

## EXPANDED DOCUMENTARY<sup>1</sup>

### ON “CHERRY BLOSSOMS”, KUTLUG ATAMAN AND EIJA-LIISA AHTILA

An van. Dienderen

#### Abstract

In this chapter I first compare the notion of the viewer as I encountered her and him in my work, both in the multimedia project *Scattering of the Fragile Cherry Blossoms*, when she takes up a participatory position, as in my single-screen documentaries where she is a prefigured viewer. Afterwards, I will broaden the scope by discussing the position of the viewer in what we could call instances of expanded documentary. In the tradition of expanded cinema (Youngblood 1970) documentary filmmakers are currently augmenting the medial possibilities beyond the classical single screen tradition. Their presentation mode shifts from a cinema space to an exhibition space. Especially a ‘new’ position of the viewer seems to be explored through such expanded instances. Kutlug Ataman and Eija-Liisa Ahtila are two important artists who investigate the implications of expanded documentaries for the spectator in different ways. By looking into the position of the viewer as exemplified in their work, I wish to explore the more performative and embodied aspects of a visual arts spectatorship. As Mieke Bal argues, the ‘primary task of exhibitions is to encourage visitors to stop, suspend action, let affect invade us and then quietly in temporary respite, think’ (Bal 2011). In embodied spectatorship, meaning is being created in a physical sense (in time and in space) so as to escape ‘the urgent passage of linear time, or what Barthes referred to as the ‘continuous voracity’ of the filmic image’ (Catherine Fowler 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> The term was the title of a research project supervised by Robrecht Vanderbeeken and myself, from 2008 till 2012 initiated at KASK / School of Arts Ghent and generously funded by the University College Ghent Research Fund. The collaborating artists were Sarah Vanagt, Jasmina Fekovic and Laurent Van Lancker.

## **Scattering of the Fragile Cherry Blossoms**

Two years ago, I was in Tokyo in a teenage fashion area called Harajuku. Youngsters were parading in challenging outfits: mixtures of Britpunk with samurai clothing and disco high heels. I entered a store, which seemed to be a perfect replica of a San Francisco hippy shop, with rainbow colors, peace signs and Navajo art. Going through the incense varieties I suddenly bumped into a wardrobe filled with SS uniforms, covered with Nazi-symbols, gas helmets and swastika signs. In our Western experience the two sides of the room represent two opposite ideologies, but not for these youngsters. What to think of these contrasts within one shop? Is this an act of resistance? If so: how is the Japanese youngster's resistance different from what I know of so-called 'Western' subcultures? A longer list of similar questions crossed my mind, crystallizing into two critical questions: How can I, as an anthropologist and visual artist, take a look at my own process of looking at these paradoxical ideological constellations? And how can I, through a work of art, simultaneously question the viewer's perspective as well?

These questions form the basis of a multimedia project that I have called *Scattering of the fragile cherry blossoms* in which I create pictures, films and an installation that explore the notions of exoticism, resistance and decay in Japanese subculture. During a short-term residence in Tokyo, a Japanese anthropologist assisted me in these explorations. We did "fieldwork", as anthropologists would label it: we spent several days talking to teenagers, being there, hanging around, and asked them for feedback. During the interviews I asked the Japanese youngsters what their favorite piece of clothing was, and ask them to point at it (Figure 1). I took pictures of these short moments of participation. It was a way of asking to share their personal thoughts with me. The process generated a feedback loop that short-circuited preconceived notions about Japanese culture and identities. I hoped that the pictures thus conceived break away from stereotypical or exoticizing images that are circulating in the 'West' about Japanese teenagers.



Figure 1. *Scattering of the fragile cherry blossoms*, Front Postcard, An van. Dienderen

A first public presentation of this project took place in 2009 when TimeFestival Ghent asked me to contribute to their artists' book, in which I created book pages with the pictures I had taken. A couple of weeks later I was invited for an arts festival in Haarlem entitled: 'When Guests Become Host'. Five art projects departed from the position of the author as a guest or a stranger to the city. I distributed the postcards based on the teenagers' pictures of Harajuku. By means of a questionnaire (in English and Japanese) on the back of the postcards, I asked for feedback from the people of Haarlem. In a small box, people could dispose their cards in bars, at hairdressers, a comic store and a sushi&tea shop. We asked the managers of these places to invite their customers to fill in the cards. The cards were deliberately sort of fragile and 'out of place' in the midst of all the commercial flyers that are being distributed. The box was also very small and feeble: it would fall apart if the manager would not take care of it. In this sense it was a caretaking participation that I asked from the shop managers. The boxes were picked up a couple of weeks later. The postcards were presented at Nieuwe Vide, an arts center in Haarlem together with the T:me book and images of the teenagers in Harajuku (figure 4).

