



IN TRANSIT



dani marti
katri walker



IN TRANSIT

(1)

A dark figure appears against pale horizon. Now three figures. A tree. They're trapped. I quicken.

Close enough now to see that they are all men, I stop and listen. One of them is talking about 'the real' and another says something about not knowing each other well. They talk about art being about nothing now; that it's all about celebrity. One figure isn't speaking, the other two don't stop.

"First of all, Osama bin Laden never existed!" one of them declares, throwing his arms apart. "I mean if you look at the clips, he's very much a CGI-looking character. There are no kinda lines in his face. I think he came out of that Spielberg company, uh, Imagine, or whatever it's called..."

"Dreamworld. Or is it Dreamworks?"

"Yeah, seriously. I don't believe he ever existed. I think he was an actor. He actually looks very much like an Australian film director called Phil Noyce. He does!"

[laughter]

I retreat into the lift from whence I came. One of the men, turning towards me, raises his hand and on his lips I read 'wait here' while another films him. From the sliver between closing doors, I see that the last one to disappear is the silent one.

(2)

The lift spits me out onto a dusty floor, from which clusters of brush have sprung. Keeping low to the ground I can hear women praying. One is crying.

They speak together in Spanish, and their context is religious. I push onward by pressing my spiny fins downward and lunging forward. With persistence my speed increases. I arrive at a small set of stairs with a rusting banister and execute a bumpy descent on my scaly front.

I arrive at a crossroad. To the right is a pile of rocks curiously placed. To the left there is the sea. I turn left.

(3)

The sea is one of observers: I am now the observed. In my hands is a Pepsi cup. I'm fucked up, sedated. If I was lucid now I'd notice a man filming on the periphery. If I was lucid now I might choose that he didn't. I fall into slumber.

I awake in a lift. Through an opening sliver of doorway I see a man that doesn't speak. The doors close, I fall back into slumber.

I arrive at a crossroad. To the right is a pile of rocks, curiously placed. To the left there is the sea. I turn right.

(4)

Above the pile of rocks rises a crudely built arch and from it hangs a scarlet crucifix. I'm looking for an exit or an ending and this looks promising. In front of it a man stands in jeans and plaid. He talks about his faith and says that it was God that asked him to build this pile of rocks. He calls them his 'church'. He argues with my camera that he is the better artist and it concedes by rendering his voice visible.



'Men so love the truth that those who tell it not yearn for what they tell to be the truth...'
St Augustine

In Transit is an exhibition that brings together a body of recent videos by Dani Marti and Katri Walker. As the title indicates, all of the works were made while the artists were either on the move through unfamiliar places or, as in the case of Marti's *Under the Coolabah Tree*, 2008, stranded in one for an extended period of time. Consequently a salient feature of the works by both artists in the exhibition is a preoccupation with the transient gaze, demonstrated through a critical engagement within and against the formal conventions of documentary.

Working closely with the characters they depict in hours of un-staged footage, Marti and Walker create what they call 'portraits' from the simple unfolding of observed quotidian events. Both artists insist that these portraits cannot be planned, as they are the product of a state of uprootedness. Perhaps the disquietude evoked by many of the works begins with this lack of fixity, inextricably linked as it is to the origins of their making.

Marti comes to the medium of video from the more anchored processes of weaving. This more tangible part of his practice runs parallel to his current video work and is similarly developed through a fixation with the challenges of portraiture today. From a distance, his often large-scaled weavings project a cool aesthetic, inviting associations to Early Minimalism, but upon closer scrutiny, their surfaces both literally and allegorically reveal clues about the characters he portrays. To create these surfaces, Marti uses unconventional materials from pearl and feather to crystal and sausages.

David, 2006, (3) is an early work in Marti's video trajectory that was triggered by the need to exceed what he was able to portray in his woven pieces. I suspect that it was motivated by his desire for a portraiture that could go beyond surface and the implicit associations of the materials woven. So *David*

cuts deep—uncomfortably deep—as the portrait of a teenager on the wet streets of Glasgow, struggling to maintain consciousness, faltering with a chewed-up begging cup. The work impacts not only because its subject's position is disadvantaged, but also because of the way in which Marti presents him to us as the viewer. Where the viewer might become absorbed in the refined surface of a weaving, the image of David is thrown at him unapologetically. The gaze that we cannot refuse him exploits him. I will return to this gaze in a moment.

Tendencies common to the practices of both artists inter-illuminate the works in the exhibition, not least what emerges as a kind of antagonism toward conventional portraiture. Several months ago, Walker wrote to me while she was in transit. "Things here in sunny Mehico are going really well", she explained,

my work has taken me to places I never imagined. I've met a llorona whose name is Catalina, she lives in a village called Matamba in the state of Veracruz. I guess they don't cry anymore, now they're rezanderas and they just pray intensely for hours and days on end. So I'm thinking the work will be about faith and life missions and dedication and beliefs and the everyday and probably other things that haven't occurred to me yet. (1)

As a finished work, *Catalina*, 2008, (2) comprises five monitors, each of which features a different aspect of Catalina's life: her work, her wedding, her playing baseball, and so on. In attempting to render a portrait, Walker, like Marti, exhibits a frustration with the fundamental limitations she encounters. What is filmed, or 'captured' isn't enough. So her process must take her to places she could never imagine or stage, as her process is only possible through watching, and attempting to portray accordingly. And it is in response to a certain failure when striving toward that end, that the artist duplicates the gaze: multiplying the perspective in order to compensate for the inadequacy. So in many ways, the work is filmed blindly as a response to a given situation, and it is only in post-production that the portrait, in fact, appears.

