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(Mis)translation in the work of Omer Fast

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(MIS)TRANSLATION IN THE WORK OF OMER FAST

A Thesis
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by
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Abstract

For the majority of people, video art does not have a major impact on their daily lives. Between ubiquitous television monitors and incessant internet pop-ups, attention paid to a video in an art gallery is passing at best. How can one’s video creations make an impression on such an already visually-immersed culture? Video artist Omer Fast, uses editorial effects such as dubbing, mistranslations, and splicing in his documentary-style works to attract the attention of, and later alienate, his audience. This essay analyzes Fast’s oeuvre and deconstructs the ways in which he attracts audience interest and subsequently encourages his audiences, through alienation, to become more critical viewers for both his artwork and their daily lives. The application of critical theory, such as Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* and Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, add to Fast’s editorial effects in order to set him apart from the standard contemporary video artist. Notably, Fast addresses aspects of artist ethics in his work, which ultimately distinguishes him as a unique leader in contemporary art.
Chapter 1 - Documentary and Alienation: Why Omer Fast’s Style Choice and Technique Aid Him in the Creation of a Critical Audience

Over the past fifty years fictional content has overloaded mass media: television, cinema, and video entertainment. Every fictional premise has been explored, it seems, and now the type of entertainment that most people find appealing is the kind that could happen to a “real” person, as in a reality television series. However, “reality” programming should not be confused with documentary. “Reality” television shows recycle the same contrived storylines over and over, covering “predators and prey, autopsies, deadly weather and celebrities.”

These “reality” television series’ mainly function as entertainment for audiences and are not an adequate substitution for documentaries. Documentaries are meant to “actively engage” the audience and “inform civic dialogue.” Equally important, documentaries challenge audiences to think about ideologies in which they believe, who created them and why, and also to decide what ideologies they would prefer to see set in place.

Despite the inherent differences between “reality” TV and documentaries, the current interest in both styles of visual media suggests the postmodern “incredulity towards meta-narratives” that Jean-François Lyotard discussed in *The Postmodern Condition.* According to that concept, contemporary society has grown weary of meta-narratives, the traditional stories told via legitimate “facts,” like religion or Marxism. A postmodern society attempts to replace its meta-narratives by focusing on specific

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
contexts and reflecting diversity of experience. Considering that television and cinema are the primary sources for the general public’s meta-narratives, then it follows that the postmodern audience should prefer specific contexts and diversity of experience within these visual media. The format that best serves as purveyor of these contexts and experiences is the documentary.

This paper proceeds from the theoretical premise, put forward by early media theory, that when audiences watch documentary-style videos they divest themselves of a critical mindset because they automatically equate these videos with “reality.” Critic and artist David Antin, in his article “Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium” (1986), states that “the social uses of television continually force the issue of “truth” to the center of attention . . . The medium maintains a continual assertion that it can and does provide an adequate representation of reality.”5 Overall, viewers tend to believe this assertion, and this is especially true when it comes to reality television. Antin also quotes Edward Stasheff and Rudy Bretz, two experts in television broadcasting. In the same article, they state, “The live production video tape, though delayed in reaching the home by a few hours or a few days, was generally accepted as actual live television by the average viewer.”6 This interpretation by the viewer is a common expectation for her viewing experience, and is a factor that Omer Fast exploits. Video artist Omer Fast’s works make use of the uncritical acceptance of factuality that audiences apply to his documentary-style videos. This paper aims to prove that Omer Fast’s work encourages a more critical

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viewer through the use of (mis)translations during the postproduction process, and that he is able to do this because of the way that he manipulates them.

“(Mis)translation,” as used here, can be thought of as the variety of ways in which Fast intervenes in his viewer’s consumption of his videos’ content. At times, Fast actually mistranslates the subtitles that scroll across the bottoms of his monitors. Other times, he edits or dubs the videos in such a way that the viewer can see that the material has been changed from the original footage to form a newly spliced-together end-product. For each case in which Fast changes the intent of the original footage to take on new meanings through his interventions, this will be termed (mis)translation. It is so termed because Fast acts as the middle-man, or interpreter, between the videotaped subjects and their viewing audience, be it as a translator of ideas, imagery, or sound. As the middleman, Fast changes the basic meaning that the subjects put forth. Therefore, Fast has (mis)translated material that he presents to his audience. Postproduction is another term that bears a similarity in meaning to (mis)translation. Nicolas Bourriaud wrote a book entitled, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay; How Art Reprograms the World*, which explains the postmodern phenomenon of postproduction. The technical definition for postproduction is “the set of processes applied to recorded material: montage, the inclusion of other audio or visual sources, subtitling, voice-overs, and special effects.” This definition is generally used in audiovisual circles. For contemporary fine artists, postproduction means all those things and also the reexamination of “notions of creation, authorship, and originality through a problematics of the use of cultural artifacts.”

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Postproduction refutes the idea of ownership; it sees the materials that artists use as signs and is constantly moving toward the ideal of a community based in sharing these signs.\textsuperscript{10} All of Omer Fast’s work includes postproduction techniques that aid him in his acts of (mis)translation.

In order to examine Fast’s production, the difference between documentary video and cinematic film should be addressed at the outset. Documentary videos differ from films in that they have more of an immediate nature, akin to “live” television broadcasts. Audiences know that making a film is a long process, necessitating extensive edits and many phases of production. When audiences view a film they know they are seeing the result of months of work, labor, and carefully choreographed footage, with nothing left to chance. Video documentaries, on the other hand, have an immediacy due to the tendency of video artists or directors to maintain the original “rough” looking footage. Therefore, it is assumed that the original footage was not edited in the same way as a film. It is true that contemporary audiences do not invest as much trust in broadcast media as the first generations of viewers. However, documentary-style creations still hold a place of authority as representing the last vestiges of “truth” in visual media. For a recent example, one might recall the confusion over \textit{The Blair Witch Project} (Haxan Films 1999).\textsuperscript{11} \textit{The Blair Witch Project} was released after heavy advertisement on the internet that insinuated that the movie’s footage was from an actual documentary.\textsuperscript{12} Because the film was shot to look like a documentary, many viewers believed the internet advertising and were deluded into thinking that the movie was “real” and not a regular fictional

\textsuperscript{10} Bourriaud, \textit{Postproduction}, 9.
production. *The Blair Witch Project* grossed over 248 million dollars worldwide, which made it the most successful independent film to date.\(^\text{13}\) The overwhelming success of *The Blair Witch Project* is a testament to audiences’ interest in documentary-style videos.

Omer Fast’s videos go beyond documentary in simply recording people, places, and things. His work draws upon ideas like Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra and Umberto Eco’s interpretation of the hyperreal. Fast also formulates a critique of the medium itself. There is even an anti-authorial effect to his work when he acts as off-camera interviewer, allowing his subjects to reveal their own “truths.” Throughout his videos Fast questions the roles of audience and artist. Ultimately, Fast engages in a discourse about ethics as it relates to the media.

I will show that Omer Fast uses aspects of simulacra and the hyperreal to elucidate the audience’s tendency to faithfully accept documentary-style videos as purveyors of truth. Then, by situating Fast’s work within a tradition of media critique, I will show that he is part of an established discourse. I will address artists like Cindy Sherman and Douglas Gordon as predecessors to Fast’s projects in the tradition of anti-authorial, appropriationist work. Anti-authorial artwork opposes the idea of the unique author. Finally, I will investigate the ethical aspects of Fast’s artwork.

First, the major tenet of my argument should be explained. One of the major concepts that my thesis rests upon is the idea that an artist can create a critical audience through alienation. This concept was made popular by playwright Bertolt Brecht, and is called the *Verfremdungseffekt*.\(^\text{14}\) This alienation effect is achieved by interrupting the

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\(^{14}\) Hereafter referred to as the V-effect, following Fredric Jameson’s usage.
audience’s identification with the subject.\textsuperscript{15} *Verfremdung* has two meanings when translated into English, and in both cases they do not adequately describe the meaning of the word in German, which is why most authors keep it in its original form. Besides alienation or distancing, it also means attraction or fascination. In *The Essential Brecht*, John Fuegi defines *Verfremdung* as Brecht used it, “to render the strange familiar and the familiar strange.”\textsuperscript{16} Fast uses aspects of Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, or V-effect, to alienate his audience. Fast creates the V-effect when he inserts multiple meanings into his subjects’ monologues via (mis)translations or editorial effects, such as dubbing and splicing. In turn, a more critical viewer is created because her connection to the onscreen subject is interrupted by continual changes in the meanings of the subject’s monologue. When a viewer cannot identify with a subject onscreen and thus empathize with the subject, she stands apart from whatever ideology is at work, and can then critically evaluate whether this ideology is correct.\textsuperscript{17}

One major technique used to create the preferred critical distance is the “missing fourth wall.” The “missing fourth wall” is a predominant part of Brecht’s plays, and is the instance where the characters onstage address the audience directly.\textsuperscript{18} Once the character addresses the audience directly it creates a distancing effect, whereby the audience sees the person onstage playing a role. This use of *Verfremdungseffekt* “signifies the sudden feeling of alienation when one becomes aware of the artificiality or

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998), 132. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey explores the male viewer’s tendency to identify with the main male protagonist in a film, and in so doing, also participates in his power, possess the female lead. The basis of this concept can be applied to all viewers in the sense that they indirectly participate in the film’s narrative through identification with roles played by the onscreen actors. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 361-373.
\textsuperscript{18} Jameson, *Essential Brecht*, 132.
unreality of a context. Thus Brecht’s plays are full of events that suddenly force the audience out of the thrall of suspended disbelief by referring to the fact that it is only a play.”19 Following this break in fantasy the actor is not considered a “real” person with which to empathize. Instead, the actor become a created character, a role, which creates the preferred critical distance. The subjects’ direct address to the viewers in Fast’s video Godville (2004-5) and CNN Concatenated (2002), and intimate interviews in Berlin-Hura (2002) and Spielberg’s List (2003), all rely on Brecht’s idea of the “missing fourth wall” to communicate meaning.20

Yet, in an interview with the author, Fast stated that he is not comfortable identifying his work with the V-effect due to the many criticisms leveled against it.21 One major criticism that Fast cites is whether or not “an alienated viewer is necessarily any closer to being a critical viewer or whether an involved viewer is necessarily uncritical.”22 Also, like all mediations, Verfremdung does not solve a problem but merely defers it.23 However, Fast’s work avoids these criticisms. The artist does not completely alienate his audience. Fast’s work incorporates alienating tendencies with conciliatory effects. First, the (mis)translated portions push the audience away because it is obvious that the material has been rearranged. The audience knows that these supposedly personal testimonies have been altered and are not the subjects’ testimonies in their entirety. But then the alienation is reconciled because the audience interprets these testimonies to be the artist’s ideas which could then foster an identification with Fast.

