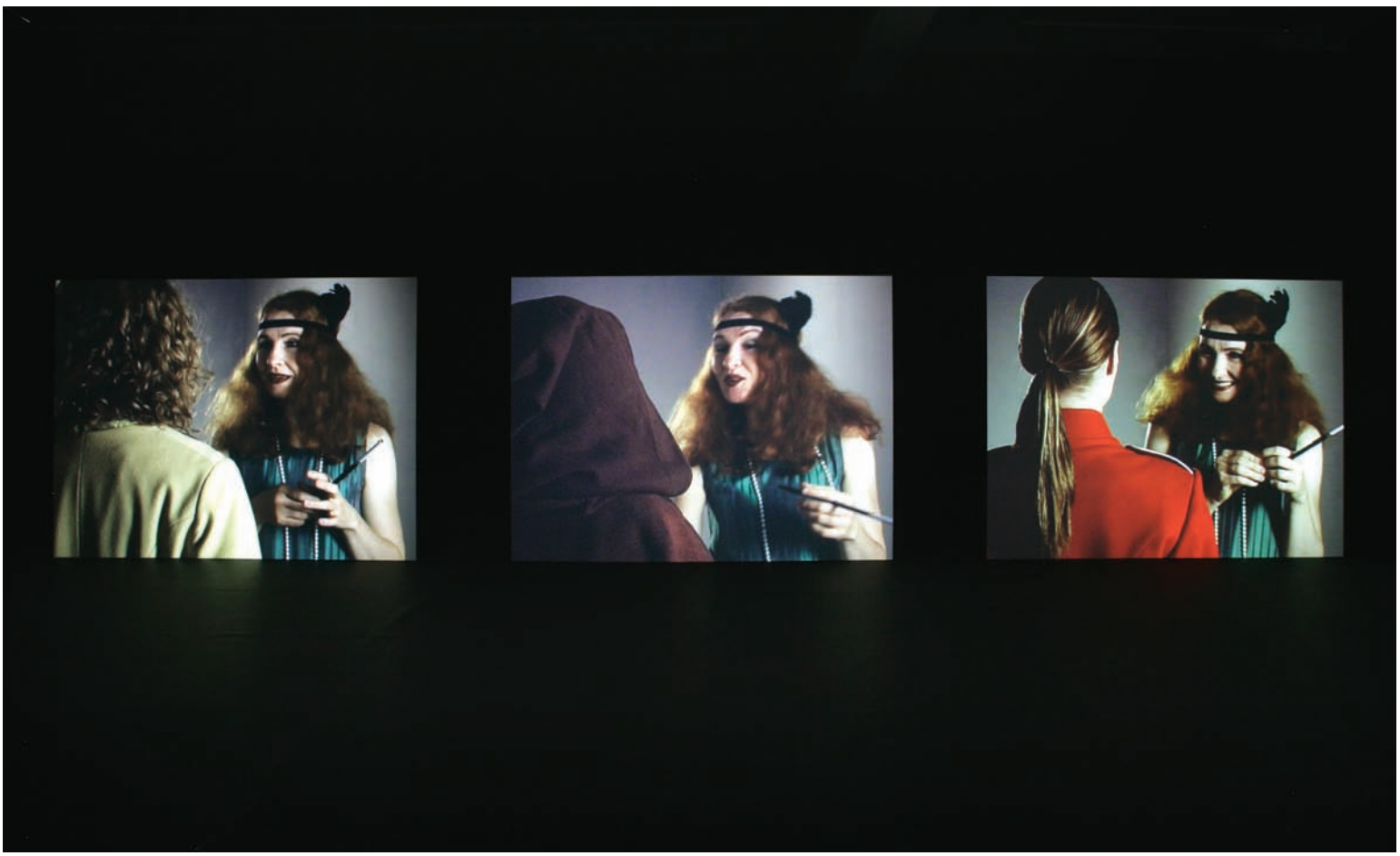
Through, around, and against the document: Maryam Jafri in conversation with Patricia Reed



Patricia Reed: I became acquainted with your work with *Costume Party: Colony & Native*, your 2006 solo exhibition at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (NBK). Your poignant photo-collage series, *Siege of Khartoum, 1884*, seems particularly well suited to begin our discussion of your work's relationship to the archival document. In this series of twenty-seven collages, you pair iconic imagery of the ongoing Iraq war with newspaper excerpts from earlier moments in history, tracing out, as you put it, the "narratives of Empire." Strikingly, the works did not suggest the clichéd notion that history repeats itself, but they opened up a quasi-theatrical territory between the script and the document. Can you elaborate on this combination of the two narrative approaches?

