Chapter 4 – The Fiction of Truth and the Truth of Fiction

Every film is a fiction film.
– Christian Metz

Every film is a documentary.
– Bill Nichols

Upon entering Omer Fast’s THE CASTING (2007), two screens hang from the ceiling and confront the viewer with tableaux vivants of a casting session. It is the beginning of the work’s fourteen-minute loop, and the action is taking place on a soundstage. A man with chin-length hair and wearing a plaid shirt is in the middle of an audition, responding to questions asked by another man seated behind a video camera. The images appear to be still photographs, so this dialogue is delivered in voice-over, invoking the formal system of Chris Marker’s LA JETÉE (1962). But looking closely, one notices that this is not a montage of stills, but rather a series of shots in which the actors attempt to hold frozen poses. Eyes blink and hands quiver. Like LA JETÉE, however, the organization of these tableaux follows a logic similar to that of continuity editing: when a character speaks via voice-over, the image track cuts in for a medium close-up, and shot/reverse-shot structures are used to depict conversational exchange. One finds a contamination of media here, an exemplary instance of what Raymond Bellour has termed the entre-image or “between-image”; between media, between stillness and movement, THE CASTING stakes out a strange formal system founded in principles of contamination and a lack of unity.

The interviewer asks the man if he likes improvising and suggests that they give it a try. The man agrees, and a story begins. Or rather, two stories unfold, woven together through the shifting reference point of the pronoun and through narrative linkages. The man intertwines a story of his experiences as a U.S. Army soldier stationed in Iraq with that of a disastrous first date with a self-mutilating girl at Christmastime. He says, “I had met a German girl, a beautiful redheaded German girl and I didn’t know that she was completely and absolutely insane.” As he speaks, the images on the screens visualize his narrative in the same almost-frozen tableaux. On the left, there is a small house in Germany; on the right, a beautiful redhead smokes a cigarette, her face bathed
in pink light. He continues, “She would stand on the side of the road as we’d drive past.” The “she” here at first seems to refer back to the German redhead, but the images that accompany the sentence tell a different story. One screen shows a Humvee parked in the desert, the other a Muslim woman wearing a k̲h̲i̲m̲ā̲r with a Humvee approaching in the distance. This transition introduces a second story, in which the man recounts his experiences as a soldier in the Iraq War. It focuses on what he calls “probably one of [his] worst days,” when he shot at a windshield to scare the driver into stopping, not realizing the car was full. The act resulted in the death of a young man in the backseat. This narrative is braided together with that of the redhead and her mental instability. She asks him to hurt her, professes her love for him though they have just met, and undresses to reveal numerous self-inflicted scars covering her body – an unveiling that functions almost as a displaced visualization of the way in which psychic scars of the shooting continue to plague the soldier. At times, the casting director interrupts with a question, such as “Are you afraid?” or “How did you know you weren’t dreaming?”

At the end of the story, we learn that our narrator has been unsuccessful in his audition. The casting director tells him that his story was too long, that he isn’t looking for a political angle. Curiously, he goes on to say, “I’m interested basically in the way that experience is turned into memory and the ways that memories become stories, the ways that memories become mediated, they become recorded and broadcasted and things like this” – a question that, as World Trade Center 2006 (2006) suggested, is intensely political indeed. A discernible element of contradiction has entered the voice-over, suggesting that perhaps something is awry. The remark reads like an artist’s statement by Fast, someone who, as noted in chapter three, interviewed Schindler’s List (1993) extras to

*Omer Fast, The Casting (2007).*
make Spielberg’s List (2003). This is fitting, indeed, since the voice of the casting director/interviewer belongs to none other than Fast himself.

When the viewer walks around to the reverse side of the screens, another perspective on the soundtrack is revealed, quite different than that available when one first enters the black box. The Casting is a two-screen installation, but a quadruple projection. On the other side of the screens, rather than the elaborate mise-en-scène of the projections visible when one first enters the room, each projection shows a talking head, one of a young sergeant in the U.S. Army and the other of the artist. The two come together to form the shot/reverse shot of an interview. The dialogue that had been in a relation of voice-over with the two frontal projections here is synchronized. The audition is recontextualized as an interview, fiction meets documentary, and the same words are given a radically different meaning due to their accompaniment by different images. The high-gloss, professional actors, and vibrant color of the front projections give way to a relatively muted video aesthetic showing two regular people discussing difficult memories. What had appeared as fictional improvisation now appears as the painful recollection of lived trauma.

To make The Casting, Fast interviewed numerous soldiers returning from the Iraq War, but chose to work with the stories of one man in particular. And yet, these stories are not faithfully relayed. Rather, as Fast put it, “I used the interview almost as a pool of words from which to edit new sentences and new thoughts that were not said in any interview.” Fast espouses a conception of the interview that foregoes any link to objective truth in favor of approaching it as malleable discourse that may be recombined at will, insisting on the ability of montage to endow an inherently variable utterance with meaning. The prominence of the jump cut in the interview projections foregrounds the constructedness of each sentence. What is initially apprehended as a continuous voice-over is revealed to be a Frankensteinian assemblage of conversational snippets. Dialogue that had been heard as seamless speech is now invaded by strange tics and intonations that are only noticeable when accompanied by the visual discontinuity of the jump cuts. In particular, the interviewer’s rejection of the story near the end of the loop (“I think it’s too long, people’s attention span is not that long”) is revealed to be fully fabricated out of a quick succession of edits that are almost audibly – but far from visually – seamless. As the viewer moves around the work, he or she is able to blend together the documentary interviews with their spectacular dramatization, mixing these two modes of representation in a purposeful contamination of the complex affects induced by testimony on the one hand and fiction on the other.

This hybrid mixture of documentary and fiction parallels the hybrid visual form of the almost-frozen tableaux, thereby redoubling The Casting’s status as a “between-image.” The use of near-still tableaux within moving images alle-
gorizes memory’s fragile nature, refusing the determinative stasis of photography in favor of an unsettling formal strategy that evokes an eerie pastness while remaining fluid, open to contingency, and marked by the present tense of unfurling movement. Though the figures stay frozen, clothing billows in the wind on the desert road and the flicker of a television is reflected on the faces of the family in the German home at Christmastime. The work thrives on this intermedial tension, using it as an anti-realist device to temper the potential impression of reality that might otherwise arise from the spectacle of the frontal projections. Spectacular representation has been described as a kind of freezing that halts narrative, something that here, as in the cinema of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, is literalized, exaggerated, and used against itself. But in addition to serving this critical function, the tension between stillness and movement in The Casting’s tableaux projections points to the desire to situate the installation in an in-between space characterized by a contamination of boundaries and a lack of fit in established paradigms.

This contamination takes place not just between media and between regimes of representation but also between the institutions of cinema and art: even though it leaves behind the references to film history found in Spielberg’s List, cinema remains a central component and concern of The Casting. Instead of engaging in an importation of celluloid (as in the work discussed in chapter two) or existing cinematic texts (as in the work discussed in chapter three), The Casting engages in an importation of cinematic techniques and forms. It makes use of an element of the production of a film, the casting session, as a fictional conceit that will provide a way in to examining the relationship between memory, narration, and spectacle — a triangulation in which the cinema has historically participated in a powerful manner. Though the dispositif of The Casting — with its quadruple projection, mobile viewer, and art institutional context — differs greatly from that of classical cinema, one can say that it nonetheless makes use of cinematographic vocabularies and techniques such as projection, the shot/reverse shot, and mise-en-scène. The scale of its projected images aligns it with the giganticism and forgetting of material support that are central attributes of the cinematic apparatus, while the frontal projections espouse a high-gloss aesthetic evocative of commercial cinema. In addition to these formal characteristics, The Casting foregrounds and interrogates two of cinema’s key abilities: fictional storytelling and documentary testimony. Both of these abilities rest on a conception of cinema as a technology of the virtual, something that has historically been problematized in artists’ employments of the moving image but that has been key to the history of cinema. The Casting is one of a whole host of moving image works produced since 1990 that interrogate a tension central to the cinema: the tension between referentiality and representation, between a fidelity to the world and a fictionalization of it.
But what exactly is the status of documentary in *The Casting*? Through extensive editing, the soldier’s words are emptied of any attestation to the real. Fast asserts the all-pervasiveness of fabulation, suggesting that so-called non-fiction imagery is functionally equivalent to fiction due to the ways in which it is processed through highly conventional structures of representation. Though the frontal projections seem to be generated by these words – they seem to be a kind of parasitical discourse that feeds off of the documentary testimony, visualizing the images it evokes – the editing of the interview suggests that in fact the opposite is true: the shaping of the soldier’s discourse is determined by the exigencies of spectacular representation. Whatever the soldier actually said has been thoroughly transformed by its submission to codified representational practices. In this respect, *The Casting* mimics the modes of representation that govern mainstream news media and “based on a true story” war movies, as reports from Iraq are redacted and repackaged to be maximally mediagenic. The installation unveils the workings of these prevalent practices and subjects them to a critical gaze, but does nothing to contest them or offer alternatives.

