

Over the course of four afternoons, two Montreal based art critics – Stephen Horne and Anja Bock – sat around a small round table challenging each others thoughts on Andrew Forster’s exhibition Duet/Trio/Quartet. Following is a fictional transcription of their conversation.

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Perhaps to approach this selection of works by Andrew Forster we need to be simple: begin with a description, of which there could be many. The central work (if you agree) is the video *Duet* (2008).

Definitely, okay.

It occupies its own room and is projected to wall-size. When we enter it is as if we're inside our heads, looking out onto a vista, a space of enchantment. We can see one or two performers. I have no hesitation in describing them immediately as actors. The sense of staging is intense due to the parallel emptiness and blackness of their surroundings. There seems to be some narrative development so it's worthwhile to wait for the beginning of the film to come around again. When we do, we see a single performer, male, wearing a business suit and tie. The scrutiny of the camera is intense and he seems to feel it (or to feel us, the viewers, now standing in the place of the camera). There is nervousness to his facial gestures. He begins removing his outer layer of clothing, the suit jacket, shirt and tie, and is left wearing a white T shirt. He struggles with the T shirt, struggling within himself as to whether or not to take it off. He pulls it upwards, downwards and repeats.

Then a second actor arrives, a woman this time. She begins to interact with the man, begins trying to assist him with his struggles which are clearly not merely physical but emotional, as well. On, off, both actors struggle with the shirt and their gestures are very emphatic. All their movements appear planned or contrived. My sense is that they are choreographed actions and roles.

But doesn't the continuous looping of *Duet* drastically undercut any sense of narrative? Sure, the man takes off his jacket and tie and then struggles with his T-shirt, but then after a moment he reappears with his jacket and tie and starts all over again. As such, there are several loops within the video which itself loops. If there is a narrative, I would say it has to do with the woman's changing role: from trying to prevent the movements, to guiding them, to calming them.

But the man seems to be the focus and he continues to struggle in front of the camera, staring at it avidly, regardless of the woman's presence. I begin to question who or what it is that he is acting out...

... another video in the exhibition supplies a partial answer. It is only ambiguously a part of the piece *Duet*, given that it is outside *Duet's* room, but

here we see the same set of movements.

Right, the male actor in *Duet* is repeating the gestures and actions of the boy we see in that other video, a video that incorporates TV news imagery. Except this time it is a mere T shirt that is the focus of the conflict.

The image is multiply displaced in this setting: a video screen displaying news outside the projection room is one displacement, and the site of the depicted action is another. I take to be a Middle Eastern location; it could be Israel, Iraq or Afghanistan, at the moment of “now.” In the clip the boy is engaged in strange gestures, apparently directed by what are for us unseen and unheard commands. He is following orders. He removes an apparatus that he is wearing: an explosive vest as worn by suicide bombers. Watching this video, I immediately drifted into thinking about the implications of such commitment on the boy's part. What compels this? Belief? In what? A nation, a deity, a community, ideology, the cause, a future? If not belief, then fidelity or obedience.

It's a very compelling and complicated image indeed. The press release informs us that the boy is Hassam Abdo, a Palestinian suicide-bomber who, wearing an explosive body pack, surrendered to Israeli forces near Nablus in 2004.

With this in mind, what strikes me in *Duet* is the apparent lack of urgency with which he handles this source material. What we see here in Halifax is enigmatic and relatively opaque. This makes me wonder, how does this reference to Hassam Abdo function in the current work?

You refer to the news footage as “source material.” In other words, a narrative sequence has been established. An anterior moment has been posited. As an element of news footage or photo journalism the image of Hassan Abdo has to reflect the truth. If truth is an issue, so too is deception.

Certainly we cannot take it for “reality” as it is a highly constructed (heavily mediated) image.

I would say that Andrew's work shares this reductive skepticism. In fact, I would propose that this is one of the work's important interests: he takes off the journalistic layer and the burden of these bodily gestures continues to resonate. From my perspective, what we're looking at in Forster's work is a case of “more than reality,” not less, in the sense that the work does not set up any requirement for an authoritative reading.

But the photo journalistic fragment... it is not just any thing. Sure, it's ambiguous, but at the end of the day it is still an image of a kid ready to blow himself into pieces except for having been apprehended, frustrated, in the process. The kid is a suicide bomber. We could surmise that he is enlisted for the cause of Palestinian liberation.

Would you say that the news image is a factoid we need to know in order to make sense of the strange dances we see in the work on the level of content? Does *Duet* demonstrate some sort of traumatic repetition? Precisely not the moment of “now” but of the aftermath?

Perhaps, or perhaps its function is more formal, as though it itself were also a choreographed representation of ...something.

Of what? Of an over-arching theme like “freedom”?

I would say of “mortality.”

