



In Times of Trouble

Several recent videos and films reflect the growing cultural response, often indirect but nonetheless penetrating, to the political conditions of our day.

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

From the fifth year of the U.S. war in Iraq and the final year of the Bush presidency, the 20th century looks like a very distant place, and a cultural response has slowly built to the ravaged political landscape this administration has created. A trickle until fairly recently and now a sizable stream, the politically engaged art that has emerged is nothing like the activist work of the '60s that is its most significant point of comparison. The new work is oblique and fragmented, reluctant to announce fixed goals or declare unyielding positions—but no more so than the policies it opposes. Instead of ideological clarity, and in the absence of tactical success, government efforts—when not outsourced—have focused on controlling the political narrative and

its visual rhetoric. Meanwhile, photographic images generated on all sides, by soldiers, terrorists, news media and the military, propagate virally in all kinds of mediums. It has begun to seem that art would be a good place to turn for relevant insights.

In the past few months, a number of recent films and videos by artists that address a variety of political conditions were on view at various venues in New York. Most are not explicitly about Iraq; instead, they examine events in present-day Syria, Algeria in the late 1950s, Hiroshima just after it was bombed and Manhattan just before it was colonized. In all, wariness about identifying finite causes and placing certain blame frames the work's motivating anger.

Among the most acclaimed works in the Whitney Biennial is the 14-minute-long, four-channel projection *The Casting* (2007) by Omer Fast, winner of this year's Bucksbaum Award. This devastating video installation is unusual in aiming squarely at the emotional consequences, for individual soldiers, of the American occupation of Iraq. It contains two narratives, related by two physically similar young men. One story concerns a soldier's encounter with a troubled woman while on leave in Germany. He's attracted to her—she's a little wild and she's pretty—but she cuts herself (she has an armful of scars to prove it), and he decides to pull back. He delivers this news while she's driving, recklessly and then suicidally fast. The other account is of a more catastrophic moment of confusion, when the soldier, on duty in Iraq, aims a shot through the windshield of an oncoming car and unintentionally kills (or perhaps only badly injures) a passenger in the back seat. The monologue alternates seamlessly between one story and the other, the paired road motifs often serving as moments of perfect ambiguity. Violence deliberate and random, professional and amateur, officially approved and both morally and legally abhorrent, are among the seemingly fixed oppositions that *The Casting* causes to slip.

Moreover, as in Fast's 2003 *Spielberg's List*, which sows confusion about whether its subjects, all extras in Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, are recalling experiences of the film or the war, in *The Casting* it is hard to say who is making things up, and which things. The four videos are shown on two sets of roughly adjacent, back-to-back screens; a single audio track serves all four. Two side-by-side screens show staged tableaux, including, at one point (all four videos are synchronously looped), the studio where the casting



This spread, two stills and an installation view of Omer Fast's The Casting, 2007, four-channel video, 14 minutes.

call for which the work is named takes place. On this side, actors playing soldiers, Iraqi civilians, the German woman and the American soldier freeze for each scene; only windblown dust and clothing, or swaying plush dice hanging from a rearview mirror, disclose that the camera is rolling.

On the other set of screens, we see only two talking heads, an interviewer and his subject. The latter clearly appears to be telling his own story when he talks about the military incident; making us examine how we determine his credibility is one of the canniest and most provocative of *The Casting's* achievements. It is not—or, perhaps it

We first see the two Algerian boys peacefully asleep, side by side. By the end of the film, they will have killed a French boy their own age.



Julia Meltzer and David Thorne: *epic*, 2008, single-channel video installation, approx. 7 minutes, with Rami Farah.



Meltzer and Thorne: *We will live to see these things, or, five pictures of what may come to pass*, 2007, single-channel video, 47 minutes.

precisely is—a matter of his delivery’s convincing affect, since often the soldier’s recollections sound emotionally stunted, as when he remembers thinking, “Shit, I just shot somebody that didn’t need to be shot. I’m going to be arrested.” He continues, in a phrase that sounds so rehearsed it can only come from a true story told too many times, “I didn’t know that that kind of thing didn’t matter.” (A catalogue essay for the work’s German premiere reveals that this narrator is indeed a U.S. sergeant, whom Fast interviewed in 2006.)