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20 Fuegi, Essential Brecht, 53.
21 Omer Fast, e-mail message from the artist, March 31, 2007.
22 Ibid.
Fast uses the alienating effect of the “missing fourth wall” but also introduces new possibilities for empathy.

An example of the V-effect in Brecht’s work is a scene in his play, *The Mother* (1930), in which the female protagonist, the mother, turns to the audience and expresses shame at serving her son an inadequate meal.24 In this instance, the audience is well aware that the woman onstage is an actress playing a role, because this “aside” removes the feeling that audience members are unseen onlookers. A comparison of Fast’s and Brecht’s work outlines the differences between the two artists’ stances on artist/viewer relations. Fast holds a postmodern standpoint whereas Brecht is considered a modernist.25 Fast uses the V-effect to make his audience aware of its natural tendency to become emotionally interested in the characters, but also offers multiple viewpoints besides the emotional one through his (mis)translations. The audience can then take a critical stance due to the incorporation of multiple viewpoints instead of only an alienated stance because of the break in empathy with the subject. The fact that Fast uses popular imagery also helps to involve the audience despite his use of the V-effect. Brecht, however, used the V-effect solely to alienate, so that his audiences would think critically about the world and work toward a change. Brecht used the V-effect in hopes that his audiences would make a change not because they sadly empathized with a stabbing victim onstage, but because they knew that it was essentially wrong to stab someone. Brecht’s work (after *The Threepenny Opera*, 1928) is optimistic in that it is centered around the idea that “what does not go well with the world (war, exploitation) is

remediable: a time of cure is conceivable."26 His plays are meant to create these feelings within his audience and thus to spur on the remedy. On the whole, both artists hold an idealistic perspective about the effects that could be obtained through the alienation of their audiences. For Fast, the V-effect is best used to enable his audiences the opportunity to inhabit multiple perspectives and use these to understand and interpret contemporary media.

Some further familiarity with Fast’s career will be helpful here. Omer Fast was born in Jerusalem in 1972, moved to New York as a young man, and now lives in Berlin.27 Fast’s interest in the individual versus the masses can be traced back to his immigration to America. Fast first came to the U.S. from Israel as a young boy, and moved many times within and between the two countries as he grew up.28 He incorporated his own struggle with cultural assimilation into much of his work, partly because of his repetitive relocations. The emphasis on translations between languages stems from Fast’s early bi-lingual experiences.

Ultimately, he remained in America and received his BFA at the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts in 1995.29 Fast acquired his MFA at the Hunter College of the City University of New York in 2000.30 He has participated in group exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2002); the Witte de With, Rotterdam (2003); the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt (2004); and the Whitechapel Art Gallery,

28 Omer Fast, e-mail message from the artist, March 27, 2007.
29 Omer Fast, Curriculum Vitae (Postmasters Gallery, New York, 2007).
30 Fast, Curriculum, n.p.
Beginning in 2002 Fast has also held solo exhibitions, for example, at the International Institute for Visual Arts in London (2005) and Postmasters Gallery, New York (2005). More recently, his work has shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the exhibition *Closed Circuit: Video and New Media at the Met,* and in *Collateral: When Art Looks at Cinema* at the Hangar Bicocca, Milan, both in the spring of 2007.

Omer Fast’s Hunter College MFA video, *Breakin’ in a New Partner* (2000) (fig. 1), dealt with the idea of original versus copy, and foreshadowed an ongoing interest in this subject.

In this DVD video installation, Fast showed two videos opposite one another in a gallery.

On one, he ran the movie, *Lethal Weapon* (fig. 2), a 1980 cop drama

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Omer Fast, “Breakin’ In a New Partner” (flyer for art exhibit, Hunter College of the City University of New York, NY, 2000).
wherein much of the plot material, jokes, and discussion are contingent upon racial differences between the two lead characters played by Mel Gibson and Danny Glover. The other monitor showed Fast himself as he recorded all of the audio from the movie—the dialogue, vehicular noises, footsteps, atmospheric effects, and so on—using his own voice.\footnote{Omer Fast, e-mail message to the artist, April 2, 2007.} After recording the audio portion of the movie in this way, any of the original content based upon black and white differences was negated.\footnote{Fast, “Breakin’ In a New Partner,” n.p.} Without the black and white differentiation the movie was not enjoyable and failed at being funny. To hear one Israeli man impersonate both a black and a white man in dialogue just is not quite as entertaining, and the jokes do not make sense. Fast used his witty impersonation to show audiences just why it was they were laughing. Both videos were synchronized so that
they played simultaneously, forcing the audience to choose between index and source.\footnote{Boston Museum of Fine Arts, “Omer Fast” (Press Packet, Postmaster’s Gallery, New York, 2001).}

Fast revisits these issues of identity, manipulation, and authorship in his later work. *CNN Concatenated, Godville, A Tank Translated* (2002), *Spielberg’s List, Berlin-Hura, T3-AEON* (2000), and *Glendive Foley* (2000), all carry marks of Fast’s original ideas and will be addressed in the following chapters.
Chapter 2 - Postmodern Theory: What Aspects Does Fast Use to Engage Audiences and How Are They Revealed in His Work?

Before delving into specific videos, the aspects of postmodernism relevant to Fast’s work should be addressed. These occur in the writings of two postmodern theorists, Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco, both of whom deal with perception and the impact of media. Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra will be addressed first, and defined through the use of examples. Next, the notion of hyperreality will be defined and addressed according to Eco’s position. After simulacra and the hyperreal are introduced, I will apply the two ideas to Omer Fast’s work. Following these theoretical analyses, the chapter will address precursors to Fast within the photography and video mediums. In the tradition of artists who deal with authorship, Cindy Sherman and Douglas Gordon will be the main focus. By addressing these precursors, Fast’s work will then be situated within a tradition of anti-authorial artwork.

Anti-authorial artwork as it emerged in the 1970s reflected Roland Barthes’ position on the “death of the author,” covered in his *Mythologies*. The “death of the author” has to do with the idea that the unique creator is non-existent in contemporary art. According to Barthes, in postmodern society “reality” does not consist of nature, rather, it consists of man-made constructs, or culture. In essence, culture is a series of symbols, or a man-made language. Historically, much artwork was an act of mimesis, modeled after the tangible reality of nature. In postmodern society “reality” is based in culture and therefore artists are taking their cues from the man-made sphere of the cultural sector. The historical definition of author has been changed because art is not a unique creation,

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but always based on another’s work. The postmodern interest in appropriating and remixing elements of pre-existing sound and images into something new stems from this situation. Photography is one medium especially influenced by anti-authorial concepts. Photographer Cindy Sherman was a part of the first generation of artists to create work in dialogue with Barthes’ ideas. One of Douglas Gordon’s more recent videos will also be addressed as an anti-authorial work. Following these artists and their investigation into the “true” creator of artwork, it will be shown how Fast has used the specific features of the video medium to outline “truth” in his visual imagery.

The idea of “truth” is hard to define. Jean Baudrillard attempts to clarify “truth” by differentiating between the “true” (originals) and the “false” (copies) found in ordinary life. In his quest to define “truth” Baudrillard invented the theory of simulacrum. Baudrillard defines simulacrum this way: “It is a generation by models of a real without origin or reality . . . It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.” A simulacrum can be defined as a copy without an original. In semiotics, this is a sign without a referent. The best way to clarify a simulacrum is through example. Baudrillard used Disneyland as an archetypical example of a simulacrum. He called Disneyland a fantastical place, full of gadgets aimed at convincing tourists that they are in an imaginary wonderland. However, Baudrillard posited that the underlying purpose of Disneyland is to distract the public from its surroundings, which he said are not actually

39 Barthes, Mythologies, n.p.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 12.
“real.”43 Baudrillard wrote, “Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the ‘real’
country, all of ‘real’ America that is Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it
is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral). It is no longer a
question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the
real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.”44 Therefore, Disneyland’s
existence depends upon conservation of the reality principle.45 The reality principle is a
set of rigid distinctions of opposites: life-death, real-illusion, and so on.46 To keep the
public unaware that their lives are not based on “real” ideas and imagery, spectacular
things need to exist (such as Disneyland) in order to maintain “real” life’s claim to
authority. Disneyland is simply an example of a construct put in place to maintain the
status quo. As long as citizens do not feel that anything is out of the ordinary, there is no
reason to upset the dominant ideology. Following this definition of simulacrum, how it is
used in Omer Fast’s work can more easily be understood. Fast uses his videos to expose
simulacra and draw attention to them, revealing them in places where the audience is
unaware they exist. Fast reveals video’s role in the phenomenon of the simulacrum
through manipulation of his footage. He refers to the slippage that can occur between the
“fake” and the “real” in a literal manner by manipulating his videos in such a way that the
viewer is presented with two options for reality, or, conversely, two unrealities.