<p>何故、彼女は首にも黒いメイクをしているのでしょうか？ 選択してください。 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 死の美学  <input type="checkbox"/> ファッション中毒  <input type="checkbox"/> 黒は色彩ではないから  <input type="checkbox"/> 誰でも失敗する運命があるから  <input type="checkbox"/> 抵抗意識  <input type="checkbox"/> 東京、原宿への道  <input type="checkbox"/> 幸せへの道  <input type="checkbox"/> 思春期  <input type="checkbox"/> はかないものに特有の美しさ  <input type="checkbox"/> その他（具体的に記入してください）：</p> <p>-----          -----          -----          -----</p> <p>貴重なご意見ありがとうございます！          いただいたご意見は、アン・バンディーンデレンの          アート・プロジェクト・“はかなく散る桜”          で使用させていただきます。          カードは箱に入れてください。</p>	<p>Why does she colour her neck? Please indicate <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> esthetics of death  <input type="checkbox"/> fashion addiction  <input type="checkbox"/> black is no colour  <input type="checkbox"/> because each individual is doomed to fail  <input type="checkbox"/> resistance  <input type="checkbox"/> the way to Harajuku, Tokyo  <input type="checkbox"/> the way to happiness  <input type="checkbox"/> puberty  <input type="checkbox"/> beauty inherent in evanescence  <input type="checkbox"/> other, please specify :</p> <p>-----          -----          -----          -----</p> <p>Your thoughts are appreciated!          They help the art project:          "Scattering of the fragile cherry blossoms"          by An van, Dienderen          Please drop your card in the box.</p>
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詳しくはこちらをご覧ください/ More info: <http://scattering.kaskprojecten.be/>

Figure 3. *Scattering of the fragile cherry blossoms*, Back Postcard, An van. Dienderen

I received 120 postcards. A selection of quotes reads as follows: *‘Nothing about this nonsense: organize yourself, love all and smash down capitalism’ – ‘Religious feelings’ – ‘It looks like the head is flying in the air, which is awesome’ – ‘Deury Liselotte, Puttestraat 32, 3080 Tervuren’ – (Translated from JAPANESE) ‘Impermanence is represented by the colors that appear during a firework’ – ‘She is cosplaying Ruhi from the J-rock band the gazette’ – ‘Her stripes are from the singer from the gazette who draws this because he is uncertain of his neckline’.* Most of the people indicated that the girl colors her neck out of ‘resistance’; followed by ‘esthetics of death’, and ‘Japanese fascination with disaster’.

These replies are in congruence with the western anthropological literature that I had found on the subject. As a visual artist, however, it was not my intention of performing a reliable qualitative research. On the contrary, I wanted to play with the form of the questionnaire so as to draw the attention to a fascinating practice of self-fashioning in Japanese subculture, where Japanese girls choose clothing in order to create ambivalent identities. In the book *Japan's Changing Generations* (2004) the authors claim that there is no obvious anti-establishment movement among young Japanese, and that there is no organized attempt to create a better society: these young people seem to protest without actually taking any concrete actions for a better life involved. The Japanese sociologist Satoshi Kotani observes that Japanese young people are in fact in a miserable situation. There is no guarantee of a decent job, even with a university degree.



There is no prospect for Japan getting out of its long economic stagnation since the 90s (Kotani 2004). Kotani confirms that under such circumstances it would be logical that young people would revolt. But in Japan they don't. Young people don't even stage demonstrations to protest their miserable prospects. They are strikingly 'passive'. Their 'passive' resistance, however, consists of publicly demonstrating their inconvenient personalities and the ambivalent imagoes they produce. This 'passive' resistance has a collective nature: of the 26.4 million people in Japan between 15 and 34 years old, there is a significant group of young people who represent a collective refusal to follow the establishment of their parents (Gordon Mathews and Bruce White 2004, 8). I argue that these ambivalent imagoes call for a specific spectatorship of negotiation, a topic that I will elaborate further on in this text.



Figure 4. Exhibition view *Scattering of the fragile cherry blossoms.*, Nieuwe Vide, Haarlem. Photo by Danielle Van Zuylen.

