Omer Fast
Der oylem iz a goylem

26 July – 6 October 2019

Textbook

An exhibition of new work by Omer Fast, including a new film commissioned by the Salzburger Kunstverein.

Known for films that blend fictional and documentary processes, Fast has recently expanded his work to include architectural interventions and theatrical mise-en-scènes that explore social issues and political topics. His new film, *Der oylem iz a goylem*, was shot in March, 2019 in Salzburg and will premiere on July 26, 2019 at the Salzburger Kunstverein.

The Exhibition
This exhibition includes three films installed in a theatrical mise-en-scène designed by the artist. The first film, *Der oylem iz a goylem*, depicts two characters who are stuck on a chair lift, high above the wooded ski slopes of a snowy mountain resort. The second film, *The Invisible Hand*, follows a family's ordeals in a forest and dense city in the Pearl River Delta, China. The third film, *August*, is loosely based on the final years of German photographer August Sander.

Although worlds apart and speaking different languages, the first two films nevertheless evolve from the same medieval fairytale. Visitors will be presented with two case studies, seemingly distinct but sharing a common past and exhibiting similar symptoms. The film *August* will be installed separately in an autonomous gallery.

Installation 1

Der oylem iz a goylem
Single Channel Film, 2019, 24 min 36 sec,
produced for the exhibition

Based on a medieval Jewish fairytale, this film takes place on a chair lift, high above the wooded ski slopes of a snowy mountain resort in the Austrian Alps. A lone skier accidentally drops her glove from the lift. As she helplessly curses her luck, a fellow passenger suddenly appears, not dressed for skiing but rather in the long black robes, the beard, side-locks and hat of an Orthodox Jew. Like any mountain spirit summoned by accident, this fellow passenger has his own agenda and story to tell. To the skier's growing dismay, he is quite impolite, will not stop talking and can halt the lift when it suits him. In order to exorcise this ghost and free herself from his stranglehold, the skier must resort to what she long thought suppressed and break up the boundaries separating the real world and fairytales.

This film was shot at the invitation of the Salzburger Kunstverein in various Salzburg locations in March 2019.

Installation 2

The Invisible Hand
Virtual Reality film in 3D, 13 min, 2018

Based on a different version of the same Jewish fairytale, this immersive 3D Virtual Reality (VR) film follows a young girl who recounts her family's uncanny past in the People's Republic of China. The story commences with the girl's father discovering a finger poking out of the forest ground, desperately reaching out for a nearby ring. Tempted by the precious jewel, the boy's better nature prevails and he helps out by carefully slipping the ring onto the finger, before running off. From then on, the family regularly receives neat bundles of cash on their doorstep, which magically reappear at regular intervals. Not knowing who their mysterious benefactor is, the

family nevertheless grows accustomed to the recurring gift and becomes prosperous. The boy goes to private school. The family moves to a nice apartment. When the boy reaches adulthood and is about to wed, a mysterious guest arrives at the ceremony.

The Invisible Hand was shot in Guangzhou, China, on a 3D VR camera at the end of January, 2018. The work was commissioned by and premiered at the Guangdong Times Museum in March, 2018, but was shut down by the local government after running for a few days. The reason given was that there are no more ghosts in China since the founding of the People's Republic.

Installation 3
August
Single screen, 3D projection, surround sound, 15 min 33 sec, 2016

Loosely inspired by August Sander's life and work, the film follows the artist at the end of his life, nearly blind and unable to sleep. As he roams his house late at night, figures from the past briefly appear, mostly frozen and ghostlike. At times friendly and at times taunting, the figures eventually drive the artist into the night, where he seeks refuge in nature.

An new edition by Omer Fast is on show in Café Cult and available in our shop.

Introduction by Séamus Kealy

We are most fortunate to not only work with Omer Fast this year, but to also commission a new film by the artist, shot in Salzburg this spring. Working across a broad spectrum of film and video over nearly two decades, Omer Fast's work often complicates the politics of race, gender, difference, political belief and related values we hold onto individually and collectively. In the context of this exhibition, we see new films by the artist presented in a marvellous hospital setting.