In her article “Omer Fast: When Images Lie... About the Fictionality of Documents,” Maria Muhle writes that, “Fast undermines the relationship between the fictional and the factual, and reveals the equally artificial nature of both.” Of course, the factual image is as constructed as the fictional image, but is it “equally artificial”? There is a real danger in negating the referential power of the documentary image and placing it on the same plane as fiction. Their relationship to actuality is simply not the same. What responsibility to his interview subject does Fast abandon when he carves up the man’s words for art world consumption? In Spielberg’s *List*, the artist used an existing film as a launching pad for an exploration of the fictionalization of reality and presented the confusion of history and the historical film as unsettling and dangerous. In *The Casting*, however, this indiscernibility of fiction and reality is staged by the work itself. While the objective may be to draw attention to the ways in which this equivalence works in television and cinema, *The Casting* reproduces it in the process. One might say that *The Casting* makes use of documentary images in order to assert a lack of belief in the possibility of documentary. It is based on a non-fiction interview, but sets to work on doubly fictionalizing it through extensive editing (on the rear projections) and cinematic visualizations (on the front projections). Far from asserting the ability to testify to an event that telescopes personal and historical experience, it suggests that in fact all such narratives are processed through highly conventionalized representational structures that distort and transform them. Reality has receded behind media images, as fiction and fact occupy the same plane of representation.

This position finds a theoretical buttress in Jean Baudrillard’s account of the rise of the age of simulation, in which a hyperreality of simulacra governs visual
culture. The simulacrum is a copy without origin, without anchorage in reality. Images refer not to the real, but to each other, linking together along a differential chain of signs. The fading of the real is a process intimately linked to technology and in particular to technologies of image reproduction such as the cinema, which offer powerful reality effects in the absence of reality itself: “[T]he age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials – worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs...” A lived relation to reality is replaced by the hyperreality of media images. The real disappears not out of rarity, but out of surfeit: as it is produced and overproduced by the media, every real event is preceded by its fictional precursor. Reality becomes a mere byproduct of representational codes. In a chapter called “The Murder of the Real,” Baudrillard states his point in a characteristically totalizing and declarative manner: “In our virtual world, the question of the Real, of the referent, of the subject and its object, can no longer even be posed.”

Since the early 1980s, Baudrillard’s work has been especially embraced by artists and curators, perhaps more so than that of many other French poststructuralist theorists whose writings also entered art critical discourse at this time. As The Casting demonstrates, this interest continues even as forms of artistic practice have changed. In a manner consonant with Johan Grimonprez’s Double Take (2009), another documentary-fiction hybrid, The Casting questions the referential claims of the documentary image, melding it with fiction to suggest that our contemporary moment is marked by a recession of the real beneath a veil of fiction. While The Casting serves to direct attention to the ways in which such events are spectacularized for media consumption and to undercut any unqualified claims of documentary truth, its wholehearted participation in a rhetoric that claims the image has been stripped of its relation to the real is worth questioning.

Other artists, meanwhile, have explored the interaction of reality and fiction in a less cynical manner that retains an investment in the referential status of the image. They turn to hybrid formations of documentary and fiction not to assert their interchangeability, but in order to explore the multiplicity of relations that mediate between the real and the image. They reject documentary transparency, but so too do they contest the logic of simulation by insisting on the moving image as manifesting a trace of the real precisely at a time when the referential power of images finds itself in question. The proliferation of digital media has resulted in a much greater ability to produce and disseminate non-fiction images, but in the process it has provoked a crisis in the faith spectators invest in these images as “authentic.” Rather than see this condition as doing away with any possibility of documentary practice, artists such as Kutluğ Ataman, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, and Amar Kanwar have underlined the coexistence of referentiality and representation in order to both problematize documentary’s truth
claims and underline the truth that can be produced through fiction. Where Baudrillard engages in a postmodern revival of Platonism that sees the image as a mere semblance, these artists assert that, more than just functioning as a vessel of empty spectacle supplying spurious reality-effects, the moving image, with its anchorage in actuality, can be used to inform, to move, and to imagine change. It can provide a way to encounter alterity, to rethink received narratives, and to see the world anew.

This desire to interrogate the relationship between reality and fiction is palpable in moving image art since 1990. The double turn to documentary and fiction at this time marks an embrace of the moving image as a technology of the virtual, a quality of film and video that had been extensively problematized in earlier artists’ employments of the moving image and film theoretical writing contemporaneous with them. Responding to Anthony McCall in a roundtable on the projected image in contemporary art, Hal Foster remarked that, in the contemporary moment, “There’s a rampant pictorialism, which is also a rampant virtualism, that the sculptural and spatial interests of your generation, Anthony, wanted to challenge, or at least to probe.”

Pictorialism, virtualism, and, one must add, narrative were perceived as the means by which cinema achieved spectatorial absorption – and were thus aligned with illusion and mystification. The shift from material actuality to virtuality that Foster points out is an important factor in conceptualizing how artists’ uses of the moving image since 1990 demonstrate an increased affinity with cinema when compared to their precursors, individuals who often aligned their uses of film and video with media such as sculpture and/or performance and against the mass cultural institution of cinema. It is easy to see how uses of 16mm or the remaking of the products of film history invoke the realm of cinema. Less obvious but no less important to the increased presence of cinema in the art of the past two decades is the manner in which artists have embraced the possibilities of virtuality and narrativity that exist within the moving image.

The preceding two chapters of this book have examined strains of artistic practice that locate cinematic specificity both within and beyond the material basis of the apparatus. Chapter two asserted that analogue film is linked to the spectral reanimation of contingent traces of pastness, while chapter three emphasized the public dimension of the institution and its status as a repository of shared cultural memory. In both cases, one finds propositions as to what cinema might be that investigate how the apparatus functions historically and socially. Following this objective to locate cinematic specificity as encompassing and also exceeding its supporting technology, this chapter will offer one final proposition concerning how cinema is “exhibited” or held up for examination in contemporary art: it will investigate the ways in which artists have latched on to cinema’s ability to both fictionalize and document the world – in short, to offer spectators
a revelatory, virtual encounter with another place and time. The transformative mechanisms that intervene between the real and its representation may come under attack, as they do in The Casting, or, as the following pages will demonstrate, they may be mined for their potential to generate an ethical encounter with the documentary archive, as they are in Amar Kanwar’s The Torn First Pages (2004-2008). Whatever the stance taken, the works under examination in this chapter investigate the modes of fiction and documentary as always already coexisting in the moving image and as constituting a vast measure of its power.

Rather than see fiction and non-fiction as opposed or separate, these works redouble the “aesthetics of confusion” that Bellour has deemed central to the othered cinema with the additional confusion of the division between fabulation and reference. They assert a space of overlap that maintains that, just as “every film is a fiction film,” so too is “every film a documentary.” As T.J. Demos has written, there has been a “significant convergence in the art of the moving image over the last decade, one that is remarkable for advancing political investment by means of subtle aesthetic construction, doing so by joining documentary and fictional modes into [an] uncertain relationship.” These works demonstrate that the museum and gallery now serve as sites at which to think beyond simulation and reimagine the tension and overlap between fiction and documentary – a tension to which, as Jonathan Rosenbaum has noted, “[f]rom the beginning, film has owed an important part of its fascination.”

While they may not evince the material relationship to cinema found in the celluloid works of Tacita Dean or Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij, nor the citational relationship to cinema found in the practices of Candice Breitz or Douglas Gordon, the works explored in this chapter are nonetheless evidence of the ways in which moving image art since 1990 has both interrogated and participated in the institution of cinema as it enters its second century. Unlike the practices discussed in the last two chapters, which focused on cinema as a superannuated medium to be commemorated and/or interrogated within the space of the gallery, these diverse practices constitute a site at which cinema is embraced at least in part for its novelty. They leave behind cinephilia and nostalgia to instead see cinema as offering new artistic possibilities and new opportunities to engage the social and political. As such, they constitute a site of novelty that is irreducible to a technophilic spectacularization of contemporary art, a novelty that is not the ever-same in the guise of the ever-new that is the hallmark of the commodity form. Rather, they invoke the novelty of the blind spot, as they renegotiate formerly distinct categories and muddle boundaries.
Anti-anti-illusionism

The interest in documentary and fiction in moving image art since 1990 indicates a waning of the phobic relationship to cinematic illusionism that had marked many earlier artists’ uses of film and video. Fictional practices have emerged that explore the new possibilities for storytelling afforded by the multiple projection environments of the gallery space, while a whole host of critical and curatorial projects have explored what has been called the “documentary turn” of contemporary art. In short, one confronts a diverse embrace of the technical and aesthetic possibilities of cinema while leaving behind specific reference to film history. For Dominique Païni, such practices displace the emphasis on remaking to constitute the next stage in a generational progression of moving image art – even though one must assert that both tendencies appear contemporaneously in the early 1990s and that such talk of “generations” frequently overlooks asynchronous developments in favor of a tidier narrative of quasi-Oedipal struggle. Païni sees “recyclers” like Pierre Huyghe and Douglas Gordon as comprising a third generation of video artists that is superseded by a fourth generation interested in exploring the spatialization of narrative and that “makes use of the moving image to exhibit a new material: time.” In this account, what is at stake in the work of such artists “is less an iconographic borrowing from the cinema than the structural importation of cinema into the space of the museum,” allowing cinematic temporality and storytelling to be explored outside of the restrictions imposed by the movie theater. Païni exhibits a discernible preference for the artists of this fourth generation, looking to them to provide the title of his book, *Le temps exposé (Time Exhibited)*, and content that they cease what he perceives to be desublimating assaults against classical cinema perpetrated by artists such as Gordon.