44 Ibid., 12-13. Italics original.
Ltd., 1993) 2, 96.
46 Ibid.
The most potent form of a simulacrum evident in Fast’s work is found in *Godville* (2004) (fig. 3). *Godville* is a two-channel video exhibited on a double-sided screen hung in the middle of a gallery with both sides showing imagery.47


The 50-minute video begins with images of Colonial Williamsburg’s Living History Museum in Virginia, intermixed with suburban homes projected on one side of the screen.48 Colonial Williamsburg is a town based on the original Richmond, Virginia, settlement from the eighteenth century. It is a tourist attraction created to “interpret the

origins of the idea of America” in order to “help the future learn from the past.”49

Founded in part by the Rockefeller family, visitors to the park may choose between a variety of ticket options that allow them access different areas (courthouse, gaol, plantation) which also determines which events they attend (“Colonial Explorer activities” or a movie about patriots, for example).50 Character-interpreters play the parts of various “types” around town, such as housewife, blacksmith, or governor. The character-interpreters basically inhabit the town as their primary place of residence. They are only permitted to leave when they are not working, which forces them to spend the majority of their time inhabiting two eras simultaneously. Although the character-interpreters are aware of current events in contemporary society they may not acknowledge this fact while within the confines of their workplace.51 Basically, the inhabitants of Colonial Williamsburg have chosen to leave a contemporary life for one in eighteenth-century society.

In Fast’s piece, voiceovers begin after the housing imagery has run for a few minutes and they alert the viewers that the interviews have started. Viewers will not see the interviewees unless they venture around to the other side of the screen. The screen facing the entrance to the gallery continues with shots of suburban housing throughout the rest of the piece.52 Fast amasses a cross-section of citizens from Williamsburg,
namely Will, a house slave (Fig. 4); Frances Southall, a housewife (Fig. 5); and Jack Burgess, a member of the militia (Fig. 6).\footnote{Fast, e-mail, n.p.}

Fast acts as off-screen interviewer, questioning the character-interpreters about their lives both inside and outside of Williamsburg. One of the most striking interviewees is Will, the house slave. In his interview, Will’s attitude seems to fluctuate from calm to angry and finally to cathartic, ending in an “aural montage” of recitations about God.\footnote{Omer Fast, e-mail from the artist (attached interview with Rachel Withers at inIVA, London), April 11, 2007.} The following is an excerpt from his interview with Fast,

\begin{quote}
God is work. God is my master. God is a slave. God is economics. God is a big stereotype. God is a big racist. God is a big survivor. God is a big star. God is in jail. Right down yonder, at the end of the street.\footnote{\textit{Godville}. Edited by John Rasmussen. Minneapolis: Midway Contemporary Art, 2005. Exhibition catalog.}
\end{quote}

This comes at the end of Will’s interview like a fast-paced mantra heard during church services. The rest of the interviews are conducted in a normal question-and-answer format, but this excerpt belies the extent of the editing done in this piece.

Before addressing the simulacrum in Colonial Williamsburg, it is important to consider the manner in which Fast reveals its presence. Fast has woven portions of the audio seamlessly together to create a slippage between the character interpreters’ actual and contrived personas. The visual portion of the video is what betrays his editorial handiwork. For example, while Frances Southall describes the role of women in the museum and their dependency on men during the eighteenth century, she slips into an anecdote about 9/11. Southall says, “We didn’t know the Twin Towers had been bombed
until our husbands told us.”

Based on the audio, Southall seems unknowingly to merge both her real and contrived lives. The visual imagery belies the lacunae in her stories. Southall’s gloves flit back and forth between her hands and lap, sometimes on, sometimes off, and her movements are jerky and stilted, due to Fast’s edits. While it seems as though Southall herself-confuses the two centuries, it is in fact Fast who remixes her interview to achieve this impression.

Colonial Williamsburg itself is a simulacrum on two levels. First, it attempts to appear as an actual community but in fact does not function as such in contemporary society. It is instead a model of a community with character-interpreters in place of actual people. Second, the “reality” that it is based upon never existed. It is not an accurate representation of an eighteenth-century society, which makes it a copy without an original.

Colonial Williamsburg may seem like an accurate representation of the eighteenth century at first glance, but in their article, “Deep Dirt: Messing up the Past at Colonial Williamsburg,” Eric Gable and Richard Handler discuss the multiple ways in which the museum fails to accurately represent its historical referent. Part of the museum’s disingenuous nature is the almost exclusive focus on the white “Founding Fathers.”

The presence of marginalized members of society—women, slaves, children—has slowly

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57 Rasmussen, Godville, 10.
58 The original series of questions were logically split between the two centuries. Rasmussen, Godville, 9-26.
60 Ibid.
grown over the years but still needs improvement. The museum is presented as a sanitized version of a decidedly messy past, missing such eighteenth-century mainstays as “blindness, rotten teeth, depravity, trash, dirt, slave quarters,” ad infinitum. The omission of less than savory elements and the marginalization of certain social types are just two of the ways in which Colonial Williamsburg falsifies history.

Fast touches on slavery in his video, one of the few “dirty” aspects of Colonial Williamsburg. Fast interviews Will, a black house slave, whom one reviewer takes to be the sole black male in the entire village. This reviewer’s assumption adds to the argument that Colonial Williamsburg is a white-washed version of history because there should have been a much larger proportion of slaves to aristocratic landowners in such an affluent area as Richmond, Virginia. Towards the end of Will’s interview, he accuses Fast of being “unsympathetic or paternalistic like every other media representative.” This accusation may seem unprovoked, but after seeing the video in its entirety, the truth behind the matter becomes clear. Fast has remixed the interviewee’s words to create new meanings. Will is not as angry about Fast’s interference and supposed condescending manner as Fast depicts him as being. Fast simply rearranged Will’s words so that he appeared angry. The topics that Will is angry about were formulated solely by Fast. Fast edited and inserted the interludes of defensive anger during multiple character interpreters’ interviews. For example, Frances Southall says, “If you did not want to come that was your choice. But if you wish to come and interview and interact with us,”

62 Ibid.
and play games with us . . . you better back off.”65 Likewise, Jack Burgess says, “Look. I know what you’re trying to do. And what kind of clichéd character you’re trying to make me into.”66 These angry statements concocted by Fast belie the worries that accompany people who work in a simulacrum environment. Most likely, the character-interpreters worry about Fast making them out to be fools, silly people who work in a false reality. These interludes portray the society within this simulacrum as aware of its own falsity. For Will, both the marginal position that slaves take in Colonial Williamsburg and the unease of an existence predicated on false premises could add to the anger directed at Fast. Southall and Burgess wonder at Fast’s hidden motives in revealing their roles in the simulacrum. Fast edits their words to reflect collectively shared, defensive personas, hyper-sensitive to outside criticisms. The resistance to acknowledging participation in a simulacrum is investigated in Julian Stallabrass’s article, “Spectacle and Terror,” in the New Left Review.67 Stallabrass writes about Americans’ war on the Taliban after the events of 9/11 as a reflex action used to preserve the image of a ruling commodity culture.68 Americans were so distraught over the idea that the “reality” they inhabited could so easily be punctured that they reacted with force. On a much smaller scale, this situation is what Fast created in Godville. He acted as the interloper who revealed the character-interpreters’ simulacrum, and they responded with angry tirades.

In Godville, all of the interviewees express some misgivings about Fast manipulating their truths. The interviewees’ misgivings, Will’s diatribe, and much of the

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65 Rasmussen, Godville, 16-17.
66 Rasmussen, Godville, 39.
68 Ibid., 90.
rest of the dialogue has been reformatted to communicate Fast’s ideas. Fast addresses the simulacrum through the voiced reservations of his interviewees. Regardless of whether or not Fast created these dialogues piece by piece, or the speakers really do vacillate between the war in Iraq and the Civil War, the end result is the same. Fast reveals how slippery the “truth” can be and that there is no ultimate “truth” or “reality.” Instead, he shows that a living history museum like Colonial Williamsburg is not a depiction of history, but instead is a reflection of a society’s view of itself. Gable and Handler’s article posits that this museum is still a sanitized version of a white hierarchical ideology. This argument is highly revealing, and it shows how a large portion of Americans view their past. Colonial Williamsburg is a copy of an original that never existed, the ultimate simulacrum. Through Fast’s video one learns that the public cannot simply be a passive receptacle for information, and must be aware that it cannot rely solely on museums to teach an accurate history.69

The hyperreal is very similar to the idea of simulacra. In addition to simulacra, Baudrillard and Eco’s theories about the hyperreal play an important part in Omer Fast’s work. The hyperreal, an aspect of consciousness in the postmodern world, can be defined as an instance when the real is confused with the fantasy, and people engage in the fantasy without acknowledging that it is not the reality.70 To explain the hyperreal condition, both Jean Baudrillard in Simulacra and Simulation and Rachel Stevens in a

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review of Omer Fast in *Flash Art* use a story penned by Lewis Carroll to clarify their point.\(^7^1\) In Carroll’s story, *Sylvie and Bruno Conclude, Chapter XI: The Man in the Moon*, a nation’s cartographers want to create the largest useful map possible. After considering various scales—six yards to the mile, one hundred yards to the mile—they finally decide to make it on the scale of one mile to one mile. The end result would be a map that completely covered the area that it was meant to depict.\(^7^2\) In any event, Carroll’s story is a useful metaphor for explaining the concept of the hyperreal.

Umberto Eco illustrates his perception of the hyperreal with a comparison between two versions of Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* (1495-98) in his *Travels in Hyperreality*. Eco compares a wax sculptural version of *The Last Supper* that he visited in a wax museum in Santa Cruz, California, to the original fresco in Milan. Eco argues that Americans prefer the gaudy, ersatz wax copy to the original because, “[that one] is far away in Milan, which is a place, like Florence, all Renaissance; you may never get there . . . the original fresco is by now ruined, almost invisible, unable to give you the emotion you have received from the three-dimensional wax, which is more real, and there is more of it.”\(^7^3\) The willing acceptance of a wax substitute for a Renaissance masterpiece is a hyperreal act. The preceding examples show how simulacra and the hyperreal dovetail. On the whole, both deal with the postmodern individual actively choosing to engage with an artificial substitute in place of an actual activity, state of being, or object.

