fast is curious about the things that happen when something checks the smooth delivery of a practiced story. He is going to make a short film that will revolve around and move beyond the medic's experience; he will reenact scenes to extend and transform the medic's brief encounter with a Palestinian bomber. So for Fast's present purposes, the story doesn't exactly have to be interesting—he can fix that himself in the production of

his film—but Fast would have more to work with if the medic's account were not spoken as if by rote.

There's a vivid contrast between Fast's professional mien and his personal reticence. On the plane from Berlin, where Fast lives, to Ben Gurion, he leaned forward across the middle seat between us and made as if to chat offhandedly. He'd just been contacted by an interviewer for some art publication—his contribution to this year's Whitney Biennial, a video installation called *The Casting*, earned him the exhibition's top honor—and all the interviewer wanted to ask was what it was like for an Israeli-born, New York–raised, secular Jew to live and make art in Berlin, a place that, historically, has not always been as hospitable to Jews as it may be now.

"But that," Fast says, "has nothing to do with anything. I don't want to have biography be the level of discourse." Fast wears tapered, military-issue, usefully pocketed pants the color of a duck pond; black mod boots with a long, slightly upturned toe; and elliptical silver glasses of a surprising Edwardian delicacy. More often than not, a five-month-old smiles flirtatiously from his chest. (The five-month-old's schedule did not permit her to come along to Israel.) He was born in Jerusalem in 1972, moved to New York City in time for the rise of hip-hop, got an MFA at Hunter College at one of the few moments in recent history that there was no money in the art world, and then moved to Berlin.

Fast, who has refused to take part in group exhibitions in Berlin that feature (as one did) the "New Hebrews," does not like to think of himself as an Israeli artist or really, for that matter, an artist at all. When asked what he does, he retreats even further and says he "makes some small films." When you tell people you're an artist, "you get into trouble. Questions follow. But when you say you make small films, people think, 'Oh, okay, I get that,' and they leave you alone." The only definition of "artist" he'll accept is a sociological one: He is an artist because his small films, some of which are longer than an hour and others of which are elaborate multichannel installations, are shown in galleries and in museums and not in cinemas or living rooms.

The Casting, the Whitney piece, is a fourteen-minute, four-channel work projected onto the front and rear sides of two large screens. The front projections show a series of *tableaux vivants*, moving images in which the characters stand completely still, while an audio track narrates. The story is framed as an audition for an acting role, shown from different alternating angles on each of the screens. In the first few moments, a directorial voice asks someone who seems to be an auditioning actor if he is comfortable improvising, and he says, with some anxiety, that he'll try.

The auditioning actor's voice goes on to tell a story that, it later becomes clear, is actually two stories melded together. The actor's voiceover, occasionally interrupted by the director's questions, is delivered in the voice of an American soldier: One story takes place when he's stationed one winter in Bavaria, presumably on his way to Iraq, and the other takes place once he's shipped out. The Bavarian part is the story of an awful date he went on with a young German woman over his first Christmas away from home, and the Iraqi story involves accidentally shooting a civilian while investigating a roadside bomb. Both narratives involve driving along a road, so Fast uses sentences about driving and speed as nodal points in switching between stories. The audio track is seamless, so it's not always easy to tell which story the soldier is relating at any given time. Yet the tension stays constant, so the emotional arc is unbroken.

The rear projections are almost unwatchably choppy. The left channel shows the actual soldier being interviewed—like the medic film, *The Casting* uses a discussion with a real person as its foundation—and the right shows Fast himself conducting the interview, which reveals itself as a series of talks minced up and hashed together. You realize you'd been hearing their voices as you watched the front projections.

Their shirts strobe. Some of the soldier's phrases have been intricately reassembled: The climax of his bad-date story, for example, in which the German woman shows him a stylized B-movie slashwork of self-cutting scars, has been strung together from almost syllabic components strip-mined out of sentences

otherwise unrelated. All of this makes for a sensuous dissonance: The soft, easy patter of the storytelling is difficult to square with the flickered visuals.

