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**This publication was published at the occasion of *for now*, Herman Asselberghs' solo exhibition at De Garage, Mechelen, Belgium, 3 December 2016 – 12 February 2017. The show included 2 new film works by the artist, *for now* and *watching words becoming a film (TXT.FLM #3)*, as well as his previous screen works *this was before* (2014) and *a.m./p.m.* (2004).**

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This publication's opening quote is from *Short Shadows (II)* by Walter Benjamin (translated by Rodney Livingstone), in: Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 2 1931-1934*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1999, pp. 700-701.



You want a film about him, but not really. Before him perhaps? And after him, for sure. But not *about* him. About what inspires him. About what he produces. About what was before him and what will be after him, but never about him. Never about the moment in which he comes together with himself. A film about him that is not about him. **For him**

A film about nothing then? About the before and the after? Something about life and death? About the transition from life to death and (more difficult) from death to life. About the life that follows after death; *das Nachleben, la survivance*, the afterlife. About the life that continues on through the generations. About what happens between yourself and the world.

A poetic film perhaps, with words that don't have purpose. The words have no end, just like that which he is working towards – like a writer who is not a writer, a publisher who is not a publisher, a thinker who is not an academic but an amateur, a handyman who would sooner work with friends than with professionals. He uses the work of others in the same way that he hopes others will go on to use his work.

The reader as an extension of the author (that too is part of life after the work).

Here, this is for you. Not about you, not after you, but *for* you. You like that word play – fooling about with pieces of words and with time. The title of your first film, *a.m./p.m.*, was translated in Dutch as *voor en na*: 'before and after'. *After Empire*, the title of one of your previous film, toys with 'afterwards' and 'according to'. Place (before) becomes time (after) becomes inspiration (according). Once again, the title of your most recent **Here**

film is not easy to translate: *For Now*. For now? For time as space? For the temporary, the fleeting? A moment in between other moments?

In Dutch it becomes *Tot hier* ('Up to here'). Time becomes place. Now becomes the world. Here becomes now.

Here and elsewhere. You head for Palestine: Birzeit, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron. You travel on to the end of the Mediterranean, to the other side of the ocean: Portbou, New York. Places become clearer from a distance. From there, you can understand, grasp, see.

### There

Long before there was an Israel, something prevented Walter Benjamin from going to Palestine. Close friends, Jews like himself, travelled there. Jewish organizations invited him. But there was always something in the way – a text that needed writing, a book that had to be read, a friend to see, a trip he had to make. But the thing that most held him back was the coupling of a Jewish identity to a Jewish state; a Jewish nation.

### Stand-in

You make your first film in English – the language for everyone and for no-one. The woman speaking your words uses the first person. She regularly returns in later works. In the meantime, you also make films in Dutch. In these, the man who speaks in the first person will – unlike the woman – also *appear* in the image. In *Speech Act*, you present him as a middle-aged man, like yourself. He teaches, just like you. He talks about film, just like you. He becomes your stand-in, your alter ego.

I think of Beckett, who sometimes uses his own language, sometimes the language of someone else. You write and film yourself through the other.

In French journalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, we find the *feuilleton* – short pieces, quick observations on small things. The *feuilleton* is a distant predecessor of the leisure sections of today's newspapers. In the 1920s, newspapers in Germany's Weimar Republic refined the genre. There, these short articles were printed at the bottom of the page, in the margins of the big news stories, separated by a thick black line. *Unter dem Strich*: the news under the line. *Der kleine Form*, or that which stands alongside the news: cultural criticism, instalments from longer literary texts, gossip, fashion, announcements, aphorisms.

Walter Benjamin's *One Way Street* is an example of *der kleine Form*: a collection of short texts written for newspapers, together ultimately constituting a book. It is a book in which the fragment is more important than the finished work. Improvisation counts more than skill, and the bits and pieces are more satisfying than the overall craftsmanship.

*Der kleine Form* depends on the anticipation of a sequel. It finds its apex in television, the medium of your – of *our* – generation. At that time, it was perfectly normal to wait for a day, a week, even a year, for the next installment. In the digital age, everything comes all at once – even television. You know what it is for something to continuously build on what precedes it and what will come after it.

