

VDB TV: *Decades*, The 2000s

Aily Nash

# *Sandwiched Between Trauma and Apocalypse: history as it intersects with biography and the rewriting of the past*

This program takes as its starting point the third sequence in Steve Reinke's *Hobbit Love is the Greatest Love* (2007), in which Reinke elaborates and schematizes his hyperbolic historical theorem. He relates history to biography by diagramming their projected forms – history culminates through progress in apocalypse, whereas, biography begins with trauma. Who we are, he states, is determined retrospectively by this original trauma. Reinke combines these two diagrams into a diamond-shaped figure – its widest point marks the present. By relating history to biography in this way, we find ourselves snugly positioned between trauma and apocalypse. It is between these two points that this program unfolds, each work radically reconfiguring this relationship between history and biography to make meaning of the present. These videos by Paul Chan, Ximena Cuevas, Jesse McLean, Steve Reinke, and Walid Raad propose subjective rewritings of historical events, claiming agency over how these pasts are understood. The works variously articulate the irreconcilability of worlds – we live together in alternate, yet parallel realities.

In the first part of *Hobbit Love is the Greatest Love*, Reinke talks us through his process of remaking an artwork. Reinke describes Adrian Piper's performance *My Calling (Card) #1*, as we watch his hands gesticulating over the woodgrain of his desk. His desktop performance, a mode revisited throughout the piece, is delivered with his distinctive tongue-in-cheek affect. Reinke claims certain deficiencies in Piper's work – the first is of scope – that it doesn't apply to everyone, and the other, is that it indulges in "that increasingly impossible category: autobiography." Reinke's version of the card, after Piper, simply reads: "I hate them, too." His satirical critique is delivered in the form of a bigoted

remake of her anti-racist performance, inhabiting a viewpoint which today might align itself with an all-lives-matter ethos. Speaking in the majestic plural he declares: "We offer, as a corrective, our own version." This detournement takes on the position of Piper's interlocutor, and speculates on the un-woke perspective that disparages the personal and autobiographical place from which she spoke.

The final segment of the video is a subjective re-sequencing of portraits of American military casualties from the second Gulf War, arranged by Reinke in order of attractiveness. Reinke has considered these lost Americans through the lens of his own desire. Confronted daily by incomprehensible death and violence, and inundation with image materials that circulate around these events, we are faced with making sense of what is beyond our control. We make meaning of our political realities by telling stories in our own way.

Similarly, Walid Raad and Souheil Bachar's *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)* (2001), takes as its starting point the Western Hostage Crisis, and recounts the event through a narrative of desire. Raad places at the center of the story a fictitious character who is credited as the co-author of the work. By doing so, Raad not only blurs fiction and nonfiction boundaries, but performs a radical rewriting of history. The work operates as an elegant performance of found footage – the purportedly lost and unreported perspective of the crisis is given voice. The crux of the work is the maintenance of ambiguity and tension between the internationally reported facts of the event and the divergent narrative that's presented by Raad. Bachar makes clear that the event is "first and foremost, a story" one that

has been conveyed in five different books, each American captive authoring their own version. *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)* acts as a proposition for a Lebanese account of the hostage perspective, and one that speculates on the sexual acts that occurred between captor and captive.

The video begins with Bachar's instructions on how these tapes are to be shown: his translated words are to appear as subtitles on a blue background, "like the Mediterranean," he says. Raad invokes a metaphorical relationship between the blue expanse of the sea and the materiality of video, the blue screen which acts as a representational void. The appendix of the video is a two-minute and twelve-second shot of a glistening sea. The fidelity of the image is low, the texture of the video pixilation is prominent, and for a few minutes we are left to experience this image. The subsequent shot is of a man standing on rocks at the edge of the sea. The subtitles read: "The previous video segment was two-minutes and twelve-seconds long. This is the average duration of all video statements I recorded during my captivity." The appendix is a durational experience, that of time in captivity, but also a representation of a segment of imagined historical time. The pixelated sea functions as a blue screen, signaling a lack of content, indeterminism, the liminal space between fact and fiction, history and the present.

Jesse McLean's *The Burning Blue* (2009) also touches on the relationship between the public and private experiences of historical events. Working with found footage and her own home movies, McLean draws lines of intersection between the most intimate memories of the Challenger



*Hobbit Love is the Greatest Love*, Steve Reinke (2007)



*The Burning Blue*, Jesse McLean (2009)

explosion, and its occurrence on a globally televised scale. McLean recounts her personal memory of staying home from school to watch a live broadcast of the launch and the eventual explosion. She then begins to conflate historical events – the Challenger explosion and the 1977 blackout, as captured through Hollywood films, are collaged with tourist footage of a visit to Old Faithful, a shuttle launch at Cape Canaveral, and news footage of the NASA Challenger memorial. The camera zooms in to focus on specific expressions of sorrow – individual displays of emotion within a sea of grief. McLean's montage weaves a connective narrative between these disparate events, relating singular experiences and documentation of historical moments to a public narrative.