### **From prefigured to negotiating viewer in expanded documentaries**

The public intervention with the postcards in *Scattering of the fragile cherry blossoms* in Haarlem, Rotterdam and Antwerp provided further insight of how to evoke – as a visual artist – an ambivalent position for the spectator in order to call attention for the mechanism of how ‘we’ look at ‘them’, and henceforth to perform the process of looking in my subsequent art projects. The ongoing project of *Scattering of the fragile cherry blossoms* aims to foreground the process of looking and the production of spectatorship. During this postcard project it is the viewer who co-creates and co-produces the work. The viewer becomes the co-author of the work of art. This is quite a different position than the one that I envisaged when making single screen documentaries. For those films I regarded the ‘viewer’ as prefigured within the interaction between ‘the other’, ‘the subject’ and ‘me, the author’. The ‘viewer’ is active during the interaction between the ‘author’ and the ‘other’ in the recording and editing aspects; yet not in a ‘real’ way; s/he is prefigured in the minds not only of the ‘author’ but also of the ‘other’ and hence projected onto preconceived notions of interaction between ‘author’ and ‘viewer’ (van. Dienderen 2008). The relation between ‘author’ and ‘other’ is connected to a ‘viewer’ via the promise of a relationship with a wider audience, with spectators that can be situated locally and globally. The ‘viewer’ is most often unknown; s/he interacts not only with the ‘author’ through the documentary, but also with a mediated reconstruction of the ‘other’.

In her book *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, the Dutch-Japanese cultural scientist Ien Ang argues that “the television audience is not the innocent reflection of a given reality but is rather a “discursive construct” providing specific advantages to the institutions that define it” (Ang 1991: 35). Ang located the audience within the production process (Dornfeld 1998: 13). As such, the ‘viewer’ is prefigured within the interaction between ‘other’ and ‘author’. This relation is therefore intertwined with specific intentions, wishes, and desires, goals and purposes, which can be transformed in a specific body language and bodily interaction. Moreover, this physical enactment might be influenced by what people see on television, what stars do, what professors do, what terrorists do. Or quite the opposite, interviewees might need to perform as ‘authentic’, or as ‘real’ as possible, thereby obliged to ‘forget’ the crew and the technical apparatus. Or as ethnographic filmmaker and writer David MacDougall observes: “The filmmaker’s acts of looking are encoded in the film in much the same way as the subject’s physical presence. This is fundamentally different from a written work, which is a textual reflection upon prior experience” (MacDougall 1998: 261).

The American documentary filmmaker and scholar Barry Dornfeld has presented a pioneering study in which he presented a full-scale ethnography of a PBS documentary production for which he worked both as a researcher for the series and as an anthropologist. In his research he calls for

a radical rethinking of the divide between production and reception. To invite the spectator to co-create and co-produce *Scattering of the fragile cherry blossoms* aligns with his perspective. Dornfeld's particular perspective on the production unit resulted in a seven-hour educational documentary series on childhood for American public television. It reveals the complex negotiations through which a documentary is constructed. According to media anthropologist Faye Ginsburg, Dornfeld "demonstrates Ang's argument (1991, 1996) that in mass media, audiences not only are empirically "out there" but also are prefigured in nearly every dimension of the production process, as public television workers bring certain assumptions about the particular class fraction of "the American public" that they imagine (and hope) will watch their work" (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002: 17-18).

The rethinking of the separation between production and reception by Dornfeld is inspired by Bourdieu's notion of the field of cultural production as "the system of objective relations between these agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated," and as "the locus of the accumulated social energy which the agents and institutions help to reproduce through the struggles in which they try to appropriate it and into which they put what they have acquired from it in previous struggles" (Bourdieu 1986: 138). Bourdieu's work on cultural production has built on the metaphor of "the field of production". According to Dornfeld, seeing production as a "cultural field" challenges theoretical limitations present in other approaches to production – from either the ideal-viewer driven perspectives in some film and television theory, the organization-dominated work in the sociology of production or the production-of-culture approach, and from the ideology-driven theories of materialistic/critical approaches. By re-articulating production as a cultural field Dornfeld attempts to locate simultaneously and in relation to each other the perspectives and interests of producers, production staff, PBS administrators, viewers, and the myriad institutions with which they interact (Dornfeld 1998: Footnote 11 chapter one p. 198).