<<2>>

Picking up on your idea of mortality, suicide may be a topic raised by *Duet*. In fact, all four works favour humanistic themes such as love, death, pain, communication and confusion. The large scale text that we are confronted with when we first enter the gallery, *I'm So Sorry* (2006), for example, is rife with all of these emotions, especially anger – “I’m so *fucking* sorry.” The text also reads: “suicide is that what you think this is about.” *Trio (dedicated to you)* (1999), as well, subtly suggests suicide: a rope – the cord leading to a set of headphones – hangs high overhead of a wooden chair that we can imagine kicking out of the way. But on the headphones we hear a love song. If we tip it over, we would lose this tenuous connection.

If humanistic concerns are an important focus of the work, why so much subterfuge to get there, or to prevent us from getting there?

Right. Is our job to tune our antennas to pick up on these themes despite the work’s reticence, or to crack some sort of code? That is, is Andrew trying to communicate something that is receivable more or less intact – accessible to us just as he “sent” it – or is the message hidden among layers of encryption that we need to decode in hopes of discerning a message? In *Quartet* (2008), for example, nine performers on four different monitors gesture in front of the camera in a way that *suggests* language but no message is legible. They raise their hands, turn around, and turn back again in recognizable gestures of surrender, but nevertheless, any possibility for communication breaks down here. There is not enough contextual information to make sense of them.

Right, *Quartet*, and Andrew’s work in general, *seems* to speak in commonsense everyday language with its meanings adequately transparent, but it subverts this model of language: that sort of communication is now radically suspended. Perhaps with his plain-talk style Forster leads us to expect instrumental communication; yet he relies on displacement, repetition and ellipses for his formal structure.

But this *lack* of transparency is confused by his emphasis on source materials drawn from everyday contexts such as media imagery or photojournalism, and with phrases or language fragments collected from overheard conversations or political propaganda. These allegedly have documentary value.

Sure. Nevertheless it seems that Forster is speaking from a place we could call “poetic” while leading us to expect an unproblematic narrative moving toward some sort of closure – toward “meaning.”

So is this a substitution of styles – plain talk for poetic – but with an outcome characterized by opacity, ambiguity and indeterminacy?

Right. What we’ve been calling “opaque” about his work results from the suggestion of instrumental communication where in fact we have only figurative language, metaphor, allusion, metonym, irony etc. I think this is key.

But in this light, isn’t the work in danger of sliding into flippancy, as if the man in *Duet* struggles to free himself from a life in a necktie and that this is somehow on par with the political struggles for a Palestinian homeland? Afterall, as you say, it’s a mere T-shirt that is the focus of the work.

Perhaps it would be useful to think of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s work. He argued that the sublime belies the unrepresentability of what it tries to present, and therefore avoids falling into political didacticism. Instead, the sublime opens a reflexive mode that does not seek an end to the critical thought process – that does not seek closure.

Right, and we see this all throughout the show: *Duet* loops, the “quartet” of actors continually turn away from the camera, and the images in *Moat* (2005) never cohere into a unified image of the area under surveillance. This is frustrating, in its lack of instrumentality. Like the (artist’s) voice in *Trio (dedicated to you)*, which softly sings to us, “If I should paint a picture too, that showed the loveliness of you, my art would be, like my heart and me, dedicated to you.” It is the “if” that is important because, ultimately, Andrew seems to be saying that art can never meet this objective. That is, it can never capture the “true” loveliness of the beloved, or the political “truth” behind the rhetoric of the media image. In this way, the “more than reality” that you mentioned earlier is also a “less than.”

But at the bottom line, “meaning” is *not* suspended along with closure.

Following Lyotard, Forster’s work forecloses conclusions. But there is an important “but:” not all political or life crises can afford to be left hanging. Resolutions need to be posited. Forster, however, suggests that art is inutile to this end, and therefore needs to find other grounds on which to argue its relevance. And this is where he is searching for meaning.

What grounds does he establish?

That art has its own politics.

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On this count – that art has its own politics - the aesthetic of Andrew's work is crucial: it is blatantly understated, an aesthetic of non-aesthetics, meticulously articulated to look run-of-the-mill, and seemingly resistant to offering any sort of pleasure. It reminds me of Adrian Piper's video *Cornered* (1988) in which she discusses racial prejudice in the dispassionate erudite style of conceptual art, thus editorializing on this style and managing to convey pathos simultaneously. Is something similar happening in Andrew's work: in his substitution of plain-talk for the poetic, as it were, is he setting up a situation in which the artistic vocabulary he uses is inadequate for dealing with the issues at hand? If this is the case, he is exploring a relationship *with* politics rather than asserting its "own," as you say.