Maryam Jafri: *Siege of Khartoum, 1884* oscillates between script and document. In this instance, however, the script is not simply a fictional text. Rather, it's a historically-mediated description of contemporary events—a mediation that is largely unconscious. It remains unconscious because we, in the West, refuse to confront the colonial past. If Bush could present the invasion of Iraq as its liberation, it's because there is over a century's worth of imperial thinking and colonialist assumptions that made it possible. Very much like Pavlov's dogs, we are trained to react to certain narratives—such as, a corrupt dictator oppresses his people or invades a smaller, peaceful neighbor (Iraq/Kuwait or Russia/Georgia for that matter)—in the same knee-jerk way. Each time, the new crisis is presented as an exception—the ultimate threat, evil unlike any other—but repetition is the very condition for its existence. In the essay "A Short History of Photography," Walter Benjamin remarks that the illiteracy of the future will be visual—it will not pertain to reading or writing, but to photography. He also elaborates on the caption's role in ensuring that photography turns all of life's relationships into literature—or narratives I'd say, historical narratives in this case. With *Siege*, I took iconic photographs—such as the fall of a statue in Baghdad, with which everyone could identify—and juxtaposed them with captions and news-

INSIDE FRONT COVER AND ABOVE: **Maryam Jafri**, stills from *Costume Party*, 2005, three-channel video installation, 14 minutes, each screen approximately 3 x 2.3 meters (courtesy of the artist) / OPPOSITE: installation view of *Costume Party* at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, May 2006 (courtesy of the artist; photo: Jens Ziehe)

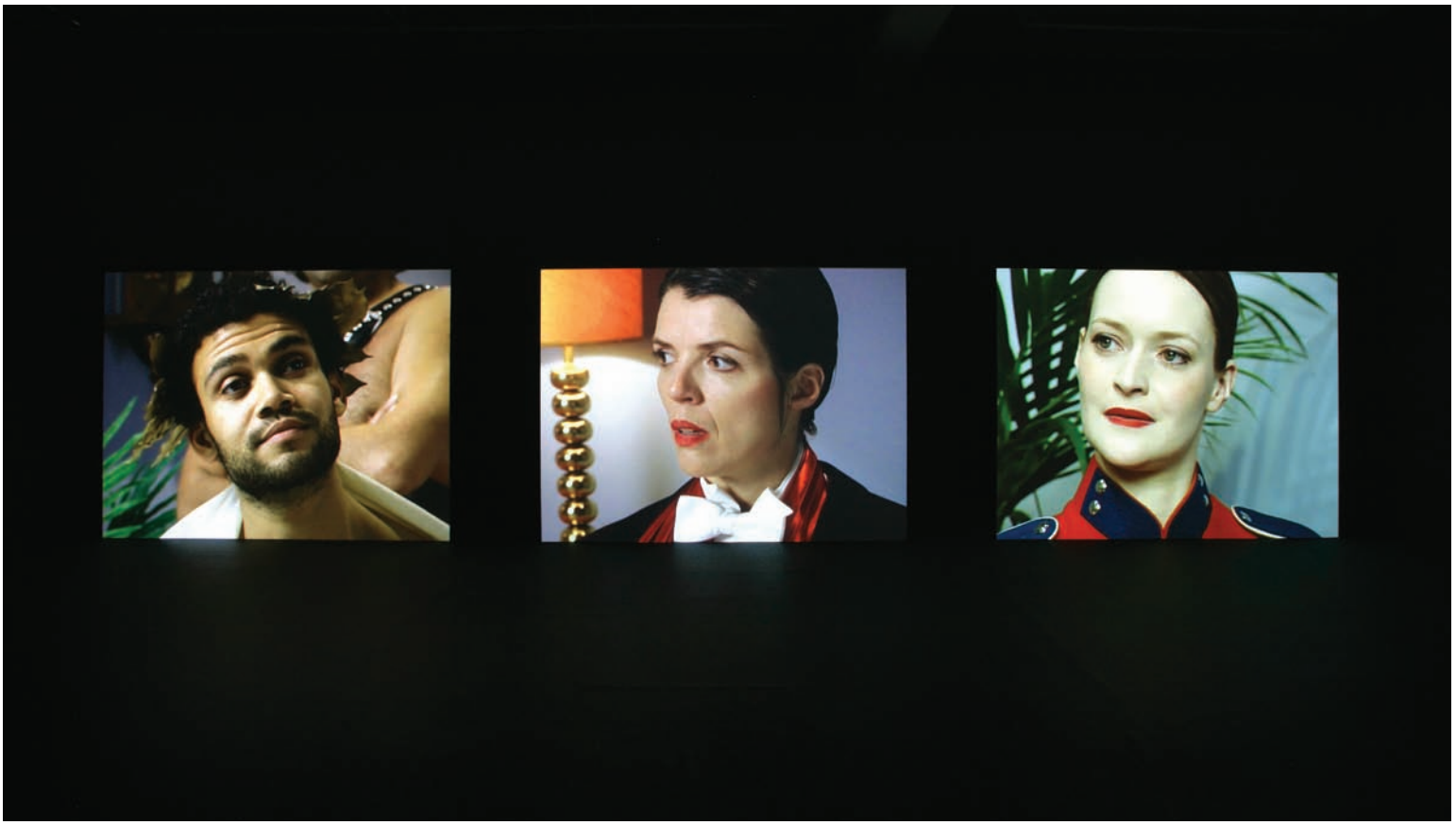
paper texts that, seemingly describing the images, were in fact from much earlier wars, such as the initial "liberation" of Baghdad by the British in 1917 or the liberation of Panama in 1990. Though the work plays with concepts such as the repetition of history or the critique of the mainstream media's role, I wanted to go further. For me, the questions were, what makes the individual journalist or presidential speechwriter narrativize the events of the war in such a way that the voices of other wars seem to come through? Why is it so easy to whip up mass hysteria and nationalism through the use of these old stories? It's important to ask these questions because, in the absence of outright censorship, we need to look at unconscious patterns that are so deeply embedded that they can be nearly unrecognizable. In terms of the power of the script, it's important to recognize that Bush's regime clearly scripted the Iraq war after the "Good War." I am interested in challenging that script—WWII—with another script: the colonial war. In this work, the document and the script are intimately connected: news articles or photo documents of events are always actually part of a script—a historical script that we have yet to acknowledge.

