

OMER FAST NOSTALGIA

It starts with a trap. Omer Fast, the filmmaker, interviews his subject, a refugee from the Niger Delta who is seeking asylum in Britain. The man speaks of his experiences as a child soldier surviving under difficult conditions, and ultimately tells a rather banal story of building a trap for partridges, a craft taught to him by an ex-soldier in his homeland. He narrates in detail, describing the type of stick used to construct the trap: importantly, when cut, it emits no smell to alert the prey; and also importantly, when bent, it does not yield completely, but will spring back to its original position even after days of being taut. It's hard to picture this contraption of sticks and fishing line; despite the great detail of the anecdote, there is no clarity. This voiceover is paired with a visualization of the trap being built, although clearly not by the refugee himself, because we see him for a split-second at the end, springing a makeshift trap, right in the studio during the interview.

Like much of Omer Fast's work, *Nostalgia* begins with an interview, conducted with a real person whose life experiences have placed them in the midst of some larger social or historical event. The Holocaust, the Iraq war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or in this case the situation of asylum seekers—these are all subjects written about in books and newspapers, represented in the media and in other films. In many ways it is clear that Fast is not particularly compelled to tell the story of these larger events, but rather to engage on the level of the personal, the anecdotal, the incidental, and to understand the role that narrative plays in shaping individual reality. So, Fast seeks out individuals with stories to tell about lived experience within these highly charged contexts, stories that they may have told hundreds of times before.

And we return to the trap. In the second part of *Nostalgia* the filmmaker interviews his subject, a refugee from the Niger Delta who is seeking asylum in London. We see interviewer and interviewee on split screens, as the filmmaker explains that these interviews will form the basis of two films, one comprising extracts from these conversations and one that will dramatize a single aspect as a separate film. We watch as the filmmaker struggles to extract details from his subject, about his home life, about being a child soldier, about war, but the subject instead relates an anecdote about his father and how he taught him to trap partridges. The self-consciousness of the filmmaker's questioning and explanation conspires with the echo of

the trap to reveal this interview as staged. There is a productive confusion when we notice the details, how this video is too perfect—the quality that mimics television, not documentary; the multiple camera angles and edits that belie the construction of the footage; the seamlessness of the dialogue. And so it turns on itself to reveal both interior and exterior narratives, articulating the fact that this work narrates the story it tells at the same time as it narrates its own making.

The spatialization of Fast's multipart installations highlights this self-reflexivity, underscoring the continuity and discontinuity of their shared narratives. The multiplicity of filmic tropes—the documentary, the reenactment, the docudrama, the melodrama—allows for the mechanics of structured scripting, exacting editing, and looping to become explicit. The physical experience of viewing, of watching and listening, and making connections between constituent parts is crucial to the exercise of creating an aggregate awareness of the effects of narrative and image construction. The work strings bits of interrelated narrative through multiple layers of representation, but the concern here is not so much the line between fiction and reality as the interplay between historical narrative and personal narrative, and perhaps more directly the ways in which narratives themselves construct history and personal experience.

The subjects of Fast's works are often characterized as political, and certainly within the context of history and current events they are; within the frame of his work, however, we understand politically significant events as complex grounds for more nuanced engagement with psychological, emotional, and personal experience. Fast uses these situations for their dramatic and metaphorical potential rather than to stake an explicit political position, and often the narrative thread is tangential to the political or historical circumstances. This acknowledges the reality of human complexity, that we both undermine and transcend easy categories like citizen or refugee, hero or victim, and that the politics of the individual in relation to a larger reality are never simple. Through his works' self-conscious construction, Fast also acknowledges the complexity of representation in all guises, from the interviewee who tells a story, to the filmmaker who uses it, to the public who consumes it,



Omer Fast: Two-channel video still from *Nostalgia II*, 2009; courtesy of the artist; gb agency, Paris; Postmasters, New York; and Arratia, Beer, Berlin.



