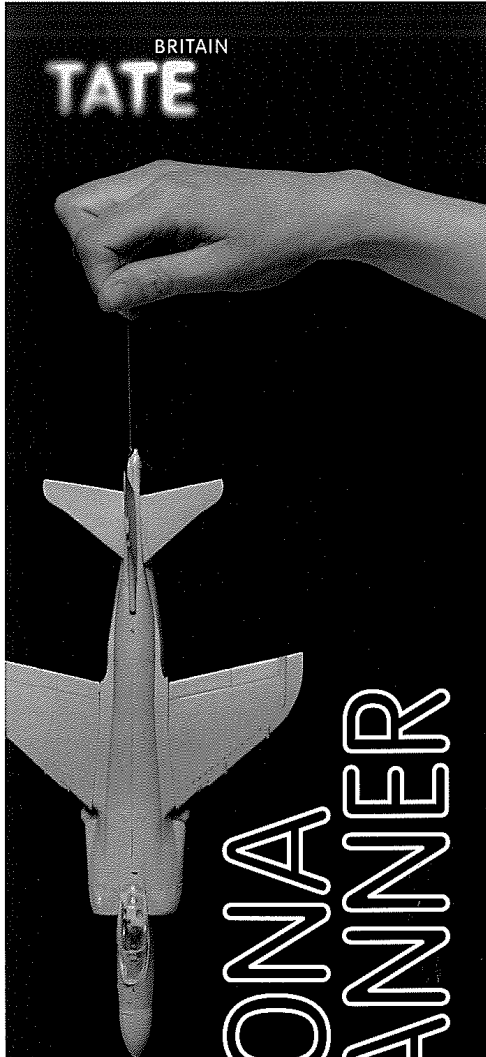



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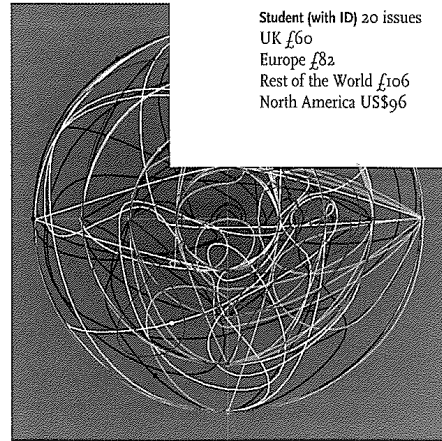
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John Douglas Millar on the ethics and aesthetics of docu-art

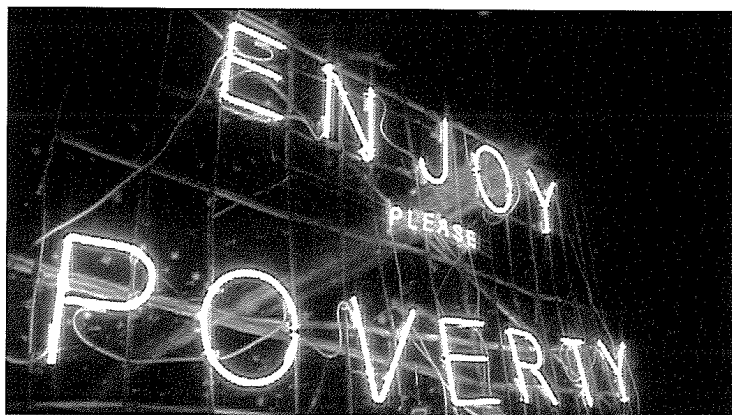
In an article entitled 'Them and Us', 2006, published in *Frieze* magazine, Tirdad Zolghadr concludes with an argument for a form of engaged art beyond narcissistic modes of sympathy and pity: 'Since the difference between misfortune and its emotionalised consumption in video installations and food fairs is, for better or for worse, increasingly blurred, [to show] one's complicity in the blurring of referents, and to dispel any smatterings of heroism and healing, is the least one can do. The challenge, in other words, is not to summon selfless goodwill or progressive content, but to find intelligent

forms of voyeurism – that is, a mode of visual production that faces up to its own strategies of entertainment, infotainment and/or objectification. I think there's much to say for strategies [that] elude simple notions of solidarity and empathy in favour of an analysis of our very fascination with the outlandish, be it touching or violent or both.'