I think there is a real affinity for an artist such as Adrian Piper. But Forster's works are relatively more opaque, resistant, frustrating and conflicted. These are not characteristics of the work; they are what it is, in its mode of operation. And so I think your question regarding cracking the code is answered: there is no code. All we need is right there in front of us. There is nothing to be gained by trying to go behind the work, or outside it. There is no cracking of any code where these works are concerned because the works bring us to reflect on our own subjective implication, our relationality with the work, which is perpetually that of a crisis within subjectivity itself, and therefore within the intersubjectivity on which communication rests.

So maybe we should stop working so hard and take this obduracy at face value. That is, we should stop looking for "anterior narratives" that (allegedly) explain the work, whether in Abdo's desperate situation or Andrew's intentions.

And we should start thinking about the relationship the artwork establishes with us, the viewers. It seems as though the work implicates the viewer explicitly – as witness to a dual (*Duet*), as inculcated by the repeated gestures (*Quartet*), as a lover going out on a limb (*Trio*), and as a shuffler of visual documents (*Moat*), for example. Of course the viewer is (and has always been) implicated by art. In relation to Andrew's work, I'm wondering if the role he ascribes the viewer suggests a model of subjectivity that is congruent with the (frustrated, opaque) message of the work.

I think Andrew's intention for his works is to have us actually confront the subject, subjectivity, in ways alternative to the doxa. He's really looking for a confrontational encounter, for himself, for the viewer, and for their relation amid the ongoing dilemma of discovering and perhaps overturning established criteria for subjectivity.

Bill Viola's work comes to mind: he pursues the spectacular effects of image technologies in order to pursue humanist themes like birth and death that hark of the "essential."

Yes, it's an excellent reference, even though stylistically Forster's works seem to eschew any desire for belonging to any "canon" of art. If we were to name the names, why not also Gary Hill, alongside Viola and Piper?

I mention Viola not Hill only because Forster, like Viola, is struggling with monumentality. He refers to History (the source material), and he refers to Freedom (the Palestinian struggle), and he refers to Love (the song in *Trio*). The works play with monumentality, or monumentalizing themes. Emotion is just beneath the surface: loneliness, chaos, longing. Although, unlike Viola, Forster hasn't declared his interest in such "spiritual" concerns in any evident way; he has obscured them with his seeming plain talk.

Yes, and while Viola tries to bring these out, Forster leaves them ensnared in struggle. In this sense all the works belie some sort of conflict. For example, in *Duet* the actor struggles with himself, which is not resolved despite the various tactics used by the supporting actress to control or facilitate his movements.

I think what comes out strongest in this exhibition is that the conflicts in the work seem to be the same as those that are involved in my own perception and interpretation of the images and its realities.

How so?

We are blocked from forward movement, the viewer that is. The artist is presenting us with a reflection within which it is our own subjectivity that is blocked.

I agree that there is a struggle taking place and it is not only the one represented in the acting out of Hassam Abdo's gestures in *Duet*, *Quartet*, and *Moat*. All the works seem to be asking, *to what end?* And they all seem to strive toward communication but somehow fail to do so. That is, they seem – desperately – to want to move forward and to initiate a shift from melancholy toward mourning. So in that sense subjectivity is not really blocked or at a dead end, so to speak: it's more like we're interrupted.

Suspended?

They leave us caught in some sort of loop, a perpetual struggle, gestures repeated by reflex, images without coherence, and love songs without promises.

Right, Andrew is handing over the struggle to us, the viewers, scripting a role for us as he or she that needs to break free somehow from something or, alternatively, surrender to the "block."

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Returning to the idea that Forster's work *blocks* the viewer's process of establishing a self-sufficient and coherent subjectivity, there is another perspective from which to look at it. Consider the block as a void. Let me explain: Andrew takes the footage of Hassam Abdo and opens it out, thereby initiating complexity and depth by *not* showing. Media information is like filler but Andrew's work generates gaps and emptiness. Allowing this void is Andrew's reparative act. Andrew in his own writings always refers to what he calls "meaning." I think in the sense he means this: it has to do with this void, which would be opposed to news media, information and facts. So this is how Hassam Abdo "functions," not as a reference but as the site of Andrew's reparative action.

That makes sense. But in another sense we are still where we started. In trying to respond to Andrew's work I keep coming back to the sense of failure I feel when it comes to engaging with it. It's very difficult to be affirmative where resistance is the dominant characteristic of the work.

But I would say that this entire conversation is affirmative: we have affirmed that Andrew's work substitutes an opaque void for the expected form of meaning as closure, for example, and that by doing so it leaves us in a state of productive confrontation, failing to "control" or take possession of the work.

Right. And we have affirmed that, even though Forster offers no closure, he also leaves us no way out. His poetic is not lyrical but parsing instead, as if decorticating (opening out, as you say) the gestures of the Palestinian boy in search of a way to unleash the trauma but to no avail: we see only repetition. Perhaps the void you discuss is the result of the expressive, "essential" self having vacated its prime position as the centre. In its place we have a precarious subject construed out of various tangents and commands, desire and damage.

The end.