One way out of the production-as-culture approach has been suggested by visual anthropologist Eric Michaels in a study of the use of television in Aboriginal communities. He proposes "a model of the intrinsic structures of the TV medium as a negotiation of texts between producers, technology and audiences, a model which intends to identify some significant features of the social organization of meanings involved in this signifying activity" (Michaels 1991: 305). In Michaels' sense, television production is a form of cultural mediation based on negotiations between powerful social agents that shape texts, presented in the contexts of a hybrid public culture (Dornfeld 1998: 19). As Ginsburg remarks: "ethnographies of cultural production open up the "massness" of media to interrogation. They reveal how structures of power and notions of audience shape the actions of professionals as they traffic in the representations of culture"

(Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002: 18). My ongoing project of presenting postcards with questionnaires precisely aimed at negotiating texts by the different spectators in a hybrid (cultural and public) field and not within the limit(ation)s of a closed cinema space.

The project of *Scattering of the fragile Cherry Blossoms* for that matter investigates the position of the viewer in a way similar to instances of expanded documentaries. In the tradition of expanded cinema (Youngblood 1970) documentary filmmakers are augmenting the medial possibilities beyond the classical single screen tradition, especially expanding the notion of their relation to viewers. Kutlug Ataman and Eija-Liisa Ahtila are two important artists who explore these dimensions in different ways. In the remainder of this chapter, I investigate the more performative and embodied aspects of spectatorship in their work, which is part of a visual arts context, before turning back to 'my' perspective on the spectator in the ongoing project of *Scattering of the fragile Cherry Blossoms*.

Although the term 'expanded cinema' was coined by the American experimental filmmaker Stan Vanderbeek, it has its origins in early twentieth century avant-garde filmmaking: 'Expanded Cinema identifies a film and video practice which activates the live context of watching, transforming cinema's historical and cultural "architectures of reception" into sites of cinematic experience that are heterogeneous, performative and non-determined', according to a recent symposium at the Tate Gallery<sup>2</sup>. Duncan White (2011) states that expanded cinema is characterized by a live and participatory form, often presented or accompanied by the filmmaker, so that a tension can be experienced between what is planned and what is contingent, indeterminacy and chance, with an emphasis on the ephemeral and the incomplete. White claims that the viewer's response is an integral part of the structure of the work, so that the work is situated in-between image production and reception, and henceforth to critique the model of production and consumption of mainstream cinema (White 2011: 229).

There is a long tradition of such artists like Ken Jacobs, Peter Kubelka, Stan Brackhage and Jonas Mekas who consider the viewer's response as an integral part of their work of art. Their form of cinema (and video) experiments with a variety of formats and performances not only to evoke a radically different experience on behalf of the spectator, but also to alter the relation between life and art so as to heighten a new form of consciousness. As Youngblood put it: 'When we say expanded cinema we actually mean expanded consciousness. Expanded cinema does not mean computer films, video phosphors, atomic light, or spherical projections. Expanded cinema isn't a movie at all: like life it's a process of becoming, man's ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes' (Youngblood 1970: 41). Steven McIntyre

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<sup>2</sup> Expanded Cinema, Activating the Space of Reception, 17,18 and 19 April 2009.  
<http://www.studycollection.co.uk/expanded/index.html>

relays the phenomena of expanded cinema also to the cinema-body performances by Carolee Schneeman, the presence of Fluxus and Andy Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*<sup>3</sup>: 'the term "expanded cinema" seems to me not easily distinguishable from the wider social project of the '60s counterculture to radically alter individual and social consciousness' (McIntyre 2008)<sup>4</sup>.

White sees a connection between the (avant-garde) film tradition with contemporary new media and video artists in that there is 'an emphasis on the ephemeral in contrast to permanence and durability; an unfixing of the image; a sense of incompleteness and an engagement with the uncertain locatedness associated with moving-image reproduction or what has come to be known as "cinema"' (White 2011: 231). Film scholar Laura Marks adds that since some decades now 'the translation of embodied experience into disembodied experience has sped up' (Marks 2011: 285). It appears that instances of expanded cinema explore how embodied experience both of the maker and the viewer can be created. White contends: 'Whether sophisticated or basic in approach, it is the complex relationships of technology, how they impact directly on the structures of consciousness and its environments that are explored in the alternating forms of expanded cinema' (White 2011).

