

Kodwo Eshun
**A Question They
Never Stop
Asking**

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e-flux journal #59 — november 2014 Kodwo Eshun
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Watching the artificial waves breaking on the mechanical shore in *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1989) prompted a question: Why did I, together with Anjalika Sagar, under the name of The Otolith Group, have to travel to Cinema Empire Sofil in Achrafieh, Beirut, in order to see nine Farocki films for the first time?¹ To answer such a question in March 2006 meant confronting the implications of Farocki's absence from Britain's film culture. The experience of being enlightened – and no other word can convey the impact of watching the ways in which *The Creators of Shopping Worlds* (2001) studies architects as they discuss images that track the eye movements of shoppers – provoked a corresponding revelation of the inconsequence of so much artistic culture within the UK. So many critically lauded moving images, I began to realize, actually functioned to shield spectators from having to come to terms with the ways in which moving images operated as interlocking components of the military, entertainment, sports, finance, and corporate complex within Europe, America, and beyond. These moving images, it seemed to me, should be challenged, if not rejected outright, for their inability to produce the kind of perceptual training provided by works such as *War at a Distance* (2003) or *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992). Inside that cinema in Achrafieh, the dynamic tension inside and between images was playing itself out. The mystifying force of images that were mobilizing outside Cinema Empire Sofil, outside of Beirut, beyond the edges of Lebanon, which would emerge in the July War, were revealed by the clarifying powers of montage inside that cinema in Beirut.

Those three evenings spent watching Farocki films with Anjalika Sagar and the writer Emily Dische-Becker acted as a kind of extended primal scene. They precipitated a process of disidentification from a tacit consensus within the UK. They incubated a desire to position The Otolith Group against the values championed by people that Farocki once characterized as “those polite British assholes.” To align yourself with his works did not mean imitating his artistic methods. It meant affiliating yourself with all those that considered themselves to be friends of Farocki, whoever they might be, wherever they might live. These friendships were nurtured in an almost clandestine fashion until 2009, when Farocki's London allies broke cover to mount three exhibitions intended to win contemporary generations over to the joys of instrumentalism and didacticism.² Perhaps many others were drawing the same conclusions. Six years on, I can discern Farockian thinking in the demonstrative, detailed, comparative projects that confront the multi-scalar histories of the present.³ And yet



Harun Farocki, *The Words of The Chairman*, 1969. Film still.

none of these projects have travelled to the UK. Which suggests that Farockian projects continue to affront deeply held presuppositions about the nature and purpose of moving images. What, then, is the nature of this affront, and how can it be characterized? In Farocki's works, aesthetic thinking takes on a very specific form, which Nicole Brenez describes as an

intensive and meditated form of encounter ... a face-to-face encounter between an existing image and a figurative project dedicated to observing it – in other words, a study of the image by means of the image itself.⁴

The outcome of this encounter between an “existing image and a figurative project” tends towards the instructional, the instrumental, the demonstrative, the didactic, the comparative, and the mimetic. These qualities were, and are, bad objects within a moving-image culture that still aspires towards cinema as an expanded form of painting, diary, dream, fantasy, sculpture.

To take Farocki's preference for the instructional seriously is to embark, joyously, upon an internal exile from much of what understands itself as experimental culture. And now that Farocki is gone, it becomes clear to me that his films, videos, television programs, essays, texts, exhibitions, and interviews provide nothing less than an alternative value system that enables you to encounter the mutation of images in the present. This face-to-face encounter with the present entails a practice of psychic secession from much of what is recognized as art through metabolizing Farocki's methods, attitudes, stances, positions, sensibilities, sensations, intensities, preferences, and negations. This process cannot be illustrated; it must be lived. Instead, the metamorphosis undergone by Farocki's ideas can be glimpsed by studying certain cinematic gestures in his films. These gestures appear as involuntary memories, unbidden and uninvited. They are expressions orphaned from narratives and disarticulated from their montage. Memory condenses and compresses a Farocki film into a single scene that takes on a mimetic character. As I write these words, I catch myself emulating a character's expression with my hands, mouthing her words. A character's gestures take momentary control of my hands and move them into a position that I then recall. They arrange my mouth in a certain shape. Goethe Institute, London, February 19, 2009. I am the front end of an image of a ponytailed, horse-faced white American male demonstrator of an animation therapy platform in *Serious Games III: Immersion* (2009), talking to an unseen audience, running