The *feuilleton* is the format for *After Empire*, which you called Episode 1 and ended with the promise '...to be continued'. *For Now*, your new film, is what takes place between those two episodes – between the before and the after. In fact, we could read *After Empire* as a sequel to *a.m./p.m.*, with its open ending and the same first – person female voice.

*Watching words becoming a film*: how those small bits and pieces come together to make up a story that is always temporary, *for now*, never complete.

Each of these films can be read as an aphorism: a divergent idea which merges into the totality of a larger story. It comes from the way you work, a method that finds inspiration in films (or fragments of films: *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*, by Jean-Luc Godard, for *a.m./p.m.*; or *Avatar*, by James Cameron, for *Speech Act*), in books (Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri's *Empire* trilogy for *After Empire*; and all the books that you used and abused for *a.m./p.m.*), and other works (*Questions*, the performance by Eitan Efrat and Sirah Foighel Bruttman for *This Was Before*; or *Mondophrenetic*<sup>™</sup>, the work that you made together with Els Opsomer and Rony Vissers, for *a.m./p.m.*). It is inherent to the way you work, with friends, at home or in the city.

**Constellation** All the stories that I forgot. The fragments come back of their own accord: a place, a moment, a situation, a gesture, a face, a feeling, a scent... Their constellation, however, is something I must put back together myself, time and time again. Sometimes it creates itself, a fragment amongst the other fragments – understanding the world as a feeling, a moment, an ecstasy. Religion, drugs, meditation, and studying can all help.

That configuration of the here and now, of the today and the back then, is what Walter Benjamin calls 'a dialectic image'. This is part of his mystical concept of history in which every 'now' is synchronized with another moment in time, just as every past can be read at any given moment. This is 'the now of recognizability'. For Benjamin, such a moment reveals the 'dialectic at a standstill' – just for one moment before it moves on.

Traveling is waiting with the other. It is being together on the metro, on trains, and on airplanes. I share time. Waiting becomes expectation. In my thoughts, I am always somewhere else. I move myself elsewhere with my telephone. I travel into my newspaper, into my book. I kill time.

Waiting confronts me with banality. It places me in the everyday. I oscillate between here and somewhere else. Time becomes place. The silence of my waiting room and of my destination opens itself like a new space, gives me something in which to move about. It makes waiting bearable. I create a different space: that of myself.

Anyone who has sat through the screening of a silent film knows the feeling. The awkwardness is part of the pleasure. What is private is in what you share.

In Ramallah we wait for ten days. We travel every day in our heads (and the heads of the Palestinians).

The repetition, the ritual, the tiny differences. Landscapes return in Tel Aviv and Portbou, actions repeat themselves in time, the hand signals of *Occupy* are picked up by the *Indignados*, by *Hart boven Hard*, during *Nuit Debout*.

1974, 16mm, b/w & color, sound, 37 min. Johan van der Keuken is two times eighteen. Is that a repetition too? Just as in the song by Dalida, the filmmaker conducts a dialogue with someone half his age. He remembers back to 18 years before, when he used to take photographs with his grandfather. He looks back, at his earlier films, made with his friends, Ben, Remco, Lucebert. He looks back at himself: the photographs from that time of

**Waiting**

**The Repetition**

**Filmmaker's holiday**

his life and of his children. His holiday takes him to a French village where the mayor's wife takes care of her husband, who suffers from Parkinson's. It is a holiday in history. The postman talks about the war on television. There is a story about collaboration clinging to the woman next door. The newspaper reports the events of the day: the collapse of the Greek dictatorship, a year after that of Portugal.

His film is about then and now, about photography and film. It is about Roland Barthes' *ça a été*, and film as the only medium that can record the transition of life into death – according to André Bazin. It is about memory and what will be.

In 1974, you and me were twelve years old. Today, we are four and a half times twelve, and we look back at his film about what was then now.

**The  
Unexpected**

Always adapt your image to reality. Beer during Ramadan in Ramallah. Africans in the streets of Tel Aviv.