Though Païni names Doug Aitken, Pipilotti Rist, and Sam Taylor-Wood as the key representatives of the tendency he describes, one might also add to the list figures such as Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Kutluğ Ataman, Matthew Barney, Stan Douglas (also something of a “recycler”), Omer Fast, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Amar Kanwar, Isaac Julien, Steve McQueen, Fiona Tan, and countless others. It perhaps goes without saying that this (far from exhaustive) inventory brings together a great diversity of practices by no means reducible to a single set of concerns. However, what all these artists share is a use of projection in tandem with a valorization of the moving image as a technology of the virtual over its sculptural or material attributes. The primary emphasis is on a represented scene or event rather than on the apparatus itself, whether this scene consists of a fictional scenario or a documentary portrait. Narrative, however fragmentary or nonlinear, becomes important. This is not to suggest that the
actuality of the apparatus ceases to be a concern for these artists; indeed, they are sharply attuned to the material specificities of the media in which they work. They do not, however, turn inwards to construct a recursive spiral of reflexivity but rather use the moving image to turn outwards and open artistic production to an encounter with subjective and/or historical experience. In The Casting, for example, the sculptural configuration of the quadruple projection is key to the work, but it is key as a means rather than an end in itself. The reflexivity exhibited here has less to do with the material attributes of the apparatus and altogether more to do with a desire to probe cinema’s double relationship to representation and referentiality – two qualities that come together in its conception as a technology of the virtual.

Though the notion of virtuality is often invoked in reference to new media (as in “virtual reality”), Anne Friedberg has noted that it is necessary to challenge such restrictive accounts. Rather, as Friedberg suggests, “The virtual is a substitute – ‘acting without agency or matter’ – an immaterial proxy for the material.” Together, fiction and documentary designate two ways in which cinema is a technology of the virtual; that is, they are terms that describe the relationship between “material” reality and its “immaterial proxy,” the image. Despite their ontological differences, they both make visible another space and time before the spectator. To assert that cinema is a technology of the virtual is not to suggest a transparency between the image and the material reality it represents; as Friedberg writes, it is not a matter of original and copy “because the virtuality of the image does not imply direct mimesis, but a transfer – more like metaphor – from one plane of meaning and appearance to another.” Rather, the invocation of the category in relation to contemporary artists’ employments of the moving image is a way of marking out a difference in the conceptualization of the apparatus relative to that of the 1960s and 1970s, a time when many artists and filmmakers refused a notion of the moving image as immaterial proxy and instead insisted on it as a material surface.

**Hybrid Forms**

The modes of documentary and fiction might seem antithetical to one another. One suggests a fidelity to the real, while the other signals a departure from it into the realm of fabulation. As Bill Nichols has put it, in fiction film, it is “a likeness rather than a replica to which we attend,” whereas with documentary “we are offered access to the world” rather than “a world.” Both, however, are always integral to the moving image, whether one is speaking of a feature-length narrative or a documentary short relatively devoid of cause-and-effect
logic. The authors of *Aesthetics of Film* write that every film – even the documentary – is a fiction film because of “the law requiring that every film, by its materials of expression (moving images and sounds), ‘unrealizes’ what it represents, transforming it into a spectacle.”²⁰ In other words, what the spectator sees is not the thing in itself but its virtual double. The real event is fictionalized as it is channeled through structures of representation. All films are fictional in this sense, while the fiction film is doubly so: “it is unreal because it represents the fiction and because of the way in which it represents the fiction (using images of objects and of actors).”²¹

At the same time, though, every film is a documentary film. Even if it “‘unrealizes’ what it represents,” it is nonetheless first and foremost a photographic record of its referent, a revelatory trace of a particular space and time. It may not transparently reflect this reality, subjecting it to various kinds of transformations through the work of representation, but it nonetheless does maintain a relation to it. Excluding the cases of animation and computer-generated imagery (about which more later), the cinematic image is a document of a profilmic event. Very different than the “impression of reality” created by the classical Hollywood cinema or the specious dramatizations of so-called reality television, this understanding of the relationship between the filmic image and the real asserts, in short, that due to the recording function of cinema, the referent adheres.²²

The tension between documentary and fiction is thus in play in almost all encounters with the moving image and is intimately bound up in the pleasures it provides and the knowledge it promises. Most often, this interplay is minimized as a given work will firmly inhabit one camp and disavow its relation to the other. In other words, a fiction film will attempt to minimize the force of the profilmic so as to strengthen the impression of reality of its diegetic world, while a documentary film will bracket the necessary unrealization of the filmic image and the factors that intervene between the real and its representation in order to better communicate a sense of immediacy and veracity. In certain instances, however, the coexistence of documentary and fiction is taken up as a specific point of interrogation and the tension between them is cultivated rather than subdued. In foregrounding a combination of the two within the textual fabric of a single work, it becomes possible to destabilize an easy opposition between truth and falsity and, in its place, to introduce a complex interaction between them that is shifting and uncertain. Given the dangers of falling back into an unreconstructed belief in documentary or of resuscitating the still-powerful ideological function of fiction, this is a particularly attractive option for contemporary artists who seek to interrogate these modes without inheriting the problems that they have historically posed. Moreover, it provides a way of reflecting on the cinema itself, caught between traditions of recording traces of
the physical world and creating grand spectacle. The hybridization of fiction and documentary dramatizes this essential friction and, in so doing, provides these artists with a way of interrogating the status of the image.

Documentary is always already present beneath the fiction, lending it a relation to the archivization of the past not present in theater or literature; at times, the testimonial value of this documentary witnessing can erupt, exceed the fabrication that seeks to contain it, and fracture the veneer of fiction so as to render problematic its ontological status. Meanwhile, one can highlight the manner in which documentary is always subject to layers of mediation that work to unrealize the profilmic event and channel it through the codes of cinematic representation – something very much at play in The Casting. There can be no access to the real in itself; to cite Jacques Rancière, “The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought.” By blending documentary and fiction, these ever-present issues can be explicitly foregrounded and interrogated. Many films throughout the history of cinema have done precisely this through varied strategies: Jean Rouch’s Les Maîtres fous (1955), Abbas Kiarostami’s Close-Up (Nema-ye Nazdik, 1990), Chris Marker’s Sans soleil (1983), Gillo Pontecorvo’s Battle of Algiers (La Battaglia di Algeri, 1966), and Orson Welles’ F for Fake (1973) are only a few of the most prominent examples. These diverse films strike at the very heart of cinematic fascination in their interrogations into spectatorial belief and the referential and epistemological status of the image. In their exploration of such hybrid documentary/fiction formations, the artists discussed throughout this chapter continue this investigation while displacing its sphere of inquiry from the movie theater to the art gallery.

Rehabilitating Narrative

Much of Kutluğ Ataman’s work relies on the interview – an intersubjective, narrative situation – as a basic unit of composition. For Women Who Wear Wigs (1999), the artist interviewed four Turkish women who all wear wigs for different reasons: an activist gone underground, a cancer survivor, a Muslim university student not allowed to wear a veil to school, and a transsexual prostitute and activist whose head was shaved by the police. The four interviews are exhibited as four projections placed side by side to form a polyphonic panorama. The installation asserts that the wig is not simply a surface level adornment that covers over the women’s essential selves, but rather an important element in their conception of self and their relation to others. Though this foregrounding of the multivalent meanings of appearance, disguise, and performance, as well as the potential for producing truth that resides therein, Women Who Wear
Wigs troubles any notion of objectivity or transparency that the interview mode it espouses might invoke. This is no simple politics of the signified that would use the medium of video as a mere container for content. Rather, instead of unmediated testimony, one becomes aware of how fabulation and mythology are always already present in the recounting of personal experience; Women Who Wear Wigs actively interrogates the signifying mechanisms that work to constitute identity. Here, as in many other works by Ataman – such as The 4 Seasons of Veronica Read (2002), Twelve (2003), and Küba (2005) – there is an insistence on the moving image as a document of lived experience paired with a keen attention to how formal mechanisms serve to shape the viewer’s experience of such content. Ataman, who began as a filmmaker, works out of a documentary tradition that has roots in the history of cinema rather than the history of art. Through the exploration of multichannel installations and experiments with the temporality of reception that would be impossible in a standard theatrical exhibition, he recontextualizes that tradition in a dynamic way that introduces new aesthetic and epistemological possibilities.

