OCULA

A conversation with Omer Fast

Artist, Berlin

Jens Maier-Rothe | Berlin | 26 May 2017

Omer Fast. Photo: MGB/Jansch.

Omer Fast (born 1972) is one of the most respected visual artists and filmmakers of his generation. His video installations and cinematic works, often dealing with war and traumatic events in strictly non-linear storytelling, have been shown in solo exhibitions at major venues across the globe. While enjoying the status of a genre-defining artist, pinning his practice down to a single genre seems

impossible at the same time. His subjects are as mundane as they are inherently paradox, exploring the origins of individual and collective neuroses in traumatic events, between war and everyday life, between the oedipal and the uncanny, between dream and self-deception.

A master of filmic techniques, Fast seeks out and amplifies what gets in the way of pure, lineal storytelling. Repetition, multiple choice narratives, video game aesthetics, fake interviews and other similar tactics play with viewers' expectations of something to be revealed, but ultimately take them elsewhere. Complex grids of narrative traces, frequently thriving on the friction between documentary and fiction, pull viewers away from their own desire for any linear storyline. Fast first nurtures the desire to empathise and identify with his characters, and then impairs that sentiment by exposing lies and taking radical turns that punish viewers for seeking trust and comfort in what they see and begin to believe.

Most recently, Fast produced *Spring* (2016), a 40-minute short film projected on five screens that builds on narrative threads from his widely acclaimed contribution to documenta 13, *Continuity* (2012). He then also merged both together into his second feature film. The result, again titled *Continuity* (2016), is three things at once: reenactment, repetition and expansion of an already existing version. All three also featured in Fast's first comprehensive monographic exhibition in his adopted hometown <u>Berlin</u>: *Talking is not always the solution*, on view from 18 November 2016 to 12 March 2017 at the Martin-Gropius-Bau. The exhibition offered an unfamiliar but highly effective combination of alienating and immersive elements by way of its spatial settings. Visitors could experience seven works from the past fifteen years in a succession of rooms, alternating between pitch dark screening areas and brightly lit stage settings. The latter—three accurate reproductions of waiting rooms designed by Berlin-based architecture office Studio Miessen—represented places in which Fast himself has spent a lot of time lately: a Berlin immigration office, an airport lounge, and a doctor's clinic. Considering that these spaces have, in a way, become extensions of Fast's studio, it was only a logical step to let them also frame viewers' experiences in an exhibition.

Omer Fast, *Spring* (2016) (still). Digital film. 44 min. Courtesy the artist, Arratia Beer, gb agency, Dvir Gallery, James Cohan Gallery and Filmgalerie 451.

While providing conceptually befitting environments for Fast's films, the gesture of staging his work like this came somewhat unexpectedly. The exhibition forms part of 'Immersion. Analogue Arts in the Digital Age', a three-year programme of the Berliner Festspiele that tests out new formats and settings for experiencing visual arts in theatres and museums in the digital age, so that 'the recipient no longer faces the art work but rather enters into it'. Living up to this concept of immersion has posed a challenge for Fast, who has been exploring the relationship between fiction and reality, immersion and alienation, for many years now. Given the deeply immersive quality of his films, the question at stake when making this exhibition was how to break with viewers' expectations on a different, spatial level.

Jens Maier-Rothe spoke with Fast about his Berlin showcase, rhythmic immersion, role-play and the seductive qualities of cinema.

Your exhibition at Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin offers an immersive experience of a wide variety of works. In the accompanying publication you compare viewers and visitors to detectives or puzzlers, and the gallery space to a bazaar or shopping mall that they can explore, as opposed to the cinema where they don't have that kind of choice. What about making this exhibition was new for you and what brought you there?

The challenge was dealing with the space. I was given seven rooms to work with, all connected to one another in a straight line. My work is anything but linear so I felt compelled to disrupt the straight logic of the architecture, which I found oppressive, and to vary the experience of walking through it. Two months before the opening, while waiting in the immigration bureau in Berlin for my passport to be stamped, I decided to recreate that environment as part of the exhibition. This resulted in a series of waiting rooms that appear as buffer areas in between the usual black-box projection spaces: an immigration office, an airport lounge and a doctor's clinic. All are transitional spaces that are impersonal, institutional but also theatrical. All have lots to do with the suspension of time.

