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VENICEPREVIEW

PÉTER FORGÁCS

EBB AND FLOW

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

The first room of Péter Forgács's installation in the Hungarian pavilion at the Venice Biennale will be lined with videos of faces set in ornate frames typical of a European portrait gallery—though that is where convention ends. In these video portraits, played in slow motion, the subjects move their heads almost imperceptibly from side to side to meet our gaze and turn away again. They seem to pulse with light, set against dark backgrounds, excised from any context. We are left with just the searing imprint of these faces—young and old, male and female—and the suggestion of softness in the mouth, or madness in the eyes, to elicit empathy or suspicion, endearment or repulsion. This disorienting visual and temporal manipulation lays bare the human process of evaluating “the stranger” that happens unconsciously countless times a day. Greeting visitors at the entrance will be a similarly framed and manipulated digital image of Giorgione's *La Vecchia*, an unidealized portrait of an old woman holding a paper bearing the Italian inscription *Col Tempo*—“With Time”—which is Forgács's title for the Venice show.

The 59-year-old Budapest-based artist, best known for his cinematic orchestrations of personal and cultural narratives using found footage and amateur films, was himself mesmerized when he first saw these faces. They were part of a Third Reich-sponsored anthropological study undertaken during World War II and today archived at the National History Museum in Vienna. As Forgács researched the photos and films in which they appeared—made under the direction of the Austrian anthropologist Dr. Josef Wastl to compare the facial characteristics of Jewish prisoners bound for concentration camps with Nazi guards and local Austrian townspeople—he was struck by how radically a uniform, a housedress or nudity could shift the impression made

by a person. Editing these portraits for his Venice installation, Forgács created a psychological game, interspersing images of Wastl, Rembrandt and himself among the faces of soldiers, housewives and prisoners, though all are presented anonymously.

I recently sat down with Forgács at New York's Jewish Museum, where his interactive multimedia installation *The Danube Exodus: The Rippling Currents of the River* (2002) is on view through Aug. 2. The piece uses footage taken by ship captain and amateur filmmaker Nándor Andrásovits, who in 1939 ferried a group of Eastern European Jews down the Danube to the Black Sea and safety in Palestine. On his return voyage in 1940, he picked up a group of German settlers in Bessarabia who were fleeing Russian soldiers in their adopted homeland. Andrásovits documented both trips, filming passengers on board—praying, sleeping and sometimes dancing—as well as his own sightseeing excursions on stops

along the river. Forgács was drawn to the emotional symmetry of the two journeys, which he intercut in his original 60-minute film *The Danube Exodus* (1998).

In 2000, as a visiting artist at the Getty Research Center in Los Angeles, he met with the animators and graphic artists of the Labyrinth Project, an art collective at the University of Southern California's film school. With them, he explored the possibility of generating a more layered, multiperspective tableau from the linear format of *The Danube Exodus*. For the principal exhibition space, they created a computer station at which viewers can choose short vignettes from a total of four and a half hours of footage and view them as variously sequenced projections across five large screens that stretch some 70 feet along a wall. The collaborators also devised interactive peripheral stations where visitors can select and watch

Digital rendering of part of Péter Forgács's exhibition “Col Tempo,” slated for the Hungarian Pavilion.



VENICEPREVIEW

interviews Forgács did with survivors of the voyages, along with other historical material about the Danube. Reediting his footage for such an expanse, which took Forgács a concentrated eight months and was his most complex project prior to Venice, he established a hypnotic pace and rhythm, so that viewers would gradually take in the grainy, undulating panorama of life on the river. He thought of these new sequences as thematic variations on a musical score, which viewers could "shuffle" to find their own ways into the story.

Similarly, Forgács wants visitors to the Hungarian pavilion to make their own discoveries as they wend their way through the nine rooms. In the first part of the show, where the video portraits play in slow motion, he intends only to elicit questions and associations that viewers may have when confronting these turning faces. In another room, the faces flicker at normal speed across a monumental wall-size grid of monitors and are also projected on thin veils hanging in overlapping layers from the ceiling. The allusive then gives way to the factual. In large-screen projections, visitors will see Wastl measure and film shirtless subjects on swivel chairs and assistants make plaster masks of the subjects' faces. Monitors arranged in a triangle will show footage of prisoners on the ground and wrapped only in blankets, guards marching in formation and village women chatting. The anonymous faces from the earlier rooms become recognizable here in their real-life roles and settings, underscoring the uncertainty and contingency of our routine assessments of one another. A man with a warm smile, for example, turns out to be a Nazi guard. As a farewell to visitors, Forgács himself makes a series of absurd grimaces that are projected across three screens, a reference to the wildly distorted expressions on marble busts by the 18th-century German-Austrian sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt. Here, Forgács caricatures the paranoid glances that betray our judgments of each other, admitting his own participation in the human folly.