*Kutluğ Ataman, Women Who Wear Wigs (1999).*
Paul Willemen has pinpointed history and “the social anchorage of meaning production” as two blind spots of vanguard media practices in the 1960s and 1970s. Questions of materiality, process, and subject formation tended to supersede an interest in historical specificity or experience, something absolutely evident if one examines the early years of video art as well. As Okwui Enwezor – a figure who, as artistic director of Documenta 11 (2002), was a major proponent of the “documentary turn” of contemporary art – has noted, Greenbergian modernism “purges the external world from the space of art, wishing for it a state of purity, a state which rejects not only illusionism, but also asserts that the full meaning of any art is to be found in its specific medium.” Though film and video mounted significant challenges to modernism as conceptualized by Greenberg, many artists’ uses of these media in the 1960s and 1970s continued this purgation and remained introverted. As the modernist paradigm waned and questions of history and the social did enter back into video production, it was often at the expense of necessary interrogation into signifying practices. Questions of form were left behind, implicitly suggesting that truth was simply out there, waiting to be captured by a camera. Willemen finds a third way in British avant-garde film production in the 1990s, in which narrative becomes an issue again, rather than simply a bad object to be disarticulated or eliminated. Narrative, as the process through which the articulation of subject and history is elaborated in the text as well as in relation to the text, is thus unavoidable if one point of the discourse is precisely to trace the existence of the political within particular histories.

Moving beyond the Adornian position that advanced art in a capitalist society must be governed by a relentless negativity, this return to narrative means a reengagement with the specificity of subjective and historical experience, whether through fiction or documentary. It does not, however, advocate abandoning of a politics of signification altogether, but rather aims at integrating an interest in the processes of making meaning with a concern for history and social existence.

Such a rehabilitation of narrative – be it fictional, documentary, or a hybrid combination of the two – occurs with force in the artistic production of the 1990s and is exemplified by WOMEN WHO WEAR WIGS. This rehabilitation of narrative is not a simple embrace of fictions that would induce spectatorial pacification nor a return to a prelapsarian belief in the truth of the documentary image. Rather, Willemen paraphrases Walter Benjamin on historiography to write that, “It is no longer the narrative that tells ‘the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary,’ nor the deconstruction of such a procedure, but a narrative that ‘brushes history against the grain.’” It acknowledges that cinema must be understood historically and also that history must be understood cinematically. In WOMEN
WHO WEAR WIGS, Ataman examines a complex and located nexus of gender, subjective experience, collectivity, and politics. The linearity of a narrative that would join events together in a tight causal chain “like the beads of a rosary” is refused, as the viewer must instead work to forge connections across the four projections of the work. Each reception of this narrative will be different depending on when in the loop the viewer enters the room, what decisions he or she makes while there, and when he or she decides to leave. No single voice is privileged, but instead the four work in tandem so that, in the words of Emre Baykal, “the work completes itself into a full and wider picture: a fifth frame that amplifies a polyphonic sound of a wider reality, which is related to the identity problem of the country, rather than to the problems associated with certain identity politics.”

The flexible deployment of interlocking narratives is a central element of this undertaking, as they telescope personal experience and public history in variable ways depending on the spectator’s trajectory through the space.

In 1970, Gene Youngblood’s Expanded Cinema advocated for pioneering new moving image environments beyond the movie theater, but specified storytelling as a specific point of derision:

> Plot, story, and what commonly is known as “drama” are the devices that enable the commercial entertainer to manipulate his audience. The very act of this manipulation, gratifying conditioned needs, is what the films actually are about... The viewer of commercial entertainment cinema does not want to work; he wants to be an object, to be acted upon, to be manipulated. The true subject of commercial entertainment is this little game it plays with its audience.

According to such logic, narrative, in large part due to the structures of identification on which it relies, elicits passive audiences content in their pacification. Rather than advocating for experimentation with and/or a subversion of narrative, Youngblood rejects it entirely – and his position is far from exceptional. Despite the dismantling and reconstruction of narrative forms that mark the cinemas of the 1960s and 1970s across the globe, uses of the moving image in art – even those by no means aligned with Expanded Cinema – largely stayed away from narrative, seeing it as an agent of mystification, ideological naturalization, and of the sublation of contradiction.

At the risk of overgeneralization, one might venture that a curious reversal has taken place: in the 1960s and 1970s, narrative was to be rejected in favor of an anti-illusionist experience of space and medium, but since the 1990s, narrative has been explored as a fragmentary and open terrain of socio-political inquiry, while certain non-narrative explorations of spectacular intensity in the vein of Youngblood’s book, such as Pipilotti Rist’s Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters) (2008), have engaged in a replication of the forms of subjectiva-
tion and image circulation that are endemic to advanced capitalism. This reversal is a result of certain impasses reached in earlier forms of politically invested media production and of the emergence in the intervening years of postmodernism as a cultural logic marked by a spatial diagram and the disintegration of the syntagmatic chain. Narrative shifts from being seen as complicit with ideological hegemony (as it was in the 1960s) to something that in fact has the possibility of departing from the dominant cultural logic of disconnected signifiers. There are, of course, instances in which narrative and spectacle jostle fiercely with each other: the work of Matthew Barney and Doug Aitken, for example, makes use of a narrative as something of a skeleton to cloak in spectacular robes, much as would a post-classical Hollywood blockbuster such as James Cameron’s Avatar (2009). However, narrative may also be marshaled as a way of intervening in economies of signification and reimagining the relationships between subjectivity, memory, and history. Through its organization of time and event, it can counter the prevailing logic of fragmentation and piece back together syntagmatic units in new ways. Like cinema itself, it has ceased to be a bad object in artists’ employments of the moving image, emerging as one strategy used to stage important investigations into historical change and subjective experience.

This rehabilitation of narrative is also present in Laura Mulvey’s “Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative, and Historical Experience,” a 1986 essay in which the author returns to the problematic of cinematic representations of sexual difference she outlined in 1975’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In “Changes,” Mulvey suggests narrative as a possible way out of the ahistorical structural oppositions (such as woman : man :: spectacle : narrative) that had governed much of feminist theory in the 1970s, be it film-related or otherwise. Mulvey admits in “Changes” that the conceptual framework she employed in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” – the frozen time of structuralist synchronic analysis – might have in fact enacted a blockage that would prohibit a consideration of her ideas in relation to temporal change, in relation to history. Instead, she turns to narrative as a locus of transformation that may leave resolution and closure in suspension, never fully dissipating the possibilities it opens.

If narrative resolution often works recuperatively, absorbing back into normality the disruptive element that initiated the story, Mulvey’s interest is in mobilizing narratives that resist such recuperation and instead investing in the liminality of the middle of the story, that interstitial stage in which real change occurs. As with Willemen, this involves a departure from a form of narrative that would relate “the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary.” She encourages the reader to remember that structures of sexual differentiation and identity formation such as the Oedipus complex function as “temporal forms,
narrative forms,” and asserts, “If narrative, with the help of avant-garde principles, can be conceived around ending that is not closure, and the state of liminality as politically significant, it can question the symbolic and allow myth and symbols to be constantly revalued.”

The gallery space, with its rejection of start-to-finish viewing and possibility for multiscreen environments, seems especially poised to pioneer the creation of these new narrative forms that might integrate experimental strategies and problematize closure.

The notion of a state of liminality as politically significant is central to Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s *If 6 Was 9* (1995). *If 6 Was 9* is a triple-projection installation that engages a topic dear to the history of video art: subject formation. However, its predecessors lie less in that tradition than in the fragmentary and multifaceted narratives of 1960s European art cinema, owing much to its loosening of the causal chain and indiscernibility of past, present, reality, and fantasy. The ten-minute loop reimagines gendered subject formation outside of a psychoanalytic paradigm of lack, instead insisting on the productivity of becoming. Though the work is based in documentary interviews, Ahtila uses fictional strategies to create a quasi-utopian space of possibility in which gender relations and attitudes towards sexuality find radically altered expression, something that suggested in the topsy-turvy invoked by the installation’s title, drawn from a Jimi Hendrix lyric: “Got my own world to live through/And I ain’t gonna copy you/If six turned out to be nine/Oh I don’t mind.”