PR: Conflict can be narrativized to build passionate mass momentum behind a project of violence. It is also interesting to note that mass media deploy a parallel vernacular strategy to soften the blow of conflict. Take, for example, the ubiquity of terms such as friendly fire, collateral damage, surgical strike, and so on, in discussions of the current Iraq conflict. Just as the scripts can be called upon to spread mass hysteria, language—or better yet, the captioning of war—can play a huge role in softening the emotional impact of violent acts.

Parallel plays an important role in your work. In *Siege of Khartoum, 1884*, the parallel operates overtly through material collage. But a kind of conceptual collage underpins all of your work. In the three-channel video installation *Costume Party*, also shown at NBK in 2006, you combine eighteen characters, each representing a key figure from Western history: a crusader, a Victorian widow, a monk, an imperial British naval officer and so on.

The work features seven scenes. Some are more theatrical as they are sited on a stage; others take place in an apartment with both contemporary and period details and are more cinematic. In some cases, we see a wide-angle panorama, in others, self-contained vignettes. This episodic approach produces, as you say, a dotted narrative structure that re-orders time in such a way as to challenge conventional notions of progression and historicity. How does that re-ordering of narrative open a space to acknowledge the scripted-ness of history? What are the implications for our subjective imaginaries?

MJ: You are correct to point out *Costume Party*'s debt to collage, both thematically and visually. The characters resemble "scraps of myth," as one critic noted in a review of the show, and they are juxtaposed to represent a sort of panorama of Western history. The pretext is that a woman invites her



guests to a costume party to which they must come dressed from their favorite historical moment. The teleological view of history posits the Greco-Roman world of antiquity as the origin of Western civilization. It also presents (Western) history as an unbroken chain of signification guided by the golden reins of progress.

By contrast, the panorama of history presented in *Costume Party* is based on fantasies of history, conceptions and misconceptions, identifications and misidentifications. All canons include as much as they exclude.