His interlocutor is Fast himself, who asks his subject if he likes improvising; presumably, that is the prompt for the story of the German girl. But what actually happened on leave, or, more to the point, on that dusty road in Iraq, and its consequences for all present, is anyone’s guess. As Fast says on-screen, his interest is in how experience becomes memory, and memory becomes a story. And, he might have added, how stories can break down under the scrutiny of art.

In March 2005, filmmakers Julia Meltzer and David Thorne went to Damascus to examine the effects of the war in Iraq on a neighboring country. Within a few weeks, the prime minister of Lebanon was assassinated, and the suspicion of involvement that fell on Syria dramatically changed the political climate there. Equally consequential was the flow of Iraqi refugees into Syria, where they now number roughly 1.5 million (in a country of just under 20 million). The five-part, 47-minute portrait of Damascus that Meltzer and Thorne made in this context, *We will live to see these things, or, five pictures of what may come to pass* (2007), screened at the Park Avenue Armory as part of the Biennial, is a mosaic that does justice to the subject’s complexity. The first section tracks the stranger-than-fiction history of a major building commissioned for Martyr’s Square at the heart of the city—a building that rises without evident plan after several architects have been awarded successive commissions for it and been dismissed in turn. Perhaps inevitably, the structure is not completed before it begins to sink, its foundations insecure; at the time of filming, it remained unfinished and unoccupied. Equally rich in metaphor is a segment about a sparsely attended, vaguely melancholy equestrian show. A voiceover, read in Arabic by an adult and in English by a child, describes the attributes of a good leader; here the allusion is to Basil as-Assad, the oldest son of Syria’s president, an accomplished rider who was groomed (the word is unavoidable) to succeed his father but died in a car accident.

In the third segment, a dissident intellectual speaks of his hopes and fears for Syria’s future. His adamant secularism, reasoned commitment to democratic processes and, above all, his relative confidence about exploring these issues on camera are so inconsistent with Western notions of allowable discourse in the troubled countries of the Middle East that what is in fact a straight talking-head interview becomes, for American audiences, the most unstable element of the film with regard to truth value. Similarly, the rote and seemingly unreflecting recitation of portions of the Qur’an by angelic young schoolgirls in the film’s fourth segment strikes a secular viewer as sad and a little chilling, though the teachers take evident pride in their students, and the filmmakers refrain from judgment. The film concludes, in a segment titled “A world purged by fire or, mission accomplished,” with a text about forging a new Middle East that is alternately calmly idealistic, grimly conservative and vaguely pastoral (it was written by Thorne, as was much of the script). The atmosphere of the Armory, where *We will live to see these things* was shown—the faded opulence of its ceremonial rooms; the chill, cavernous drill room at its core; and drearily functional upstairs spaces serving needy New Yorkers—was a suggestive backdrop that mirrored the film’s pointedly disjunctive parts.

While they were in Syria, Meltzer and Thorne began to work with Rami Farah, an actor from Golan who delivers the mesmerizing monologues (spoken in Arabic, subtitled in English) featured in two videos screened at the Whitney proper, also as part of the Biennial. *Not a matter of if but when: brief records of a time when expectations were repeatedly raised and lowered and people grew exhausted from never knowing if* (2006) is a half-hour-long series of improvisatory sketches that, like the title, are almost provocatively digressive. Often they start out simple, promise to be perfervid and then pick up momentum, becoming both surreal and enraged—an unfamiliar combination in which dreamy displacements and condensations have the impact of a punch in the face. Farah imagines body parts blown apart in war and crying out to one another; a house closing in on itself and sinking into the ground, the person inside buried and forgotten; an enemy choking on a peanut that lodges, in turn, in his eyes, ears and heart before being devoured by a mouth that next consumes itself and, finally, is reduced to wax, to dirt, to nothing.

Farah’s face is tightly cropped and fully frontal throughout, and his enormous eyes never lose contact with the camera, but the rest of his preternaturally mobile face and his graceful hands do a lot of expressive work, too. The intensity of his control—he was trained as a dancer—is no less unnerving than his anger, and the protection of the screen is welcome; when he suddenly leans toward the camera, fogging its lens with his



Three stills from Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s *Where is Where?*, 2008, video installation, approx. 54 minutes. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

breath so the image goes white, he creates a level of tension you can almost see him grinning at through the blur.