I would like to add another characteristic of expanded documentary. In the tradition of expanded cinematic projects, formal strategies are explicitly explored to enhance the documentary gesture of the filmmaker. I consider Linda Williams' call for negotiating truth claims and strategies in this respect the hallmark of the contemporary expanded documentary tradition: 'Truth is not "guaranteed" and cannot be transparently reflected by a mirror with a memory; yet some kinds of partial and contingent truths are nevertheless the always receding goal of the documentary tradition. Instead of careening between idealistic faith in documentary truth and cynical recourse to fiction, we do better to define documentary not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths' (Williams 2005, 65). I furthermore would like to stress the importance of reflecting on the process of production when relating to the (contemporary expanded) documentary tradition. In my opinion, it is the (ethically charged) relation between filmmaker and subject through a mediated process (with its historical particularities and political-ideological connotations) which is in touch with the viewer, which can ultimately help to distinguish between the non-fiction and fiction tradition (van. Dienderen 2008). When relating to a 'real' person, a documentary filmmaker necessarily enters the ethical domain because the image created of this person will have an impact on the 'real' life of this

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<sup>3</sup> *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* was a series of multimedia events organized by Andy Warhol (1966 and 1967) with musical performances by The Velvet underground and Nico, screenings of Warhol's films and performances by members of the factory.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of possible influences and relations between Expanded cinema and other phenomena see the Expanded Cinema Map [www.upv.es/.../expanded\\_cinema\\_map\\_es.pdf](http://www.upv.es/.../expanded_cinema_map_es.pdf)

person. The expectations of the audience are constructed in such a way that viewers relate a documentary image to his personal life, yet a fiction image to the actor's professional life. I contend by referring to Bruzzi's approach as she refers to the process of the (documentary) encounter as well: 'Documentaries are inevitably the result of the intrusion of the filmmaker onto the situation begin filmed, they are performative because they acknowledge the construction and artificiality of even the non-fiction film and propose, as the underpinning truth, the truth that emerges through the encounter between filmmakers, subjects and spectators' (Bruzzi 2006, 11). The 'expanded version' of this perspective of documentary is not only pointing at the performativity of the encounter but also of the viewer, who is a participant in a spatial or interactive presentation. To explore the concept of expanded documentary I would now like to compare the position of the viewer and the use of formal (documentary) strategies in the work of Kutlug Ataman and Eija-Liisa Ahtila, before returning to my project *Scattering of the fragile Cherry Blossoms*.

### **Ataman's spatial reflection on the documentary gesture**

Born in Istanbul, trained as a filmmaker at UCLA, Kutlug Ataman combines directing (award winning) fiction films (presented at a variety of international film festivals) and installations created for museums and art galleries. In what follows I concentrate on the latter. Working with real people as his subjects, whom he often knew long before filming, Ataman uses his camera 'as a mediator (to negotiate) between artist, subject and audience' (Kent 2005: 8). The subjects of his installations all occupy the more marginal or peripheral spaces of middle class society, by whom Ataman elaborates a collective auto-portrait 'each piece reflecting one aspect of himself and his experiences as an isolated teenager and young gay man growing up in Turkey' (ibid). *Semiha b. unplugged* (1997) is his first installation, about an opera diva whose star has since time faded, in *Women wear wigs* (1999) four women relate about their particular experience with wigs, wearing it for different reasons, in *Never My Soul* (2001) a transvestite singer talks about her life of political exile in Switzerland, *1+1=2* (2002) is about a Turkish woman living on the Greek side of Cyprus, in the diptych *Seasons of Veronica Read* (2002) and *Stefan's Room* (2007) Ataman confronts a portrait of an overly-enthusiastic breeder of flowers in her London flat with a very dedicated collector of tropical moths in his Berlin apartment. These installations have been presented in various configurations of screens, so that the viewer both narratively and corporally can engage with Ataman's subjects. In these installations his subjects tell their stories, sometimes hours in a row, a reason why his work has also been described as 'conversational art' (Kent 2005: 10 and Volk 2005: 87).