\(^7^3\) Eco also addresses Americans’ penchant for “more” in this essay. Eco states that in addition to wanting “the real thing” Americans also believe “more is more,” as the basis for their concept of prosperity. Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 8, 18.
Within Omer Fast’s oeuvre to date, Spielberg’s List (2003) provides the best example of hyperreality (fig. 6). Fast videotaped Spielberg’s List in Krakow, Poland, where he interviewed the extras from the film Schindler’s List by director Steven Spielberg (Amblin Entertainment, 1993), after the film was made. Two wall-mounted monitors show Fast’s footage as he intersperses his interviews with shots of the Schindler’s List movie set and the city of Krakow.74

6. Omer Fast, frame from Spielberg’s List, 2003, video, New York, Postmasters Gallery. At times, Fast juxtaposes the footage of Poland with scenes from the movie. The extras he interviewed played either Jews or Nazis, and Fast questions them about their experiences as such. Many of the older actors used as extras for the Spielberg movie are survivors of the Holocaust.

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74 Williams, “Omer Fast,” 140.
The hyperreal becomes evident when Fast begins his interviews. For example, one man says that the tourists have taken to visiting the movie set that Spielberg left standing after making his movie, instead of visiting the actual Plaszow labor camp, because the copy is in better condition. Tourists come to see a historical site, instead look at a movie set, and are satisfied with their “historically educational” trip to Poland. The tourists prefer to engage with the fake over the real. In fact, they even consider it to be a better experience. Spielberg’s newly constructed labor camp gives the tourists a “better” experience as opposed to the older one, which is falling apart anyway, thus making the copy the preferred version of “reality.”

The Shoah business in Krakow has many facets, and many of them are hyperreal. The Shoah business is a term used to denote the victim-commemoration industry that surrounds the aftermath of the Holocaust. For example, tourists may take bus tours around sights of particular interest in Krakow. These bus tours purport to teach tourists about the Holocaust, but they also include anecdotes about the filming of Spielberg’s movie. Portions of Fast’s video were shot aboard one of these tours. The hyperreal begins to creep in when Spielberg was forced to deviate from the original events during filming. Spielberg filmed the Jews marching off to the ghetto in the direction opposite that of their original path because modern architecture, built since World War II, would have looked anachronistic in the context of the movie. The tourists get the film’s version of history rather than accuracy, on this tour. The Shoah business replaced the

75 Jessica Ostrower, “Omer Fast at Postmasters,” review of A Tank Translated by Omer Fast, Art in America 91, no.10 (October 2003), 126.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
actual venue with a modern-day substitution. In his article about *Spielberg’s List*, Brian Boucher explains that “tourists coming to see the city often asked to be taken to sites that didn’t exist; eager to oblige, the Poles fudged certain facts to satisfy customers who were ready to pay for a ‘genuine’ experience of real places where real history occurred.”\textsuperscript{80} The willing acceptance of copies and convoluted histories in place of originals bears out the existence of the hyperreal in this case.

Fast purposely incorporates hyperreality into his video using the (mis)translations that he creates during the editing process. Fast de-contextualizes his interviewees’ responses to his questions, which adds to the confusion within this already chronologically confused video. A good example is found at the end of the video, where Fast interviews a man of advanced age who has lived through World War II and also acted as an extra in *Schindler’s List*. The elder gentleman speaks about his experience at the camp, and Fast asks him to clarify whether he is speaking about the real camp or the fictional one.\textsuperscript{81} The man replies, “When he was making the film,” which seems to answer Fast’s question, but later the confusion arises again. At the end of the video, the man finishes with “I have a picture of that camp.”\textsuperscript{82} The fact that the man has a photo is a clue as to whether he is talking about the historical or the cinematographic labor camp. Steven Spielberg strictly prohibited anyone from taking souvenir photographs during the filming of *Schindler’s List*.\textsuperscript{83} Thus, the photo that the man speaks about must be from the original labor camp. Indeed, the man confuses the actual and the reproduced events. The viewer is left wondering which aspects of the man’s dialogue with Fast referenced

\textsuperscript{80} Boucher, “History, Memory, Fiction,” n.p.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
historically accurate phenomena, and which parts did not. It is almost impossible to tell from the audio portion, but Fast has made it obvious through the man’s jerky movements that he did major post-interview editing. In sum, Fast’s “nullification of historical memory,” as David Deitcher quips in his article “Get Real: Two Contemporary Israeli Artists Subvert the Documentary,” is part and parcel of the postmodern tendency to accept the copy for the original, and to do so willingly.\(^{84}\)

The art of photography has long been criticized for presenting audiences with a copy of an image in lieu of an original, and then naming the photographer as the “true” author.\(^{85}\) Prior to Fast, Cindy Sherman explored this aspect of authorship in photography quite extensively.\(^{86}\) Sherman is best known for her staged reproductions of film stills, her variously numbered *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-81) (fig. 7).


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The photographs depict B-movie female characters from the 1950s and 1960s, modeled by Cindy Sherman herself. Sherman’s main motive in reproducing the films is to ridicule through mimesis the common stereotypes of women by reflecting the (assumed) male viewer’s desire back at him. However, a level of play between fact and fiction can also be detected. Sherman reproduces the movie stills exactly, even down to the cropping and depth of field. Thus, a viewer unfamiliar with Sherman’s work would surely take the stills to be originals. She plays with the viewers’ understanding of copy vs. source.

Omer Fast does not attempt to confuse his audience as to whether his product is a commercially produced movie or an artist’s video. However, he does attempt to confuse the audience as to whether what he records should be accepted as the total truth, or perhaps just one facet of it. While Sherman’s unintentional disclosure is her repeated use of herself as model, Fast reveals his interference by presenting viewers with both source and copy. One work done in this fashion is *Spielberg’s List*, where the video screens show the juxtaposition of the actual labor camp versus the movie set camp. Although Fast does not blatantly label one or the other, he gives his audience the tools to discern what they see for themselves. Both Fast and Sherman critique the audience’s tendency to trust the camera. However, Fast supplies viewers with a juxtaposition of the true and the false. Since Fast presents multiple versions of the narrative within his work, he gives the

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viewer more control in deciding what they believe. When the audience is given two “realities” from which to choose, they are afforded more of an opportunity for critique than if they were only given the altered version. This is one area where Fast’s use of the video medium allows him greater flexibility than Brecht had with his plays. Fast utilizes video’s synchronization option to put more control in the hands of his audience. Brecht, on the other hand, could only alienate, and only showed chronologically linear storylines, which Fast subverts with concurrent imagery.

Fast’s possible influences also include Douglas Gordon, a video artist who created 24-Hour Psycho (1993) (fig. 8).


Gordon appropriated the movie Psycho (Shamley Productions, 1960) by director Alfred Hitchcock and slowed it down so that it would run for an entire day rather than the film’s original 109 minutes.⁹² When Gordon co-opted Psycho he drew attention to aspects of the film that may have gone unnoticed in a normal viewing, giving the feeling that he is

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showing a “previously undisclosed truth.” Both Gordon and Fast take aspects of popular culture, like movies, and re-appropriate them as their own in order to offer a new perspective on the source. Compared to 24-Hour Psycho Fast’s works are more palatable because they can be viewed in their totality in one visit to a museum or gallery, while Gordon’s work cannot possibly be viewed from beginning to end during regular visiting hours. 24 Hour Psycho usually drives viewers away due to boredom and prior plot knowledge, but Fast’s videos keep viewers engaged with surprising (mis)translations inserted throughout the work. While Gordon’s work makes his viewers aware of their position in an eternal present, Fast’s work offers a new tool with which to understand the present, via multiple perspectives.

In sum, an important aspect of Fast’s work is his investigation into simulacra and the hyperreal. Fast is part of a tradition that questions authorship and the role of the audience, asking how do we perceive “truth” in a postmodern world? He uses multiple viewpoints and manipulation to reveal simulacra and the hyperreal, and these theories help to set the foundation for Fast’s true purpose, leading the audience towards its own subjective critique of media.

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93 Brown, Douglas Gordon, 22.
95 Brown, Douglas Gordon, 40.
Chapter 3 - Omer Fast as Part of a Media Critique

It is difficult to accomplish a media critique while remaining within documentary format. Audiences tend to invest quite a bit of faith in the authenticity of documentary films, and well they should, as nonfiction is an inherent part of the definition of documentary. Documentaries present “factual information about real people, places, and events, generally portrayed through the use of actual images and artifacts.” However, unbiased reporting can be difficult due to the inherent interest of the filmmaker in her subject and her motive behind telling the story. Omer Fast’s work alerts audiences to the possibility of unreliable information and authorial bias present in the documentary genre. Fast’s works are created in such a way that viewers may see how easily ideas can be manipulated or mistranslated. In addition to viewers empathizing with the subjects that they see onscreen, they also tend to divest themselves of any personal judgment applied to documentary videos because of the medium’s immanent “truth.” Fast’s work uses a variety of manipulations via the V-effect to show viewers that they fall into a narrative trap and stop thinking, and warns them to avoid passive acceptance of documentaries as “true” and unbiased reproductions of reality.

Fast manipulates his videos by cutting and rearranging the scenes to disrupt the otherwise seamless viewing experience. This disruption allows the viewer’s attention to be redirected to other aspects of content that may have previously gone unnoticed.

98 Ibid., 36-37.
Manipulation is very evident in Fast’s video *A Tank Translated* (2002), which consists of four video monitors set up in such a way as to mimic the various positions held by the operators of an Israeli tank (fig. 9).