Looking beyond the grammar, this statement might serve as a manifesto for the work of several artists working today at the critical frontier of what it might mean to be engaged or political as an artist, or what the production of a genuinely ethical art might mean. Artists who critique how we consume images

of atrocity while at the same time contemplating their own role as mediator pose questions about how we might step beyond the barrier of 'looking', to an ethical position with regard to images described by the Israeli philosopher and photography theorist Ariella Azoulay as 'watching'.

It is widely proposed in contemporary critical writing that, in the reporting of recent conflict zones, the image has taken on a new subjectivity. The images of suffering and humiliation upon which we feed are no longer necessarily captured by professional photojournalists but by participants in the field. The photographs themselves, as Judith Butler has written, are now 'part of the event'. Some oft-cited examples: the images taken at Abu Ghraib were captured and distributed by



Renzo Martens
Episode III 2009
video still

Watching v Looking

the torturers themselves; Israel enforces blanket bans on journalists and their cameras at contested sites, but camera phones allow Palestinians and those sympathetic to their cause to put images of the effects of phosphorus bombing and forced resettlement in the (semi)public domain. Félix Guattari commented on this flattening of subjectivity at the time of the first Gulf War in relation to the 'bomb's-eye' view that, like a grainy pastiche of the scene in *Dr Strangelove* where the insane Major rides a nuclear bomb like a rodeo bull to annihilation, allowed the spectator to follow the projectile right into its target before cutting. It was these new kinds of images, and the lack of information available about the technology involved, that inspired Harun Farocki's 'Eye Machine' series (see Interview AM333).

In *Eye Machine II*, 2001, Farocki uses a split-screen projection to construct a visual essay that, on one side, shows the digitisation of military mapping systems and, on the other, the ways in which these technological innovations diffuse into civilian industrial contexts and render the human worker superfluous to the production line. This sets up an interesting correlation between the post-human killing machine in the field – the unmanned drone or guided warhead – and the machine that renders the human redundant in the factory. This is an updating of themes Farocki examined in his early film *Inextinguishable Fires*, 1969, a work that sought to demonstrate how, under capitalist conditions of labour, the means of production separates the worker from what it is he produces – a situation that is particularly troubling and morally smudged when what is being produced is an element used in the formulation of napalm. The film also expresses doubt that spectacular images of violence can have any mobilising effect at all. In his voice-over Farocki says: 'How can we show you napalm in action? And how can we show you the damage caused by napalm? If we show you pictures of napalm damage, you'll close your eyes. First you'll close your eyes to the pictures, then you'll close your eyes to the memory.'

Beyond the strictly ontological sense in which this statement is true, it might be countered that Farocki's position is somewhat naive. In the apparently desensitised era in which we live, it is interesting to note the vast sums of money NGOs and charities are still able to mobilise. Images of suffering and torment are used – in media studies parlance – to 'mobilise shame' and in this context we might ask what the idea of the 'closed eye' might mean. Not so much that images are not seen and in some sense acted upon (ie financially, the donation of money), but rather that they have become an emotional siphon emptied of radical potential. They function as a guilt lever in a moral fruit machine that serves to produce a single straightforward reaction in the viewer, in much the same way that the crudest advertising aimed at males might associate the product with a sexually attractive female. Sex sells cars while violence sells the promise of empathy, of connection with the alien world and the

quasi-religious satisfaction that our guilt is assuaged.

In an essay on Jeff Wall entitled 'Spectres of the Everyday', 2002, Jean François Chevrier writes that: 'The dogma of direct snapshot photography [stresses] a spontaneous gaze [over] critical analysis, thereby encouraging the repetition of existing responses to a world reduced to aesthetic appropriation; it represents contemporary life, or social situations, without the knowledge and participation of those living through them, the social actors (particularly troubling in "exotic" situations).'

The Dutch artist Renzo Martens has produced two films that, in deeply complex and sometimes apparently morally ambiguous terms, explore and satirise the role of the western image maker. Entitled respectively *Episode I*, 2003, and *Episode III*, 2009, the films draw a disturbing portrait of what Martens has termed the 'poverty industry', and explore how what we choose to look at and how we choose to look at it affects where aid might be distributed and where bombs might fall. *Episode I* locates the artist in Chechnya in 2002, problematising his performance as an investigative journalist. Rather than remain behind the camera, he turns it upon himself and asks those who would normally be the subject of the lens what they think of him. A simple enough proposal but one that produces an overwhelmingly effective result, as UN workers, refugees and combatants express their rage or disdain for the media corps – as one refugee says, 'if they came here to make photographs and anything happened, I would welcome them, but nothing happens'. The aesthetics of photojournalism and the lie of documentary objectivity are revealed to be just that: aesthetics in the hands of ideology. As Slavoj Žižek contends, ideology is at its most dangerous and pervasive when we don't even realise we are subject to it, or when we perform it without realising we are doing so. It is also here that the artist begins to explore the – for want of a better word – 'character' of Renzo Martens.