In *Artforum*, critic Tom Holert has discussed *The Casting* in terms of media critique, writing (in art-world vernacular) that Fast's films "reflect and rearticulate the truth regimes regulating contemporary image production." This reading strikes Fast as a banalization of his work. As he says in a forthcoming interview in the Italian art magazine *Uovo*, "None of this is done in order to reveal something about the way narratives are made or framed by 'the media,' which is anyway something long understood by your average gallery-goer." This is a good point, which applies not only to his work but to a lot of video art. Fast also goes a step further and disclaims any ethical content, concluding the *Uovo* interview with the coy remark that he doesn't "think ethics provide particularly interesting criteria for judging or making an artwork."

One may be reminded of Nabokov's famously evasive claim, in the afterword to *Lolita*, that the novel "has no moral in tow." Nabokov continues: "For me, a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss." Fast suggests his work should be taken in terms of the aesthetic bliss it provides. "I wish I could make films about weekends, about hobbies," he says with a sigh that feels awfully well rehearsed. When you make small films about the Holocaust and suicide bombing, there's something suspect about this disclaimer.

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One lunchtime in 2002, during the first few years of the Second Intifada, the medic gets out of a van in Jerusalem and walks toward his favorite falafel joint, hears a bang, softer and blunter than you probably would have expected from a bomb, and sees that it came from the falafel joint. Upon hearing the bang he either continues straight ahead toward the falafel joint, as in the version he extemporizes for Fast, or he "turns around" and heads toward the falafel joint, as he stated in the version he wrote down at the time, which Fast asks him to read aloud on camera. Either way, the man hesitates a moment outside the site, hoping to be relieved of

medical responsibility by an ambulance, then walks into the falafel joint and sees a person on the ground with his legs blown off. The medic, an American who left Long Island for Jerusalem in the late seventies and served in the first Lebanon war, proceeds to give the injured man mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Now either the legless man is about to die or actually does die, so the medic leaves the bombed-out falafel counter and walks across the street, stepping behind the police tape so as to go from being a participant to being a spectator.

At this point the man hears two other spectators talking about the one-casualty suicide bombing. The medic "does the math" and realizes that the man he had been resuscitating must have been the suicide bomber.

Over the next few hours and days the man is told, by friends and colleagues, that this story is "moving" and "important," and has at its core a "moral dilemma." (An email account of his story, which the man wrote in the middle of the night two days later, "went viral.") The moral dilemma, at least as the medic sees it, is this: He had a gun on him that day, he says, and had he known that the Arab was going to do what he did in fact do, he would have shot the Arab as he passed him on the street; after the Arab did do what he planned to do, however, the unwitting medic, trained to save lives, tried to save his life. Over the years since the experience, the man has come to believe outwardly that this chain of events did, in fact, represent a moral dilemma, and that such a dilemma makes his story profound and poignant. He is proud of the story and feels as though he acquitted himself honorably. There is nevertheless some anxiety attached to all of this, as though he has found himself in the position of being compelled to retell a story whose significance eludes him. Part of him must understand that though he did act with courage, there was never a moral dilemma on offer.

Fast's intelligence is steely and opaque, but when he interviews the medic he affects the indiscriminately tender reserve of a good therapist. His questions are gently prodding but operate on an unthreatening level of generality. He does not call attention to the inconsistencies in the man's story, such as whether or not he could have turned around when he heard the bomb. Pointing out an inconsistency would

be a form of asking for less of a story, and Fast is always hoping for more. He encourages an artless pile of detail. When the medic repeats something the way he usually repeats it, Fast asks him to pause and try to come up with something new. Where, exactly, was the blood? What did the blood look like? Where did you see the shattered glass? Tell me about the bomber's severed arm. Did you see any emotion in the bomber's eyes? Fast doesn't ask much about the man's own emotional reaction or interpretation of the event, focusing instead on trying to generate profuse sense memories.

Fast is preoccupied with the question of how experience becomes story, the process by which events are given meaning as they are compressed, transmitted, stored, and retrieved. Fast is drawn to subjects who, like the medic, have told their stories many times. In these cases, the original events have been so hyperactively embalmed that they have become corroded. The medic repeats the account in a way that makes him seem estranged, from both the event and from himself. He cannot recall many additional details; he tells his story as if he had read it in a newspaper. Which he did, but only after he himself had written it there.

At the end of the interview, Fast breaks character for a moment. "Do you like telling that story?" he asks the medic.

"It's cathartic," says the medic. But it doesn't seem cathartic at all; it seems mechanized.

