

THE SKINNY

THE ETHICS OF ENCOUNTER @ STILLS

Posted by Rachael Cloughton, Wed 05 Jan 2011



Although set within the formal paradigm of the documentary film, the works in the second part of the Stills Gallery's exhibition are not didactic or explanatory in their content. In fact, the camera's interrogatory gaze on what is a consistently loaded subject prompts only further questions. These questions extend beyond the immediate and into the more clandestine, ethical elements of each film's formation: why did the artist select their subject? Are they being exploited? Are we complicit in the act as a spectator?

When Artur Zmijewski coerces an Auschwitz survivor into having his identification tattoo 'refreshed' such questions come immediately to the fore. Zmijewski deliberately provokes what is usually a dormant analysis of the artwork but, whether the cost of enlivening Holocaust memories is too steep, remains ethically ambiguous. By the end of the film, the man, previously resistant to the act echoes Zmijewski's persuasive words: "I've just renewed it, like a piece of furniture." Unable to recognise the poignancy of the scar's 'refurbishment', he becomes the victim of a new ideology, this time belonging to the artist.

Dani Marti's documentation of a 65-year-old man's first sexual experience engages in a more wilful participation with the subject in his *Bacon's Dog*. However, despite the great lengths subject Peter Fay goes to to describe the film's liberating affect through a series of email exchanges displayed downstairs, our voyeuristic consumption of an intensely personal experience remains uncomfortably exploitative.

"Yes our story is tragic. Yes it is sordid. But you have to remember it is first and foremost a story and in this way it is familiar to you," narrates Lebanese-born Bachar in the Atlas Group's cinematic contribution to the show. Often, documentary films are presented with an 'otherness' we can use to distance ourselves from the subject, but Stills, like Bachar, acknowledges that viewing is not a passive act and that beneath every individual tale lies a collective story to which we are ethically tied.

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Episode III

EVENT REVIEW

Rating **★★★★★**
 Event name The Ethics of Encounter
 Venue Stills Gallery
 Date 11 Dec - 6 Mar

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Stills, 23 Cockburn Street, Edinburgh

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