**Pilgrimage for  
intellectuals**

Portbou looks like a pilgrimage site for intellectuals. Rushes from your film make me think of Sirah and Eitan tracing the trajectories of tourists in Portbou with fragments from YouTube – from their leaving the train station to their arrival at the monument. This is also how the Israeli artist Dani Karavan imagines the monument – as a route, a passage leading to that impressive view of the sea. *Passages* is also the name that Karavan gives his work (and instead of calling it a *monument*, he refers to it as a *gesture* for Walter Benjamin, at the place where he stepped out of life in September 1940).

When Michael Taussig writes about his visit to Portbou, he uses the term 'pilgrimage', placing it in the cult of Benjamin's grave. Here, death takes on a greater meaning than life. Or, in Benjaminian terms, it is death that gives authority to the storyteller. This is his story. Taussig writes about the discomfort of the experience – too sorrowful, too sentimental, too definitive – at the same time as he writes about Benjamin's failed passage across the border, about the beauty of Portbou, and about the horror of history.

Benjamin's death was almost perfectly bad timing. Had he waited one more day he would have had the papers he required. He was buried under a false name – Benjamin Walter – in a Catholic rather than a Jewish cemetery. Five years later (when the concession on his grave expired), his body was moved to an anonymous, common grave. Today there is one gravestone bearing Walter Benjamin's name, but the grave's contents are in doubt. Even with his own death, Benjamin writes a history of the losers, not the winners. It is as he had always wanted it. He died as he had lived.

I think back to that uncomfortable feeling in Ramallah, 14 years ago. We weren't tourists but part of a cultural exchange. We had no clear objective but we were curious. We wanted to see what others had seen before us. Of course, predictably, we discovered something entirely different: both more and less. More everyday life and less spectacle. More of the history of the losers and less of that of the winners. That feeling of discomfort only goes away when you do something with it. You make a book, an exhibition, or a film, and in this way try to share what you have or haven't seen: the image of history that disappears as soon as it appears.

**Pixels** A selfie in Portbou. A tropical paradise in Times Square. Where does that irresistible attraction for the electronic image come from?

**Loss of place** Television means looking from a distance. It brings things closer. After the Paris attacks in November 2015, there was a lockdown in Brussels. The city is deserted. I stay indoors and watch soldiers passing through my street on television. Minutes after the March 2016 attacks in Zaventem and the Maalbeek metro station (just three stations away) Martina sends an e-mail from Italy to ask if everything is okay. She places me at the centre of the events. I find myself in front of the TV and search online to see what is really happening.

In Walter Benjamin's description of artistic aura as 'a unique manifestation of distance, however close it may be', Ariella Azoulay (in *Death's Showcase: The Power of Image in Contemporary Democracy*) already sees an eerily accurate description of television. For Azoulay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* – one of the best-known and most quoted essays in the literature on art since the 1930s – is not about the loss of aura but the loss of place.

**An image without people** In a time when history seems to be moving from catastrophe to catastrophe, people are increasingly disappearing from view. Images of war show places, ruins, and landscapes after the battle.

In the first photographs of the holy land, there are more ruins than people. Elias Sanbar presents them in *Les Palestiniens. La photographie d'une terre et de son peuple de 1839 à nos jours*. The few people we do see are posed, strategically placed, and (consequently) mostly iconic

figures. Or they are moving, shadowy, or vague. This is an effect of the long exposure times of early 19<sup>th</sup> Century photography, and effect that helps establish a persistent image of a land without people (for a people without a land).

Today, it seems as if everything is immediately visible via satellite. But even in these images, we see hardly any people. Nearly 200 years after its invention, photography has established new technical restrictions upon itself. For reasons of privacy, the resolution of satellite images is limited to 50 cm per pixel – a restriction that accords perfectly with strategic choices that dehumanize the battlefield. The only visible damage is damage to infrastructure.

Though there are no humans to be seen in current satellite images, the evidence of man is everywhere. In the Anthropocene Age, human intervention has the power of volcanoes, earthquakes, and shifting tectonic plates. Satellite images show the results of this development, from the extraction of raw materials to globalized trade. Here, Ecologists see warnings of climate change, of a world that is heading straight for environmental catastrophe. It is an image of a future in which, effectively, no human will be seen. Only the effects of their former presence will be visible.

In Israel and the occupied territories, satellite images are restricted to a full square meter per pixel.

I have experienced it so often, yet it remains a strange experience: waking up in a different bed. That fleeting thought of 'where am I?' The faint panic and the reassurance that follows.

