

The Storyteller

Traveling Exhibition Project Description



Cao Fei, *Whose Utopia*, 2006 (video still)

Curated by Claire Gilman and Margaret Sundell

Organized and circulated by iCI (Independent Curators International), New York

Tour Dates: October 2009 – March 2012

[The Story] does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. The traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 1936



Omer Fast, *Spielberg's List*, 2003 (video still)

Responding to the rapid, often violent transformations of the 21st century, contemporary artists have displayed a growing desire to activate art's documentary capacity: its ability to bear witness to events in the world. *The Storyteller* focuses on these artists who use the story form in contemporary art as a means of comprehending and conveying political and social events. All of the works in *The Storyteller* revolve around situations that are either in the process of unfolding or that continue to impact the lives of the artists or protagonists. However, in each case, these events are re-imagined and thereby re-experienced through the artist's personal encounter or the character's narration.

For the artists in the exhibition, the story functions neither as a purely imagined narrative nor as a piece of verifiable information. Rather, it is a document of a different sort— one whose focus is less empirical accuracy than the reality of events as they are encountered, experienced and delivered by a thinking, receiving subject and an active listener. The story is at once temporal and personal, public and communal. It persists through the listener's interpretive process and through each subsequent retelling. Significantly, unlike their postmodern predecessors, the artists in *The Storyteller* neither take the idea of documentary truth as an object of critique nor abandon fact for fabrication. Rather, they enable individuals (whether themselves, their subjects or their audience) to construct the story of their unique participation in historical processes, thereby presenting these events in a new and unexpected light.



Ryan Gander, *As Time Elapsed*, 2006



Jeremy Deller and Mike Figgis, *Battle at Orgreave*, 2002
(video still)

The Storyteller includes an international group of artists working in video, photography, drawing, mixed media and installation: all media that have lent themselves to a documentary approach. Although the featured artists have enjoyed a degree of critical attention, none has received serious consideration for the role that storytelling plays in his or her work. In some cases, the artist's "story" takes the form of a drama based on real events: Jeremy Deller and Mike Figgis's film reenacts a 1984 clash between striking miners and police in Thatcherite England; Ryan Gander revisits the construction of Trellick Tower,

London's infamous blighted urban housing project, in a children's book and accompanying sculptural installation; the collective, *Missing Books*, imagines the final minutes in the life of Argentine dissident Rodolfo Walsh, a well-respected fiction writer.

In other cases, the stories function less as reconstructions of the past than investigations into the relationship between past and present: Liisa Roberts's multi-layered filmic narrative about the 2002 restoration of Alvar Aalto's municipal library in the formerly Finnish, now Russian city of Vyborg; Omer Fast's video featuring testimony from movie extras about their experiences filming Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*; Hito Steyerl's video featuring a Bosnian artist attempts to reconstruct a lost newsreel depicting literacy classes offered to Muslim women under Tito.

A third group appeals to diverse literary genres: for example, Cao Fei's fairytale-like video portrait of workers in a Guangdong Province factory; Joachim Koester's photo essay documenting Immanuel Kant's daily walks through his native city of Kaliningrad; Adrian Paci's video of his three year-old daughter recounting a folkloric tale that incorporates present-day international conflict; and Mounir Fatmi's sculptural assemblage of videotapes to recreate the New York skyline pre-911.



Adrian Paci, *Albanian Stories*, 1997 (video still)

Finally, Lamia Joreige, Steve Mumford and Michael Rakowitz initiate a dialogue with active participants in a contemporary political situation that their projects then serve to narrate: Joreige's video portraits feature personal experiences of the Lebanese war told via a memorable object; Mumford's intimate drawings of war-torn Baghdad pair scenes of on-duty soldiers with images of the local artists and shop-owners he befriended while living there; Rakowitz revives his grandfather's import/export business to Iraq in an extended project that includes a functioning store as well as documentation of stories shared by visitors. In all cases, the artists in the exhibition adopt the story's use of commonly shared lore to unite individual experience with communal histories.

Artists in exhibition:

Cao Fei
Jeremy Deller and Mike Figgis
Omer Fast
Mounir Fatmi
Ryan Gander
Lamia Joreige
Joachim Koester
Emanuel Licha
Missing Books (Maria Barnas, Maxine Kopsa, Germaine Kruijff)
Steve Mumford
Adrian Paci
Michael Rakowitz
Liisa Roberts
Hito Steyerl



Steve Mumford, Selections from *Iraq and Baghdad Journal*, 2003-05 (detail)

About the guest curators, Claire Gilman and Margaret Sundell:

Claire Gilman, Ph.D., is an independent curator and writer living in New York. From 2003-2006, she was Janice H. Levin Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Modern Art where she worked on *Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul* (2006) and *Greater New York 2005*. Before that, she curated *Arte Povera: Selections from the Sonnabend Collection* (2001) at Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery. Gilman recently received her doctorate in art history from Columbia and is currently writing a book on 1960s Italian art.

Margaret Sundell's writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *Art Journal*, *Documents*, and *Time Out New York*, of which she is a former art editor. Sundell has taught art history and critical theory at Columbia University, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and Parsons New School of Design. She is currently director of the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

Technical Requirements:

DVD players	10
Projectors	5-9
Flat screen monitors (1 at least 42").....	1-5
Television monitors	2
Sets of speakers.....	9-11
Sets of headphones.....	6-12
Amplifiers.....	7-10
Projection screens.....	5
Seating areas.....	6

Plus the capacity to sell books from a pile that is on display in the exhibition is recommended but not required. Details will be provided.



Note: Because certain single-channel video works in the exhibition are of considerable length (one hour or longer), daily screening times should be determined by the venues and indicated for visitors. Liisa Roberts' *What's the Time in Vyborg?*, 2000-04, must be shown in an auditorium or similar setting, or it should be omitted from the exhibition altogether.

Basic facts:

Participation fee: \$10,000 (for ten weeks)

Number of artists or artist teams: 14

Number of works: 27

Space required: 3,500-4,500 square feet (Note: space requirements are flexible depending on how certain videos and films are shown, whether as projections or on flat-screen monitors)

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