This is the kind of dead end that Fast, with playful disbelief, likes to press past. He takes a story that is static and animates it. He takes a story that is reduced and adds to it. He takes a story that has been ploddingly ordered and rearranges it to see how it might otherwise go, to propose what form it might take if it hadn't been somewhere arrested.

The way Fast accomplishes this, or one way he accomplishes this, is to inhabit the stories of his subjects without destroying the originals. The suicide-bombing piece won't be shown until September, when it will premiere at the Tate Liverpool as

part of the 2008 Biennial, so Fast's not yet sure what it will ultimately look like, though he's written a script for the various reenactments that will cloud around the medic's story. (These involve a directorial character named Omer Fast, who is shooting a film about this memory of a suicide bombing.)

Despite these scripts, Fast never sees the specific form of the work until he has to edit something together. The new story which will result, even if it's a complete fabrication, will still be built of the discrete phrases and gestural tics of his subject.

When Fast sits down to edit a piece, he can have an idea of how he wants the final narrative to unfurl—he can know, for example, that the soldier's German-date story in *The Casting* doesn't generate enough intensity to properly parallel the Iraqi shooting, that it will have to be ratcheted up with an invented revelation of, in that case, the German woman's self-mutilation—but he has to work within a certain set of audio constraints dictated by the subject's speech patterns. One of the requirements of this sort of piece, if it is going to have the intended aesthetic effect, is that the narration must sound like it was actually spoken as presented, which means that Fast's changes are limited by the register and speed of the initial interview. Sometimes these editing jags take ages; one five-minute harangue in a film called *Godville*, in which a reenactor in Colonial Williamsburg assails him, hilariously, as an effete interloper, took Fast two months to edit. Part of his artistic practice is an almost masochistic exaction, an effort rendered invisible if the work succeeds in covering its seams. What we get out of all this is neither the original subject nor Fast but something in between. Fast has written of his own narrative character in these works that "it's a bit like the classic horror movie possession (although I'm not sure who's possessing whom)."

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The aesthetic experience of watching his films is one of confused interpretation. One might roughly suggest that Fast has two corresponding strategies of obfuscation. The first is to complicate the identity of the subject.

This is clear in *The Casting*, but it is perhaps even clearer in a 2002 work of Fast's, *CNN Concatenated*, an eighteen-minute video mosaic of ten thousand words and word fragments cached from hundreds of hours of television news and flashed together in a epileptic tirade. We hear an audio track offering some kind of monologue and we try to understand what we are hearing in terms of the person talking. But what we get is an impossible hash of a subject: it's part Fast, author of the screed, who alternately damns and cajoles; part familiar cable-news talking heads, whose words are accompanied by an immediately recognizable physical idiom of alarm; and part the corporate authority behind the news, offering spectacle instead of analysis, urgency instead of history, fearful entertainments in the guise of information. It's the same kind of sensuous dissonance created by *The Casting*, where our visual awareness of pastiche jars with an aural sense of coherence.

Other works of Fast's confuse the events and objects to which his subjects refer. In 2003 Fast made a film called *Spielberg's List*. The beginning of the film seems like just so much more Holocaust testimony: first-person descriptions of the camps, the smokestacks, the dogs, the hunger, the widely plumbed range of Nazi inhumanity. One might watch this testimony with the same measures of sadness and respect and anger and exhaustion with which most Holocaust testimony, at this point, is taken.

But the film starts to breed some strange incongruities. One woman begins to talk about how she fell and scratched her knee in the middle of a forced march, but then reports with relief that "they" came and fixed up her knee for her soon after. She smiles broadly. The interviewees, it begins to become clear, aren't talking about their experiences in the camps themselves but about their experiences *as extras in the film Schindler's List*. They are talking about a response they had to an experience that was staged, in which they were paid to perform as sufferers we have all heard a lot about. In this light, these interviews no longer feel like important testimony but rather a curious artifact of a fake experience. The woman

whose knee was fixed up says that what she experienced as an extra was just like being in the actual camp but "on a mini-scale."