![Image of four video monitors showing soldiers' faces with subtitles running along the bottom](image)


Each video screen shows a soldier’s face which corresponds to the location of each soldier’s post: commander, gunner, loader, and driver.\(^{100}\) The soldiers give short (three to seven minute) interviews on their experiences during active duty.\(^{101}\) Subtitles run along the bottoms of the screens, seemingly accurate translations of the soldiers’ dialogue.\(^{102}\) However, partway through the videos, some of the words change shortly after they appear. For instance, “This week an American guy stopped by who’s in the military,”

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\(^{102}\) *Ibid.*
turns into “This week an American guy looked out at me in the mirror.”103 Or, when a soldier describes his blind position within the tank, “The guys above you tell you what you’re seeing,” becomes “The news anchors tell you what you are seeing.”104 Finally, Fast even remixes his own monologue as the interviewer: “I have both English and Hebrew questions ready,” turns into “I have both English and Hebrew problems, really.”105 Fast interviews the soldiers about a wide range of topics within the scope of this twenty minute video, covering daily activities, newscasts, and personal issues. Normally, an audience may find this type of video to be mundane—a short video on how each soldier in a tank conducts his job—but Fast adds another level of meaning and interest through his (mis)translations.

When Fast (mis)translates, he draws attention to alternate meanings within the soldiers’ interviews and also within his own role as interviewer/artist. Fast gets the audience to think of three things. First, the audience’s attention is called to its need for subtitles and thus to the high level of trust it places in the translator. When Fast allows the audience a short glimpse of the actual translation before inserting his own, he creates an opportunity for critical thought. Fast reveals the possibility of translator, or, in his case, artist interference. The question of which translation is correct, which meaning is the “truth,” is raised.

Second, Fast calls attention to the viewer’s role. He engages the V-effect when he disrupts the level of familiarity with the characters onscreen by manipulating the only link the viewers have between themselves and the characters: language. The viewers are

105 Ibid.
forced away from an empathetic response, as a monologue in a foreign language is confusing without a linking mechanism like subtitles. According to the Verfremdungseffekt, the audience then takes a more critical, objective position on the video because of their state of alienation. Thus, the stance that they take towards Fast’s video could then be applied to other videos that they watch. Further, Fast points out where the audience’s critical ability is weak and exploits it so that they may see the extent of their dependence upon the creators and mediators of language, who are the artist and translator in the case of this documentary.106

For the third point, Fast offers an alternative way for the audience to interpret the (mis)translations. With the subtext he adds another layer of depth to the soldiers’ thoughts. This occurs when he manipulates the translations. Fast gives the audience another way to understand the documentary by changing the subtitles halfway through their scroll across the screen. While the forced change in subtitles outlines the propensity for bias by a translator or creator, this also reminds the audience that there is a multiplicity of perspectives to any given event. Unless audience members speak Hebrew, they will not know which version of the translation is the original. The idea here is that it may not matter in the end, because the audience should consider all options. When Fast overtly manipulates meanings within his video, he also manipulates the way viewers understand their relationship to the documentary genre as a whole.

Early video artists (mid-1960s to mid-1970s) also exploited the perception of “truth” that inherently comes with documentary-style video and television.107 When

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mounting their media critique, they railed against television-like qualities, most notably the disingenuous quality of its “live” shows. Stasheff and Bretz say that the television industry attempted to maintain a façade of reality during its early days, “the feeling that what one sees on the TV screen is living and actual reality, at the very moment taking place.”\textsuperscript{108} Raindance Corporation was one of the first collectives of early video artists that used documentary video as an example of “real” live events in contrast to television’s scripted versions. Raindance dealt with issues of social criticism through the production of “street tapes,” videos of unscripted events in the public domain.\textsuperscript{109} These video artists saw themselves as producing something more “real” than primetime newscasts for multiple reasons, but the major factor was the “lack of intrusive editing and its [the videotaping’s] immediacy.”\textsuperscript{110} It is evident that, from very early on, video artists were interested in the accurate portrayal of information. Omer Fast, on the other hand, exploits this historical trust that audiences invest in documentary-style video. He follows suit with the early video artists’ media critique and offers audiences something more “real” than a one-sided documentary. By incorporating different perspectives on the events that he videotapes Fast subverts the television format wherein one “real” perspective is generally shown, much like a voice of authority. Fast confuses his audiences with assumed “truthful” events turned into “false” conglomerations of multiple viewpoints, in opposition to traditional television format.

In the 1970s, Vito Acconci explored video’s relationship with audiences in their normal, non-critical, passive roles. In \textit{The Red Tapes} (1976), Acconci consistently engaged, then alienated, viewers by leading them to believe that a conventional narrative

\textsuperscript{108} Stasheff, \textit{The Television Program}, 8. Italics original.  
\textsuperscript{109} Sturken, “Paradox in Evolution,” 52.  
\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Ibid.}, 114.
was taking place, and then shocking them with an unexpected change.\textsuperscript{111} The two-hour video is a collage of images spliced together in an anti-narrative format. The anti-narrative is a postmodern creation that attempts to frustrate an automatic application of stories to events, which brings one’s automatic narrative codes into the foreground. The anti-narrative technique is meant to subvert the traditional narrative structure that inhibits social and individual change. Anti-narratives attack narratives and make them open up and show their fallacies and faults. I am using the term narrative following Donna Haraway, who defines it as a “culturally important story with a plot, hero, obstacles and achievements.”\textsuperscript{112} Most genres of cinema are narratives: comedy, horror, or romance, for example.

Acconci utilizes the anti-narrative technique to prohibit his audience from dropping itself into the easy format of a predetermined storyline when watching his video. For example, at one point during \textit{The Red Tapes}, the viewer is shown an image of a forest. After some time, Acconci’s hand appears and makes the forest disappear as he turns it over, revealing it as a page in a book. The initial, automatic response in the viewer is to take the image for what it seems, an actual bucolic forest. However, Acconci presents the image for what it truly is: a fake, a copy. This portion of Acconci’s video can be seen as hyperreal; the forest that the viewer considers to be real is actually a photographic copy, so without the use of media critique the audience is unwittingly interacting with the copy instead of the “real.” Within \textit{The Red Tapes}, Acconci also reminds the audience to be mindful of the multiple perceptions available for any event. Acconci’s sleight of hand may seem a bit like tomfoolery but he makes a pertinent point.

\textsuperscript{111} Michael Rush, \textit{Video Art} (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2003), 76.
Fast makes a similar point in *A Tank Translated*. Fast’s use of the anti-narrative technique is not the focus of his piece, as it is in the Acconci work, but he makes use of it just the same. Fast’s overall narrative is discernible in the interviews, but his interjections of (mis)translations disrupt the flow of the story throughout the video. Both artists take pains to alert their audiences to the mistake of simply accepting the voice of authority within documentary video. Both artists also use anti-narrative to push their audience to change its way of looking from that of a passive viewing receptacle to active, critical judge. Fast and Acconci are not insinuating that one should never bother with narratives. Rather, the artists’ point is that perhaps the audience should not trust others to give it narrative comfort. Basically, one should not let others, especially those with a stake in what they document, tell one how to perceive things.

Other contemporary video artists address some of the same issues as Fast. Senam Okudzeto is another contemporary video artist who deals with issues of displacement, language, and intercultural dialogue in ways that recall Fast’s work. Okudzeto appeared with Fast in the exhibition “Fiction or Reality” which investigated each artist’s distinctive perspectives on “identity, language, and memory” in a complementary manner. Okudzeto’s video *The Dialectic of Jubilation* (2002-2003) parallels many of Fast’s themes (fig. 10).

In her video, Okudzeto investigates her faulty memories, her own personal (mis)translations. She intersperses images of herself doing dance steps in her father’s village in Ghana with later footage of herself trying to teach the same steps to others in

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113 Lunn, “Fiction or Reality,” 153.
114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
This translation of ideas across cultures reflects Okudzeto’s own necessary translations of character, as she maneuvers between dual citizenships. Fast and Okudzeto’s personal histories are similar. Both artists had to assimilate their identity across cultures, albeit very different ones, and both utilize video to relay their interest in information (mis)translation. Okudzeto manifests her (mis)translations through dance movements that are understood in one locale and then misinterpreted in another. Fast takes a more literal approach and records interviews in one language, Hebrew, in *A Tank Translated*, and illuminates the misinterpretations through changing subtitles in English. These artists maneuver between disparate cultures—the transition from Africa to Switzerland is much rifer with tension than the transition from Israel to America. But both situations encourage critical awareness of the ideological underpinnings of everything, even such basic things as dance steps or oral histories.

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Chapter 4 - Artists and Ethics

As globalization has accelerated and people have received greater access to a larger variety of viewpoints, it becomes harder to determine which viewpoints to adopt. There is a split of opinion in the art world between artists who prefer to address ethical issues and those who do not. Ethical art is an art that “examines the social and political reality behind appearance, and illuminates social relationships to help us to recognize and change social reality.”

This kind of ethical art that engages with political issues and ecological problems often goes unnoticed. Artists who deal with societal ills do not receive the same amount of attention in the press or museum circuit as those who deal with more entertaining or sensational subject matter. For example, in an article about the Sensation exhibition (1999) shown at the Brooklyn Museum, “Don’t Shoot the Messenger: Why the Art World and the Press Don’t Get Along,” András Szánto writes how “even meritorious news organizations tend to abandon their respect for objectivity” when they report on art, eschewing most art-related stories unless they include some newsworthy aspect of the dramatic.

One of the artworks that attracted the most attention at that exhibition was Chris Ofili’s The Holy Virgin Mary (1996) (Fig. 11), because of the use of elephant dung for a portion of the painting.

Szánto points out that, “The need to position art as ‘news’--which is increasing as the mantra of cost cutting steadily replaces the civic obligation to cover arts--results in

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120 Ibid., 181.
the single-minded focus on scandal, money, and death.”121 Less sensational literature about socially-invested artists has been relegated to the periphery of art historical study. Nevertheless, a tradition of artists who work with ethical matters does exist, and includes such people as Joseph Beuys, Simon Starling, and Rikrit Tiravanija. Because of this, I have included ideas from writers who occupy the border between art history and other disciplines, like biology (Donna Haraway), and philosophy (Nicolas Bourriaud).

