

Cinema of the Invisible

In the course of my work there have been a few recurring questions over the years. I have an ongoing interest in the question of representation of political ideas and more specifically the phenomenon of terrorism. Another obsession is the idea of 'invisible cinema' or images that have disappeared and perhaps also the question of memory and false memory. The work that I have been doing in the past few years plays around with these different notions and some of the works address difficult political issues frontally. Other works really do not have a political content in their appearance and instead focus more on the question of narrative and the question of cinema, the cinema that we create by ourselves in our heads.

I'm French but I was born in the United States as a result of my father being a student in an American university. I grew up mostly in France, and when I finished high school I decided to go back to the US and ended up living there for about twelve years. I was living in New York during September 11th 2001 and like many people who lived in New York at the time I was on the rooftop of my building when the Twin Towers collapsed. I had a camera with me but I didn't take any pictures that day; and for several years after that, I questioned myself about the role of the artist in relationship to certain dramatic paradigm-shifting events. I've worked on a series of pieces that tiptoed around this question, this is one of them and it is called *Sugar Water* (2007). Shot in a subway station in Paris, it is a slow piece, almost performative. It unfolds in the time that it takes to wheat-paste five posters on the wall. It is basically a piece that collapses different dimensions of time inside of each other. There is the time of the event which is being photographed and which, if it were real, would have taken a few seconds to unfold. Then it is broken down and extended into the time that it takes to 'paint' it inside of this space on the wall of the station. Of course this is a context-specific space because it is the space where there are generally advertisements inside of the subway. It also has this gilded frame, which relates to the frame of a painting. So it is as if in the space of this video, different dimensions of time coexist with each other. I changed the name of the subway station, I renamed it 'Erewhon'.



Eric Baudelaire, *Sugar Water*, 2007.

It's an anagram for 'nowhere', an anagram which is also the title of a book by Samuel Butler that takes place on an island called Erewhon, a Victorian era fiction that supposes that time has frozen on this particular island. In a way, something similar happened in terms of the way we experienced time on and after September 11th in New York, and this is related to the way we experienced images of September 11th. Our reading of images has a very specific context, and it varies in different times and places. For example if you take the images on the posters in this work, if you imagine they were taken in the eighties in France, the image of a car exploding would probably make you think of an accident. But in Beirut, the same image of a car exploding would be very specifically related to a car bomb. In France, in 2006-2007, when I was making this video, the image of a burning car evoked a phenomenon in the suburbs around Paris where young people, due to social and economic alienation, would burn cars. This had nothing to do with terrorism, it was more about social decay. *Sugar Water* plays with these different associations and it plays with the experience of the time within which we see them.

I will now speak about another work from 2009, *Chanson d'Automne*, that I think is quite exemplary of what my practice was about. September 2009 is when the world financial markets were starting to collapse and in the course of the month of September I collected articles from the Wall Street Journal, the newspaper of reference of the capitalist system. There is a second element to this piece: a poem by Paul Verlaine that we learned about in history lessons in France, specifically its use as a code during the Second World War. Translated into English, the poem would read something like this:

*When a sighing begins
In the violins
Of the autumn-song,
My heart is drowned
In the slow sound
Languorous and long*

So I found, or rather I went looking, for these exact verses embedded in the pages of The Wall Street Journal. The significance of this poem is that in 1944 on the BBC radio, every night, there would be coded messages intended for listeners in France, secret messages addressed to members of the French resistance who knew what these messages really meant. In June 1944, before the Normandy invasion, the BBC broadcast two verses from Verlaine's poem *Chanson d'Automne* as a way to inform the French resistance that the invasion was imminent, triggering a number of acts of sabotage to assist in the liberation of Europe by Allied forces. I was interested in the idea of 'finding' the very same coded message inside another media sixty years later. You could say I am making a parallel between the German occupation of Europe and the current world order subjected to the hegemony of financial markets. I think I was most interested in asking a question at a time when the collapse of the financial system seemed imminent: 'What does it mean to resist today?' If the same poem can be decoded from within a media today, who would be making this call for resistance and who would be listening to this call for resistance? So I think of this piece as an open question.

When I was in Japan in a residency program, I was not making any pictures. I had a difficult time filming because I found that in Japan everything was very different, of course, and complicated to comprehend and therefore complicated to photograph or film. As a result of not making pictures, I started collecting existing pictures instead.



Eric Baudelaire, *The Makes*, 2009.

I started collecting publicity photographs for Japanese movies that I had never seen. I came across this image and it immediately brought a story to my mind. This child who is about to be shot reminded me of a story in a book by Michelangelo Antonioni called *That Bowling Alley on The Tiber*. A book where Antonioni published 'narrative nuclei' for movies that he would have liked to make but that he was never able to film. One of the stories in the book is about a man who sees two children playing, he sees a moment of beauty in the way they are playing. He then gets out of his car and approaches them, takes out a gun and shoots them both. The man knows that later on life will never be as beautiful as it was at that particular time for these children, so he decides to freeze life in this moment of beauty and joy because he knows it is soon going to disappear. Somehow, I saw this film unfolding on the surface of a series of unrelated film stills that I was collecting in Japan. I imagined that this was the man, on this picture, and I imagined that these were the children, and when the gun goes off, the mother hears the sound and she screams outside the window, and so we have this third photograph. And then the man gets back to his car and drives away, on this other photograph. From here on, I was looking through thousands of photos that I was finding, film stills from various Japanese films that I had not seen and I matched them with pages that I had torn out from this Antonioni book.



Eric Baudelaire, *[sic]*, 2009.