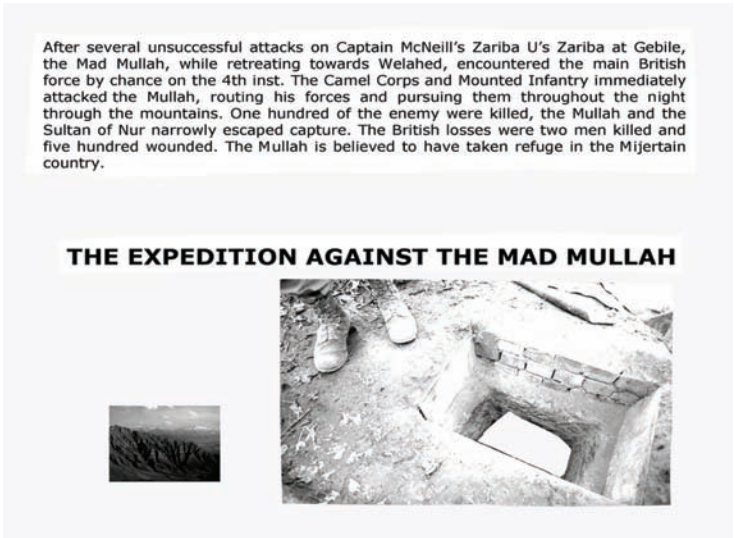
Costume Party is also greatly indebted to recent debates triggered by feminist and postcolonial theories, which have drawn attention to the gaps and inconsistencies of the grand narrative of Western history. In this context, Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, which looked at the African and Semitic influences of Ancient Greek culture, was very important for me. It presented Ancient Greece in a continuum of Mediterranean, Near Eastern, and African civilizations, rather than some fetishized originary culture that sprang up rootless on the shores of the Aegean. Expressions like "history repeats itself" sound like laws of nature—like gravity, for example. I prefer the notion of scripted-ness because it implies human agents. The script of history is a blueprint, that is, an abstraction, which nevertheless has concrete effects upon our subjective imaginaries above all.

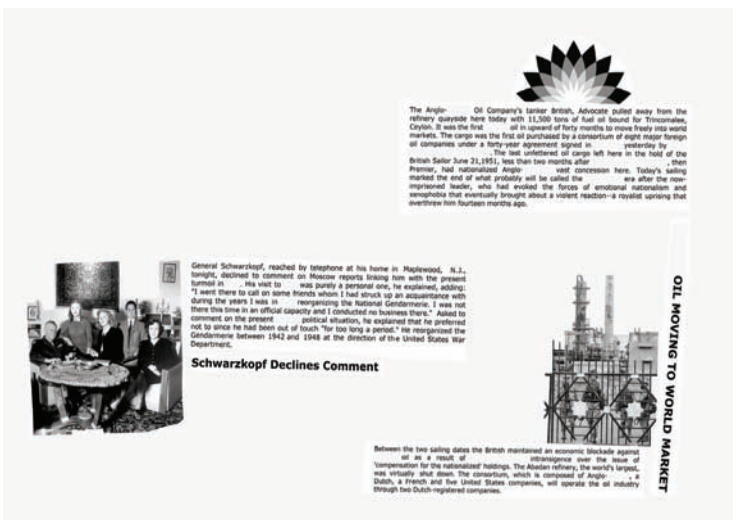
PR: In the artworld, the recent debates produced by this assault on the hegemony of Western history's master—and terribly linear—narrative also proliferated in the guise of the "documentary turn." In her essay "The Politics of Truth—Documentarism in the Art Field," Hito Steyerl describes how modes of artistic production based in the archive and the journalistic document allowed artists to get closer to reality through direct social critique.[1] In your work, however, you move *through, around* and *against* documents and social/historical facts. That's what interests me the most insofar as this process is transformative rather than representational. You often deliberately manipulate the document's truth and authority through a process of theatrical transformation in order to address the fantastical space of subjective identification.

In your latest work, *Staged Archive*, 2008, pre-WWII travelogue-style literature and missionary "mobile cinema" archival photos from Ghana meet in a dream-like film sequence. The nine-minute projection takes us through a variety of cinematic genres as well, flipping between film noir and courtroom drama—the courtroom scenes reminiscent of Fassbinder's adaptation of theater to film. How do all these somewhat divergent elements come together in a continuous, albeit oneiric, narrative structure when you research and produce the work? Could you tell me more about *how* you work in re-constructing these embedded, or unconscious blueprints of history? How do you go from the document to the staging of other narratives?

MJ: I definitely aim to work around documents, that is, to transform them and not just represent them. The documentary turn has meant that artists' approaches are now much more

OPPOSITE: stills from *Costume Party* / ABOVE: installation view of *Costume Party*, at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, May 2006 (courtesy of the artist; photo: Jens Ziehe)





research–based. But I'm not interested in reducing the artistic process to mere research. Artistic research differs from research in the social or physical sciences in that art can open up a fantastical space where imprecision, ambiguity, and contradiction—the very things that the natural or social sciences avoid—come into play.

For me, the most interesting art works are also formally innovative—even in our so-called documentary era. In other words, research must operate at the levels of both content and form. It must push the medium further. This requires an engagement with formal and aesthetic parameters, that is, research in relation to, but also independent from, content. So, I often take visual material that is usually seen in a certain way—such as archival photographs—and present it entirely differently. *Staged Archive* is a film, but it is also a collage of filmic codes and conventions from film, theater, and photo history. This brings us back to collage, Fassbinder with Ghana and missionaries with film noir, with the difference that in *Staged Archive*, the collage is made up of both materials—newspapers, photographs, and so on—and ideas—in this case, genres culled from the treasure trove of film history. As with all processes, serendipity meets conscious effort in art making. I found the photographs while researching a different project at the national archives of Ghana. That project never happened. My research also encompassed other background material, such as actual transcripts from Ghanaian court cases and the missionary theme in English literature—Somerset Maugham's short story *Rain* in particular. On a more formal level, I relied on the films of Fassbinder and the neo-noir strands of David Lynch to give the work a psychological and performative dimension.