A key concern in these portraits works is indeed the duration and the open-endedness, as there is no real beginning or end, reflecting the 'sense of incompleteness and an engagement with the uncertain locatedness' that White ascribed to expanded cinema (2011: 231). Or, as Kent states: 'Expressed in 'long streams of communication'<sup>5</sup> and through the nuances of movement, gestures, hair and costume, the individual narratives in Ataman's film works suggest a much wider commentary on the onion-like layers of reality and fiction that anchor our sense of self in a rapidly changing world' (ibid). This aspect has been explored in a magnificent way in what, according to me, is Ataman's masterpiece *Küba* (2004, figure 5). *Küba* is the (unofficial) name of a neighborhood in the outskirts of Istanbul. Ataman has interviewed forty members of this community and presents each interview on a separate monitor, installed in front of an individual seat creating a 40-monitor installation. The viewer walks through these small islands of seating experiences, and by coincidence or intuitive affinity chooses which subject's story to listen to. Because of the individual seating experience and the community-gathering position of seats both the individual and the collective identity of *Kuban* is explored: 'Identities are assumed and worn externally as they are internalized through language' (Kent ibid).

Again, the issue of duration is central: viewers create their own micro-narratives, while moving in and out of these works, like Ataman and his camera have done when recording. Ataman deliberately offers almost no structural editing into the narratives of his subjects so that they can speak in their own space and timing. According to art critic Nash the audience is therefore 'overwhelmed by interview monologues, presented not in series (as in a single screen film or video) but in parallel, simultaneously. Almost aggressively, the issue of choice is returned to the audience' (Nash 2005: 44). Ataman also offers an incomplete account of *Küba* so that these images serve as 'research documents' as he puts it or 'sketches, for which there is no one definitive conclusion' (Kent 2005: 8). This aspect is strengthened by the spatial configuration, which 'physically reflects the disjointed nature of the stories that are told through them' (Kent: 12).

In this way Ataman presents a meta-reflection on the history of the documentary film format and the construction of its codes. American film scholar Mark Nash argues: 'His art videos represent a subversion of the video documentary format, not only through the mode of installation (...) but also through choice of subject matter and length' (42). He continues: 'this freedom of choice within an apparently collective viewing situation is part of a shift towards privatization and individualization of experiences such as cinema, which were formerly collective, and rearticulating them in terms of art with a different story of spectatorship (Nash: 46). Indeed, Ataman offers a classical documentary content, that is the lives of inhabitants of a marginalized community, in a visual arts context so that we have the possibility to experience these lives in a

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<sup>5</sup> Here Kent refers to the exhibition/publication title *Kutlug Ataman: Long streams*, Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, Exhibition catalogue, 2003.

more embodied way. The spectator has the opportunity to walk through the composition of seats, to select and hear different voices, to move in and out a cacophony of individual voices. Rather by chance or attraction the visitor decides to sit down, altering our intimacy to the subjects. Throughout this bodily transformation induced by the spatial configuration of the seats, we are also reminded of the choice of the artist not to enforce a time-restricted format, often associated with TV documentaries. This spatial configuration refers to the living room and this prompts the historically formalized connotations of the documentary formatting and its aesthetical codes of representation. By using modest equipment allowing a more intimate one-an-one interview situation, so as to reflect on the historical role and function of film, the viewer 'looks in from the outside, forming a part and also distanced from the local culture... Employing a range of techniques including montage and a characteristic circular structure in which linear time loses its meaning, his film works suggest that objective reality is a problematic construct' (Kent: 9-10). As such, through bodily attraction, the viewer experiences not only a familiarity with the subjects as lived through their relation with Ataman, but s/he also spatially experiences the transformation of the documentary format, by which the installation presents a meta-reflection on both the documentary as a genre or format and its ambiguous relation to a (constructed) reality.



Figure 5. Kutlug Ataman *Küba* 2004 Installation view Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery New York / Photo Christopher Bliss



### **Ahtila's vertical investigation of (documentary) narration**

If one could side Ataman in the tradition with Ken Jacobs and Jonas Mekas in which formal strategies are used to (de)construct themes such as identity, presence, location and belonging, then Catherine Fowler asks us to understand the work by the Finish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila referring to the iconic pioneer of American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren (Fowler 2004). Ahtila lives and works in Helsinki, and studied painting and film in California and London. Her background in painting is important as, in the words of the artist, 'making films and installations became a matter of identifying the links between images, sounds, rhythms, light, characters, and words, and using them to approach and construct the story' (Iles 2003: 58). Most of Ahtila's projects exist both as films and as installations. According to Birnbaum 'they borrow from established forms such as documentary or music video, but they do it in a way that dodges traditional classification'. And he continues enthusiastically: 'These works give us a sense of what Gilles Deleuze may have had in mind when he discussed the potential of film not just to represent a subject's position, but to create entirely new forms of life' (1998).

