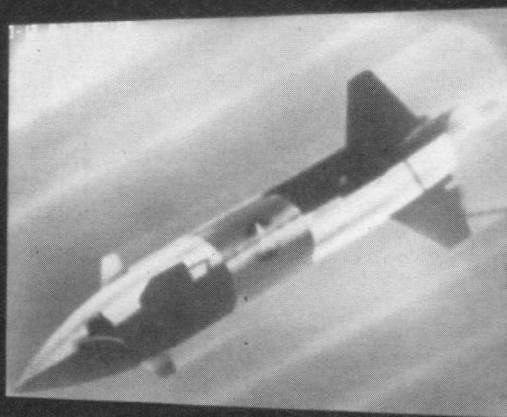




11/08

Chronogram

ARTS.CULTURE.SPIRIT



KNOWING GLANCES

There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know.

—Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld

This unexpected flight into epistemology took place during the run-up to the latest Iraq war in 2002, as part of the smoke-and-mirrors play with the truth by the Bush administration to convince us that Saddam Hussein actually possessed WMDs. After all, what is scarier than “unknown unknowns”—isn't the old saw true about preferring the devil you know over the one that you don't know?

The trouble here isn't so much the willful misleading of the public by the government (which is, of course, still a big issue); but, rather, the much larger reality that it highlights. Given the global echo chamber of the mass media that we now live in, how is it possible to really know (or to believe, which amounts to much the same thing) that anything that's being presented to us is true? Is a representation of evidence the same thing as “truth”?

This crucial and very basic question propels the current exhibition on view at the Hessel Museum at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. “The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art” is the first major exhibition produced as part of a much larger, very ambitious three-year research project mounted by Maria Lind, director of the graduate program at CCS. Assembling work by more than 70 artists, including photographs from the Hessel Collection, installations, sculptures, paintings, and a number of intriguing film/video works, the show opens a window onto the sometimes rather intense discussion within the contemporary art world regarding the problematic nature of documentary practice and its relationship to both reality and aesthetics.

A two-channel video installation by Omer Fast is emblematic of the fundamental issues being explored here. *Spielberg's List* presents a series of interviews

with Poles who served as extras during the filming of *Schindler's List*, recounting their experiences. At times the talking-head images are doubled, shown on both screens; at others, the person is paired with blurry shots from the movie, or of locations in modern-day Krakow. As the extras (who played Jews interred in the concentration camps) tell their stories, a rather surreal slippage takes place, as it becomes difficult to separate the experiences re-created for Spielberg's film from what sounds like direct-witness testimony of the original events of the Holocaust. This slippage is amplified by the subtitles at times when slightly different translations of the spoken statements are simultaneously offered on the two screens.

The deep irony of Fast's video can be found in its stark contrast with Spielberg's own documentary project, launched as a result of his work on the film in which he is assembling an archive of videotaped first-hand witness testimonies. While such an enterprise is of course laudable, it suppresses certain inconvenient questions—how believable are the witnesses, especially after so much time has elapsed? How reliable are their memories, especially if the witness was only a child at the time of the war? The brilliance of Fast's video is in the way that it provides a clear, questioning counterpoint to what otherwise might be taken as simple, direct truth—while simultaneously pointing out that the only experience of the Holocaust that the vast majority of us will ever have takes place through the mediation of films like *Schindler's List*.

While there are some examples of more traditional media like painting and sculpture (most notably Emily Jacir's 45-part series of paintings documenting e-mails in her *Inbox*, and Michael Rakowitz's *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, which reconstructs a number of plundered treasures from the Iraq National Museum, using middle eastern packaging and newspapers), the vast majority of work included here falls into the category of “lens-based” media.

In the center gallery of the museum, Lind has hung an enormous number of photographs drawn from the collection, highlighting work by artist



ABOVE: *LOCKERBIE WITNESS BOX*, NATHAN COLEY, 2003, ROSEWOOD LAMINATES, ALUMINUM, STEEL, CARPET, PLYWOOD, ELECTRICAL COMPONENTS AND CHAIR; (ON WALL) *LOCKERBIE EVIDENCE*, NATHAN COLEY, 2003, PENCIL ON PAPER

OPPOSITE: HARUN FAROCKI, *WAR AT A DISTANCE*, 2003, SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO, 54 MINUTES

with various degrees of interest in documentary, from the 1960s through what seems like last week. Displayed in enormous, largely gridded clusters splayed wall-to-wall around the room, it presents a veritable tsunami of photographic practice. With this exhibition strategy, Lind places responsibility for making sense of it all squarely on the viewer, which is fine if you already know the basic gist of the artists involved. But given such a range, from Valie Export to Martha Rosler, from Nan Goldin to Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and from Christian Boltanski to Vanessa Beecroft, anyone who is not a fairly avid follower of the contemporary art scene will feel overwhelmed, I'm afraid.

But perhaps that's part of the point—aren't we all overwhelmed now, by world events, the obsessive-compulsive coverage of the election, gigantic political issues like the bailout of Wall Street, and all those lesser stories running across the creeper at the bottom of the CNN screen?

At the end of the day, we're all implicated in what we know, what we know we don't know, and (scariest of all) those damned unknown unknowns. One 16mm film in the exhibition summarizes this beautifully. London-based artists Rosalind Nashashibi and Lucy Skaer collaborated on a silent film titled *Flash in the Metropolitan* in 2006. Visiting the museum after hours, they took their camera on a nocturnal voyage through the collections, plunging the viewer into prolonged passages of complete darkness, punctuated by brief glimpses of the artwork in display cases, illuminated by gentle bursts of light that reveal the face on a pre-Columbian terra cotta, or some finely done bit of Mesopotamian metalwork in flashes that last a second or two. Sometimes the flash repeats, allowing a second or third glance at the object; at other times, the camera moves restlessly through the inky, unknowing darkness, presenting a new object with each flash of light. With no identifiable pattern of exposure, the film becomes a pure expression of living in the moment—bounded on all sides by the realization that we are wrapped largely in ignorance, never to know exactly what might be lurking in all that darkness. ⑥

"THE GREENROOM: RECONSIDERING THE DOCUMENTARY AND CONTEMPORARY ART" IS ON VIEW THROUGH FEBRUARY 1 AT THE CENTER FOR CURATORIAL STUDIES AT THE HESSEL MUSEUM OF ART AT BARD COLLEGE IN ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON. (845) 758-7598; WWW.BARD.EDU/CCS.

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