Shown on a much smaller screen and against a black rather than white background, the otherwise similar *epic* (approx. 7 minutes) is muffled by its scale; the filmmakers have chosen, they say in a wall text, less confrontational material for this work in progress. But it sustains the longer piece’s deliberate confusion of acting and testifying. Using an interview format borrowed from documentary filmmaking, Meltzer, Thorne and Farah together stage scenarios in which—as in Fast’s *The Casting*—the improvisations required by life, by theater and by the theater of war all run together.

Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s dazzling *Where is Where?* (2008), which had its U.S. premiere in late March at Marian Goodman gallery, is organized around two sharply drawn milieus. One is the comfortable, warm interior and lush wooded surrounds of the home of its blond, blue-eyed, middle-aged female protagonist. The other is the chaotic streets and arid surrounding landscape of Algiers, shown in staged footage and also original documentation made at the time of the armed uprising against the French in the late 1950s. Played out primarily on four screens, the nearly hour-long drama begins with a knock on the woman’s door and, after an ominous nocturnal interlude in the woods, returns to her house, where a very Bergmanesque figure of Death—a tall, pale man in a hooded black robe—finds himself seated at her kitchen table. The woman greets him calmly enough (“Bonjour, Monsieur la Mort,” she says, though otherwise she speaks Finnish, which is subtitled), but the walls of the kitchen tip away as they talk, cabinets, countertop and stove easing backwards into the abyss. The collapse of a woman’s world and of her sense of self are familiar motifs in Ahtila’s work, but here for the first time they read as luxuries—as emotional experiences that are less likely to be indulged (or revealed) by those whose lives are at physical risk.

The first scenes in Algeria are in grainy black and white, with soldiers, resistors and bloodshed present if not clearly visible; a cemetery is seen early on. The contrast with the color-drenched, lucid northern interiors and leafy landscape is potent. But formal contrasts are the least of Ahtila’s concerns. Before the unnamed European has kissed her two tow-headed sons good-bye as they rush off to school, heedlessly brushing past Mr. Death on the way, we’ve met the two Algerian boys around whom the plot revolves. We see them first peacefully asleep side by side. By the end, they will have killed a French boy their own age (roughly eight or nine), though all three had been friends. And though nothing suggests the Algerian boys’ budding anger, the tension in both locales quickly mounts. At a particularly terrifying moment roughly midway through the film, the tidy separation between the war-torn south and the peaceful if melancholy north is abruptly violated when soldiers storm the woman’s house, firing automatic weapons at the door to her book-lined study, rousing Algerians from its recesses and marching them at gunpoint down hallways that become the alleyways of Algiers. Briefly, frightened-looking soldiers aim straight at the camera.

Before the story reaches its tragic resolution, clear portents appear. The boys spin a switchblade on top of a kitchen table. Not long after, Mr. Death visits Algeria, rowing the boys across a boundless sea. But it is shocking nonetheless when one of the children plunges the knife into the stomach of their French friend. It takes but a moment, and is preceded by a scene in which the boys are led through what looks like a theater lobby, which momentarily undermines confidence in the truth of the violence. But, with dreadful believability, the knifing is followed by an official interrogation (the transcript of which comes from Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, an important source for this project). Yes, they were all friends, they say to the relatively humane prison doctors. And no, the French boy did nothing to anger them. But all Europeans were out to kill all Arabs, as they saw it, and the French boy’s father, a policeman, said his son’s friends should both have their throats cut. Gammely, one boy answers the question “What does being dead mean?” with “You go to heaven.” But of course the boys’ confusion is deeper than their belief in redemption. Before committing the act, one of them wonders, “Is death always a private death? When you die where are you? And,” giving the work its title, “where is where?”

Buckingham's film emphasizes that the colonization of New York was a business undertaking rather than an assertion of national determination.