**A different bed**

**I dream** In 1961, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes: 'The native is a being hemmed in; apartheid is simply one form of the division into compartments of the colonial world. The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one stride, or that I am followed by a flood of motorcars which never catch up with me. During the period of colonization, the native never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning.'

Do you remember Emily? We exhibited her work in Brussels after our meeting in Ramallah. In *From Texas with Love*, a car rides through a wide landscape, undisturbed. Emily asked different Palestinians what music they would play during an endless drive like this. The audience can select from the examples she compiled on the radio. You drive and you drive and then you keep on driving, as in a dream.

**Cold War** That sensation of a threat that is not (yet) there. The world feels it every day. That feeling of superiority that makes and breaks a society is still a reality. The inability to see that people themselves create the fertile ground for the violence against which they want to protect themselves. Nothing has changed.

**Experiencing distance** Aura: a unique manifestation of distance, however close it may be.

Pasolini's dream of filming his gospel in the Holy Land

vanishes the minute he arrives there. Depardon flies to New York to film the city. From far away, it seemed such a good idea. Once there, he is unable to capture it in an image. He looks around, watches the people, and then returns back to where he came from. Finally, what we have is two beautiful films about the unachievable: *Location Hunting in Palestine (1965)* and *New York, N.Y (1986)*.

In Ramallah, we are welcomed with open arms. When we leave, they call after us: 'Do come back; we are only an airplane ticket away.' But the book and the exhibition we made about our stay there require distance. We have to go home. The results don't come until two years later. It is a work about time: *Time Suspended*.

Jean-Luc Godard took five years to make his film about the Palestinians. It became a film about place: *Here and elsewhere*.

The director of the museum in Norway thought your installation version of *a.m/p.m.* in our exhibition *Time Suspended* was so appropriate for its title: that suspended screen and the suspension of time.

**Time,  
suspended**

So much has changed since 2002. Then, Palestinians took secret routes from Ramallah to Bethlehem to avoid the checkpoints. Today, there is a wall that makes any uncontrolled movement impossible. Checkpoints used to be mud puddles in which you had to change taxis. Today they are organized like airport terminals. Yassir Arafat's compound was then in ruins. Today, it is where his mausoleum is located. In 2002, one learned to make a clear distinction between Palestinian refugee camps in the valley and the Jewish settlements up on the hills. Today, Palestinians build their own settlements in the hills around the city.

**Time does  
not stand  
still**

## Searching for a landscape

In *Location Hunting in Palestine*, Pasolini searches for locations for a film about the gospel according to Matthew. In 1963, when the filmmaker travelled to Palestine, it was divided into Israeli and Jordanian sections. The border separating the two halves of the country ran right through Jerusalem.

Pasolini found a country that was undermining itself (the division ensured as much). The politics of settlements as well as modernization in the Israeli section caused the history of the Holy Land to disappear behind colonies that seemed like Swiss villages, or else behind residential towers like those in every neo-capitalist city. The other side of the division looked too old and too decayed to be used for the film. Those ruins were still good enough for the Palestinian sub-proletariat. Even the faces of the impoverished Palestinians were too pure and too beautiful to be assailed by the words of the gospel. The only time when the biblical landscape actually revealed itself for Pasolini was in the desert, en route to the Dead Sea. But the filmmaker could find landscapes just as good as these in southern Italy, in Bari, Calabria, or Sicily. It would be there that he would finally film his *Gospel According to St. Matthew*.

With *a.m./p.m.*, after your stay in Palestine, you made a film with images of generic high-rise residential flats that could have been anywhere in the world. And also in *For Now*, the interchangeability of the images brings confusion: Tel Aviv reminds us of the news footage of refugees on the city squares of Athens, and images of Taybeh in the West Bank shifts seamlessly into the pastoral landscape around Portbou, at the other end of the Mediterranean Sea.

Pasolini's problem was that the Palestinian landscape did not fit his imagination of the biblical land. He

sought a reversal of the ruin, which could bring him to the unblemished land where Jesus was born.

The question, of course, is why Pasolini wanted to make a film about the gospel at all. Just as with Benjamin, we have the unusual mix of theology and politics: religious Marxism. Religion is that which unites, and politics is that which divides. This is why politics has so much difficulty with ecological questions. Ecology begins with the landscape.