It was a way of giving an existence to films that were never made by simply associating found objects that together would create the paratext for the missing film. If you create enough paratext, it may substitute itself for the existence of the text itself, a movie that actually never existed. The project is called *The Makes* (2010) and it started as a series of collages or assemblages inside vitrines, then I also decided to make a film. The protagonist of my film is Philippe Azoury, a film critic, a famous French critic. He develops a critical discourse about Antonioni's 'Japanese' period, with documents and photographs in hand. So we have these photographs of films I have not seen contextualised by a critical discourse by a very serious critic, and so I called this movie *The Makes*, because it is like the remake of a film that was never made in the first place. One last short piece that I made while in residency in Japan. I was going to the newspaper store to buy *Artforum*. As I turned the pages of the magazine I came across things like this: this is a picture by Richard Avedon of Andy Warhol's Factory but all the sexual parts have been scratched from the page. Then I found this issue of *Frieze* magazine, with a picture of a naked dancer, and his sexual parts have also been scraped off the surface of the printed page. I was curious because Japan is not a puritan country; it is a country that has a tradition of erotic, even pornographic, woodprints going back centuries, so why are they scratching away these pages today?



Eric Baudelaire, *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi, and 27 Years Without Images*, 2011.

I found out that there is a grey area in Japanese law: the penal code says that obscenity cannot be sold, but the constitution says that there cannot be censorship. And so there is a tradition of artists who have provoked with their work to try to see how to negotiate this legal contradiction. The most famous being Nagisa Oshima who directed *In The Realm of The Senses* (1976). I decided to make a collection of these ‘scratched out’ spaces, scratched because the concept of obscenity is tied to the question of desire. The Supreme Court in Japan has defined this difficult notion of obscenity in a fascinating way: ‘What is obscene is that which unnecessarily excites desire’. It is a wonderful phrase because it questions the necessity or non-necessity of desire. And in a way it brought me back to the history of image making which revolves around the question of desire, the question of where desire resides inside an image. Taken quite literally, these ‘scratched out’ spaces are the spaces of desire, in the mind of the anonymous scratcher. From here I made a short film called *[SIC]* (2009), where I restage this situation, bringing it outside of the strict documentary dimension, partly fictionalising what I am portraying in order to open up broader questions about the relationship between the image and intangibles that are representable or unrepresentable.

Once again, my last work, *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi and 27 Years Without Images* (2011), addresses the issue of the unrepresentable. There are three people in the title of the work. Fusako Shigenobu is the founder of the Japanese Red Army: she's the one who left Japan in 1969 to settle in Beirut. Her daughter, May Shigenobu, was born in 1973 and lived her life until the age of twenty-seven in a complete clandestine manner. Her existence was a secret and she had to hide her identity for the twenty-seven first years of her life, until the year 2000 when her mother was arrested. Then, she was able to emerge into a different phase of her life, where she was allowed to say who she was; that was the time she also moved back to Japan. The third person in the title is Masao Adachi, an experimental, quite radical, formally political, very emancipated director and film writer, whose work – I think – is really interesting in the Japanese new wave cinema of the sixties. He became increasingly politically radicalized, both in his films and in his ideas, so that he eventually decided to make a film about the Japanese Red Army in Beirut and, finally, he joined them, spending twenty-seven years not so much as a filmmaker, but rather as a fellow traveller or a person who's participating in Japanese Red Armies activities.

The Anabasis is a journey and the story of these three characters, which are all in the film and also in some of the works on paper and photographic works, which are parts of the installation.

In 1969, Adachi, together with a number of filmmakers and theorists who were working with him, had this idea around a project based on a serial killing: the main character was a real-existed young man of nineteen who had shot and killed three strangers. What seemed to be just a random act of violence had become a serial killing, which captivated the Japanese public because nobody understood why he shot this people. That is why this collective of filmmakers including Adachi decided to make a film about this. Obviously, they couldn't approach him because he was in jail, so they decided to start by just doing some location scouting in a number of different locations where this young man had lived. They did a geographical biography of this young man's life. Going from the place he was born to the different places where he lived, it occurred to Masao Adachi and Masao Matsuda, the anarchist theorist who was working with him, that perhaps there was something interesting in the landscape. I think they came from the belief that if this young man, who's name was Norio Nagayama, had killed randomly, it was probably not a random occurrence, but it had something to do with the environment in which he grew up and lived his life till the last point of alienation he must have felt.

And the source of this alienation had probably something to do with power structures in Japan in the sixties. That is how they developed this idea of the 'landscape theory', or *fūkeiron*, which consists in making a film about a human story, but turning the camera to the landscape that this person has experienced instead of towards the subject of the film himself. It is in a way a sort of circumscribing a subject by looking at the architecture and the landscape around it instead of the subject itself. The film that Adachi made using the landscape theory was called *A.K.A. Serial Killer*. After this film, he abandoned the theory.

I had this idea of turning the theory back on the theorist and said: what if I make a film about the theorist applying the theory that he developed? So I used this idea of landscape theory essentially to film the places in which Adachi lived by turning the camera towards the landscape that he experienced, but I wouldn't say I simply applied the landscape theory in my film. I would say that I was interested in testing the landscape theory in order to see what it tells us, what it teaches us. To be honest, I think it is a problematic theory, because it is very deterministic and the determinism of the landscape theory is something I am comfortable with, because it is going to reveal things: when the camera spends enough time scrutinizing a surface you are going to learn something. So there is obviously something very interesting about this theory, but I wouldn't say that I'm a practitioner of it.