The complexities of the film, which is based in part on a true incident of murder, are considerable. The moral issue at its heart, however irresolvable, can be simply expressed. But it is compounded by the competing religious as well as nationalist and cultural claims of the protagonists. Not only the boys profess their faith in God; there are also long segments addressing the European woman's faith, including a heated debate she has with a female priest who assures her of God's forgiveness. "How can I be forgiven for what happens to other people?" the woman asks. As well as the conflicting demands of different gods, there are the equally demanding imperatives of language; sometimes the two sets of claims are shown to overlap, as when the woman, who is a poet, says to the priest, "if we are always forgiven, that makes us illiterate." Earlier, she asks, "Which words make a world?" and "Which are the same for everybody?"

No less penetrating are the questions Ahtila raises (as do the other artists under discussion here) about the comparative reliability and expressive utility of documentary, reenacted and wholly invented visual and textual material. But unique among *Where is Where?*'s provocations is the way the screens are positioned. The four related video streams that constitute the bulk of the installation play simultaneously on the walls of a squarish room, and viewers sitting there can fairly comfortably integrate their rich interrelations. Two additional screens in adjoining chambers, however, can't be seen from any central vantage. On the first, an introductory animation begins with deceptively sweet birdsong, and a cheerful sunrise soon gives way to a murky sea amid which a chunky map of the U.S. is set adrift, just as a lush orange background turns blood red and a clock begins to spin madly. This short looped cartoon runs continuously, its mixed message gently coloring, literally, the main event.

On the final screen, in an irregularly shaped cul-de-sac entered through the main room, another short looped sequence runs throughout, this one of grainy, nearly illegible black-and-white footage—from René Vautier's *Un peuple en marche* (1963)—of dead children being loaded onto a truck and covered with sheets as turbaned men watch. There are lingering close-ups

of the children's faces. Here and there the film seems to have been subtly touched with splashes of blood red. This segment not only has the final word (it is on view for a short time after the narrative screens go dark, eventually giving way to the film's credits). It also haunts the whole, delivering information we feel we don't need to check more than once or twice—though we may worry, dimly, as we absorb the visually and intellectually demanding main drama, that something is happening on this back screen of vital importance to the whole. A simple device, it is heartbreakingly effective.

Stepping back in time just slightly, Leslie Thornton's *Let Me Count the Ways 10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . . 7 . . . 6* (2004) counts down to many things, beginning with the detonation of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima. The 22-minute movie, a work in progress screened at the Biennial, is mostly a montage of archival material, including, evidently, family movies: the label "Dad" floats intermittently over one of the soldiers in footage of World War II. One title announces that Dad sees the bomb drop, though what is shown are sailors watching a hula dancer. Similarly dissociated is the recorded account of the detonation and its consequences by an American woman who was in Hiroshima at the time. Evidently far enough away from the blast to escape serious injury, she is an eager, cheerful witness who delivers her account like a starlet reading for a big part. As she chatters about the miraculous survival of the few other white people in Hiroshima during the attack, imagery of devastation blinkingly appears and fades, partly obscured by a big blue disk that remains at center screen. Gradually, focus improves enough that we find ourselves looking at lower Manhattan, World Trade Center towers intact. As we watch, the American woman reports that many silly Japanese believed the Germans had the bomb ready to drop on New York, but the Americans took it away.

It's a gripping sequence, and just a glimpse; soon the scene shifts to a pale, greenish and powerfully creepy orchid that opens its petals in time-lapse documentation; postwar Japanese horror movies of mutant monsters inevitably come to mind. A scrolling text explains that for more than a decade after the atomic explosion, new deformities were being observed in plant life. But this is just a dozy interlude before the film's quick, explosive conclusion, in which a stuttering sepia image of a wild-eyed Hitler, an image that won't sit still on the screen, accompanies a voice-over explaining that the Führer worked with a drama coach before delivering an important address written by Göring; the speech begins, "The most vigorous forms of terror must be employed. Anyone who creates the slightest opposition must be shot." As Hitler alternately raises both fists and extends his arm in a salute, all the while staring fervidly upward, a woman reads the text fragment repeatedly in both German and English. The photos are from 1925; Hitler was a neophyte politician and, here, only practicing his act in a studio. The performance is precociously accomplished.