Forgács doesn't want the underlying Holocaust narrative to overwhelm the larger theme of the show—that of misperceptions and their consequences—and hopes that positioning the Austrian found footage within the conventions of old-master European portraiture will invite more open-ended responses. The integration of archival

material has been a hallmark of his works, which have been shown widely in Europe since his 1988 film *The Bartos Family* was awarded the grand prize at the World Wide Video Festival in The Hague in 1990. That lush mosaic—which Forgács pieced together from hours of home movies of bourgeois Budapest shot by the Hungarian businessman Zoltan Bartos from the late 1920s, through the Nazi period and the Communist nationalization of his lumber plant in 1949, and into the 1960s—is the first episode in the artist's acclaimed "Private Hungary" series, now numbering 15 works, which chronicles ordinary lives interrupted by historic events.

Forgács's first major exposure in the United States came with the completion of *The Danube Exodus: The Rippling Currents of the River* in collaboration with the Labyrinth Project. It was presented in its expanded, interactive form at the Getty Museum in 2002 and has since traveled to Barcelona, Karlsruhe, Helsinki, Berkeley and now New York. In May, Forgács's new film about the wave of Hungarian immigration to the U.S. in the first half of the 20th century, titled *Hunky Blues: The American Dream*, premiered at New York's Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., as part of the cultural festival "Extremely Hungary."

Born in Budapest in 1950, five years after the end of the war and just after the beginning of the Communist dictatorship that would oppress his country for the next four decades, Forgács grew up at the base of Castle Hill, which was heavily scarred from the German occupation. The artist's developing political awareness and anti-Communist stance put him at odds with his father, a journalist, and then with the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, which he entered in 1971. He was one of five students expelled that same year for being a member of an unsanctioned leftist art movement. Forgács says that his tribulations—being banned from all universities in Hungary—became a blessing. He found his way into the avant-garde music, film and art scenes. As part of a minimalist music group for seven years, he met Tibor Szemző, the composer who has collaborated with Forgács on most of his films. A visit to the 1978 Venice Biennale, where he saw Robert Wilson's multimedia theater work, would prove formative, along with exposure to the works of Marcel

Opposite, Forgács:
Rendering of video portraits
in frames for "Col Tempo."

Duchamp and the filmmaker David Lynch.

During the early 1980s, Forgács was inspired as well by the experimental work of Hungarian artist Gábor Bódy, who collaged films from existing and original footage. It suggested a new terrain to Forgács, who began collecting home movies and photographs. In 1983, he established the Private Photo & Film Archives Foundation with thousands of images and hundreds of hours of footage, largely from the 1930s and 1940s, which have since provided source material for more than 30 of his films. For Forgács, this scratchy black-and-white medium is embedded with treasures—complex private and public stories and a past that's forbidden or forgotten.

Forgács's dreamlike re-orchestrations of image and sound weave together photography, music, history, time, memory and poetry. In *Wittgenstein Tractatus* (1992), he layers a somber score and readings from the philosopher's essays on logic, reality and representation, which were influenced by the horrors of World War I, over everyday scenes of early 20th-century life before the rupture of 1914. *Miss Universe 1929* (2006), about a Jewish girl from Vienna named Liesl Goldarbeiter who won the international beauty contest, tracks a collision course of two disparate narratives: it is a patchwork of home movies filmed by her infatuated cousin, pageant pictures and modeling shots combined with newsreel imagery of Hitler's troops parading into Austria.

While Forgács has gained the greatest attention with his found-footage films, he continues to make multimedia installations. *Hungarian Totem* (1993), his wry commentary on the battle between creationism and theories of evolution, shown in 1996 at Postmasters in New York and the São Paulo Bienal, features a large taxidermied pig seemingly enraptured by a television broadcasting a show about how the pig was created from a stew: "proof" of the origin of its species. Forgács's reworking of the *The Danube Exodus* into a more immersive experience integrates these two strands of his artistic practice, as does his project for Venice.

Whether through the coursing waters of the Danube or shifting perceptions of identity, Forgács returns again and again to the idea of flux. ○

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