Omer Fast, *5000 Feet is the Best* (2011) (still). Digital film. 30 min. Courtesy the artist, Arratia Beer, gb agency, Dvir Gallery, James Cohan Gallery and Filmgalerie 451.

There is one video piece integrated in each waiting room—*CNN Concatenated* (2002) in the immigration office, *5,000 Feet is the Best* (2011) in the airport lounge, and *Looking Pretty for God (After G.W.)* (2008) in the doctor's clinic—which creates an ambiguous situation because your work collapses with its theatrical scenery into one installation piece. Even the publication accompanying the show blends in under the guise of a tabloid newspaper. In this reality crisis, viewers are increasingly activated as storytellers via their own disposition for pretense. Can you describe how you create a balance between disorientation and orientation?

I'm not interested in disorientation as an effect but as a cause for reassessing some basic assumptions about where we are and what we're looking at. The terrain I deal with is social and involves constructs like families, professions and borders. In fictional works like *Continuity* (2012) or *Spring* (2016), you have a basic family unit that unravels the more time you spend with it. The parents are desperate for a son who's been lost and obsessively hire young men to replace him. In the more documentary works, like *5,000 Feet is the Best* (2011) or *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (2013), you have professionals in the military or pornography industry whose work is physically real and psychologically punishing but is fundamentally involved with pretense and role-playing. I suppose the bottom line is that I approach my subjects as unsolvable riddles or puzzles. Maybe it's better to talk about defamiliarisation as a key technique rather than disorientation.

What I mean is that the staged scenery adds another layer to the defamiliarisation evoked in your films. All three rooms are generic enough to appear in anyone's life, and as such they activate all kinds of personal projections. They are very convincing in appearance, yet you make it clear that they are only representations. Upon entering the exhibition the room is divided into half original, half staged room, for instance. In the black-box projection rooms this unease with the space vanishes for a moment. That creates a certain dynamic, viewers are constantly plunging in and out of different kinds of immersion, with a traumatic effect. The combination of *Continuity* and *Spring* seems to operate with a similar dynamic on the narrative plane. In *Continuity*, seemingly coherent narratives disintegrate, while *Spring* synthesises various narrative threads again. Can you describe how you worked on both *Spring* and the feature length version of *Continuity*?

That's a very accurate reading of the dynamic I was hoping to create in the exhibition. I've talked with Cornelius Puschke from the Berliner Festspiele about this notion of a rhythmic immersion, where visitors are repeatedly pulled in and pushed out. The analogy he used involved swimming, which is nice if you think about the moment of pulling away from an illusion vis-a-vis the reality of having to breathe, i.e. periodically leaving the immersive waters because they're not our natural medium. I shot *Continuity* in 2012 as the story of two parents who repeatedly recreate scenes from the life of a missing son. The work is intentionally episodic, which has a lot to do with the parents' disrupted life and their obsessive desire to recreate the past. The moments of immersion happen when the story seems plausible: We can suspend our disbelief and pretend, along with the parents, that the family is restored and everything is normal. But every so often something happens to rupture this illusion, a distraction involving something physical and taboo: Body parts emerge in the food or the mother and son kiss a little too amorously. In these moments, you get pulled out of the illusion of mourning and into a reality that is a lot less stable. In *Spring*, I decided to revisit this situation from the perspective of two young men who are hired by the parents. Their stories intersect and the notions of fate and punishment become very topical. I guess if *Continuity* is about an obsessive desire that's fuelled by loss, *Spring* is about the objects of that desire. For the movie version, I just took these two works and wove them together into a big messy tangle.

Omer Fast, *Continuity* (2012) (still). Digital film. 40 min. Courtesy the artist, Arratia Beer, gb agency, Dvir Gallery, James Cohan Gallery and Filmgalerie 451.

It adds another puzzling layer that both films have a double life as individual films and as parts of another work. What made you add *Spring* to *Continuity* and create a third version of the story?

I literally had some unresolved issues with *Continuity* and wanted to revisit its characters. It's a little luxury that you have as a living artist: You can travel back in time by engaging with works that you made earlier, sometimes adding to them and sometimes changing them. The feature-length version developed a little afterwards and required a little bit of parallel thinking. I wanted to test how the story worked in a cinema format but I'm not sure it's better than seeing the two shorter works separately.