Donna Haraway teaches the History of Science at the University of California at Santa Cruz, and holds a Ph.D from Yale University in Biology.122 Haraway is a major activist for ethics in science, in respect to producers of knowledge and their inherent

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121 Szántó, “Don’t Shoot the Messenger,” 184.
biases. For instance, she holds that traditional creationist theories of communal ancestral heritage have been biased by the still predominantly male scientific community. She believes this situation aids in upholding patriarchal male-domination rhetoric as a natural state of affairs. Haraway promotes the integration of a multiplicity of viewpoints in the sciences, including those of females and ethnic people who have been historically marginalized.\textsuperscript{123} She works from a socialist-feminist standpoint, and analyzes science as it affects social history in a semiotic way, following Jacques Derrida’s model. Haraway’s writing crosses the boundaries of science, art, and anthropological disciplines. Definitions provided by her theoretical writings have been included in this thesis.

French theorist Nicolas Bourriaud wrote \textit{Relational Aesthetics} (in addition to \textit{Postproduction}, cited earlier), a book wherein he explains how artists in the 1990s used their work to interact with the public in a social way, stressing interpersonal relationships over solitary contemplation of objects.\textsuperscript{124} Bourriaud’s stance is considered by many to be ethics-driven because of his interest in the creation of community and sharing, rather than separation and isolation, between people. In both of his books, Bourriaud stresses the importance of community as an objective for artists in particular, because of their unique position in society. For example, in \textit{Relational Aesthetics} he points out that television and literature usually entail private consumptive practices, and movies and theater allow no room for commentary during the proceedings, therefore art exhibits allow for a higher level of discourse due to the possibility of immediate discussion.\textsuperscript{125} The future of

\textsuperscript{125} Bourriaud, \textit{Relational Aesthetics}, 16.
contemporary artists’ ability to impact the public in constructive ways lies with increased discourse among diverse groups which can be facilitated by artistic practice.

Bourriaud outlines his theory about socially-minded art in *Relational Aesthetics,* which acts as a call-to-arms for artists who wish to create relationships with the world instead of simply representing it. Bourriaud dismisses the viewpoint that artists should inhabit their “ivory towers,” churn out esoteric works, and just let the market sort it all out. Rather, he suggests that artists should “… learn to inhabit the world in a better way, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution. Otherwise put, the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.” Bourriaud’s requirement for relational art is that it deal with, “the realm of social interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.”

Fast is not considered a relational artist because his work does not require that an encounter be made between the artist and viewers or between the viewers themselves. However, Fast’s work embodies the idea of a “model of action” for his audience, in that he addresses societal ills instead of pursuing esoteric, exclusively personal, or formal themes.

Since World War II, a long tradition of ethical artists predates Omer Fast. In Europe, the Situationists (1957-1972) wrote about the “increasing politicization of urban space” and the “banality of revolutionary images.” They were interested in disrupting the trend that philosopher Guy Debord explains in his seminal text, *The Society of the Spectacle:* that of culture turning into a visually-centered commodity. Artists like

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128 Bourriaud’s requirement for relational art is that it deal with, “the realm of social interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.” *Ibid.,* 14.
130 Thompson, *The Interventionists,* 16.
Asger Jorn used the concept of *detourné*, “the re-arranging of sign-systems in order to produce new meanings” to fight the spectacle, instead of relying on the tired, revolutionary images previously preferred.\(^{131}\) Jorn, for example, would pick up old paintings at resale shops and then paint on top of them, as in his *Paris by Night* (1959).

During the 1970s, political activists and yippies such as Abbie Hoffman engaged in performance actions which foreshadowed interventionist art.\(^{132}\) One of Hoffman’s most remembered actions occurred on August 24, 1967 when he led a group of people to the New York Stock Exchange and dropped dollar bills onto the traders down below, who stopped work to clutch at the falling money.\(^{133}\) Applying his sense of wit and irony to a performance in public influenced much interventionist work that now still applies to media and the spectacle.\(^{134}\)

Another early artist who engaged in subversive interventionist art projects is Cildo Meireles. His *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* series included one action that utilized the ubiquitous Coca-Cola bottle (1970).\(^{135}\) Meireles added his own political, anti-capitalist messages to Coca-Cola bottles in a script similar to that already found on it, so that the average under-challenged Coca-Cola worker would not notice and continue to circulate the altered bottles in the market.\(^{136}\) He did similar graffiti actions on currency.\(^{137}\) Both actions were focused on widely distributed mediums that would be sure to pass through the hands of a high proportion of individuals.

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\(^{131}\) Thompson, *The Interventionists*, 16.
\(^{133}\) *Ibid.*
\(^{134}\) Thompson, *The Interventionists*, 16.
\(^{137}\) Thompson, *The Interventionists*, 16.
Interventionist artists were exhibited as a cohesive group in *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* which was held at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in 2005.\(^{138}\) Most of the artworks in the exhibition were re-creations of events that took place in the streets. The reason that the artwork was presented in a street context was because it would reach a larger portion of the populace and encourage them to participate.\(^{139}\) What makes this type of activity different than a rally or speech on world politics and problems is the artwork’s purpose in giving audiences tools with which to make changes rather than simply instructing them to behave in particular ways.\(^{140}\) The exhibition catalog itself can be considered an artifact or art object for the exhibition, engaging in more of a “showing and doing” instead of a “telling,” like a regular text.\(^{141}\) Raising awareness of social injustice is the ideal for interventionist artists.\(^{142}\) For example, the art collective HaHa formed in Chicago in 1988 and focuses on community involvement in its creations.\(^{143}\) *Taxi* (2003) was a monitor mounted to the roof of a taxi cab that flashed site specific phrases as it made its rounds through Chicago.\(^{144}\) The artists had gathered the phrases from locals and the monitor displayed things like, “Who decides slums or model communities?”\(^{145}\) This integrated art action confronts audiences in an unexpected place, and also engages a large portion of the community as it is highly mobile.


\(^{139}\) Ibid.

\(^{140}\) Barber, review of “The Interventionists,” n.p.

\(^{141}\) Ibid.

\(^{142}\) Ibid.

\(^{143}\) Ibid.

\(^{144}\) Ibid.

\(^{145}\) Ibid.
Craig Baldwin is another artist included in the interventionist exhibition. Baldwin is an independent filmmaker who works with politically satirical subject matter.¹⁴⁶ For the interventionist exhibit, a compilation of Baldwin’s still photos was projected, works that depict billboards whose original meaning has been skewed due to manipulation on a graffiti artist’s part. For example, the original meaning of a billboard for the Marines read, “Maybe you can be one of us. The Marines.” Baldwin’s slide shows the altered billboard with the subverted message reading, “Maybe you can be one of us. War Machines.”¹⁴⁷

Unfortunately, Fast’s work is not available to those outside of the gallery context, and, unlike Baldwin’s billboards, Fast’s videos have more limited circulation. But, like the former, the ethical aspect of Fast’s work focuses on language as a pathway to address societal ills. Transmission of information is highly regarded in contemporary society, which is evidenced by the total integration of the global media network in first-world cultures. In fact, one might even say that contemporary society is gluttonous for information. The use-value of knowledge has surpassed the use-value of most commodities and reliance on dependable sources of information has become of the utmost importance. In his work, Omer Fast steps in and disrupts the continual flow of “accurate” information, revealing hidden agendas and supposed “truths” otherwise buried beneath the barrage of data.

Fast’s video CNN Concatenated (2002) deals with both language and media ethics (fig. 12). The premise of the work is that, today, audiences have become alienated

¹⁴⁶ Thompson, The Interventionists, 63.
¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 64.
as a result of news anchors’ alarmist reports. Fast gives viewers a glimpse of the “real” news behind all of the fear-mongering done by the reporters. He has cut and remixed hundreds of words to create an amusing monologue by popular “talking heads” Christine Amanpour, Wolf Blitzer, Robert Novak, Judy Woodruff, and others.  

Bertolt Brecht also investigated concatenation. Barthes writes that Brecht questioned successive discourse in that he felt it created a sense of “assurance: concatenated discourse is indestructible, triumphant. The first attack is therefore to make it discontinuous—to discontinue it: literally to dismember the erroneous text is a polemical act.” Therefore, the constant discourse that CNN takes part in is distracting and comforting, so both Fast and Brecht feel that the breaking up of the discourse is the first step to stop the false comfort of concatenation. This standpoint is directly reflected in Fast’s manipulation of material in *CNN Concatenated*. He dismembers the smooth continuum of the media’s discourse and reassembles it in a choppy fashion to unveil the alarmist undertones that the successive reportage hides.

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CNN Concatenated has been installed in exhibitions in different ways and also circulates on the internet as a fragment, but the most compelling version of it was found at Pol-i-tick, an installment in the Media Field video series at the Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts (2003).\textsuperscript{150} CNN Concatenated was presented on a television monitor in the museum’s lobby instead of in an exhibition room. Due to the positioning of the piece in a lobby rather than a space marked off for showing art, patrons initially mistook Fast’s video for CNN news.\textsuperscript{151} This mistake was not due to naiveté on the part of the viewers, but instead occurred because of postmodern citizens’ tendency to compulsively absorb information, a tendency that has led to televisions being installed and playing newscasts at all hours of the day in common areas like airports and corporate lobbies.\textsuperscript{152}

Initially, Fast’s work does not create a distinct impression on visitors. However, once one passes by and hears the “reports,” then it becomes obvious that these are not regularly scheduled programs. The images switch too rapidly back and forth between reporters as they deliver sentence fragments that add up to messages about anxiety over death and loneliness. The reporters’ words portray such emotional states as condolence, aggression, and humbleness.\textsuperscript{153} A few quotes from the video that outline these differing states are: “Look, I know that you’re scared,” “You always blame me for your laziness,” “I need to know that I’m being understood,” and “We can’t handle the quiet.”\textsuperscript{154} These quotations allow a window of understanding into Fast’s mindset since these remixed

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
broadcasts are, according to the artist, “built around personal themes.” As the audience is lead through the anxieties of Fast’s world they can see what topics he considers important. It is evident that Fast is mainly concerned with the state of reporting and “truth.”