A group of teenage girls candidly discuss their views on gender, sexuality, and sexual experience, crisscrossing the public and private realms to engage the world of MTV and magazines alongside intimate recollections shared between friends. The girls move between three modes of discourse – memories, fantasies, and perceptions – that are at times indiscernible from one another. An alternating use of voice-over and synchronized sound troubles any easy knowledge as to whether the speaker is addressing someone else within the diegesis or presenting a monologue accessible only to the spectator.
As noted above, If 6 Was 9 is a work of fiction, but was informed by interviews with young girls Ahtila conducted in Helsinki. The influence of documentary in the work is felt in its formal vocabulary, which makes frequent use of direct address and the device of the interview. The installation sets up a series of contaminations of normally upheld boundaries – self/other, fiction/non-fiction, public/private – that carry over into what is perhaps the central conceit of the work: its temporal regime. A girl of approximately fifteen delivers an anecdote in the past tense about her sexual activity in high school and how the other girls treated her because of it. She says, “Flat-breasted bookworms wondered if I had too big a mouth and fake eyelashes. Tough girls called me a whore and sapling feminists thought I was just stupid.” This summons a schism within the audio-visual representation, as it occupies two temporal locations at once. A teenage girl speaks the words of a woman much older; perhaps they belong to another and perhaps they belong to her future self, but in either case they are reflecting back from a time to come on the present tense of the image, young adulthood. In the following scene, Ahtila moves towards a more blatant proclamation of such anachronism: a young girl sits on the railing outside her school and proclaims, “Here I sit with my legs apart like a little girl who hasn’t learned anything about sex, who has no idea that a woman must hide her private parts and lust. In fact, I’m thirty-eight years old.”

The anachronism of If 6 Was 9 effects a dislocation, as the girls sometimes speak what the viewer presumes to be their “own” words – intensely personal words, at that – and other times parrot the words of women who are their senior. In either case, these words are not their own, but those of documentary subjects interviewed by Ahtila. This ventriloquism allows for a loosening of the connection between the speaker and what is spoken to allow for fantasy and memory to circulate through the work in a depersonalized and temporally fluid manner. Ahtila has said, “Instead of just getting characters to talk about feminist issues, I wanted to incorporate feminism deeper into the structure of the work.” If 6 Was 9 both recalls and points to the limitations of the feminist consciousness-raising documentary by introducing a series of refractions that makes evident the impossibility of a stable subject who would utter “I” or who would communicate authentic experience. The work remains grounded in a discussion of the experiences of women and girls, but these stories are mediated through fictional conceits that allow them to reflexively confront the conditions of their enunciation and the non-transparency of both language and the filmic image.

In her analysis of the installation, Alison Butler has suggested that

The installation’s form, through its spatial and temporal articulation, embodies a micropolitics of becoming, even as its content – its insistent concern with women’s experience – defines this field of micropolitics in terms of molar identity. From a femin-
ist perspective, If 6 Was 9 is especially interesting because it explores a feminist politics of temporality.\textsuperscript{35}

One thus finds an alliance between a feminist politics grounded in the specificity of women’s experience and a “micropolitics” that refuses such identitarian logic. It is by maintaining these two approaches in play at once that Ahtila overcomes a problem that has plagued feminism: how to rally around the signifier “women” while also engaging in a critique of the logic of identity that has subtended the regime of phallogocentrism. The looped format and the refusal of a developmental logic move away from any possibility of narrative closure, something that film history has shown rarely ends well for women. Instead, If 6 Was 9 remains open, inhabiting a space of liminality.

In its looped, multiscreen format and accompanying temporal dislocations, the work insists on the powers of fragmentation, recombination, and becoming. The figures of If 6 Was 9 are not girls and not women, as they are placed in an interstitial position that allows them to shift age brackets, knowledges, and discursive registers. Girlhood ceaselessly oscillates between being championed as a site of potentiality and freedom and being retrospectively viewed from the future of womanhood as a painful training ground for what will follow. One voice asserts, “One thing is certain for us all, the players in this game: we have a future,” only to have another respond, “But I’ve been there already: educate yourself.” There is an interplay here between determination and room to maneuver, inevitability and unforeseeability, that refuses to allow the possibilities of girlhood to be entirely recuperated into a traditional developmental narrative. Ahtila has remarked, “The idea of linearity bothers me, as does the notion of causality that accompanies it and the assumption that a story should become understandable only through that formula.”\textsuperscript{36} Linearity and causality are refused in If 6 Was 9 both in its account of gender formation and in its narrative and formal structure. In this way, Ahtila rehabilitates fictional narrative as a possibility for political engagement and draws out the new possibilities for cinematic storytelling that are made possible by multiscreen projection.

\section*{A Return of the Real}

The revival of fictional narrative may thus be seen as both a response to the omissions and impasses of an earlier generation fixed on anti-illusionism and self-reflexivity and as a by-product of a change in the dominant cultural logic that enacts a shift in the available possibilities for opposition. The recent embrace of documentary also draws on such developments. It may be seen as a
desire to reinject questions of history and the social into aesthetic production as well as a reaction to often hyperbolic proclamations of the fading of the real and a concomitant proliferation of simulacra. As noted with regard to The Casting, certain artists continue to affirm the rule of simulation even as they expose it to critique. But others – and here one might invoke Ataman’s commitment to the interview and contrast it to the way Fast uses the interview in The Casting – reassert the referentiality of the moving image precisely as an intervention into a visual culture that all too often treats documents like entertainment.

In The Return of the Real, Hal Foster diagnoses the fascination with trauma and abjection in the art of the 1990s as in part symptomatic of “a dissatisfaction with the textualist model of culture as well as the conventionalist view of reality – as if the real, repressed in poststructuralist postmodernism, had returned as traumatic.” 37 Just as poststructuralism’s emphasis on signification as a process grounded in a differential system of signs rather than any referent in the external world led artists to return to the fleshy obstinacy of the body, so too one might suggest that the surge in documentary practices is another such “return of the real” after its long-time bracketing. The return to the real of documentary comes at a time when technological advances in image production have displaced the acheiropoietic images of film and video with images in which the human hand (via computer) once again intervenes. Commercial cinema increasingly relies on compositing and computer-generated imagery in a manner that substantially alters its ontology and weakens its link to the real. Lev Manovich has suggested that this precipitates a condition in which “cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation.” 38 Though animation has long been considered to be one particular case of cinema, Manovich asserts that the proliferation of digital imagery in contemporary cinema reverses this notion to make cinema “one particular case of animation.” 39

In such a climate, declarations such as “the Gulf War did not take place” have dialectically reversed into a renewed interest in referentiality. 40 Baudrillard predicted this reaction already in 1983’s Simulations: “When the real is no longer what it used to be…[t]here is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience, a resurrection of the figurative where object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential…” 41 Of course, a cynical view of this interest in the referential would see it simply as a nostalgic pastiche of history and a false production of the real that remains fully within the realm of the simulacrum, perhaps of the American Graffiti (1973) variety or even that of the nightly news. Or to follow a diverging but equally cynical path, the so-called documentary turn, with its ability to render the distant proximate and offer the urgent charge of actuality, might be simply understood as fully complicit in the art world’s opportunistic forays into the exotism of otherness, providing a thoroughly demarcated and reified zone of “realness”
for ready consumption. However, the recent turn to documentary in contemporary art practice also attests to the possibility of refusing the logic of the simulacrum and reveals the extent to which proclaiming the recession of the real serves to perpetuate the very forgetting of history it seeks to describe. The political imperative was once to dismantle the simulation machine and refuse the illusionism of cinema, but now it is to embrace that very same machine’s powers of registration as they are increasingly displaced by manufactured images that have little to no anchorage in physical reality.


Amar Kanwar’s The Torn First Pages both insists on the testimonial value of the image while also engaging in strategies that “unrealize” the image and assert a distance from the referent. Under the military junta in Burma, the State Peace and Development Council requires that all publications include state objectives and slogans on their first page. In December 1994, Ko Thon Htay, a bookseller, was arrested for removing these first pages in the printed matter he sold. The Torn First Pages draws its title from this act of protest. The installation consists of nineteen video projections on paper, so many torn first pages now rid of government slogans and given over to serving as a material support for a heterogeneous array of images that respond and testify to the struggle for democracy. The projections, arranged in three structures, mobilize the traditions
of found footage, reportage, ethnography, and activists’ video in mobile constellations of meaning that never resolve in a finite manner. The viewer is free to move around these projections at will, here encountering a found-footage work by Kanwar that makes jarring interventions into the audio-visual archive, there coming across interviews with the Burmese diaspora in India, Norway, and the United States, and still over there pausing to watch video footage smuggled out of the country. Michael Renov has enumerated four modalities of documentary poetics: preservation, persuasion, analysis, and expressivity. Through its nineteen projections, The Torn First Pages engages all four of these discursive functions: it asserts the image as a trace of the historical real, it argues for the cause of democracy in Burma, it produces knowledge of this struggle by interrogating a selection of images stemming from it, and it does so with a formal and aesthetic acuity that heightens the work’s affective resonance.