The subject of Ahtila's work relates on the one hand to the human psychic condition, how complex interrelations shape our world and on the other hand to processes of perception and cinematographic codes. Her films are characterized by her direct address of psychic conditions of watching, such as anxiety, loneliness, separation, illness or anguish (*Me/We*; *Okay*; *Gray* (1993), *If 6 Was 9* (1995, 10 mins) *Today* (1996/97), *Consolation Service* (1999), *Tuli – The Wind* (2002), *Love is a Treasure* (2002, 55 mins). In an interview with Chrissie Iles, Ahtila points out that although the stories she presents seem to reflect on her personal life, they are not autobiographical; as she conceives of the personal as a structure, in which the focus is on the process of filmmaking and the collaboration of the crew (Iles 2003: 63). The reason why people often conceive of her work as autobiographical is because Ahtila investigates much time in research and interviews, which form the basis of her scripts. Often actresses work with transcripts of such interviews. The result of such a documentary approach is that the work immerses the viewer into the world of the characters. Frohne contends: 'Works such as those by Tony Oursler, Monika Oechsler, or Eija-Liisa Ahtila capture the audience in a psychologically loaded narrative structure and fictitious dialogue sequences, which force the audience to oscillate between the role of the eyewitness and the potential fellow actor. This kind of reception aesthetic, which Michael Fried has criticized for being a 'fictitious viewing position' pre-calculated and inserted in its entirety by the artist, is based upon a revealing psychology of reception. Its performative disposition can be compared to early documentary videos by Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, or Joan Jonas, in the sense that it transposes the action (a depiction of an all-encompassing experience) through the medially over-determined physical presence of the (virtual) protagonist onto the (real) viewer, thus giving the impression of a real, live situation

through physical, psychic, and institutional frameworks' (Frohne 2004). Tarja Laine affirms that 'the spectator, too, gets caught between screens, which causes confusion about where and how his or her mental state (the inside) meets the outside world' (2006).

Fowler adopts Maya Deren's conception of 'vertical investigation' to analyze Ahtila's work: 'although a 'story' seems to have been progressing, we are suddenly halted by the realization that time and space are no longer continuous and instead there is a repetition with a difference of something experienced earlier, or an edit to suggest a slippage in time or space'. (Fowler 2004: 328). At such moments the double exposure of the linear cinematic experience is foregrounded and the spectator is forced to confront the passing of time within which she/he is caught. These films are successful in bearing out Deren's notion of 'a vertical investigation', a time of meanwhile, which asks us to stay with, and think around, an event. However the amount of time we can stay is inevitably limited by the imperative of the cinema film to keep moving from A to B' (Fowler 2004: 328). This 'meanwhile' is especially interested when exploring how films treat the semiotics of the gallery space in which 'the material properties of film and the mechanics of cinema are exposed here in spatial terms' (Gale 2002 as quoted by Fowler 2004: 332). Ahtila's work plays out the spatiality in terms of experimentation with storytelling and the emotive state of both characters and viewers. Instead of pointing to a continuous timeline, to search for what happens next or after, Ahtila through a complex editing and a spatial configuration using multiple screens, invites us to compare psychic states, and narratives moments, referring to collage, simultaneity, comparison and contrasts: 'through placing images side-by-side the notion of time moving not necessarily on, but back and around can be fully explored' (Fowler 2004: 338). The result is a 'loss of balance' on behalf of the spectator, as 'the psychological character of the space itself' is intensified (Frohne 2004). Following Frohne, this 'gives viewers the feeling that they are like real conversation partners in a therapeutic experiment. Her video characters are like chimeras playing very diverse roles; they embody the abysses and border zones of the human soul, and at the same time, reflect the actual observers' ambivalent roles between fiction and reality' (Frohne 2004).