This is not the only surprise. Many of Spielberg's extras were *themselves* survivors of the camps, and Fast's interviews have often been cut—and, to complicate matters even more, the subtitles have often been falsified—in such a way as to make us unsure whether the interviewees are talking about their real experiences or the reenactment. (Fast points out that a funny correlative of this is the condition of the two camps, outside Krakow: The real, original camp is in disrepair, while the camp set built for Spielberg's film is maintained for tours. There is an amusing scene in the video where Fast, who has bribed his way into the camp set, brushes away some snow on the ground and discovers the fake road, which Spielberg had had realistically paved with ersatz Jewish gravestones.)

In this puzzling context, what we begin to do—what I began to do—is give up trying to figure out whether any particular interviewee at any given time is recalling the real or the fake experience, and instead pay as close attention as possible to the emotional charge of the accounts. So despite the fact that yes, on some level it's horrifying that this woman thinks she experienced a concentration camp "on a mini-scale," there is nevertheless some substance to her claim. She did, after all, have some significant emotional experience as a paid reenactor, and this experience continues to resonate in her life.

This is no blithe who-are-we-to-judge moment. It is, rather, that questions presuming judgment have changed. We notice that our central questions, as viewers, have changed from questions such as, "What is the connection between this woman's testimony and the history to which it refers?" to questions such as, "What is this woman's emotional experience, and how has it played out in her life?" Where the woman in Poland had actually been at a fake place, the medic in Jerusalem seemed to have been absent from something real: His participation in a real event was a far less emotional experience than her participation in a staged one. She was what Fast calls "an authentic witness to a representation," and he was a participant in reality at a remove. For her, it is a matter of how meaning

disproportionately accrued; for him, we find ourselves asking where it has been lost.

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In the end, what Fast tries to pass off as mere aestheticism has more than its share of ethical content. Fast understands that in order for his work to be effective it must hold something out to its audience, it must offer a barter: His films are fun and interesting to watch, fun and interesting to think about, made with extraordinary cleverness and unfathomable patience. But it is only because they are fun and interesting to watch—because they offer an aesthetic experience that is memorably vertiginous, because they *tell a great story*—that his films can operate at the ethical intersection of personal history and cultural history.

Last year, Fast was commissioned by the curators of an exhibition in the Flemish city of Mechelen to make a film, in Flemish with subtitles, called *De Grote Boodschap* ("The Great Message"). There is a scene in the film where a (white) Belgian beat-boxing champion, who has a stunning black girlfriend, is trying to rent an empty apartment to an Arab. The Arab says almost nothing, though he speaks Flemish, and is even made out to seem vaguely suspect; he says that he has no bank account and can only pay in cash.

The scene has the beat-boxing champion falling all over himself to connect with the Arab, complaining about the racist old woman who lived in the apartment (who was the beat-boxer's grandmother), and desperately trying to wave credentials that indicate he's not like the rest of these crudely xenophobic Belgians. The first time I saw the scene I identified with the put-upon Arab; we Jews in Berlin can be so lavishly backed into symbolic presence. But the second time I saw this I identified with the Belgian, as it occurred to me—with some discomfort—that the way he tries to relate to the Arab isn't too dissimilar from my own apologetically diplomatic interactions with the Turks at the döner kebab place by the U-bahn.

Part of the ethical experience of watching one of Fast's works is discovering the ways in which we have assumed a subject to be too simply a representative of history. Fast warns us that people are too robust to be treated as historical categories, too various to be treated lightly. People are at the same time more than the stories history tells about them (in the case of Holocaust survivors) and more than the stories that they have become trapped into telling about themselves (in the case of our friend in Jerusalem).

I'm speculating, but I suspect the impulse in Fast that asks for his work to be evaluated only aesthetically must be related to his being an Israeli-born New Yorker in Berlin. For this is one of the things that can make it so hard to be a contemporary Jew or a contemporary German here: to be framed by a history that does not feel like your own, yet nevertheless shapes the most intimate of interactions. Fast says that "people are traps for history," but history is also a trap for people. Fast's works free his characters from the stories that have trapped them, enabling their details and their gestures to tell other stories.

Some critics, like *Artforum*'s Tom Holert, have interpreted Omer's self-referentiality—his rear channel, as it were, and his directorial character's statements about how stories are mediated—as a kind of apology for the narrative authority he exercises. Omer's inclusion of himself, and his acknowledgment of the process by which an interview becomes a narrative and the traps of history are sprung, released, and reset, is not apologetic but exultant—and deservedly self-congratulatory.

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