In *Before and After: Documenting the Architecture of Disaster*, by Eyal and Ines Weizman, I find a fragment from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse V* in which he reverses the bombing of Dresden, making it into a moment of surreal beauty:

'The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes ... When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again.'

Behind the wall of the Mahmoud Darwish mausoleum, the old hills around Ramallah disappear beneath the new Palestinian apartment buildings. In the gardens

**Ruins in reverse**

**Compensation**

around the mausoleum, there are plants from all over Palestine.

### Lost nation

Long ago, in the nineties, you and Dieter made *Lost Nation*, a library with books from countries that no longer exist. At the time, you called yourselves *Gojim* 5.I. *Gojim* is the plural of *goj*, Hebrew for 'the people', but which is today primarily used in the sense of being non-Jewish. Either you are Jewish or you belong to the people. According to Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin in *Exil et souveraineté*, the wandering life, without a people, without a nation, is inherent to being Jewish. With the loss of the Temple, the Jews were also evicted from the Holy Land and they have been living ever since in diaspora, in exile.

Strangely, I don't recall any books about Israel in your library. If living in exile is inherent to being Jewish, then it is difficult to understand that Zionism, in contrast to that singular characteristic, supports an exclusively Jewish nation. It is an impossible task, right from its beginning, Israel was a lost nation, doomed to disappear. A temporary country, eternally now, always just for the time being. It is a country that does everything in its power for a future that lies in the past.

It is here that one finds the tension between the religion of being Jewish and the politics of the nation. More than striving for a country, Zionism strives for its own history. It is a journey in time, more than in space. For all of those centuries, Jews lived outside of history – in an ahistoric vacuum, from an ahistorical period in which time has remained suspended.

In order to re-create its own history, Zionism must first sweep away another history: that of the Palestinians.

History becomes state, time becomes place. The only solution for this conflict is the removal of the dichotomies between Jews and Arabs, between religious and secular. Only in this way can Israel succeed in suspending the colonial relationships from within Palestine.

Place de la République, summer 2016. The cleaning crew is busy eradicating graffiti on pedestals and under their feet. They are the last remains of the last rebellion. Soon it will all once again be a perfectly proper urban square. It is the end of the *Nuit Debout*. What now?

### What now?

The question remains hanging, just as it had after all those other moments of spontaneous rebellion. What now? From the beginning, it was the central issue for the *Nuit Debout* protesters that time had to be suspended, with the introduction and establishment of a new calendar. In your film, there are all those squares and – strangely enough – parks: Zucotti Park, Maximilian Park, Parck Farm. The Occupy movement has departed, the refugees have been disposed of, but the community (whatever that might mean) of Parck Farm still exists.

Should we look for the signs of rebellion there? In the everyday and not the spectacular? Is that why you also want images of Central Park, of Liberty Plaza, or of Place de la Liberté in your film? The places where nothing happens, where everything happens?

Do you know when I was first in Maximilian Park? Long before the refugees huddled there, I went there after school to kill some time with your son. To look at the donkey and dig for worms in the compost heap to take back to my own compost bin at home.

**A stunning  
image**

As I write, Samah sends me a recording of this story: ‘With major historical events, it seems always like the first question: where were you? Do you remember where you were on that particular day? For September 11th, I was walking up the stairs to my parents’ duplex house in Amman. My sister was watching the news. She’s like, ‘Did you hear?’ I hadn’t heard yet, and when I saw the news, the images were going over and over, the two planes crashing into the World Trade Centre. And all I could think of was, ‘Wow, that is a stunning image!’ It was beautiful, poetic, better than movies. So creative. Really, almost, in a strange way, enjoying the brilliance of it, the magnificence of it, the largeness, you know, if you are going to think big, the sky is the limit. I didn’t entertain the news for very long. I went in to take a shower. And as I was shampooing my hair, it slowly sank in that we’re fucked. We are absolutely, as a human race, but this particular region, we’re doomed.’

Every history lets itself be reread at a different point in time.

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**A Dutch version of his text is available at [www.amarona.be/p/friends/for\\_now.htm](http://www.amarona.be/p/friends/for_now.htm)**