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Emanuel Licha Interview

with David Norr

DN: In your War Tourist series, your alter ego travels to regions torn apart by recent war or social crisis. He hires locals who tour him through some of the most dangerous areas, where evidence of destruction and suffering are most evident. Can you give us a full description of who this war tourist is?

EL: A war tourist wants to see destruction, chaos, and the pain of others, at close range. He travels the world, searching for ever-greater sensations. But, paradoxically, this curiosity functions as a means to keep these events at a distance. A war tourist travels to make sure that this is really happening elsewhere, that it's not happening where he normally lives. It is right to say that War Tourist is my alter ego. It's been a very practical invention to get rid of my scruples, allowing me to load this character with some of my greatest basic instincts. My first projects as an artist dealt with voyeurism; later, through various trips in conflict zones I became increasingly interested in war and how it forces the public sphere into people's private lives and spaces. I worked from architecture, which, I believe, presents the best artifacts of any social, political and historical environment. While looking at destroyed buildings and listening to survivors' terrible stories I began to ask myself what was so attractive to me in all this. I have some elements of an answer. But I believe it's much more interesting to ignore them for the time being and assume, through the impulses of War Tourist, this joy while regarding the pain of others. Of course, it might seem cynical, but I'm rather sure I'm not that far from a widespread attitude among people. The proof may be in the fact that War Tourist, with his frankness, attracts much more interest and sympathy than I personally do—with all my scruples intact.

DN: You live in Paris, a city like many in Europe facing problems with immigration and national identity. War Tourist recently traveled to the suburbs of Paris to explore the terrain where the riots of 2005 took place. War Tourist seemed far more empathetic in the Paris piece than in any of the other works. Can you explain this discrepancy?

EL: When the riots in the suburbs of Paris started, I received messages from friends living abroad asking me if I was all right. I thought that was amusing, since here in Paris we only heard about the riots through television. Even though it's only a 15 minute drive, Paris knows

how to protect itself... It was possible to follow the events the way we follow any event in the world, without feeling the least concerned. But these messages I received made me wonder how the whole situation was being presented in foreign newspapers. Their websites gave me an indication that the riots were amplified, some articles stating, "Paris is burning..." I guess this helped sell the newspaper. It also gave me the idea to check the websites of various Ministries of Foreign Affairs, and their travel advisories. The official American, Canadian and Australian advisory, suggested postponing any trip to France. Too dangerous, I thought: "Finally, I live in a country in war!" From that moment it became logical that I had to bring War Tourist for a visit to the suburbs. It took me over a year to find someone ready to guide me there. Various organizations I contacted had already been much solicited by journalists, and many were reluctant to the idea. The greatest fear was that my project would give a bad image of the whole situation. It's true that there was a difference for me between this new visit and the previous ones I had done in Sarajevo and México City. I guess I felt much more concerned. I believe it is in a way easy to worry for the rest of the world, but this concern often acts as a smoke screen for what happens right next door. Doing this project in the suburbs of Paris was for me an effort to cross this smoke screen. The result is probably not as "detached" as the other episodes of *War Tourist* for this reason.

DN: There is a cultural assumption that documentaries are neutral and transparent representations. In the war tourist video's, you adopt a journalistic approach to both your interview style and camera point of view. Do you consider these works documentaries or mockumentaries?

EL: The *War Tourist* project is not a documentary, and it doesn't even try to be neutral. The project is not intended to mock anyone—if only myself and my desire, which is shared by many, to see others' misery. After the first tour I organized in Sarajevo in 2004, it took me a long time to understand how I wanted to edit the video. In a very conscious way I chose not to make an interview with the guide, not wanting to have a journalistic approach. The most important reference for the "style" of this video are the films every tourist brings back from their visits to foreign countries. They usually film everything they see, without really looking at it in reality. They will experience the country later, when they're back at home, through their videos. The way I diverge from these is that my videos are edited, and that I add subtitles to it. In every city the guide speaks in English, and although he expresses himself in a very intelligible way, his speech is subtitled also in English as a way to emphasize the feeling of superiority of the tourist/spectator and underline the incurable otherness of the foreign guide.

Also, the information given in each episode isn't really what counts. There are already three episodes (Sarajevo, México City, the Suburbs of Paris) and I'm planning to produce as many others as I can (next destinations will be soon programmed to New Orleans and Beirut). The multiplicity

of the destinations creates confusion. When the series is presented each video is projected on a screen, and the sound can be listened to through wireless headphones. The spectator might be looking at a certain visit, but listening to the commentaries of another one, from another city. This is the confusion that takes place in a war tourist's mind. He visits a place but he thinks of another, and for him everything looks alike. So don't expect to learn much on the cities War Tourist travels to with this project!

DN: When did you become interested in burning things?

EL: I've always had a fascination for fire. As a child, I even set fire to a holy book! I know, its bad. But since the events in the suburbs of Paris in November 2005, I've been interested in the causes and functioning of riots. It's a vast theme, crossing the history of political and social fights, over many centuries. All these urban riots have some common aspects, which seem to be some kind of rituals. Like, for example, the burning of objects (garbage, cars), or buildings, most often public (schools, police stations, ministries...). Fire purifies and destroys at the same time. You never know when you see fire if it's a joyful sign of celebration or a worrying aspect of a rebellion. In my project *Preparing For Serious Events* for the exhibition I meant to establish confusion in that regard, by having a group of joyful cheerleaders perform while the building is burning.

DN: You've mentioned to me before your interest in Punishment Park (1971), the Peter Watkins film that is a fake documentary of a fictional correctional facility for protesters of the Vietnam War. For the film he used non-professional actors to play cops and protesters. He selected his cast based on their political beliefs—to play cops or protesters. It is an interesting way of dialoguing, wouldn't you say?

EL: There's another film by Peter Watkins, which uses this type of dialogue in a more subtle way. It's *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* (1999), a re-enactment of some of the events of La Commune de Paris, made with non-professional actors. Watkins questions the historical events as well as the contemporary situation within the context of French national strikes in 1993. By introducing some obvious anachronism such as two TV journalists—one sympathetic to the rioters from "Radio Commune" the other closer to the government from "Radio Versailles"—Watkins shows that history is a loop, that we do not learn and if we do we forget quickly, and that what was important yesterday is still relevant today. It's the type of work that makes the spectator feel history is developing before their eyes, and that we can be part of it. There's a huge amount of energy released by this work, and this mix between fiction and reality is extremely efficient and troubling.

DN: Can you speak more about this release of energy—because these are not happy endings, there is nothing comfortable about these films?

EL: One consequence of this release of energy is the will and the desire to stay in motion. The lack of happiness, and even more so the lack of comfort, is what makes one never wanting to rest. Unfortunately, we can't allow ourselves to be in a position in which we're not ready to react. And I believe what will help to stay in this attitude is: anger. I see anger as a driving force. Reading newspapers daily is a way to keep this anger intact. It's not a raw and untargeted anger: it knows exactly where and how it can be fed, where it can find its energy, and how it should transform. I have the feeling Peter Watkins has this type of anger. I hope I'm an angry man too, and paradoxically I feel very joyous about it.