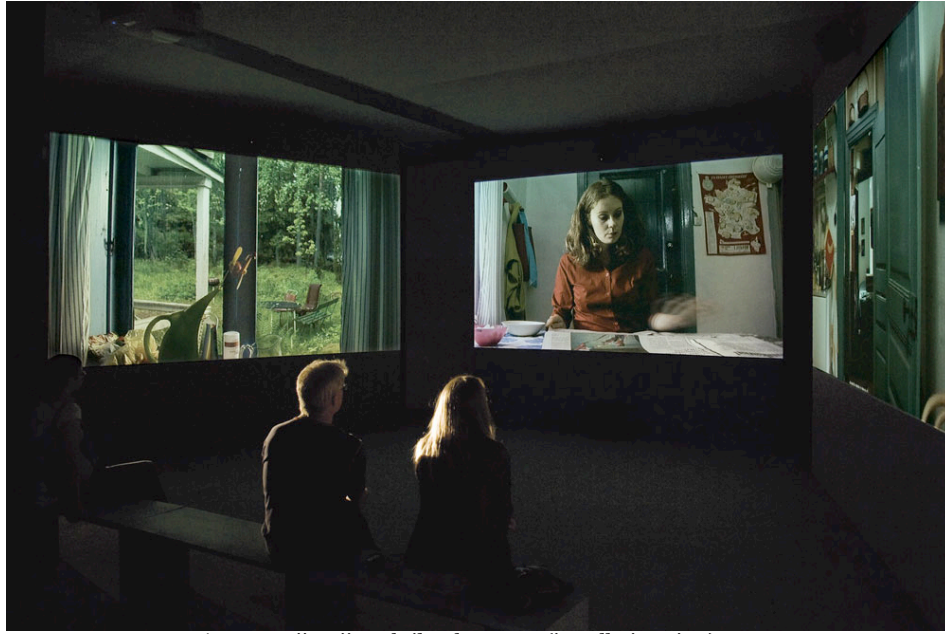


Figure 6. Eija-Liisa Ahtila *The House* (installation view) 2002 .

The analysis of Ataman's and Ahtila's work reveal an interesting perspective on the position of the viewer in so-called expanded documentaries. By relaying a documentary approach and the relationship between maker and subject, the formal strategies of the visual arts context create a more embodied experience in which time and space are reshuffled in relation to a classical cinema configuration. As Mieke Bal argues, the 'primary task of exhibitions is to encourage visitors to stop, suspend action, let affect invade us and then quietly in temporary respite, think' (Bal 2011: 91). As such, meaning is being made in a physical sense (in time and in space) so as to escape 'the urgent passage of linear time, or what Barthes referred to as the 'continuous voracity' of the filmic image' (Fowler 2004: 338). Like the editors of this volume, I interpret spectating as 'a notion that embraces all different kind of corporeal capacities and practices such as reflecting, sitting, walking, clapping, talking, running, watching, hearing, etc'. In doing so, I aim to 'overcome any possible dichotomy of "body/senses" and "mind/reflection" for both are intertwined'.

The ongoing project *Scattering of the fragile cherry blossoms* is inspired by the above mentioned expanded documentaries. My view on spectatorship as negotiation re-articulates the prefigured spectator in a relationship of negotiation with different agents, such as the Japanese subculture, . Additionally, the formal strategies of the visual arts add a layer of embodied engagement and vertical investigation to the viewing process. Considering production as a hybrid cultural field, the viewer's response on the questionnaire is an integral part of the structure of the work. I invite the spectator to co-create and co-produce several co-existing, often disjointed, micro-narratives. In doing so, I deliberately blur the distinction between production and reception. Additionally, I expand the format of the single screen documentaries, emphasizing the ephemeral in contrast to permanence and durability. Mapping thus the expanded consciousness of several agents, I call

attention to the mechanism of how ‘we’ Western people look at ‘them’ Japanese youngsters and call attention for the inherent ambivalence of identities, particularly with regard to Japanese subculture. Tickling their individual and social consciousness about attributing fixed identities to the Japanese ‘other’, I enter the ethical domain. The unfixing of rigid imagoes coincides with a sense of imbalance on behalf of the spectator. The unfixing of rigid imagoes of Japanese identities as constructed by the ‘West’ inaugurates for that matter a sense of incompleteness and open-endedness on behalf of the spectator, and an (embodied) engagement with the uncertain locatedness associated with moving-image reproduction or what has come to be known as “cinema” (White 2011: 231). Foregrounding my co-presence as an agent in the cultural field, I also draw attention to the process of artistic creation. Adding a layer of ‘vertical investigation’ to *Scattering of the fragile cherry blossoms*, I demand that spectator to circle around the process of attributing straightforward meaning and superficial labels to ‘other’ people. In bearing out the (embodied) engagement with the diverse roles the Japanese youngsters communicate, the viewer experiences the ambivalent nature of all identities, pointing at our own need as Westerners to have clear oppositional parameters to think by. As such *Scattering of the fragile cherry blossoms* offers ‘not an essence of truth but a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths’ (Williams 2005, 65).

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