

Capitulation Project

by Frédéric Moser and Philippe Schwinger

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Installation view, Zürich, 2003

The project

Capitulation Project is a 21-minutes 16 mm black-and-white film, the starting point for which is Commune, a performance by the Performance Group (New York) from 1971 that addressed the massacre of My Lai committed during the Vietnam War. Moser & Schwinger recreated the original scenery and wrote a new scene of their own, which is performed by a group of actors -casted by the artists in Berlin- and subsequently filmed. When presented in the gallery context, the stage constructed for the performance becomes the seating area for viewing the film, with the audience now seated in the physical space that the actors previously occupied.

Film data

Year:
2003

Original format:
black-white 16 mm transferred to DVD

Screening format:
DigiBeta

Duration:
21 minutes

Language:
English speaking with german
or french or italian subtitles

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Artists' statement

The New York-based Performance Group staged their piece *Commune* for the first time in February 1971.

The play included a short scene referring to the My Lai massacre. If members of the audience refused to participate actively in what was happening on stage during this scene, the actors interrupted their performance - sometimes for as long as three hours, depending on the audience's reaction. The group experimented with several variations of the scene.

Starting with photographs of the performance and the notes of Richard Schechner, the theorist of environmental theatre, we came up with a new version of the My Lai sequence. We worked with the statements of soldiers involved in the massacre, criminal investigation reports, and contemporary articles in the press. In the process, we developed a scenario that enabled us to translate the historical documents into a form suitable for the stage.

We aimed at representing an event of war without using any of the film industry's spectacular devices. What means do we have, as ordinary citizens, to come to terms with an act of terror? We followed the trail of the Performance Group. Their attempt to create a platform for self-criticism within the context of a theatre performance motivated our dramatic intentions. For this we reconstructed the stage set of *Commune*: a wave, evoking a landscape and also functioning as an agora, and scaffolding around the stage with seating for the audience.

In 1971 the performers were inspired by rituals: they danced and they sang. We did not attempt to recreate this authenticity in our production. Although we do evoke the symbolic level of their representation, we chose to develop our play with the actors on two different levels. Each of the performers takes on a function, for example, as a reporter, but they can also intervene at any time

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in their own name. Thus, there is a constant back and forth between the actors and the characters they are representing. This method of dramatic framing enabled us to establish an analogy with film.

There is no live performance in Capitulation Project. The scene was filmed in about 30 sequences during two night shoots, with extras as a 'fake' audience. The distance from the performance that is created through the process of filming is comparable to our detachment from current political events.

We intentionally moved back a few steps in time. We evoked the massacre by means of a contemporaneous artistic form in order to demonstrate that the grasp of an event of war is tied to its medial transmission.



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Review by Axel Lapp

In the film *Capitulation Project* (2003), four performers and a dozen passive extras struggle to come to terms with staging the horrors of war. Their acting fluctuates between brutal renditions of fictional violence, the ostensibly neutral communication of sanctioned historical fact and the dramatisation of subjective testimony. The action takes place on several levels, with the levels overlapping and subverting each other in a variety of ways. The actors keep switching between their own character and the role they are playing in the staging of the Vietnam War. The 'Civilian' is both a Vietnamese victim and a revolutionary communist; the 'Soldier' is an automated murderer as well as a charming animator for the extras. The 'Reporter' is cast as an interpreter in the dramatised conflict and reports on current events in the present of the play; and the 'Officer', having announced that they have to "push" two more villages, remarks in an aside that the lieutenant was thinking in military terms at that point. As members of a politically active, experimental theatre group, the four protagonists act out different methods of dealing with history while analysing it at the same time. As a result, they question not only their own understanding of perpetrators and victims but also their own approach and even the very possibility of communicating their subject matter.

On the morning of 16 March 1968, American soldiers swept into My Lai. Within a few hours they had murdered several hundred unarmed civilians: old men, women, children. When news and pictures of this bloodbath finally reached the public in the autumn of 1969, a flood of shock and indignation spread throughout the world. In 1970, General Peers was ordered to conduct an official inquiry. Hotly debated both in the United States and elsewhere, the "Peers Report" launched the decline of public support for military intervention in Vietnam.

The imagery of *Capitulation Project* addresses the

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constantly recurring questions of guilt and violence. The My Lai massacre is used as an exemplum for the investigation of processes that turn people into murderers, and of the consequences such acts have for the survivors. Since objective history can never make this atrocity comprehensible, the actors in the play strive to unravel the many layers of reality through their performance. However, the testimonies used to evoke an image of what happened in My Lai come only from surviving perpetrators – their victims have been irrevocably silenced – and the violence played out on stage reflects the actors' own preconceptions. Thus, their dramatised approach to reality necessarily remains a fiction and the massacre itself incomprehensible and irreproducible.

