
THE BOX

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Julia Meltzer and David Thorne (with Rami Farah) *not a matter of if but when,* **2006**



Image courtesy of Julia Meltzer and David Thorne

Los Angeles–based artists Julia Meltzer and David Thorne worked together from 1999 to 2008 under the name of the Speculative Archive. One of the works they produced under that creative identity was *not a matter of if but when: brief records of a time when expectations were repeatedly raised and lowered and people grew exhausted from never knowing if the moment was at hand or still to come*.

The “time” of the title is 2005, when Meltzer and Thorne were in Damascus, Syria, where Meltzer had received a Fulbright grant to teach and study. They traveled to Syria in 2000 as tourists, but the five intervening years produced a new portfolio of instabilities. While they were in Damascus in 2005, Lebanon’s former prime minister, Rafik Hariri, was assassinated in Beirut, forcing a withdrawal of the Syrian military from Lebanon for the first time in three decades and further targeting Syria (meanwhile receiving over a million refugees from war-torn Iraq) as a suspected player within the Bush doctrine’s preemptive “Axis of Evil.” Meltzer and Thorne set out to investigate what it would feel like to be a Syrian living daily within a country beset by pressures and fears unimaginable to anyone not living under such circumstances—which the filmmakers characterized as, “widespread anxiety and anticipation around the potential for imminent

change, regime change, internal reform, internal collapse, civil war, and the increased power of fundamentalist Islam.”

They worked with Syrian artist Rami Farah, a young performer with a remarkably expressive face, and a temperament inclined to regard the world as a tragic-comic fact. In their collaboration with the extravagantly gifted Farah, the artists provided him with verbal suggestions—words, questions, phrases—to which he would respond via improvisation, bypassing sectarianism in favor of fragmented monologues, heartbreaking in the emotional terrain they traverse. Spoken in Arabic with English subtitles (there’s a certain amount of untranslatable word-play and double-meaning set loose in Farah’s speech), and presented visually by the filmmakers with elegant restraint, Farah’s dexterous address is to a fluctuating “you,” sometimes cast as a foe, sometimes as a possible friend living under happier circumstances; supplication abides by defiance, assertion followed by retraction. “Peace. I don’t want it. Fairness. Why? Victory? Makes me sick! Love? What a pity....”

Farah’s monologue is a virtuosic composition for a face and two hands, the latter raised to gesture no less than to rain down kisses bitter and sweet upon anyone wandering into the range of his voice. He sends the viewer politely off: “We will never forget you... we will not do the same to you.” He speaks his unspeakable loneliness, but socially: “I won’t make you talk to yourself like a lunatic... You ask who is talking, and then you answer, ‘It is me.’... I don’t want to tell you who I am.”

Disraeli once said that finality is not the language of politics, and to that extent Farah’s speech to the viewer remains pre-political: he can only speak from within the lower depths of what’s yet to be determined, a report on Syrian realpolitik from the fogged over viewing position of its center. In that, he evokes, for me, no one so much as a man sprung from the imagination of Samuel Beckett, a tragic actor trapped within the absurd, a dignified presence stoically signaling his existence to us from behind a wall, glimpsed from the far side through a clarifying lens.

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video, 32 mins.

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