Ximena Cuevas's *La Tombola (Raffle)* (2001) is at once a piece of found footage and a work of interventionist performance. The thrill of this work is in the sense of hope that emanates from the presence of an antagonistic agent who acts with autonomy in the midst of a media nightmare. The addictive distraction of television noise, often charged with numbing the minds of the people, is interrupted and questioned by an artist who planted herself within it as a foil. Cuevas rewrites this episode of *Tombola* through her intervention. What would have been an ordinary installment that brings together a group of semi-celebs to dramatically fuss over mansions and affairs, becomes radically disrupted: Cuevas takes the reins and demands a reflective moment

of the viewers and the other guests. She questions the value of this experience. She asks: "So this is entertainment?" A guest on the show responds: "I would like to know what it is that you find most entertaining." Cuevas pulls out her camera and points it at the camera directed at her. She declares her hope that there is someone out there who is interested in their own life – this phrase then echoes to create a boomerang-like tunnel of image and sound. Cuevas hijacks the televised production by staging her performance within the structure of the show itself. She then uses the footage produced by the show as found documentation of her performance. Perhaps the most divergent formal approach in this program, Cuevas performs a rewriting of this public event through the commandeering of the spectacle.

Speculating on the subjectivity of key figures in the George W. Bush administration, in *RE: THE OPERATION* (2002), Paul Chan gives us intimate access to their psychology, philosophy, and private confessions. He offers an alternative perspective of the war through an imagined intimacy with those at the helm. How can we understand senseless state violence but by trying to conceive of the dark personal traumas and pathologies of those who created and perpetuated the conflict? Reinke's historical schema is all too relevant here. Each section is dedicated to a single figure who is introduced to us through intertitles. Their animated and decapitated head is

often injured and twitching from battle wounds. The rest of the work is mostly composed of still images, found, altered or produced by Chan – these images share a seemingly random quality, yet the montage is exacting; the affective overtones are profoundly legible, provoking in the viewer a quiet sense of empathy.

In Elaine Chao's sequence, Chan makes palpable the banality of evil. She asks after family members in a letter home which is read over images from domestic life that point to the proximity of the ordinary and the inhumane: close-ups of house cats, left over bits of food on dinner plates, empty parking lots, a garden hose on a barren lawn, a hand outstretched, drenched in sunlight, a cat curled up on a red leather sofa, precede an image of an emaciated body sleeping on the tiled steps of a storefront. She reminds her parents to feed the neighbor's neglected cat: "Why should he suffer, just because he's not ours?" Empathy is commonly extended to animals, but our fellow humans who are hungry and without shelter are too often overlooked.

Many of these sections are in epistolary form, but the more abstract chapters are exhilarating breaks – these efficient visual nuggets, like aura photos, reveal something about the character's essence that the others cannot. The imagining of the roles of desire, sexual fantasy, and repression in relation to violence is a recurring motif in Chan's video, as it is in Raad and Reinke's. The most striking is the John Ashcroft sequence – his masochistic interior is



*Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*, Walid Raad and Souheil Bachar (2001)



*La Tombola (Raffle)*, Ximena Cuevas (2001)

expressed visually through the intensity of a camera's flash that gleams off of shiny black leather pants, juxtaposed with the eerie image of a man wearing a wrestling mask, echoed in a small painting of faces in similar masks on the wall behind him – these photos do not overtly exhibit violence, but come together to insinuate its pervasive mood. The texts also render much of the emotional dissonance in the piece.

Chan poignantly expresses these figures' recognition that they're simultaneously complicit and overwhelmed by the colossal nature of human barbarity. The tone ranges from the philosophically eloquent (Powell's are the words of Blanchot, for example), to more pedestrian psychoanalytic clichés. Condoleza Rice states: "I should not think it's up to me because this is much bigger than me. This operation is the pivot point for a new kind of time." Whereas, Karl Rove reflects in a letter: "Do you remember that time when dad started crying because he couldn't find our car in the Supersaver parking lot? ... I remember now because I know how he feels." These imagined personal traumas function as entry points into the miasma of atrocities of the Iraq War, and serve as an attempt to examine the idiosyncratic depravities that lead to collective apocalypse.

**VDB TV: *Decades*** celebrates forty years of Video Data Bank's support for video art and artists. This five-part series, programed by experts in the field, casts a distinctive eye over the development of video as an art form from the early 1970s to the 2010s.

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