One of the conceits of the film is that Martens has come to a war zone in order to heal a broken heart. In various scenes he interviews a pretty Chechen girl, asking her questions about love and how he might understand relationships better. In another scene he is shown having a candlelit dinner with an aid worker whilst an impossibly romantic nocturne is played in the background: 'What have you come here for?' she asks. 'For tears,' he replies. This is one of

Artists who critique how we consume images of atrocity pose questions about how we might step beyond the barrier of 'looking', to an ethical position with regard to images described by the Israeli philosopher and photography theorist Ariella Azoulay as 'watching'.

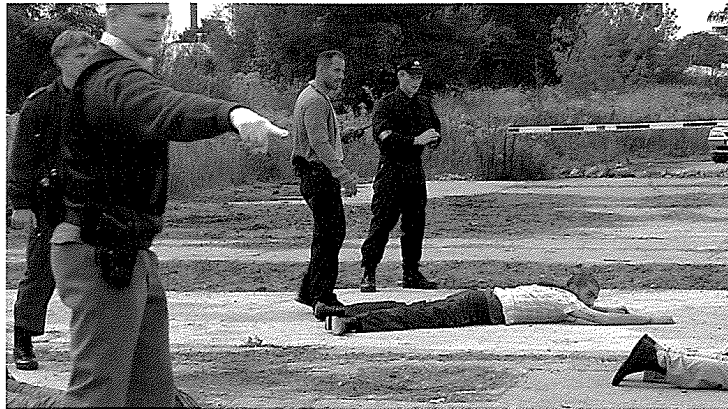
the difficulties of the films; viewers do not know which Renzo Martens they are watching at any given time. Sometimes, as in the examples above, it is the satirical character of the solipsistic romantic, at others it could be the holy fool, as when he asks a group of UN workers what they think of him and 'why they look at images'. As Vande Veire writes, 'We are already complicit but refuse to acknowledge it, and thus project everything onto the filmmaker.'

In *Episode III*, Martens follows his logic of engagement to an almost pathological degree in order to further interrogate the power relations involved in the consumption of images of atrocity and modes of representation. Twice the length of the first film and edited from two years' worth of footage shot on location in the Democratic Republic of Congo, *Episode III* is an excoriating and unforgiving examination of viewer responses. A performance in the field that fuses elements of satire, documentary, sculpture, performance and alienation, the film renounces typical documentary compassion in order to ask the viewer what political options are left. As Tom Keenan has written: 'The ethical finds itself in extreme proximity to the ethico-political now; the proximity is perhaps discomfiting to some, but it is also the condition of any serious intervention. That intervention, though, will have to enter into political dispute, not from the safety of a distance or the ethical certainty of a good conscience. The closer we get the more uncertain things are. What difference does all this exposure make, here and there? Only time and force will tell. The time and the force of those images will surely have something to do with it. That is why we have a responsibility – ethical and political – to attend to them.'

A baby whose anus has distended due to malnutrition and that peels the skin from a mouse in order to eat; another child that appears to die on camera as its mother wails inconsolably; the fly-infested bodies of rebel soldiers; rape victims begging for money and food. The artist asks in what context it is correct for us to see such images and what our ethical responsibility might be to them. At every site of violence or pain that the artist visits he turns the camera on himself and on the white photojournalists who capture these images for distribution in the West. What the artist seeks to delineate is the fact that the system of representation is not the same as the thing represented.