The two main films in the central installation, "The Invisible Hand" and "Der oylem iz a goylem", are both based on a medieval Jewish fairy-tale. One interesting distinction between the two fairy-tale films is that the context in "The Invisible Hand" relies upon the story being set and told in China, but one feels, this story could have been set anywhere. With the "Goylem" film, set in Salzburg, these racial distinctions as part of the fairy-tale seem to melt into the "place" of the Alpine landscape, even the context and histories of Austria itself, especially repressed histories, and thus *place* comes into focus as the active backdrop. This is not however to suggest that *place* is the central protagonist, there is much more going on here.

When Omer Fast first came to visit us in Salzburg several years ago, he whimsically described Salzburg as a "fairy-tale city." I remember this distinctly when considering how he came about writing and shooting the new film here. What might also be interesting to consider, although I haven't spoken with the artist distinctly about it, is his ongoing interest in religion and how that may come to bear upon the narratives. We see topics of God and belief colliding especially in the "Goylem" film with mythology, repression, matters of race and racial tensions, as well as the underlying reference to the holocaust. Like life, nothing seems really

concluded in these films. Nothing seems reconciled, as religion in principle seeks out to do. And then ghosts keep twitching beneath the surface.

Below I will ask the artist about some of the references, but for now, we might examine a few elements. There are both visible and unseen references in the film, all at play with one another. In "Der oylem iz a goylem," the ghost, in the form of an orthodox Jew, speaks about a precariousness of the world, of everything really. Even if the world seems to be under our control, the world can turn against you suddenly, he seems to say. Naturally he speaks with the wisdom of the dead or the undead, he has seen it all, and he is close to God we might ascertain. But still he has this kind of Judaic scepticism or mistrust of the world. It reminds me of how Rabbis argue continually over how to interpret the Torah, as if it is not God's final word after all. What seems to tie to two fairy-tale films and the "August" film together, for me, is re-telling of a traumatic past, where ghosts are created out of repression, tragedy, catastrophe or injustice. It seems to be material that the artist can spin into so many different directions and contexts.

We also see a number of conflicting or contrasting elements at play in both fairy-tale films. The old world seems played against the new world; the undead and the dead brush up against the living, fantasy contaminates reality, history and tragedy emerge again in the form of dark passages and references to the holocaust to darken or contaminate the picture-perfect present (ski resort, wedding party). Roles are even shifted provocatively, where the harasser (the Jew) becomes harassed, even stripped and bled by the harassed (the skier). Then she seems later to become him, completing him, in a way, uncontrollably it seems. Something uncategorical—unspoken, unsayable maybe—seems to emerge between the gaps of these conflicts and contradictions, and it appears that Omer Fast strategically sets up scenarios where nothing is ever as it seems, and once this is evident, it can never be what it was before. This seems to mimic processes of trauma or repression itself.

The floating coffins with the alleged dead children at the end of the Golem film are reminiscent of the story of the changeling, in Nordic, Germanic and Celtic folklore. In this situation, briefly distracted parents see that their baby has been replaced by a terrible creature, which jumps up and runs away once discovered. This story has been "updated" by historians and anthropologists as the elaborate and culturally-repeated story parents would tell in the case of infanticide or death of their child through neglect. This clears the family of communal shame and criminal guilt, and perpetuates superstition and a system of belief that simultaneously unites the community, bringing order where disorder could have easily erupted. The skier tells us that the coffins can float back upstream, and the mongrel children arise as the undead, bringing disorder again. Here at play seems to be the workings of collective systems of belief, as kinds of collective madness on the one hand, or as collective perception that binds a people together through identity, race, religion or place. All this seems put to the test in both fairy-tales, which maybe has always been a role for fairy-tale to play, we might consider.

When I think of a re-telling of fairy-tales, I think of Angela Carter and her appropriation and re-tellings of medieval fairy-tales for example. Emerging from these re-tellings in her case is a kind of retroactive cultural and psychological analysis, updating the stories to take up her political and feminist concerns especially. In Fast's films, there might also be a resonance of this kind of re-writing or subversion of narrative to bring it into a contemporary context, as we have explored above.

When in Salzburg before the exhibition opened, Omer Fast and I had a short conversation about some of these topics. Below is a part of that conversation.