Omer Fast: Still from *Nostalgia III*, 2009; Super 16mm film transferred to HD video; courtesy of the artist; gb agency, Paris; Postmasters, New York; and Arratia, Beer, Berlin.

projecting an ambivalence with regard to the function of politicized works, and even the trap of politicized representation.

So we follow the trap. The third part of *Nostalgia* repurposes the anecdote of the trap, and also jumps off from the general circumstances of the asylum seeker, but upends them by inverting both racial and national dynamics: this time we follow a white, English man who seeks asylum in Africa. This inversion is an overt move to pull the narrative away from the specificity of the current news cycle, to allow the drama and the characters to be read outside of an identified time and place. It also functions to elide and avoid characterizations of people based on race and nationality, letting them be understood based on their complex motivations, outside of some predetermined victim/oppressor dynamic. This geographic dislocation is matched by a temporal ambiguity—the piece feels of a different time, from the tone and quality of the 16mm film used to shoot it to the set dressing and costuming; the 1970s are evoked but not replicated, and we are left with some atemporal projection of the future conceived in the past.

The recollection of the trap recurs and repeats throughout this fictionalized narrative, the thread passing from one character to another. Although this part of *Nostalgia* also begins with the subject of asylum seekers, with a caseworker interviewing a refugee about his possible asylum, this is a dead end, a trap in and of itself. Rather than follow the refugee, the film follows this anecdote as it circles around the generative idea of asylum while avoiding addressing the subject directly. So the story moves from refugee to caseworker, from office to escape tunnel, from the caseworker to her lover and on to his daughter, from official space to private space to the public space of the school where the refugee works as a janitor. And so the larger narrative loops around and connects these disparate episodes; the recurring

tale of the trap connects them, but each reiteration serves to signal a loss or a projection, each personal absence echoing the larger absence at the core of the film. And it becomes clear that the title doesn't simply refer to nostalgia for a lost homeland, or a life changed forever by immigration, but rather to ideas of loss and longing writ large.

The anecdote of the trap of course suggests a metaphorical relation to the work's purported subject—to the reality of people trapped inside political and historical circumstances, trapped in some limbo between a troubled homeland and an unwelcoming adopted home, trapped by systems of government and control. But as a leitmotif the idea of asylum is foregrounded so much that it nearly disappears, becomes a blind spot and a void in the center of the story. And we recognize the trap of language, or the trap of our desires for narrative cohesion; again, there is great detail, but little clarity. Instead we see how this simple anecdote, carried forward from person to person, once heard and once spoken, reveals individual needs and motivations, and serves as a foil for the construction and projection of self through narrative. Fast has said that people are traps for history. His works meditate on the ways in which we hold history and release it; how experience becomes story, and story becomes experience again through its retelling, and how in the process we author our own identities in relation to the world.

Elizabeth Thomas

PHYLLIS WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR



ABOVE, FRONT Omer Fast: Production still from *Nostalgia III*, 2009; Super 16mm film transferred to HD video; courtesy of the artist; gb agency, Paris; Postmasters, New York; and Arratia, Beer, Berlin. Photo: Thierry Bal.



Omer Fast: Still from *Nostalgia III*, 2009; Super 16mm film transferred to HD video; courtesy of the artist; gb agency, Paris; Postmasters, New York; and Arratia, Beer, Berlin.

Born in 1972 in Jerusalem and currently living in Berlin and New York, Omer Fast won the prestigious Berlin Nationalgalerie Prize for Young Art in 2009 and the Bucksbaum Award from the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2008. He has had solo exhibitions at Kunsthaus Baselland, Basel; Lunds Konsthall, Sweden; Kunstverein Hannover; and the Museum of Modern Art, Vienna. This fall Fast's work will be featured in Performa 09 and in a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. His group exhibitions include *On the Subject of War* at the Barbican Art Gallery, London; *Made Up* at the Liverpool Biennial, Tate Liverpool; the 2008 Whitney Biennial; *The Anxious* at Centre Pompidou, Paris; and *The Cinema Effect: Realisms* at The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. Fast received a B.A. from Tufts University, a B.F.A. from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and an M.F.A. from Hunter College of the City University of New York.

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