Later, in a satirical set piece, Martens trains a group of Congolese wedding photographers in the truths of the image economy. He demonstrates to them that if they change their subject from weddings and parties to rape and violence they could make a tenfold increase on their current income. Of course, the project fails. After Martens shows them what to take photos of and how, the Congolese photographers seek press accreditation from Médecins Sans Frontières, whose representative denies them the pass based on the quality of their images, or rather on the failure of the images to match the aesthetics of war expected in the West. Martens, the white colonial, fails in his role as teacher and subverts the humanitarian cliché that, 'if you teach a man to fish he will feed himself for life'. Martens fulfils Zolghadr's notion of an art that eludes 'simple notions of solidarity and empathy in favour of an analysis of our very fascination with the outlandish, be it touching or violent or both'. And he avoids the accusation that an artist like Santiago Sierra might face of the spectacularisation of exploitation because the edit, in Martens case, cannot be known; his relationship with those depicted in the film cannot be guessed at beyond the closed frame of the artwork.

In 2006, Martens's one-time tutor, Aernout Mik, presented a show at



Aernout Mik
Training Ground 2006

both the Camden Arts Centre and the Fruitmarket Gallery entitled 'Shifting Shifting'. Four films were shown, *Vacuum Room*, 2005, *Scapegoats*, 2006, *Raw Footage*, 2006, and *Training Ground*, 2007. Three of these were fictions using actors to depict scenes of political tension or violence in familiar settings: civilians lined up in a sports stadium by armed guards/rebels, an old man beaten in the road, protesters storming what might be a civic building or conference event. *Raw Footage*, however, was edited from tape of the Bosnian war left on the cutting room floor by ITN, footage that was deemed unsatisfactory because it did not portray ethnic cleansing as an exuberant Dionysian rite of bloodletting. *Raw Footage* is a disturbing film precisely because it places us, as the anthropologist Mick Taussig has written, in 'dullsville, the sludge that allows the dailiness of organised hate to flourish'. Here are everyday people going about their business while the pop and rattle of machine-gun fire can be heard in the distance; here are troops laughing and drinking bottled beer as they fire guns at random targets.

Mik is exploring what Hannah Arendt famously described in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as 'the banality of evil'. A phrase she was much criticised for using at the time. Israel wanted Eichmann's trial in

Jerusalem to be a show trial, the spectacle of the captured monster facing justice. But Arendt went beyond the façade and showed that the truly monstrous thing about Eichmann was his ordinariness. It is the unsettling ordinariness of war that *Raw Footage* demonstrates. Like that strange feeling when watching film of a shooting, there is a banality to it, a shocking normality that perhaps belies something fundamental about why shootings and direct violence do not appear on the mainstream news; it is something deeper than their apparent shock value, or rather that their shock value lies somewhere beyond our grisly imaginings. Like pornography, news media functions through repetition and expectation. While Martens's film mimics the conditions that it aims to subvert, Mik's film critiques the aesthetic of spectacle journalism by inference.



Renzo Martens
Episode III 2009
video still

Harun Farocki
Immersion 2009
two-channel video



There is currently a show at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge in Barcelona entitled 'Antiphotjournalism'. Curated by Thomas Keenan and Carles Guerra, it might be considered an overview for a certain tendency in contemporary art of which the above works are examples. Jacques Rancière has termed this kind of work 'documentary fiction', while Alfredo Cramerotti has written a book attempting to delineate its characteristics called, perhaps unsatisfactorily, *Aesthetic Journalism*. The concept of documentary fiction is, of course, nothing new, but it is a mode that seems to be lighting up synaptically across the wider culture: in fiction, the late works of JM Coetzee, David Shields's *Reality Hunger*, Jonathan Littell's faux-Nazi memoir *The Kindly Ones*, or the popularity of misery memoirs like Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and, in popular culture, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Borat*. The show in Barcelona features works by, among others, Martens, Farocki and Hito Steyerl, and a lecture series including presentations by the curators and Azoulay. The artworks are presented alongside examples of unconventional photjournalism that subvert mainstream media norms. The show reflects an urgency in the culture, a belief among certain artists that these are questions that demand to be addressed.

Contemporary art, unlike ethnography or other branches of the so-called social sciences, does not have the yardarm of objectivity at the centre of its practice. It is a unique form of knowledge production that is able to acknowledge its own subjectivity. Works like those presented here break down notions of objectivity and the separation between the documentary and the fictitious. That is not to say that they do not have any moral or ethical responsibility, but that the artist is able to explore beyond the tired liberal mores of political correctness, pity and empathy in order to reframe and critique vital political and aesthetic questions. Now is perhaps the time to ask ourselves what the answers might be. ■

Antiphotjournalism is at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge in Barcelona until 10 October.

JOHN DOUGLAS MILLAR is a writer, critic and poet based in London.