After careful analysis of the flow of newscasters’ “truths,” one can see that the selfish motivation behind news reporting is the “truth” of the news. To illuminate this fact, Fast created his montage by taking the reports out of context, which reveals the underlying motives of the reporters and the news stations. The repetitive theme of “listen to me” stresses the reporters’ interest in attention and can also be construed as orders straight from the station itself. It seems as though news stations feel they need to constantly remind the public of their own importance. The reason for this constant reminder lies in the fact that the nightly news is not exempt from television ratings. By convincing viewers that missing the news means they are missing potentially life-threatening information, the stations ensure high ratings. This is not to say that newscasts do not provide important information. However, Fast’s point is that the ubiquitous stream of fear-mongering is excessive. Fast subtly convicts the producers of CNN when he mentions the barrage of alarmist news reports that ran for so long after 9/11 that they enabled him to amass an enormous word bank of paranoid phrases. For, without the producers’ extensive, 24-hour coverage, he would not have been able to create the tirades seen in CNN Concatenated.

Fast’s interest also lies in the audience/reporter symbiosis. In reality, the reporters’ existence depends on audience ratings, but the reporters have somehow

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convinced the masses that it is the other way around. Alarmist news reporting can be seen as a result of this power struggle.\textsuperscript{157} Fast presents the reporters as “talking heads” who project the unwarranted excitation of fears, both their own as well as the audience’s. The plethora of alarmist news reporting has been discussed many times, but Fast approaches it with an entertaining yet poignant artwork.\textsuperscript{158}

The most clearly interventionist work created by Fast started in neither a gallery nor a museum. One of Fast’s most famous pieces, \textit{T3-AEON} (2000), combines both video art and social action (fig. 13). In \textit{T3-AEON} Fast and friends rented multiple copies of the film \textit{The Terminator} (Buena Vista World Entertainment, 1984) from New York City Blockbuster video stores and he inserted personal histories into the movie’s audio narrative. Fast recorded testimonial type voice-overs to fill periods of quiet that occurred near periods of extreme violence in \textit{The Terminator}. The testimonials are all real stories recounted by members of his family, who discuss childhood memories of parental discipline and the emotions it engendered.\textsuperscript{159} These testimonials offer an intriguing new way to view \textit{The Terminator}. The juxtaposition of real childhood violence paired with fantastic, cinematic ultra-violence makes the viewer reconsider the supposed pleasure that she gets from watching harm inflicted onscreen. After recording new audio in the Blockbuster copies, Fast re-released the videos back into the mainstream marketplace.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{157} Godfrey, “Making History,” 131.
\item \textsuperscript{158} Some texts that discuss the wave of alarmist news reporting are, Daniel Cohen, \textit{Yellow Journalism: Scandal, Sensationalism, and Gossip in the Media} (Brookfield, Connecticut: Twenty-First Century Books, 2000) and Naomi Klein and Debra Ann Levy, \textit{Fences and Windows: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the Globalization Debate} (New York: Picador, 2002).
\item \textsuperscript{159} Omer Fast, “T3-AEON,” (Press Packet, Postmasters Gallery, New York, 2007), n.p.
\end{itemize}
13. Omer Fast, frames from *T3-AEON*, 2000, video, New York, Postmasters Gallery. using the regular Blockbuster rental service. Audiences unknowingly rented and then viewed the altered versions. This project continued for quite awhile, until the VHS tapes were eliminated to make way for DVDs. While the VHS tapes were still in circulation, Fast’s social action was perpetuated with the cooperation of the viewing audience.
Considering that these videos were in circulation within the Blockbuster system for years, and customers did not dispose of the altered videos once they realized they had been given a “graffitied” version, the work lived on.\(^{160}\) This context of private viewership adds a new layer to Fast’s work. The viewer can contemplate Fast’s intervention in the comfortable setting of her home, which makes the content and context much more intimate and accessible. This work is rooted in social action art known as “hacktivism.”

A long tradition of “hacktivism” predates Fast. For instance, the Barbie Liberation Organization, or BLO, a division of the RTMARK Corporation, engaged in a guerrilla war on the ubiquitous Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls in 1989 (fig. 14).\(^{161}\) The BLO obtained and then swapped the voice-boxes between hundreds of each of the dolls and then returned them to the market.\(^{162}\) The result was a Barbie that yelled, “Vengeance is mine!” and a G.I. Joe who mused, “Will we ever have enough clothes?”\(^{163}\) A sticker slyly placed on the back of the boxes encouraged parents to call their local news station if dissatisfied with their purchase, ensuring media coverage for the event.\(^{164}\) The point here is that “hacktivism” is a useful way for artists to engage people who normally may not see their work in an art gallery or museum context. Compared to the BLO, Fast’s work is a small public outreach activity, but he still managed to create some discourse without the

\(^{160}\) Omer Fast was able to monitor the altered videos by checking to see if a small sticker that he had inserted into the case, which said T3-AEON, was still there.

\(^{161}\) According to its website, the RTMARK Corporation functions in the Activist Industry, offering limited liability to artists and cultural producers through supplying tools for “creating and measuring cultural value.” The Barbie Liberation Organization is a function of this mission statement, as well as such projects as “The Yes Men impersonate the WTO” and “The etoy Fund.” RTMARK, “[legacyRTMARK: Past Projects],” http://www.rtmark.com/legacy/history.html (accessed April 7, 2007).


\(^{164}\) Ibid.
help of many collaborators. In fact, here again the use of video as a medium may have
opened up Fast’s work to a broader cross-section of the populace, as viewing movies is
something enjoyed across a broad spectrum of ages, rather than something like the BLO
dolls which are only purchased by people with small children.
Chapter 5 - (Dis)Appearance of Ethics in Omer Fast’s Videos

Omer Fast embodied the idea of the ethical artist when he remitted the power to continue his media critique of *The Terminator* to his audiences with *T3-AEON* (2000). The viewers chose to return the videos and allow the rental cycle to continue until the VHS tapes were replaced by DVDs.\(^\text{165}\) Part of the reason that the audience perpetuated the rental cycle of *T3-AEON* relates back to Fast’s intention to surprise, but not alienate, his audience. Fast takes an educational position in his artwork, rather than an offensive approach, giving audiences a feeling of power and dignity. Instead of directly attacking viewers, he enables them to learn and then change on their own terms. Fast stepped outside of the modernist “ivory tower” and interacted with his audience on equal terms when he inserted *T3-AEON* into the marketplace. This social aspect of Fast’s work sets him apart from most other contemporary video artists and renders him, in spirit, more like video artists from the past, or new media artists. New media artists can be defined as those who use contemporary media, like the internet, to address current cultural and political problems.\(^\text{166}\) While the interjected personal histories in *T3-AEON* are private, they are easily “read” by members of the populace. The stories are not fantastic, but real, lived experiences of a type that engenders empathy. Fast uses narratives of childhood pain to make the audience think about the violent fantasy spectacle they have rented in a new way, in the context of acceptable violence as perpetuated by the media. For example, one edited portion contains the comment, “And then he saw me with this thing--he was so upset that the first thing he slapped me in the face.” The comment overlaid a

\(^\text{165}\) Omer Fast, e-mail message from the artist, April 2, 2007.
quiet video segment of *The Terminator* just before Arnold Schwarzenegger shoots and kills a woman. This interlude is a good example of how Fast has confronted viewers with new perspectives on violence, making him an artist interested in the ethical ramifications of artwork.

Fast’s ethical stance in *T3-AEON* emphasizes the fact that media critique is important. But many artists do not dedicate their time to ethics or social actions. Should artists address ethical issues? If so, what should they address? Major moral issues like war, famine, and poverty, are important, but more abstract ideas like language, “truth,” and freedom should be considered as well. Omer Fast’s interest in the ethics of information dispersal are reflected in his work. For example, he comes back again and again to language and how it is understood across cultures. The transition across cultures can be seen in several works: *A Tank Translated* (2002) in the translation from Hebrew to English, and *Spielberg’s List* (2003) in the translation from Polish to English. Fast also acts as mediator across subcultures in *Godville* (2004-5), in which he acts as the subversive middleman, altering the information (mis)translated between the character-interpreters of the eighteenth century and viewers. While Fast consistently plays the role of the “unbiased reporter,” his (mis)translations reveal his ethical stance, that being the preference for multiple perspectives as opposed to one voice of authority. In reference to language, he admits that he is interested in taking sad histories and making them happy. His interference in personal narratives moves him away from the role of reporter and toward that of subjective artist addressing social issues. Fast values a multi-

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faceted version of reality, a multiplicity of viewpoints from which viewers can discern their own “truth” and “reality.”

The social topics in which Fast is interested are manifold, as he himself has addressed things such as violence (*T3-AEON*), alarmism (*CNN Concatenated*) (2002), and history as narrative cliché (*Spielberg’s List*). However, based on the continual use of language as the common denominator, or the mouthpiece through which all of these ideas are voiced, it appears that his work targets language as the most foundational, and most flawed, cultural construct. Fast’s work with language gains importance when considered in a worldwide social context. A newsworthy example of content drawn from the global context is one of Osama bin Laden’s audio recordings that was released to the media in 2003. In the recording, bin Laden denounced both Iraqi and American politics, but the tape was manipulated by the military and media to sound like an endorsement of Iraq, while still denouncing America.\(^{169}\) *CNN Concatenated* deals with issues directly related to this incident: the question of “truth” in current events and who gets to construct it.\(^{170}\) Those who control both the transfer and dispersal of information can greatly affect world audiences. As Fast lobbies for more critical analysis to be applied to information dispersal within the context of his work, the public is called upon daily to engage that skill, as evidenced by his (mis)translation of information by “trusted” news sources.