In order to reimagine the developmental narratives of gender, If 6 Was 9 fictionalized a series of documentary findings. By contrast, Amar Kanwar’s The Torn First Pages stays firmly grounded in the documentary mode. Throughout, one finds a strong commitment to the testimonial powers of the image. Where, then, lies its alliance with fiction? Rather than in the staging of scenarios or in any recourse to a likeness of a world rather than a replica of the world, The Torn First Pages evinces a relationship to fiction in its wholehearted embrace of the manner in which the projected image is always fictional insofar as it “unrealizes” the referent, even when it makes documentary claims. Recall the axiom cited above: every film is a fiction film since “every film, by its materials of expression (moving images and sounds), ‘unrealizes’ what it represents, transforming it into a spectacle.” Certain strands of documentary filmmaking – notably direct cinema and cinéma vérité – have attempted to combat this necessary unrealization by cultivating formal techniques that would aim to collapse image and referent in the production of objective truth. This denial of mediation is, however, eminently ideological, as it aims to dissimulate the processes of unrealization that are always at work. Rather than work to deny such processes, Kanwar acknowledges them, pries them open, and mines them for their potential for intervention. He pulls the referential image farther away from the real in order to return to the world a greater truth than would inhere in the image alone.

The notion that there is a need to depart from the reproduction of physical reality in order to produce knowledge of this reality has a long history in debates around the relationship between aesthetics and politics. In a reaction to the aesthetic writings of Georg Lukács entitled “Reconciliation Under Duress,” Adorno writes,

The truth of the matter is that except where art goes against its own essence and simply duplicates existence, its task vis-à-vis that which merely exists, is to be its
essence and image. This alone constitutes the aesthetic; art does not become knowledge with reference to mere immediate reality, i.e. by doing justice to a reality which veils its own essence and suppresses truth in favour of a merely classificatory order. Art and reality can only converge if art crystallizes out its own formal laws, not by passively accepting objects as they come.⁴⁴

Where Lukács had advocated for realism, Adorno asserts a divergence from the world as necessary to avoid simply replicating the petrified surfaces of capitalism. Unlike evidence, which is constituted as a category through its proximity and fidelity to the world, art, for Adorno, essentially diverges from it. Art would be “go[ing] against its own essence” if it were to simply duplicate the physical world. If art were to replicate empirical appearances, it would merely reproduce the reified surfaces that exist there, obfuscating any true knowledge of the economic and social realities of the capitalist system that underlie its superficial functioning. By producing a “negative knowledge of the actual world,” art is able to remain committed only insofar as it diverges from empirical reality.⁴⁵ And yet, despite its clear political commitment, Adorno’s position risks turning a blind eye to the particularities of social and historical existence.

How might one synthesize an engagement with reality and an acknowledgement that merely reproducing images of the world is insufficient? In The Torn First Pages, one witnesses a careful negotiation of departing from and returning to existence. Rather than simply reproducing existing images of the Burmese struggle for democracy, Kanwar subjects them to dissection and cross-analysis and situates them in relation to larger constellations of meaning. He sees them as documents and as images that possess their own formal and material specificity. Rather than assuming that the image might self-evidently hold forth, Kanwar follows Georges Didi-Huberman’s proposition: “Images become precious to historical knowledge the moment they are put into perspective, in montages of intelligibility.”⁴⁶ Seeing may be believing, but it is not knowing. In order for the production of knowledge to occur, it is necessary to create constellations of meaning.

The Torn First Pages incorporates small, quasi-autonomous works that embrace formal strategies that question the premises of visibility and the truth of media images. One such video is The Face (2005), shot on 25 and 26 October 2004 when the then-commander of the military junta, Senior General Than Shwe, visited Mahatma Gandhi’s memorial site in New Delhi.⁴⁷ The Face begins with a shaky, handheld shot of Than Shwe being greeted with a garland of flowers in a crowded room. After roughly twenty-three seconds, a hand covers the lens and a small title appears at the bottom of the screen: “no cameras allowed.” Once again, the obstacles to visibility are underlined. After several seconds of blackness, one grainy image dissolves into another, a barely visible
close-up of Than Shwe. The work’s title and date of filming appear onscreen. Grainy slow motion footage of a wreath of flowers gives way to an intertitle: “The next morning/ Senior General Than Shwe/ Supreme Head of the Burmese Military Dictatorship/ visited/ the cremation memorial site of Mahatma Ghandi in New Delhi to pay his respects.” The remainder of The Face is given over to Kanwar’s manipulations of footage of this visit. In the absence of being able to film the day before (“no cameras allowed”), the artist intervenes into the sanctioned imagery in order to speak to the absurdity of the event: the leader of a country that violently represses non-violent opposition is paying tribute to Ghandi, the man who said, “I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent.”


Two men carry the floral wreath in front of Than Shwe, who lays it on the memorial site and poses for the cameras, the shutters of which are heard clicking on the soundtrack along with Gandhi’s favorite hymn, “Vaishnava Janato.” Than Shwe walks around the memorial as a voice from off-screen shouts, “Excuse me, sir! Wait, wait, sir!” As the camera pans to follow Than Shwe, it reveals a white barrier behind which the press stand. As cameras click, Than Shwe begins to throw pink flower petals on the memorial, surrounded by functionaries. The voice from off-screen coaxes, “One more, sir, one more!” As if following the injunction of this onlooker, Kanwar isolates this throw and repeats it over and over
over again faster and faster, causing the music on the soundtrack to turn into an increasingly high-pitched, frenzied chirping. He zooms in on the basket of flower petals and isolates the faces of a number of onlookers, ending on Than Shwe. With the grating audio still on the soundtrack, Kanwar moves to an image of the face of a young man on a poster, the kind carried by activists to recall individuals who have been killed or imprisoned by the regime. Frames are blended together so as to create a tension between stillness and movement. The soundtrack goes silent and the face stays onscreen. The video ends with a dissolve to black.

The Face foregrounds questions of media representation and suggests how false a documentary image can be. Than Shwe presents a benign visage to the world in a ceremony staged for news media, a complete fiction when considered in relation to his government’s policies. The opening of the video, with its abrupt disturbance of the image of Than Shwe receiving the flower garland, explicitly stages the problem of the absence of images due to the rigid censorship of the press in Burma since the 1962 military coup. By the end of the video, the official face of the military junta has been replaced by languid close-ups of a Burmese citizen: from the face of power to the face of the oppressed. Kanwar’s manipulations of the footage reveal the monstrosity and absurdity of the event, reframing this document of a state visit as a document of falsity. The onlookers at the ceremony turn into so many willing accomplices to this pretender, called out in a series of close-ups that isolate their facial expressions during the flower throwing. In their passive acceptance of this feint, they come to stand in for an international community that has largely turned a blind eye to the human rights abuses under the military junta.

The Face is one of six projections in part one of The Torn First Pages. It occupies the upper left corner of the apparatus, positioned immediately above two mirrored projections of Thet Win Aung (2005). This short video concentrates on the face of its titular individual, a thirty-four-year-old man who died in Mandalay Prison while serving a fifty-nine-year sentence for organizing student protests. His photo is affixed to a placard in a solemn gesture of remembrance. The Face is next to Ma Win Maw Oo (2005), an anatomization of a photograph of the titular individual, a high school student shot and killed in the 1988 student protests. The video is comprised of a series of pulsating, blurry close-ups of details of a photograph of her body being carried away by two medical students. The entire image becomes visible just briefly at the end of the video. The soundtrack of The Face jostles for attention with the sounds of a brass band playing jazz on the projection on the extreme right, which documents the experiences of Burmese exiles in Norway involved with the Democratic Voice of Burma, a radio station that broadcasts via shortwave into the country. The connections that arise between The Face and these surrounding
projections are of central importance. While one might well view The Face as an independent work, it achieves its full resonance within the larger constellation of the other projections. The face of the military dictatorship stands above and next to the faces of individuals whose lives were lost in connection with their political activism; the spurious ceremony of official government functions on the left side of the apparatus finds an inverted double in the oppositional media activities of the Democratic Voice of Burma on the right.

Throughout its tremendous and unruly archive, The Torn First Pages remains partial in a double sense: it is both fragmentary and subjective rather than totality and objective. This partiality troubles any pretense to fully delivering over the non-violent struggle for democracy in Burma to comprehension or visibility. Instead, the gaps between all the fragile paper projections and the frequent strategy of blacking out certain projections to draw attention to others summons an image of Burmese history as rent with lacunae and marked by opacity. It is here that one might locate Kanwar’s engagement with a fifth discursive function of the documentary, one that Renov adds to his list in a later article: the ethical. Renov has described the ethical function of documentary as “its attentiveness to the mutuality and commensurability of self and other, despite differences of power, status and access to means of representation, a ‘you’ and ‘I’ placed in a delicate balance” and invokes Emmanuel Levinas as an important thinker of this kind of relation to alterity.49 In The Torn First Pages, Kanwar takes care to negotiate a commitment to making visible multiple facets of recent Burmese history while circumventing the possible violence that resides in the ethnographic gaze. He instead incessantly circles back to the limits of representation, to the points at which the Burmese experience becomes opaque.