Within the finished videos of both artists there are usually few signs of the artifice of staging or editing in favour of what could be identified as a "style-less" style: the characteristic that confers to documentary its flavour of truth. (II) But, as post-modern philosophy and social theory has done its best to argue, the gaze can never be neutral. Soviet film director Dziga Vertov famously remarked as early as 1923 that the camera shows a world that only its operator (or its operator's eye) can really see. But the eye of the cinema, that teller of stories, holds a gaze that is inevitably governed by the desires, whims and cultural fingerprints of the one that holds the camera and dictates the lens' every movement.

The primary concern of Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema* is that the cinematic apparatus is a 'mastering' gaze, portraying the passive image of woman as fetishized, psychologically fragmented and, most importantly, politically silenced. (III) Mulvey's trope can easily be extended to mainstream coercive modes of address, featured most notably in advertising, and surfacing less frequently as a problematic within contemporary art. Ways of looking have become institutionalised



Lois Rowe

as gendered, sexualized and hierarchical, based on the explicit polarities between the observer and the observed being exploited and reinstated in new forms.

So how does an artist working with documentary today avoid perpetuating the 'mastery' now associated with the gaze? The works that comprise *In Transit* raise this question as not only do they show the beliefs and strengths of their subjects, they also objectify them to the extent that viewing becomes uneasy. Common to the work of both Marti and Walker is the intentional problematization of the act of viewing from within the familiar language of documentary. The passive gaze elicited by documentary's form is denied via strategies they employ specifically to disrupt the viewer's trust in the observed image and its featured subject. Walker's *Señor Celestino on the edge of Heaven*, 2008, (4) is a good example. It is a piece that, like several of her previous works, documents the faith of a main character - in this case through the recounting of how Celestino's church was built, commissioned by God Himself. But near the end, the 80 year-old Celestino challenges Walker on who is the better artist. Her position becomes subjectivized by her relinquishment of conventional, one-directional authorship, thereby allowing her own role to be questioned and subverted. The previously objectified subject declares his own authority by subverting the authority of the gaze that films, and in turn, views him.

Like many of Marti's video works, *Under the Coolabah Tree*, (1) exposes its subjects raw under an invasive, prying scope. It features the artist himself stranded with a filmmaker, an electrician, and a painter under a Coolabah Tree in the middle of the Australian landscape. With only the demands of sustenance to occupy their daily activities and irritations with each other, the conversations of the four drift from art to politics and back again in quick succession. Isolation rapidly becomes confinement, which amplifies the relationships between the four. They become archetypal and compelling in the way that Big Brother's characters become recognized and familiar. But within the work there are two distinct methods of

fragmentation, which disallow the desensitized passive viewing that Big Brother might invite. The first method is formal: the work is divided into two screens (with sound only ever coming from one at a time) - a structural citation of Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey's 1966 film *Chelsea Girls*. In both Marti's work and its antecedent, the mode of presentation de-centres the viewing subject by doubling the image and oscillating the soundtrack between the two. This renders it impossible to experience the same viewing twice. The second method of fragmentation in the work is the way in which Marti reflects his own position through an intra-diegetic gaze and an extra-diegetic gaze. In other words, one of the characters within the frame not only films Marti as Marti films him, but he films the other characters within the video as well. At one point, the footage switches to that of the subject that has been filming Marti, abruptly shifting the perspective of the work. The viewing becomes not only fragmented, but provokes uncertainty as a result of having been removed from its regular mode of legitimization: it becomes scrutinized, orphaned. The gaze becomes more acute as a result of this overt problematization.

"Problematization", as Michel Foucault writes,

doesn't mean the representation of a pre-existent object, nor the creation through discourse of an object that doesn't exist. It's the set of discursive or nondiscursive practices that makes something enter into the play of the true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether under the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.) (IV)

The works suggest that the portrait can never truly be generated other than through the subjectivity of the viewer, and it demonstrates this by placing conventionally understood truths into a play of true and false, constituting their very practices as object for thought. These two artists engage and contest

the conventions of documentary to highlight the contemporary challenges of portraiture. *In Transit* not only refers to the geographic transience of its featured artists, but also to the contingencies of how we come to view. If a seemingly 'style-less' gaze confers to documentary man's 'so-loved' flavour of truth, the modes of address exploited by Marti and Walker in this exhibition ask us to question again what we as viewers have come to taste as truth.

(I) Aside from describing a myth of Mexican folklore in which *La Llorona* (crying woman) is a figure who is said to be the ghost of a woman crying for her children whom she'd drowned, the term *llorona* was initially understood by Walker, to be a professional mourner who was paid to cry at funerals in order to assist the spirit of the deceased in its journey to the afterlife.

(II) I borrow the term 'style-less style' from the vocabulary used to describe Italian neorealism, a post-World War II form of documenting the 'Italian psyche' as it was portrayed through improvised depictions of everyday life.

(III) Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and the narrative cinema', Screen 16.3, 1975, pp. 6-18

(IV) Michel Foucault, 'Concern for Truth', Foucault Live (Interviews, 1961-1984), Sylvère Lotringer (ed.), Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston (trans), Semiotext(e), 1996, pp. 256-257



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