Besides language, audience responsibility is another topic that Fast investigates. Fast forces audiences to occupy multiple mindsets while viewing his pieces, which is a means to encourage active responses. Fast enables his audience to choose from multiple

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viewpoints in his videos. He offers up both the index and the source in *Breakin’ in a New Partner* (2000), and in *Berlin-Hura* (2002). In both, he gives the audience two versions of the same narrative, one is source, and one is index.\(^{171}\) In order to see how the audience is forced to choose between index and source, *Berlin-Hura*’s content will be explained. *Berlin-Hura* is exhibited on four monitors, with one showing a parcel of land in the Mitte area of Berlin, one showing a parcel of land in the Negev desert in Israel, one monitor showing an elderly woman in her apartment in Tel Aviv, and the last monitor showing an elderly man sitting in a domestic interior (fig. 15).\(^{172}\)


The woman recounts a meandering, fragmented narrative that moves from what she remembers about the two pictured landscapes to what she thinks the future will hold for

\(^{171}\) Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of semiology, coined the terms “index” and “source.” Following Peirce, “index” is a sign that almost always denotes a “source” in a specifiable spatio-temporal relation. The most common example is smoke as an index for the source fire. Roman Jakobson, “A Few Remarks on Structuralism,” *MLN* 91 (1976), 1534-1539.

them. Fast forces the viewers to act critically when an elder man, a hired actor, begins to recount the same narrative on another monitor. The audience is not informed of whose story is historically “correct” and is left on its own to determine the “real” subject. Fast does not give any clue as to who is the subject and who is the actor, and so gives the power to the viewer to decide which one they consider “real.” Fast gives his audience the opportunity to make an active decision in what is at stake for its understanding of the situation.

In any case, viewers’ attention, and thus level of responsibility, to works of art varies depending on the context. The majority of Fast’s work has been exhibited within the confines of either galleries or museums, but he has also transcended the boundaries of the “white box” with T3-AEON. In this way, Fast is operating in a manner that is similar to that of painter Keith Haring, who exhibited in galleries in the 1980s but also made drawings in subway stations (fig. 16).


*T3-AEON* and Haring’s graffiti creations confront audiences without prior consent, which is an audacious move for artists. Most artists are content with confronting those who wish to be confronted, those in a museum or gallery context. Artists do not usually venture outside of the traditional venues for exhibition and so their work is only seen by a small portion of the populace, most likely those who share beliefs similar to those of the artists. The circulation of *T3-AEON* was a testament to the flexibility of audiences to accept an alternative way to consume art. The public sphere that this work touched was categorically different than the social sphere that normally engages in viewing art, even though there was a limited supply of the work. The broad scope of viewers affected was facilitated by the disguising of the work as a popular cultural object, *The Terminator*. Fast’s work would not have been as conceptually potent if it had only circulated within the art world.

The fact that Omer Fast deals with aspects of daily life, like the media, makes his work more easily accessible for a larger proportion of audiences. This accessibility translates into better understanding of his points and a deeper level of discourse between the artist and his audience. Attention should be called to the fact that the specific qualities of the video medium have aided Fast in purveying his ideas. By using this medium, a medium with which the public is familiar, Fast gains immediate access to its psyche. This access to the psyche is key, as the public constantly has to filter out unwanted information directed at them by advertising media. In order for an artist to “be heard” amongst all of the “noise” that the public contends with on a daily basis (billboards, television ads, radio spots, mail circulars), a quick avenue into their minds is
invaluable. Again, if Fast had chosen to deploy his ideas using a medium that is more obtuse--say, installation art--he would not have the same impact.

The internet is an ideal way for artists to engage a large cross-section of the public that would normally never see their work inside an art gallery or museum. Fast does not work on the internet, and has not voiced his position on the matter. One explanation as to why he does not work on the internet is that he prefers to control the environment in which his works are shown, *T3-AEON* being the only exception. For many pieces, multiple monitors or screens are required and their placement adds to an understanding of the artwork. *Godville*, for example, is shown on a double-sided screen, and Fast does this to encourage viewers to walk around the screen and see the two different channels playing. This is part of his technique to encourage viewers to hold multiple viewpoints when watching a video. Also, *A Tank Translated* is exhibited with monitors in specific positions, reflecting the positions of soldiers within a tank. Although the positioning of the monitors may seem like a minor necessity, it is of importance to the artist.

Other aspects that could conceivably contribute to Fast’s lack of presence on the internet are image quality and presentation--formal qualities that could suggest his attachment to the modernist tradition. Generally, image quality is degraded on a computer screen versus a monitor in a museum. But, beyond modernist issues are logistical ones: the multiple images that play concurrently on different monitors in a gallery would have to be shown all at once on a single computer monitor, which would compromise the viewer’s understanding of Fast’s vision for the piece. The problems inherent in transferring a multi-monitor work to a single computer screen are demonstrated by Fast’s video *Glendive Foley* (2000) (fig. 17-18). It is normally
exhibited on two monitors in a gallery, but an excerpt of the work is also available on a CD that comes with the book *Beyond Form: Architecture and Art in the Space of the Media.*\(^{174}\) *Glendive Foley* is a simple farce, a video that depicts suburban dwellings in Glendive, Montana, coincidentally the “smallest Television Market in the United States.”\(^{175}\) The video seems quite serene, with the sounds of traffic, birds, and ambient noise paired with the visions of the American dream—a home in suburbia. After some viewing, it becomes evident that the noises do not quite match up with the imagery depicted. Something is amiss, yet it is hard to pinpoint. The reason that the audio sounds slightly strange is because there is no noise coming from the monitor showing the suburban landscape, Fast is making all of the sounds himself on the opposite screen. On another monitor, he is pictured in his home studio at his apartment, wearing oppressive headphones, creating all of the noises one hears solely through his own mouthed sound

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\(^{174}\) Omar Calderon, Christine Calderon, and Peter Dorsey, *Beyond Form: Architecture and Art in the Space of the Media* (Santa Monica: Hennessy & Ingalls, 2004).

\(^{175}\) *Ibid.*, 17.
effects. Thus, the audio does not quite conform to the images on the screen showing the suburbs, and the noises themselves, although very realistic, do not impeccably recreate their referents. The viewer is once again given the choice to hear and view either source or index. On the CD in Beyond Form, the image of a suburban home is shown first, paired with the audio manufactured by Fast. After a couple minutes the image of the house minimizes and then the image of Fast in his apartment studio maximizes and fills the screen. The entire excerpt consists of constant swapping between the two monitors, which is distracting and does not allow the viewer to focus on what they choose, which is something that Fast allows for in his original installation. Therefore, audience choice is omitted. Although Fast has not addressed the internet himself, these points serve to suggest incompatibilities between the mechanics of Fast’s works and the characteristics of the internet.

Nevertheless, if Fast wanted to foster a dialogue with a wider audience he would find ways to transfer his ideas to the internet. This emphasizes another characteristic of Fast’s work: its non-confrontational manner. When an artist only shows their artwork in a gallery or museum context the audience is severely limited. First, the work is labeled as “art” and so may be dismissed as such, not to be considered a strong political statement, for example. It is art made for the art world, an insulated community that holds a peripheral position in society. Also, when one enters an art gallery, an oft-found belief that is encountered is that one has “left reality” and has entered an entertainment-style venue. To apply the artworks to daily life, the artist must work to overcome this initial understanding of the context in which the works are seen. In order to be acknowledged

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by more viewers than those who actively seek out his work, Fast must look beyond the art world and integrate his artwork into the largest database available, the internet.

Fast chooses to work with abstract ideas like language across barriers, the alienation of the public, and the effects of the media, so he should be all the more interested in opening up his dialogue to the multiplicity of views available on the internet. In fact, for someone who so highly values a multi-perspective stance in his audience, he does not embrace the multi-faceted pool of potential audience members found in cyberspace. Interventionist artists embody both aspects of ethical art: they use their artistic practice to create public events and social actions in order to effect change in the world.

In sum, Fast embodies a common contemporary artistic dilemma: whether to create art that will work well in a gallery and support him financially, or to create art that could impact a wide portion of the populace, not earning him much financially, but communicating his ideas to a larger population of viewers. The subjects that Fast investigates are compelling in many ways and would create enhanced dialogue among audiences if Fast changed the exhibition context from galleries to the internet. It has been proven that Fast works successfully with the interventionist artistic style in *T3-AEON*. His interest in (mis)translations is also applicable to a wide variety of people, and it would benefit both him and his audience if he would try to expand his media critique to a wider populace.

Considering that Fast works in a video format, the quickness and ease of the internet would be the ideal vehicle for his work. Other outlets for video exist as well, like the signs attached to the taxis that the interventionist artist collective, HaHa used in *Taxi*
(2003). The originality of *Taxi* is just one example of the many ways in which video can be incorporated into daily life. Message and context are both important in postmodern society, where the public’s attention is a scarce commodity.

Bertolt Brecht is a good example of an artist who, in an earlier era, utilized the context within which his message was delivered. As an influential progenitor, Brecht’s V-effect can be seen in Fast’s artwork as he attempts to change his audience members into critical judges. The relationship between audience and artist is a complicated one, made even more so when the artist attempts to educate, as Fast does. Alienation is a useful tool for educating an audience. The danger lies in restricting the lesson only to those who choose to learn it.
Bibliography


Vita

Kelli Lynn Bodle was born in Fort Worth, Texas, on September 30, 1980. Following this, she moved around the United States until 1993 when she settled in Michigan. In 2002, Kelli graduated with honor from Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. She graduated with a bachelor of arts in art history with a concentration in Pre-Columbian art and minors in journalism and Spanish. After enrolling at Louisiana State University, Kelli studied contemporary art and theory under Susan Elizabeth Ryan. Kelli will receive her Master of Arts degree in art history in August of 2007, graduating with a 4.0 grade point average. She hopes to one day run her own gallery, exhibiting the work of people that have been historically under-represented in the world of art history.