This piece is a capitulation of the search for truth! Nonetheless, the characters in the film are buoyed by the hope that their investigative work will prevent such atrocities in the future. They realise neither how little the realities of war and of civil society have in common, nor how little the people involved differ.

When the actors join in singing about friendship at the end of scene, it sounds to us today like echoes of a distant era when people still believed that songs could change the world. However, despite the historical implications suggested by the acting, by the intensity of the conflict and even by the costumes and hairstyles of the actors, visitors to the exhibition, who walk around in the installation Capitulation Project or sit down on the accompanying stage, do not see a document from the times of the Vietnam war. Nor do they see an authentic re-enactment from the piece Commune by the Performance Group. Only the basics of the scene have been adopted from what is known of the historical performances. Everything else has been developed by Moser / Schwinger in order to produce a drama and a film that exemplify the ways in which violence is filtered through the media. The

drama within the film thus functions as an exposition of the entire project.

For visitors in the exhibition space, the wooden stage of Capitulation Project becomes a place to reflect on the function of theatre and on the massacre in the Vietnamese village of My Lai. Furthermore, the artists' retrospective look at that historical debate inevitably directs our attention to current events as well. The parallelism of recurrent military conflicts and their historical continuum are as obvious as the divergence in the way people react. The intensity, in the film, of trying to cope with horror is juxtaposed with the passive act of contemporary observation.

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Credits

Performers	Steffen Boÿe, Jean-Theo Jost, Robert Lyons, Julie Randall
and with	Birgit Asshoff, Joachim Bergmann, Arne Friedmann, Uwe Metzenthin, Eliana Salinos, Sabine Souza de Avellar Pires, Ilka Willner
Production manager	Ulrike Mantel
Camera	Stefan Runge
Sound	Johanna Herr
Gaffer	Günther Berghaus
Production Designer	Volker Rehm
Costumes	Sybille Gänsslen-Zeit
Make-up	Martin Turansky
Camera assistant	Sibylle Grunze
Sound assistants	Uli Scuda, Frederik Haupricht
Costume assistants	Mahela Rostek, Carola Ruckdeschel
Construction crew	Niels Müller, Martin Petersmann, Torsten Schimmer, Uwe Stindt, Barbara Schaefer

Written, directed and edited by

Frédéric Moser, Philippe Schwinger

Produced by

Fine Arts Unternehmen Film AG

Supported by

Academy for Film and Television "Konrad Wolf", Potsdam-Babelsberg HFF, Bildhauerwerkstatt Berlin im Kulturwerk des bbk Berlins GmbH and das werk novalisstrasse, Berlin

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Artists' info

Frédéric Moser & Philippe Schwinger were born in 1966/61 at Saint-Imier (Switzerland). From 1988-91 they are co-directors of "l'atelier ici et maintenant", an independent theatre company based in Lausanne. From 1993-98 they study at the High School for Visual Arts in Geneva. They win the "Swiss Art Award" 3 times in a row (in 98-99-2000) and the Providentia "YoungArt 2000" prize. In 2001 they are invited for 6 month at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart. In 2002 they receive the One Year Scholarship & Studio in Berlin of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture. In 2003 they are invited to the first residence program at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw. In 2004 they represent the Swiss Contribution at the 26th International Biennial of Contemporary Art of São Paulo. They presently live and work in Berlin.

filmography

2006 Schwejk Perspektiven, Time flies, Donnerstag, Alles wird wieder gut / **2005** Revival Paradise / **2004** Unexpected Rules / **2003** Capitulation Project, Acting facts / **2002** Internment Area / **2001** Affection riposte

solo exhibitions

2006

Amanda, Gallery Arndt & Partner, Zürich
Farewell Letter to the Swiss Workers, Kunsthaus Zürich

2005

Revival Paradise, Kino Lab, Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw
Play gallery for still and motion pictures at MACO, Mexico-city

2004

Non chiamateli civili, Associazione Prometeo, Lucca
Capitulation Project, Cornerhouse, Manchester
NB - Bob Gramsma / Frédéric Moser & Philippe Schwinger, Kunstmuseum PasquArt, Biel

2003

ARTissima 10, Play gallery for still and motion pictures, Torino
Capitulation Project, Play gallery for still and motion pictures, Berlin

2002

Internment Area, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart
Affection riposte, Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart

2001

Affection riposte, Centre for Contemporary Images, Saint-Gervais Geneva
Embrigadés, Galerie Skopia, Geneva

2000

Lux Gallery, London
Galerie Institut - Horten, Düsseldorf
Dose miracle, Musée des beaux-arts, La Chaux-de-Fonds

1999

Auf den Höhen, Museum zu Allerheiligen, Kunstverein, Schaffhausen

selected group exhibitions and festivals

2006 Protections, Kunsthaus Graz / 59. festival internazionale del film, Locarno / 35. International Film Festival Rotterdam, Rotterdam / Multiple Versions : cinema and contemporary visual art, 4th. Magis Spring School, Udine / 41. Solothurn Film

Festival, Solothurn / Trieste Film Festival, 17a edizione, Trieste
2005 Contemporary Swiss Art Show in Japan, Chiba City Museum of Art / 58. festival internazionale del film, Locarno / Contenance, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart / 49th London Film Festival, the British Film Institute, London / Helden Heute, Kunsthaus PasquArt, Biel / 11th Biennial of Moving Images (Focus), Centre for Contemporary Images, Saint-Gervais Geneva / Contrabanditas de Imágenes, Seleccion 26 Biennial de São Paulo, Museum of Contemporary Art, Santiago de Chile
2004 26th International Biennial of São Paulo, Swiss official Contribution, São Paulo / The 3rd Seoul International Media Art Biennale, Museum of Art, Seoul / So wie die Dinge liegen, Hartware Medien Kunstverein, Dortmund / Play at Cirrus, Cirrus gallery, Los Angeles / Video lobby, Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius
2003 Remakes, CAPC- Musée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux / Shifting time/space, Kunstraum Walcheturm, Zürich / 10th Biennial of Moving Images (Intramural exhibitions), Centre for Contemporary Images, Saint-Gervais Geneva / Peripheries become the Center, Prague Biennial / Flux, Musée des beaux-arts, La Chaux-de-Fonds / Arco 03, Galerie Skopia, Madrid
2002 Another Swiss Version, AR/GE Kunst Galerie Museum, Bolzano / Videomathon, Centrul pentru Contemporana, Chisanau / VideoRom, Gian Carla Zanutti Gallery, Milano / Showroom, Galerie Skopia, Geneva / Lange Nacht der Museen, Projektraum Römerstrasse, Stuttgart / Shrink to fit, www.xcult.org et Musée de la communication, Bern
2001 VideoROM, Valencia Biennial, Valencia / Art 32 Basel, Galerie Skopia, Basel / Swiss Videos, Galerie Barbara Thumm-Angelika Richter, Rosso Bar, Venezia / Analogue-Dialogue, Musée jurassien des Arts de Moutier-Kunstmuseum Solothurn
2000 No vacances, Internationale Videoausstellung, Berlin / Screening, Artjunky, Leicester Square, London / Out of Space, Kunstmuseum Thun / Paroles, paroles, Kunsthalle Palazzo, Liestal / Prix fédéraux des beaux-arts, Fri-art, Fribourg / Dans le domaine du possible III, Centre PasquArt, Bienne / L'art dans le monde, Beaux-Arts Magazine-Parkett, Pont Alexandre III, Paris
1999 Prix fédéraux des beaux-arts, Kunsthalle, Zürich / #1, Espace croisé, Lille / Habiter le monde, Alliance française, Montevideo / Another Swiss Panorama, Centre for Contemporary Images, Saint-Gervais, Geneva / 3 ème festival de l'art en vidéo (section swiss video), Musée d'art contemporain, Lyon
1998 Dog Days Are Over (video lounge), Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris / Prix fédéraux des beaux-arts, Museum zu Allerheiligen, Schaffhausen / Videostore, Bricks & Kicks, Wien / Freie Sicht aufs Mittelmeer (video lounge), Kunsthaus, Zürich and Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt / Not strictly private, Shed im Eisenwerk, Frauenfeld / Video Exhibition, Cultural Foundation, Abu Dhabi

selected bibliography

Frédéric Moser Philippe Schwinger: Unexpected Rules, [texts: Alessio Moretti and Stefan Schoettke], Swiss Federal Office of Culture, Berne; Revolver, Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, Frankfurt a. M., 2004.
ISBN 3-937577-80-7
Frédéric Moser Philippe Schwinger, [editor: Andreas Münch], Swiss Federal Office of Culture, Bern; Centre PasquArt, Biel; Edition Fink 2004.
ISBN 3-906086-62-3 (www.editionfink.ch/presse.html)

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