Following Levinas, Édouard Glissant has argued that the right to opacity is a prerequisite to an ethical relation to alterity. Though Glissant does not specifically invoke the visual, considering his insistence on opacity in relation to documentary production – a filmic mode with a mandate to make the world visible – yields insight into the formal strategies of The Torn First Pages. Glissant suggests that barbarism does not lie in the admission that one does not understand, but rather in imposing one’s own frameworks of understanding and desire for transparency on the other in a violent assertion of comprehension that would reduce the other to the same.50 To insist on opacity is to trouble the epistemological drive of the gaze and to register what cannot be seen as much as what can. It is to point to the necessary insufficiency of representation and to undo the arrogant posture that the documentarian might present a complete picture of the event. One is incessantly caught between the obligation to not turn away from the other’s pain and the equally pressing obligation to not objectify the other. In order to circumvent this dilemma, Kanwar intervenes into the audiovisual archive and insists on producing a set of multiple perspectives
and meanings. He marshals opacity and partiality in order to negotiate an ethical relation to the display of images of struggle and violence. He insists on the way the moving image unrealizes or fictionalizes the referent, while still asserting that the referent adheres.

In Ma Win Maw Oo, for example, a horrific photograph is refilmed detail by detail, with blurriness and pulsation obscuring the representational function of the image. When it does appear, and Ma Win Maw Oo’s corpse and the men who carry it attain legibility, it is briefly and at a smaller scale, centered in the frame and surrounded by blackness. Kanwar is interested in interrogating the status of these images as material artifacts as much as he is mining them for their testimonial force. One might accuse Kanwar of a dangerous aestheticization of images of atrocity, of making horror beautiful and consumable. But to do so would be to neglect to consider these manipulations of the image as strategies that mediate the potentially violent and exploitative nature of the documentary gaze while refusing to deny the evidentiary force of the image. There has been a longstanding opposition, however false it might be, between evidence and art, beauty and reality. Kanwar willfully trespasses these oppositions by recruiting aesthetic strategies that will temper the possibility of seeing the image not as an image but as an unmediated truth. There is a violence to invisibility, to leaving these abuses unpublicized, but so too is there a violence to visibility, to subjecting them to a visual economy eager for sensationalized images of trauma. The fragmentariness of The Torn First Pages serves to mitigate any pretense to totality or objectivity and acknowledges that the historical real will invariably exceed its representation. It insists on affective resonance as much as it does information or argumentation, thereby constructing an alternative economy of signification that undoes longstanding assumptions that visually seductive images and incisive commentary are antithetical to one another.51

Two Images of Death

Thus far, this chapter has outlined how artists who explore the modes of documentary and fiction have rehabilitated cinema’s status as a technology of the virtual through the creation of multiprojection installations. They do so not out of a simple fascination with illusionism, but to articulate complex aesthetic and political commitments and to open artists’ cinema to encounters with subjective and historical experience. In the process, they offer a reflection on the extent to which the specificity of cinema rests on the tension it stages between referentiality and representation. Omer Fast’s The Casting invokes the testimonial powers of the moving image only to demonstrate how they have been compro-
mised by fiction. As a reaction to this widespread condition, Kutluğ Ataman’s Women Who Wear Wigs and Amar Kanwar’s The Torn First Pages insist on the continued importance of the documentary image, but do so while deploying strategies that mediate any claims to objective truth. In both cases, the artists acknowledge the old Roman law, testis unus, testis nullus – “one witness is no witness” – and instead produce polyphonic and collective testimonies that tele- scope the singular and the plural, the individual and the collective. In Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s If 6 Was 9, fiction and documentary join into productive contamina- tions that allow for the imagination of temporalities and narratives that would be impossible in either modality alone.

To conclude this examination of how documentary and fiction have been mobil- ized in recent artists’ employments of the moving image, it is worth returning to this chapter’s beginning, to the work of Omer Fast. A single image from Fast’s three-part video installation NOSTALGIA (2009) encapsulates the work’s proposi- tion concerning the relationship between reality and its representation. In a science fiction film, a woman lies on the ground in an underground tunnel, dead or dying. She has been brutally assaulted by police and their dogs. A close-up on her face pans across to reveal a spatter of vomit that issued from her mouth. The camera follows along the stream in all of its glistening abjection.
Small, whole blueberries start to appear within it, then strawberries, then flower petals. As the pan continues, the vomit turns into a vibrant array of cherries, grapes, roses, figs, pomegranates, daffodils, and other flowers arranged just so. It is the sole shot throughout the three parts of the installation that breaks from verisimilitude and yet it might be the shot that most truthfully encapsulates NOSTALGIA’s central thesis: from the visceral real of violence, bodily matter, and death, the camera will find composed beauty. Or, in other words, representation will betray the real.

*Nostalgia* carries on the project of *The Casting*, though with a more intricate formal structure and with an increasingly nuanced position taken with regard to its central issues. The work begins with a 4:35-minute looped video on a flat screen television. On the soundtrack, the voice of a Nigerian refugee seeking asylum in London tells of his upbringing, his experiences in England, and discusses in some detail how one might go about building a trap for a partridge. On the image track, a white man in a forest builds a similar trap out of sticks. When the trap goes off, there is a cut away from the forest to the interview that has occupied the soundtrack. A black man, framed only from the neck down, is demonstrating how to build the trap in front of a green screen. Fast’s voice is heard for the first time: “Let’s go back in time. Tell me about where you’re from.” This prompts the loop to begin again with the man responding, “I’m from the Niger Delta. I’ve been here for over ten years.” This interview and its story of building a trap will serve as a generative mechanism for the installation’s following two components.

The second component of the installation consists of a two-channel video lasting 9:49 minutes, exhibited in a black box on two flat screen monitors. Here, actors playing Fast and the asylum seeker restage a fictionalized version of the interview from part one. Adopting the same double screen expansion of the shot/reverse-shot structure used in *The Casting*, the Nigerian occupies the screen on the left and Fast the right. Once again, the Nigerian stands in front of a green screen, used in industrial filmmaking to impose the desired background
behind the filmed subject, as if to point to the mutability of context. Though it deals with many of the same subjects, the tone of this interview is very different than that of part one. The actor playing Fast (hereafter referred to as “Fast”) intervenes much more often and displays a visible suspicion toward his interview subject. Fast’s sole interjection in part one, “Let’s go back in time,” turns into “I want to go back in time,” as the interviewer asserts control, presses his subject for details, and becomes irritated when they are not supplied. He is anxious to hear about the man’s experiences as a child soldier – a potentially lurid and sensational narrative – but instead is told in detail how to build a trap for partridges. The story quickly turns from catching a partridge to catching monkeys to eat or sell to tourists. Instances of disbelief and misunderstanding proliferate. “Fast” looks bewildered as he asks, “You really eat monkeys?” The jovial interview subject momentarily turns angry and forces “Fast” to admit that he has never been to Africa.

This second part of the installation highlights the variable power dynamics that underwrite the interview situation, as “Fast” paradoxically asserts a certain authority over his subject and yet requires this subject in order to discover the narratives he seeks. “Fast” says he is planning to make two movies, one that will be composed of interviews with asylum seekers and another that will use a detail from one of these interviews to construct an old science fiction film – projects that correspond for the first and third parts of Nostalgia. “Fast” is using the man’s lived experience as material for an art project for which he will claim sole authorship. Given that Omer Fast does precisely this in both The Casting and Nostalgia, it is striking that the character of “Fast” is represented as at best insensitive and at worst exploitative. In this middle section of Nostalgia, the ethical concerns of the interview form become visible. This is a sharp departure from The Casting, which confronts neither the issue of authorship nor the possible injustice of using the soldier’s words as mere fodder for recontextualization. Might Nostalgia II be a form of autocritique, a self-indictment for absolute devaluation of documentary that took place in the earlier installation?

The viewer leaves this black box and walks down a dim corridor to reach the third part of Nostalgia. Unlike the first two sections, which were shot on high-definition video and displayed on flat screen televisions, Nostalgia III is a large-scale projection that was shot on Super 16mm and transferred to video so as to achieve an appropriately cinematic look. The 32:48-minute narrative concerns a post-apocalyptic future in which an unnamed African country, wealthy and safe, has its fortified borders overrun by Britons fleeing a devastated England. An underground passage provides a way of circumventing the policed border. The viewer is introduced to a world in which only aid workers and hippies visit England to help the country build irrigation systems and in which schoolchildren give presentations to the class on how things like milk and bread
were once made. It is an imagination of a dystopian future, but one that might have stemmed from the mind of the 1970s: old surveillance monitors, clothing fashion, and rotary telephones bespeak a very different vision of the future than would be found today. Summoning both the future and the past, its peculiar temporality is augmented by a non-chronological arrangement of sequences that are loosely linked together but leave many questions unanswered. A British man that happens to make it through the tunnel – after selling his bike and a kidney to traffickers to take him across the “lake” of the Mediterranean – is interviewed by an African immigration official who offers him citizenship if he tells her where the underground tunnel is located. She asks him about his life in England and inquires as to where he found his food. The man describes hunting and tells her how he made a trap for partridges out of sticks. As the woman asks, “What kind of sticks?” a new scene begins of the man running through the underground tunnel with his friends. Police and their dogs pursue the immigrants, leading to the death of the woman whose vomit metamorphoses into flowers.