SK: You've visited Salzburg several times since 2016, when we began quietly toying with the idea of doing a show here. When we finally decided on a date for your show, you had the concept for the film "Der Oylem iz a Goylem" at your fingertips almost immediately. Can you take us through the beginnings of conceiving and writing this film? It all happened so quickly, it is astonishing to consider how the film came together, considering the depth and richness of the story and its development. Where did the idea originate from and why did it apply or rather how did it arise specific to this Salzburg context?

OF: There's a whole bunch of reasons why a particular work gets made, most of which lurk beneath the surface, invisible but integral, like an iceberg. What I know is that I wanted to follow up on the previous film I made, The Invisible Hand, by adapting its source material in an entirely different language and context. About two years ago, I read a book of old Jewish fairy tales and decided to use one as the basis for a film about a contemporary Chinese family's relationship with a ghost. The family first benefits from the relationship, rising from poverty into relative wealth, until the ghost crashes their wedding and reminds everyone where they came from. That film was commissioned by the Guangdong Times Museum but was immediately censored by the local authorities and has been hardly shown since because it's in virtual reality and requires this awkward, head-worn equipment, which most curators are turned off by. So when you presented me with what seemed like the precious and only opportunity to show that work, I simply wanted to make something people could watch while waiting to put on the VR head-sets. That something turned out to be another version of the same fairy tale. The original 18th century Yiddish script sets the story in Worms, a West German city with a long history and an unattractive name, which I wasn't keen to discover. But then my wife suggested setting the story on a ski lift, which I imagined as an irresistible postcard image superimposing two enduring clichés: The eternal, vulgar Jew who won't stop talking and the eternal Alps that are majestic and silent.

SK: Your work has shifted from using an interview-format as material for making your films (A Tank Translated or 5000 Feet is the Best), to adapting genres (porn, horror, sci-fi, the war film) that respond to currencies, whether political or around sexuality and identity (The Casting, Continuity, Nostalgia), to these current stories, all told in the exhibition (August, The Invisible Hand, Golem) with a focus on the fairy-tale. What, however, has been your common interest in your film-making, if there is one?

OF: I have a grand total of two ideas, which I keep coming back to in every work I make, no matter how hard I try to cook up something different. The first has to do with a past that refuses to play by the rules and stay in the past. Instead, it keeps returning and re-emerging in the present, like an uninvited and unwanted guest, always at the wrong time, often offensive, demanding and lurching. We can call this the undead past or the zombie past. The second idea involves liminal figures or persons who cross borders. These borders can be geo-political or national. But just as often they can be social or behavioural borders, the crossing of which involves breaking certain taboos. Think of soldiers and migrants, crossing from one land to the next, from civil society to lawless terrains. Or adult film performers crossing from the private realm to the public one in their most intimate moments. Or funeral home directors who work the line between the dead and the living. Or psychics and ghosts. Sometimes, the two ideas combine into one awkward hybrid, like the ghost in The Invisible Hand, who crosses from the supernatural to the human realm in order to deliver an unwelcome message from the past. Or like the recreation of a commercial space in Chinatown, which tried to talk about what was gone but was similarly rejected by those policing the present.

SK: In your recent exhibitions in New York (James Cohan Gallery), Berlin (Museum Martin Gropius Bau) and Guangzhou (Times Museum), you started using *mise en scene* around your installations, just as you have done in this exhibition here with the hospital setting. Beyond expanding

your work into a theatrical setting for the audience, can you speak a little bit about this approach?

OF: I've done a lot of installations in white cubes and black boxes. I love these spaces because they allow people to really focus on what's being shown, while fostering the false illusion that the space is otherwise neutral or empty. But after a while it gets repetitive and unchallenging, especially when the work tries to draw attention to social issues. At those turning points, I've tried to contaminate the environment where the work is displayed by introducing details that point elsewhere, sometimes back in time and sometimes to other spaces, to other economies, to other conditions of viewing. I often try to use problematic language or borrowed symbols to talk about a problem. More recently, I've tried to situate the work completely outside the gallery space. For our show, we even contacted two nearby hospitals and tried to get them to host the work but they had more important things to take care of.