Matthew Buckingham's 40-minute *Muhheakantuck—Everything Has a Name* (2004) takes the issue of terror tactics a few centuries back, to a 1609 Dutch East Indies Company expedition commanded by Henry Hudson. Buckingham's film was commissioned by Minetta Brook for its 2003/04 program of Hudson River-front projects, and first screened in a storefront in Beacon, New York; Creative Time made it possible for the film to be shown this spring in a water taxi that circled New York Harbor and went a short distance upriver, as Buckingham had also wished (two other, recent works were shown at the same time at Murray Guy in New York). *Muhheakantuck*, which is Lenape for the river that runs two ways (strong tides push up from the harbor), has a simple visual structure. Filmed from a helicopter, it follows the eastern shore of the Hudson from its mouth to the Sleepy Hollow area, then goes back down on the Jersey side. The camera was aimed both down and out, so the horizon is gener-



Leslie Thornton: *Let Me Count the Ways 10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . . 7 . . . 6*, 2004-in progress, video, 22 minutes.



Water taxi screening of Matthew Buckingham's *Muhheakantuck—Everything Has a Name*, 2004, 16mm film, 40 minutes. Photo Sam Horine, courtesy Creative Time.

ally visible. As viewed inside the water taxi, the unprepossessing imagery, on stock tinted a grayish magenta—to denaturalize the landscape, Buckingham said in a recent lecture at New York University, and also to evoke unstable film stock from the '70s that has tended to acquire a distinctive "red shift" over time—competed, often at a disadvantage, with the views of lower Manhattan and New Jersey out the boat's windows.

Several registers of time and space were in play simultaneously: the aerial view of the film and its horizontal sweep up the river were set against the horizon-level perspectives of passengers/viewers, which were in turn agitated by the lively tides and wakes in the busy harbor. Similarly, the present tense of the screening forced attention on the date stamp of the film (it was shot after 9/11, but before the explosion of corporate construction in Jersey City that was in part a response to the attacks). Of course all these perspectives offered views of a landscape at odds with the 17th-century terrain evoked in the voice-over narrative.

That narrative itself offers a multitude of perspectives, the most consistent and illuminating its emphasis on the colonization of New York (and by extension North America) as a business undertaking rather than an assertion of national determination (or, even more fancifully, perhaps, religious freedom). Like present-day global corporations, the trading companies that funded precolonial exploration were essentially transnational. While the East India Trading Company was Dutch owned, its employees were also English, French, Irish, Swedish, Danish, German, Italian and Moroccan. "Eighteen languages were spoken among a few hundred people," the film's narrative explains, evoking 21st-century Dubai. "Far from being the

first, Hudson was one of the last Europeans to arrive before European colonization," it continues. "Indeed there seems to have been little surprise when one of the first indigenous people he met on his voyage spoke to him in French." But as its title suggests, language, and staking territory by way of imposing names, is a theme of the movie.

In his NYU lecture, Buckingham quoted Walter Benjamin by way of Susan Buck-Morss, noting that "the vanishing point of history is always the present moment." Mournful and slow-paced, Buckingham's project—and not the text alone—was designed to invoke a range of mostly vanished landmarks, the most obvious being the Trade Center towers. They were an absent center of the harbor tour, which passed the site twice, just as the attacks of 9/11 are a dropped link—a lost cause—for both present American foreign policy and the art that responds to it. The Trade Center victims, like the grievances that animated their attackers, are only peripheral references in Buckingham's film. But the thousands of Native Americans who died in lower Manhattan before them, and the corporate policies responsible for those deaths, find in *Muhheakantuck* a powerful acknowledgment. □

Works by Omer Fast, Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, and Leslie Thornton were presented at the 2008 Whitney Biennial [Mar. 6-June 1]. Eija-Liisa Ahtila's Where is Where? was screened at Marian Goodman in New York [Mar. 29-Apr. 30]. It is included in her retrospective now at K21 Düsseldorf [May 17-August 17]. Ahtila will have a solo show at the National Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. [July 4-Oct. 26]. Matthew Buckingham's Muhheakantuck—Everything Has a Name was presented by Creative Time in New York [Mar. 28-30, Apr. 4-6]. His traveling exhibition "Play the Story" is at the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle [July 12-Sept. 21].