Nostalgia begins with the testimony of a Nigerian refugee and uses it to generate a series of fictions. The story of the partridge trap reappears across all three components of the work, linking them together through a detail that might be thought to function as a metaphor for the process of storytelling itself: a structure built out of unwieldy bits and pieces that attain a tremendous force when assembled together in the proper manner, a force that can function as a trap. Despite the potential criticism of The Casting’s interview techniques found in part two of the installation, like The Casting, the testimonial value accorded to interview upon which Nostalgia is based is nil. It functions almost as a red herring, promptly obliterated by the layers of fabulation that accumulate on top of it. In these two installations, Fast might be accused of a rather opportunistic use of the Iraq War and the civil strife in Nigeria, respectively. They function as germs that flower into fictions, but ultimately the installations have little to do with them.

Fast himself has equated the tasks of fiction and documentary: “After all, both ‘fiction films’ and ‘documentaries’ present stories that ask for their viewers’ beliefs, and both activate and suspend their viewers’ judgment with regard to what they represent.” This may be the case, but there is a profound ontological difference between documentary and fiction. Fast’s insistence on subsuming the documentary image by fictionalization suggests that Nostalgia, like The Casting, foregrounds the notion that contemporary visual culture is marked by a crisis of referentiality in which simulation has truly overtaken reality. However, rather than counteracting this condition, Fast compounds it. In order for documentary images to function as documents, they require spectators who will invest in them as such and makers who will treat them sensitively and con-
textualize them responsibly. NOSTALGIA refuses to take the document seriously and thus further exacerbates the crisis of visual evidence that it seeks to diagnose.

There is, however, a second image of death in NOSTALGIA that suggests that this may not be the case. In the science fiction narrative, the three Britons running through the tunnel come across an eerie figure. A shirtless man with a shaved head sits on a chair, facing the wall. His posture is slumped and, given the circumstances, there is a fair possibility he might be dead. The trio casts a strange glance at the man as they walk by and continue onwards, hoping to find asylum. But after they pass, the man looks up, turns back around in his chair and – despite the fact that he is sitting in an abandoned subway tunnel where border patrol police search out refugees – begins to watch a film. It is projected against the wall he originally faced and then comes to occupy the entire screen. The film is none other than one of the most striking images of Chris Marker’s SANS SOLEIL: the archival footage of the death of a giraffe. In SANS SOLEIL, the giraffe sequence follows a scene at a Japanese zoo where families pay tribute to the animals that died throughout the year, but as it appears onscreen the voiceover commentary that runs throughout almost the entirety of the film stops. As the giraffe is shot, bright red blood spurts out of its neck and it flails around before lying down on the ground to die.

The image of death is something of a limit case that tests the image’s powers of documentary and the spectator’s relation to them. As Vivian Sobchack has written, “The conjunction of death, representation, and documentary film foreground what is true of all vision as it engages a world and others;” that is, it generates an “ethically charged” situation in which both filmmaker and spectator are held accountable for their gazes. As the single found-footage shot in NOSTALGIA, an installation that jettisons an interest in referentiality in favor of a treatment of the documentary image as fiction, what purpose does this “return of the real” serve? This image may be seen as the antithesis of the image of death described above, in which a representation of death is used to critically comment on the way in which scenes of violence and atrocity are processed by cinema and television into highly conventionalized forms that aestheticize their horror. Unlike the representation of the woman’s death, the death of the giraffe protrudes with the presentational force of the real. It testifies to its persistence amidst simulation, even though it is an image already familiar from another film. Images may relate to other images, but they can still relate back to the real. The death of the giraffe punctures the representational fabric of NOSTALGIA and reasserts the manner in which the documentary image can asymptotically approach the real. It invokes SANS SOLEIL, a docu-fiction hybrid with a marked investment in the referential image and that interrogates its fate in an age of electronic media while never relinquishing a commitment to it. The image of
the giraffe recasts the entire enterprise of NOSTALGIA as haunted by an outside, as troubled by the referential value of the image it has worked hard to exclude from its representational system.

At the end of the world, when the great veneer of simulation has been torn away and these precarious immigrants truly inhabit the “desert of the real,” a man still turns his gaze to cinema. As a way of remembering another time, perhaps, one before whatever unnamed events precipitated the global reorganization that differentiates this world from our own, or perhaps as an effort to gain understanding of death when it is close at hand. This would seem to speak to a faith in the image in spite of the ways in which it has been marshaled by media spectacle. But the man manifests a glimmer of insanity and the dramatization of analogue film projection underground while surveillance monitors reign above suggests an alliance of this apparatus with the outmoded. Perhaps the image of the giraffe is simply a remnant of another time, an emblem of a relation to the world through technology that is no longer possible in the futuristic society depicted. Perhaps it is an instance of nostalgia that lends the installation its title. This spectator of documentary images might be longing for a lost relation to the real and pursuing its recovery through cinema, that technology that paradoxically unrealizes and re-realizes the physical world, creating a lack and compensating for it by the very same means.

But all of this speculation about the mental and affective state of this character relates to the world of the fiction, to the diegesis of the third part of NOSTALGIA. The image of the giraffe, meanwhile, has exceeded this future anterior science fiction plot and has recast its images as mere simulacra. The “impression of reality” carefully manufactured by the installation’s third part is destabilized by the return of the real that occurs through the excerpt from SANS SOLEIL. The entire storytelling venture of NOSTALGIA is thrown into crisis as the image of the giraffe obliquely points back to all that has been excluded from the story of the Nigerian refugee as it has been channeled into fictional codes of representation. The presentation of the animal’s death stands in for the bracketed real that begins to encroach on Fast’s elaborate fabulation, suggesting its injustice. It signals that referentiality does indeed persist as long as there are spectators to attend to it. In the words of Serge Daney, “There has to be some risk and some virtue, that is, some value, in the act of showing something to someone who is capable of seeing it. Learning how to ‘read’ the visual and ‘decode’ messages would be useless if there wasn’t still the minimal, but deep-seated, conviction that seeing is superior to not seeing…”

Despite its commonalities with THE CASTING, NOSTALGIA introduces a measure of suspicion towards its own strategies that had been absent in the earlier installation. It moves from simply dismantling the conventions of realism in film and television to instead question how the notion that all documentary
images have now become inextricable from fiction might contain some spurious assumptions of its own. The image of the woman whose vomit turns to flowers may indict the way violence is processed in fictional cinema, but the prominence of the giraffe’s death suggests an uneasiness with the outright discrediting of referentiality that appears in both The Casting and Nostalgia. As Hito Steyerl has noted, documentary testimony can be unreliable, can lie, and will not necessarily transmit events in any transparent manner, and yet it “can express the unimaginable, that which has been silenced, the unknown, the saving, and even what is monstrous – and thus create the possibility of change.”

To give up on this possibility of change by depriving documentary images of their relation to the real is tantamount to a resignation that there is no alternative to the representational systems that govern today’s mass media. One must attend to the documentary image with the attention that it demands, seeing in it neither the truth of the event nor a simulacrum, but a material image to be confronted, questioned, and considered.

Anne Wagner has suggested that what is missing in Bill Viola’s work is “any built-in mistrust of his medium... Instead his work insists – sometimes to the point of coercion and against the grain of his predecessors’ sheer reluctance and scepticism – that we believe in the magnitude and meaningfulness of what camera and artist give us to see.” Certainly, Viola’s work suffers from a techno-spiritualism that attempts to spuriously reconstruct subjective wholeness and aурatic experience; Wagner’s critique of the artist undoubtedly holds weight. However, the opposition that she sets up between a mistrust of the medium and a belief in the meaningfulness of the referential image must be put into question. In the work of the artists discussed in this chapter, there is a demonstrable interest in combining these two qualities. Embracing the power of cinema as a technology of the virtual does not necessarily mean ceasing to interrogate the way a medium intervenes between physical reality and its representation. At times, there is a magnitude and meaningfulness of what the moving image can present to view and one has an ethical obligation not to look away but to look sensitively.

As Susan Sontag has written, “To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment... It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world.” Precisely because our news media have been converted into entertainment and precisely because our artistic media increasingly resemble entertainment, it is necessary to reassert the spaces of the gallery and museum as institutional and discursive sites that can contest the derealization of spectacle. By reimagining the relationship between documentary and fiction – by recognizing their imbrication rather than asserting their ontological equiva-
lence or refusing them entirely – contemporary artists repurpose an apparatus that has so often been put in the service of forgetting the world in order to return to it, while producing a sustained reflection on the status of the moving image in the process. They locate one of the many specificities of cinema as residing in its capacity to produce images caught between referentiality and representation. In this way, though they may leave behind the concentration on the materiality of the apparatus that had been deemed a progressive attribute of earlier moving image art in favor of the formerly anathematic qualities of virtuality and pictorialism, they by no means renounce reflexivity, nor do they lapse into idealism and mystification. Rather, they constitute a site at which cinema is embraced and interrogated not as an old medium but as a new way of bringing art into conversation with existence.