

On Aernout Mik: Deconstructing Spectacle

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Objects of the past have always been pulled into the present via the gaze that hits them, and the irritation, the seduction, the secret they may hold is never only on the side of the object in some state of purity, as it were, it is always and intensely located on the side of the never and the present as well. It is the live gaze that endows the object with its aura, but this aura also depends on the object's materiality and opacity. - Andreas Huyssen, in *Twilight Memories*

Call it re-emergence, re-generation, or re-enactment, the compulsion to *revisit, recollect, reflect, remix, rework, reimagine, reassess and revive* through *reinvention or reanimation* is at the core of the work of artists and curators who propose alternative incarnations or documentation methods of prior moments. These inclinations of *re-* attend to what has been described as a crisis in history. This crisis usually involves an epidemic of forgetting caused both by repetitions of dominant paradigms and also by an obsession with new. Directed to counter what has been deemed history's so-called reality, recent projects within the field of contemporary art have taken up an infatuation with prying open the past, illuminating the blindspots, the *contretemps*, *retro-nyms*, and other recollections or interpretations of an original moment.

In the work of Dutch artist, Aernout Mik, the past that he often reverts to is one which has been generated and glossed over by scenes from popular news media. In videos such as that proposed for *Shifting Sitting* (2009), the artist, by way of digital sampling, deconstructs broadcasted spectacles which, as news, at once determine current realities and ultimately become archived as historical indexes. It is often through re-enactment that Mik rewinds, fragments, and then slows down these familiar occasions which, through the crafted work of the media, otherwise depict stories using styles particular to what captivates viewers. Mik's video reruns of such decelerated scenes effectively reveal what has otherwise been eclipsed or altogether blinded by spectacle, or, as the artist turns determined spaces into endless sites of speculation open to infinite possibility, at times seemingly crucial circumstances tarry in total nonsense.

What captivates the viewer in Mik's versions is his interruption of expectations, a sort of denial of anticipation as he re-enacts moments that are ultimately never explained or resolved. Adverse to continuities, persistence or sequence, Mik's work nullifies the "story" in history. And so the sustained attention, or even enthrallment with what is on screen must be developed by way of scrutinizing idiosyncrasies and minute details of temporally flippant intervals. For instance, in the midst of disaster, or in moments just thereafter - in a war zone, in a riot, in a heated debate, in a boxing match, on trial, or about airport security or immigration - Mik suspends dramatic scenarios, ones that most viewers have seen many times before, lingering on an impasse or incongruity. What is typically in the spotlight alters its habitually foregrounded position that the camera lens so often gravitates to, and uncovered is something quotidian, or absurd. In *Shifting Sitting* (2009) the routine acquittal of a Prime Minister becomes indeed a sort of routine; in *Touch, Rise and Fall* (2008) an average day at the airport is made tense by usual goings ons around the security check point; in *Raw Footage* (2006) Mik accesses unused footage from the war in Yugoslavia to reveal day-to-day lives beyond the "action" seen on television; in *Refraction*,(2004) those at the scene just following a bus accident either uselessly respond or actively intervene, but

all victims are absent; in *Glutinosity* (2001) what first appears as some sort of intense protest becomes increasingly theatrical and staged; in *Middlemen* (2001), a nearly abandoned stock exchange is littered with papers and a few men with glazed-over expressions. Without a context to go on, Mik's video installations immediately direct attention to the social relations unfolding within the scene that he has suddenly immersed us in. The absence of cause and effect eliminates the viewer's sympathy or lack thereof for particular characters in the scene, so that meaning is extracted based on the specific actions or responses of those involved in an isolated instance, of how one finds agency in a situation or within a community. Mik's work frequently raises the questions, what is the potential of raising a voice or moving in a direction amongst many other raised voices and directions taken, and where are impulses derived from and to what effectiveness can action taken be applied? Unlike the fast-moving spectacle that media notoriously wraps up into an enticing narrative, often answering these questions for us, Mik's disuse of plot frays any logic of narrative forcing us to pay closer attention to what we are accustomed to rely on during processes of understanding why things are as they are.

While re-enactment has been widely employed to imply reproduction or duplication, in attempt to accurately remember traditions (i.e. the historical pageant), to recontextualize the past in the present (i.e. film remakes), or to venerate style (i.e. architectural revival), in Mik's work it seems an opportunity to disrupt fetishes of vraisemblance. Rather than re-enactment duplicating existing narratives, new manipulations of the past defyingly depart from what is - or is in the process of becoming - commonly remembered, puncturing collective memory by applying different focuses on omissions, marginalized perspectives or nuances. Through Aernout Mik's infusion of disorder and arrest, likelihoods or guarantees egged on by the ventriloquism of media tactics and transported by momentum is ruptured so that nothing is as we anticipated.