

REVIEWS

'Aernout Mik: Shifting Shifting', Camden Arts Centre, London, 16 February – 15 April 2007. Catalogue: Michael Taussig (ed.), Camden Arts Centre, London, 2007, hardback, ISBN 9781900470636, £12.00.

'Danger!', reads the subtitle that translates the words of a gesticulating soldier trying to warn off the press. 'Why?', 'Do you speak English?', continues the foreign journalist's assault. The nervous soldier seems stunned by the stupidity of his interlocutor, whose questions are absurd in view of the heavy artillery we see amassing on all sides. The footage we are watching shows reporters negotiating with patrolling militia, scuffling to construct a narrative. Aernout Mik's editing intercuts shots of huge cameras with shots of queuing armoured tanks. On both sides, there is the same heavy gear, the same waiting around, the same sense of anticipation. We see reporters as information vultures, scrounging for a piece of the action. Cameras become tanks in our minds and the foolhardy reporters, the aggressors. The purpose of the scramble for footage gets lost somewhere along the way.

Mik's video installation *Raw Footage* (2006) is one of four pieces brought together in *Shifting Shifting*. It is a collage constructed out of previously unseen ITN and Reuters film reports from the war in former Yugoslavia. The footage it uses is unconsciously self-reflexive, showing war from backstage. Much

of it is dull, but the dead-weight tension of the 56 minutes of film edited by Mik has us riveted. We hear birds singing and dogs barking while in the far distance smoke issues from a vast complex of concrete buildings. As we wait for another explosion, Mik tempts us to feel bored – disappointed even – by the deadpan absence of spectacular catastrophe. The waiting is appalling because we imagine what it might be like to live in such conditions, daily. Recognizing that horror may no longer have the power to move us, in view of the usual bathos of media spin, Mik arms himself instead with anti-sensationalism. His approach is in stark contrast to the false closure proposed by narratives such as the one staged for the benefit of the international media in Baghdad in April 2003. The story of 'the victorious Coalition forces and the jubilant, emancipated Iraqi people knocking down Saddam's statue', as Adam Chodzko put it, was as suspect as the motivations for the war itself.¹

Shifting Shifting explores power relations between people in situations of war, conflict, and their aftermath. Power is always in flux. Subject positions are mobile. The camera is a player that negotiates and produces the shifting ground invoked by the exhibition's title. The remaining three works in the show are experimental, artificially constructed scenarios used by Mik to test how conflict is played out. *Training Ground* (2006) is a simulation of training exercises for border patrol police, in



Figure 1 Aernout Mik, *Scapegoats*, 2006. Video installation. Produced by BAK, basis voor actuele kunst and the artist. © The Artist. Courtesy of carlier | gebauer, Berlin. Set Photo: Florian Braun, Berlin.

which the repetitive sequences suggest so many takes on a film set. The sense of troubling un-professionalism is strong. It speaks of the unpredictable, always makeshift nature of the human response to crisis.² Mik's role-play, meanwhile, degenerates into unintelligibility. Plain-clothed police and refugees(?) are indistinguishable as they mill around in a crowded parking lot. Prisoners and guards swap wooden guns for machine guns against a backdrop of trucks on a motorway. The author of the catalogue essay, Michael Taussig, captures our growing unease: 'What the hell is going on here? Why is there no sound? God! Now I have to think for myself!'³ Art too, Mik seems to suggest, struggles to transcend the

status of an absurd training ground in which attempts to distinguish corruption from innocence are thwarted by a horde of deranged imposters and plain-clothed aggressors. Nevertheless, we have a hunch that, even though we recognize this as fiction, it may be more real than what passes for truth on our TV screens. Disaster and war, likewise, defy the conventions of narrative and spectacle on some fundamental level.

The installation *Scapegoats* (2006) not only deprives the viewer of narrative, but also of the usual gallery comforts. There is no bench, so we sit in the corner of the room on a rough black carpet facing the diagonally positioned screen to watch what appear to be

bewildered civilians being lined up, shoved and humiliated. The young men with guns seem bored and show off – boys with big guns, playing. Suddenly the silence is broken by the metallic click-clack of a round, as we see one of the boys firing his machine gun in the air. He fires carelessly, thus making the complicity between soldier and cameraman unnerving. As people are herded into a sterile sports stadium we are reminded of the scandalous mishandling of the floods in New Orleans. With its rows of plastic seats, the stadium also doubles as an empty theatre. Although small things prompt us to see that this is a phony scenario, the neat rows of empty seats come to signify the absence of those that should be responsible for the chaos – the bureaucrats orchestrating events that others have to live.

Vacuum Room (2005) explores the ability of bureaucratic power to flow like water around anything that might try to impede it. When activists interrupt a meeting (the chandeliers and the vast corporate bouquets jar with the protestors' shell suits and trainers) direct action proves no more than an embarrassment, a nuisance. The officials seem bored, lapsing into chitchat. Someone refills the jug of water. They wait for the intruders to be removed so as to get back to business as usual. Video screens as environment are at their best in this piece. Low-level projections, bounced off mirrors and back into a central circle, place us in the centre with the protestors, encircled, as they are, by the suited occupants of the roundtable. Sitting on beige cushions on the floor, we are in limbo, unclear who to identify with or how. Moreover, we, as spectators, are scrutinized by a series of low-hung strip lights. The installation makes us comfortable and then makes us uncomfortable. Every easy option

entails a sacrifice to be made by someone, somewhere. Subject positions can be created, tested, and destroyed, but civilians, military personnel and reporters are all, like us, spectators – all culprits and victims in a game whose sheer complexity Mik materializes. Everyone seems shifty. There are no heroes.

¹ Adam Chodzko, 'File Note #18 (Michael Taussig, ed., *Aernout Mik: Shifting Shifting*, London, 2006)', London, 2006, n. p.

² Peter Watkins' post-nuclear docu-drama *The War Game* (1965) was tellingly programmed by Mik to accompany the exhibition – an unforgettable film staging the inhumanity born while maintaining official roles during the appalling fall-out from cataclysm.

³ Michael Taussig, 'Aerapeutics', in Taussig, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–19.

Klara Kemp-Welch

Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, 280 pages, paperback, ISBN 978 0 415 34522 4, £19.99.

In *Self/Image*, Amelia Jones continues to offer up radical new approaches to the ways in which contemporary artists enact their subjectivity. Developing debates originally presented in her *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Jones expands the category of performance to include those artists who use new imaging technologies as a means of staging the self. With *Self/Image*, Jones reinvigorates the discourse around self-representation by expanding its range to include digital imaging, video installation and robotics, thereby distancing it from traditional models of portraiture. Using the work of