

SAMSTAG / SPRING SEASON



Omer Fast / Continuity

Samstag Museum's Spring season brings together artworks that investigate relationships between fact, fiction, film, art and documentary. Israeli-born, Berlin-based artist Omer Fast (b. 1972) has devoted much of his artistic practice of over twenty years to exploring these themes. The work on display, *Continuity* (2012), is both overt and oblique in its treatment of these concerns. A work of fiction, *Continuity* presents a repeated scenario of trauma and return: a middle-aged German couple, Torsten and Katja, reunite with their son Daniel who has returned from military service. Yet the truth of this narrative is gradually undercut and problematised across the video, as the same scenario is repeated with different actors playing the role of the son.

Continuity is a noteworthy piece in Fast's oeuvre because it is one of his first and most expansive forays into a wholly fictionalised format. Most of Fast's earlier artworks were developed from interviews that he conducted and then variously reimagined in short films, videos and installations. Over a decade, Fast interviewed soldiers, film extras, undertakers, asylum-seekers, living history museum re-enactors, and members of his own family. Of course, using other people's stories always comes with risks and obligations, and the ethics of documentary practice are under continual scrutiny. Fast primarily interviews people whose stories have already been narrated in various mediating contexts; as he says, 'I don't think I have made works with people who tell their story for the first time'.ⁱ He gravitates towards subjects whose stories already embody the self-reflexive tensions between documentary and fictionalisation, through which he can also implicate himself in his reworkings.

Continuity was commissioned for the 2012 dOCUMENTA (13) art exhibition in Kassel, Germany. The piece emerged from a failed attempt to interview people from that region whose stories had been shaped by its complex histories. Fast eventually abandoned this approach due to the enduringly traumatising experiences of some of his interviewees.ⁱⁱ While *Continuity* therefore lacks the overt documentary referent of Fast's previous works, it remains grounded in these complex relations between representation and reality. Fast often states his reluctance to subscribe to clear distinctions between fiction and documentary, citing film theorist Bill Nichols, who argues that the 'boundary between the two realms is highly fluid'.ⁱⁱⁱ In *Continuity*, Fast uses fiction to transform the missing documentary referent into a persistent sense of absence that pervades the final video and contributes to its unsettling impact.

Continuity is about loss, absence, trauma, and their undefinable and unknowable qualities. The work's repetitive and cyclical structure amplifies these uncertainties. As the succession of 'Daniels' becomes obvious, it appears that the couple has been hiring these young men to enact the role of a lost child. By repeatedly performing their reactions to their returned 'son', the couple seems to be working through a process of grief, perhaps in response to the loss of a child killed in action.

i Omer Fast and Kris Paulsen, 'Omer Fast and Kris Paulsen: A Conversation', *Wexblog*, 9 July, 2012, <https://wexarts.org/blog/omer-fast-and-kris-paulsen-conversation>.

ii Fast and Paulsen.

iii Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), xi; Omer Fast, 'Annotations', in *In Memory: Omer Fast*, ed. Sabine Schaschl (Berlin: The Green Box, 2010), 149; Fast and Paulsen.

Over dinner, however, the ‘family’ conversations take various awkward, tense and uncanny turns, from hallucinogenic moments reminiscent of horror films to elements of incestuous longing. These visceral interruptions break the veneer of the homecoming narrative, shattering any desires for closure and resolution. These ruptures magnify the couple’s compulsive and unnerving actions, and suggest an alternative reading: perhaps they never actually had a son. When viewed like this, the couple appears to be acting out lurid fantasies rather than working through a particular trauma, appropriating grief as a general condition rather than a specific response. They seem to be motivated not by a definable loss but by a broader sense of absence; caught in a cycle of obsessive and delusional repetitions, their actions come to signify a ‘repetition compulsion [as] a repeat of something which may not have actually happened’.^{iv}

Fast’s work problematises how social, cultural and political traumas – including ongoing contemporary conflicts – are negotiated and appropriated in the present. *Continuity*’s absence of a documentary referent becomes its lingering but undefinable presence, enabling the video’s palpable sense that something is missing, something irreconcilable for its viewers, something horrific and uncanny. Fast’s use of horror tropes intensifies this, from the eyeballs and maggots that appear in the family’s dinner to the nagging question of what happens to these sons *after* their quasi-familial encounter. Horror films have long been important cultural sites for exploring the intersections of individual perversions and social malaise. Consider, for instance, the vision of the family as oppressive social institution in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), or the zombies in George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) as ciphers for social destruction. While *Continuity* implies a sense of individual pathology to the couple’s actions, more broadly it reflects the myriad ways in which traumatic stories and historical events can be adopted and manoeuvred for competing political or social interests. *Continuity*’s cyclical procession of soldiers portrays a view of society appropriating past traumas and narratives, reusing and abusing its youth for self-interested or political purposes. It presents a circular but pointed critique of Western societies who – by inflicting conflict and trauma on foreign countries and their people – are themselves simultaneously debased by war and conflict.

There are many moments of rupture in *Continuity* but one scene is particularly discordant because it interrupts the looping cycle of reunion and return. On one of the couple’s drives, they are startled by the vision of a camel standing on the road. Following it through the forest, they encounter a violent scene of young soldiers lying dead in a clearing, many resembling their cycling ‘sons’. Fast created this vision by re-enacting the famous tableau photograph by Canadian photographer Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)* (1992). Wall’s photograph is a highly orchestrated depiction. It imagines a scene from the Soviet War in Afghanistan (1979–89) in which the slain soldiers are reanimated after death, many shown conversing and joking. When Wall created his photograph the conflict had ended and was overshadowed by the subsequent fall of the USSR, which allowed Wall to, as he says, ‘play with elements of journalism and history quite freely, since I was in a near-forgotten playground’.^v

iv Paul L. Russell, ‘Trauma, Repetition, and Affect’, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 42, no. 4 (2006): 614.

v Jeff Wall and Gordon MacDonald, ‘Interview: Jeff Wall’, *Photoworks* 5 (2005): 20.

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Fast's reconstruction (minus the soldiers' 'reanimations') references the more recent War in Afghanistan (2001–21). When *Continuity* was made, this war had become an entrenched conflict whose visibility had receded from the public consciousness of the Western invading forces. Fast's appropriation of Wall's tableau reinvested it with a contemporary urgency, as a reminder that the devastating effects of conflicts far away can re-emerge unexpectedly and traumatically in the present. Specifically, as Fast says, it 'dovetails into ... this notion of an endless war, an endless occupation, an endless conflict with just changing uniforms'.^{vi} Interrupting their cycle of traumatic appropriations, the couple (and the audience) are confronted with a situation of complex historical and political continuities, entangled in an interplay of cultural representations and historical traumas. In light of the recent chaotic withdrawal of Western armed forces from Afghanistan, these complex continuities of conflict, trauma, absence and presence seem all the more relevant today.

Kate Warren is an art historian, writer and curator, with expertise in modern and contemporary Australian and international art.

vi Omer Fast, interview by author, Skype, 28 January 2014.

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Curator: Gillian Brown
Catalogue author: Kate Warren

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Adelaide SA 5001 T 08 8302 0870 E samstagmuseum@unisa.edu.au W unisa.edu.au/samstagmuseum

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