Much of what you see in my work are the dead ends of other projects that never happen, thus I'm constantly researching all sorts of things. What makes or doesn't make it into a work depends on a host of factors, some conscious and others unconscious.

PR: Your transformative working process often calls upon theatrical devices to open up spaces of *un-common* history. I use the term "un-common" to mean that they create an antagonistic space of reflection—as you mentioned earlier, of contradictions. They are simultaneously common and not common histories of subjectification—shared and different.

You stage these *uncommon* narratives in non-naturalistic ways, most evident in your characters' overly exaggerated delivery of their lines. In *Costume Party*, for example, the host

ABOVE, LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM: *Expedition Against the Mad Mullah: The Times (UK), 1901*, from the series *Siege of Khartoum, 1884*, 2006, 27 A1 size photo-collage posters, archival inkjet on Hahnemuehle paper, 23.4 x 33.1 inches each; *The General Goes To Court, New York Times, 1990*, from the series *Siege of Khartoum, 1884*; ABOVE, RIGHT: *Freedom for the Arabs, The Baghdad of the Future: The Times (UK), 1917*, from the series *Siege of Khartoum, 1884*

greets her guests with a high-pitched "you look smashing." In *Staged Archive*, the wheelchair-bound woman dryly recounts her son's murderous activity to the judge. This recalls Brechtian strategies of estrangement (*Verfremdungseffekt*)—of emotionally distancing the audience from the characters in order to foreclose any sort of cathartic response. The interruption produced by that distance from the characters parallels this dotted narrative structure we discussed earlier. I would even suggest that there is a moment of double interruption in your filmic works. For Benjamin, interruption was a way to give form. In that sense, I see your process of working/researching as a disruption of the syntax of documents, which aims to produce potential subjectivities rather than real ones.

MJ: Stan Douglas elegantly summarized why these moments of interruption are so interesting. He notes that we are partially fascinated by the archive, by the past, because it reminds us that things could have turned out differently. Moments of interruption open the way for potential subjectivities that point to other presents that could have taken shape—that still might take shape in the near future. The desire to find hidden potentialities in the present requires the use of distancing devices such as an estranged form of acting and some other element culled from the language of theater in order to create a distance to the present. Time naturally creates a distance to the past, interruption can create a similar distance to the present.

PR: This distancing of the present sets up other historic-narrative constellations—by setting in motion events, references, and aesthetic devices as wholly pliable agents, cite-able and reformable so to speak. Your work addresses the virtuality of subjectivity—that is, its inherent capacity to be affected differently and produce affect otherwise. It heralds a becoming-subject whose destiny is always incomplete and written in chalk.

Samuel Weber concludes the interview "Stages and Plots: Theatricality After September 11, 2001," by stating that justice requires a defiance of all narratives, especially those that appear "most compelling and self-evident"—which are perhaps the most dangerous ones.[2] He uses the term "justice" to defy such binary categorizations as Good over Evil—which echoes your earlier point on the justification of the Iraq War through the script of the "Good War." His tone has a sense of urgency as he advocates for the dislocation and disruption of self-contained narrative structures by making them permeable and over-full. There is a similar sense of urgency in your speculative practice, that is, in your blueprinting of historicity and the malleable becoming-subject it outlines through aesthetic experience in a non-reductive, non-didactic way.

MJ: The "most compelling and self-evident" narratives are certainly the ones that need to be disrupted and called into question most vocally. Contingent narratives are more interesting to me because they actualize the need to make contingent and partial sense of the world.

NOTES

1. Hito Steyerl, "The Politics of Truth—Documentarism in the Art Field," in *The Need to Document*, Bettina Steinbrügge and Sabine Schaschl-Cooper, eds, Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2005.
2. Samuel Weber, "Stages and Plots: Theatricality After September 11, 2001," in *Theatricality as Medium*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2004, 336-364.

Patricia Reed, an artist, curator, and critical writer based in Hanover/Berlin, operates under the name of Aesthetic Management to describe her varied practice and research.

ABOVE: installation view of *Siege of Khartoum, 1884*, 2006, at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, May 2006 (courtesy of the artist; photo: Jens Ziehe)