Over the past two years you've released two new feature films. What draws you to the format? I'm also thinking about the limitations of cinema compared to the more versatile options of an exhibition space, where you have far more possibilities to translate all kinds of storytelling devices into spatial form.

I love the cinematic ritual: The whole business of buying a ticket, sitting down in a dark room with strangers and watching an illusion together. Even if you're home alone, watching movies on a laptop, it's still a special way of being in time that stands out in relation to the everyday. That classic

escapism—and the bigger budgets—make it a very seductive platform. But you're right that exhibitions are more versatile. They follow a different logic, which is more connected to the everyday and involves space and motion in the viewing experience. Gallery visitors are freer and have more responsibility to engage and make sense of what they're seeing. Somehow it's more democratic and more grown-up and I love that. It's more connected to how I think. But cinema is always going to be seductive.

Installation view: Omer Fast, *Talking is not always the solution*, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin (18 November–12 March 2017). Photo: MGB/Jansch.

Many of your works revolve around traumatic episodes and the ensuing physical and psychological entanglements of your characters in their repercussions. Whatever happened to your characters, it afflicts their relationship to reality in catastrophic ways. Your films engage with repetition, doubling, role-play and reenactment as both stylistic elements and as gateways for psychologically reworking that traumatic past, and to eventually give it a form. How does this play out differently in *Continuity* than in *5,000 Feet is the Best*?

Continuity leaves the traumatic event out of the story. We assume that a son has been lost but only meet the parents at a later point in their lives. Their domestic relations have obviously been disrupted and what we see are their attempts at re-establishing a functional family, even if this involves a great deal of pretense. We're dealing with symptoms, which are our only clues. This is

probably the case for all of my works. My interest in the traumatic is mostly related to symptoms: how life is disrupted and how this disruption can reconfigure relations. In their sometimes perverse attempts to recreate their lost world, the protagonists of *Continuity* are arguably idealised surrogates for the artist. They're certainly a lot more creative in their everyday lives than I am in mine. In *5,000 Feet is the Best*, we're dealing with an actual person, who has been traumatised by the work that he's done as a drone operator. The psychological disruption he describes in a few choice phrases like 'bad dreams, loss of sleep, looking at a situation over and over' become the structural logic of the work.

You often describe your films as portraits, but then also as riddles. It seems as though you want to force viewers to lose sight of their desire to understand through logic in order to access a different, perhaps more visceral, experience of the internal complexities of your characters. How do you mobilise affect, memory and cognition to interact in this portrait-making process?

I try to put viewers in a similar spot to where the protagonists in my stories are. This means dealing with symptoms more than causes, showing rather than explaining. Repetition and variation are also very important. It's like music: A theme or an idea is introduced and reinforced through repetition. Then, something suddenly changes, which immediately causes a mini crisis of meaning: What happened? Why is the familiar suddenly different? What does it mean? It's not like I necessarily have the answers myself. Or, if I have the answers, they're often several and contradictory and I try to chase them all down at the same time.

Installation view: Omer Fast, *Talking is not always the solution*, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin (18 November–12 March 2017). Photo: MGB/Jansch.

Can you tell us more about the relationship between labour and role-play in your work? What draws you to the professions of your characters and their role within society? Is it their unusual relationship to death?

The persons who appear in my works are always liminal figures. What soldiers, migrants, mortitians and porn actors have in common is they all cross borders, trespassing into spheres which are off-limits, tabboo or invisible. I keep returning to these figures because their liminal status can say a lot about normative social space, as well as an alternative or disrupted ordering of that space. And I suppose death is the ultimate border where both the verbal and the visual must cease—or be allegorised and reimagined. That's always been the job of artists and writers and shamans.

Good storytellers are often good liars too. Do you think the current climate of fake news and post-truth politics will fundamentally change the dynamic of storytelling, even your own, in the near future?

I honestly hope it won't.

What new projects are you working on at the moment?

I'm currently working on several projects at the same time: They include a performance of *Waiting For Godot* with young Syrian performers, a medieval legend to be shot in virtual reality and another feature film adaptation of a novel. All projects are more or less at the beginning but pull in totally different directions, which feels good. —[O]