SK: You often use glitches repeatedly and centrally in your films. In "Der Oylem iz a Goylem", the skier seems to be hallucinating; something could be amiss with her. The interviewed former drone pilot in "5000 Feet is the Best" has clear psychological and psycho-chemical problems, confusing stories, memory and reality. The characters in "Continuity" cross their trauma and collective tragedy with sexual perversion. The protagonist in "Remainder" has apparent brain damage and his madness weaves an obsessive tale of vanishing and re-appearing memory. In short, stories get confused or crossed over in many of your films. Would you tell us a little about that, why this interests you?

OF: I already talked about repetition in relation to the zombie past, which refuses to stay buried and keeps re-emerging. As a Brechtian device, repetition also allows you to play with structure, to push people past immersion or identification in order to look at what's happening obliquely or critically. When I do interviews, I often ask the same questions over and over. It's a little annoying and people often resist, but sometimes it's really

surprising what comes out when you have to reconsider what you're saying, to push past your rote answer and come up with an alternative or different perspective.

SK: The prosthetics (the Groucho Marx noses on the Jewish characters in the story, the fake breasts on the golden demon) seem to do a few things in the film. They seem to underline or accentuate the tale-telling of what we are seeing, broadening its absurdity and humour while touching upon darker topics. But the Jewish features then also seem to implicate us or the idea of an observer to the story, challenging us on questions of racial difference (especially historically, as if this old fairy tale is being told to an anti-Semitic audience). It also seems you are intentionally but also jokingly objectifying these characters, enhancing their Jewishness (especially since, I believe, the two actors are not Jewish), raising a specter or backdrop of anti-Semitism, as well of course as the historical persecution and mass murder of Jews here, but then always with your tongue in your cheek. Is this an elephant in the room thing? Would you comment?

OF: I asked Marie Schreiber the makeup designer to come up with prosthetics to cover over the little problems I had with some characters in the film. Of course any time you try to cover a problem you make it more visible. And as you point out, this dynamic involving prosthetics and artifice, covering and visibility is where politics enters the story. On the one hand, the plastic noses and latex breasts immediately pull the gaze away from the actual body and into the realm of the body as code, as screen, as fetish. On the other hand, the covering up or masking emphasizes the phantasmagoric and mutable, the darker realm where myths and fairy tales operate, which invites us to momentarily suspend the rules that normally govern the symbolic order and see things obliquely, alternatively. So, yes, the big noses might remind us of a particular tradition and a thousand clichés, of Der Stürmer and recent FPÖ posters, but also of Groucho Marx and Gogol, of Woody Allen and Pinocchio. The fake breast is actually a more direct reference to a photo by Cindy Sherman, who herself referenced the Madonna as painted by Jean Fouquet. But beyond

all these references, there is also a weird normalization that take place while watching the movie, where you no longer see the prosthetics and accept the characters for whatever they are. I remember that when the actors would pull off their fake noses in between takes, I would sometimes stare at them in complete disorientation, with their normal noses they would suddenly look very strange and I wasn't sure what was missing.

The Director wishes to thanks the generosity and hard work of his team, the dedicated members of the board, all supporters and partners, and our generous sponsors and funder. A very special thank you to Omer Fast for his energetic commitment to this project and exhibition.

Der oylem iz a goylem

Producers & Partners

About the artist
Omer Fast (*1972, Jerusalem) holds a BA in English from Tufts University, a BFA in Visual Arts from the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts and an MFA from Hunter College, City University of New York. Fast has had solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum in New York, the Jeu de Paume in Paris, the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna, and Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, among others. Group exhibitions include dOCUMENTA13, the 52nd Venice Biennale, the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Fast received the Bucksbaum award for his work "The Casting" at the Whitney Biennial in 2008 and has also won the National Galerie's Prize for Young Art in Berlin in 2009 with his work "Nostalgia". His work is in several international collections including Tate Modern, the Guggenheim Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Centre Pompidou.

About the Salzburger Kunstverein

Founded in 1844, the Salzburger Kunstverein is a long-running and leading contemporary art organisation specialising in contemporary art. It is located is Salzbur, Austria, and is housed in the Künstlerhaus, built in 1885. The Salzburger Kunstverein organises about twelve exhibitions of international and Austrian artists annually, and generates discourse and other relevant programming through its lectures, residencies and screening programs. The Director since January 2014 is Séamus Kealy.

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Opening hours Café Cult: Mon–Fri 11 am – 11 pm