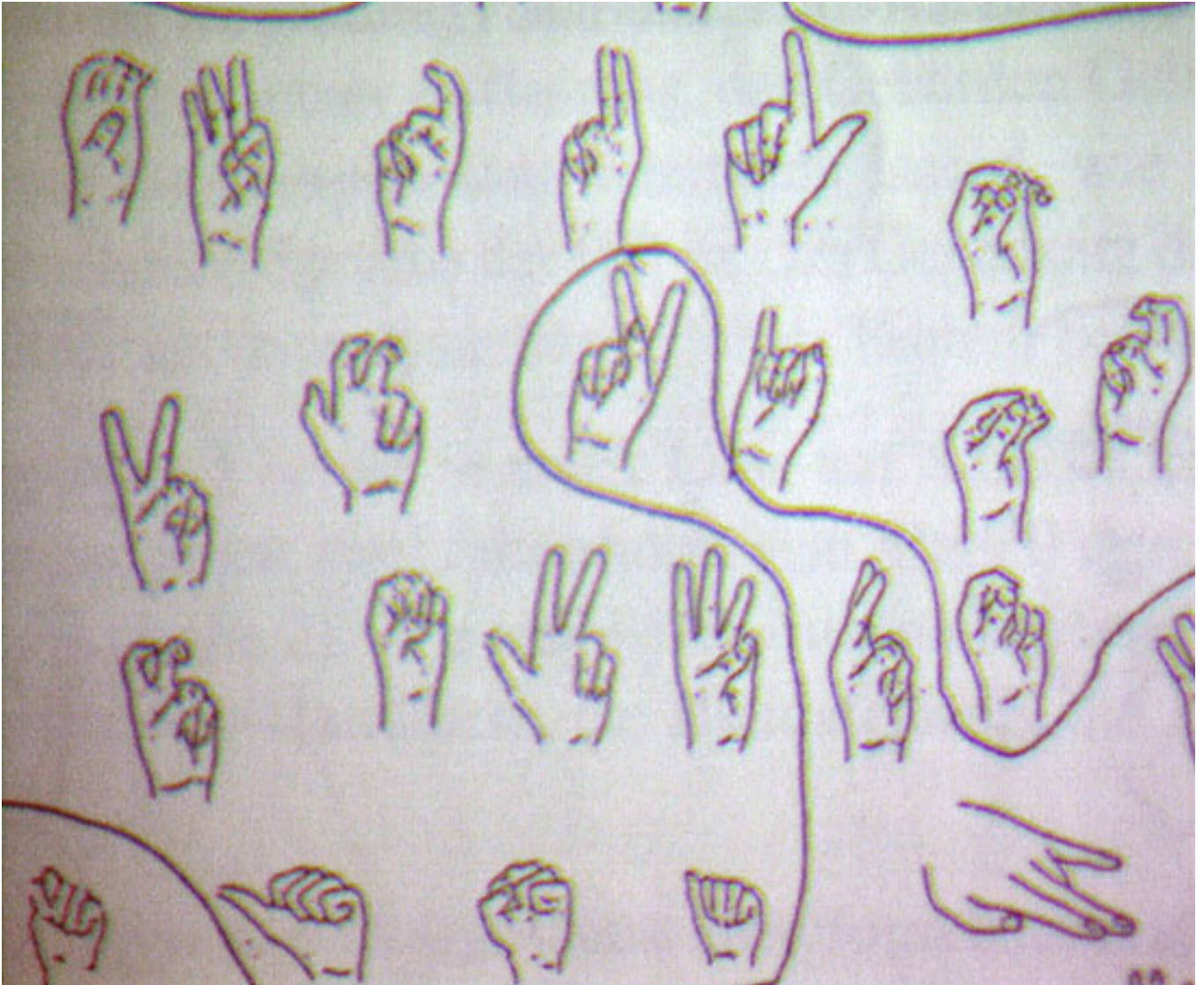
through the menu of audio options for rocket shells, tilting his head, waiting for the delayed audio of a detonation, obediently lifting the right side of his mouth as it finally, satisfyingly explodes on impact. In my mind's eye, I see Farocki's face, that peculiar complexion that eluded racial identification, in *Interface* (1996). I see him imitating the right-hand-on-right-hip of a Greek statue, the video camera framing his standing position in a perspective whose awkwardness recalls the cramped, cornered perspective of Gustav Leonhardt seated at his harpsichord in *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968).

March 2008. I watch Zurich bystanders during a grey afternoon waiting for their bus, ignoring the giant screen of *Transmission* (2007) that depicts people placing their hands in the devils footprint. 2009. November. The red room at Tate Modern. An incongruous, uncredited Jaco Pastorius-esque fretless bass that plays faintly, intermittently, insistently as the images assemble one abstract diagram after another in *As You See* (1986). Hamburger Bahnhof, 2014. August. In *Serious Games I: Watson is Down* (2010), a sullen expression of an American soldier, facing his monitor at frame left, his shoulders slumped as he sits back in his chair upon hearing a soldier announce unexpectedly, inexpressively to the other soldiers practicing steering tanks: “Watson is down.” Raven Row. November 2009. Ground floor. I watch crowds watching Marilyn Monroe scowl at her loutish boyfriend when he says to her, “You'll spread,” as the couple, dressed in denim shirts, sleeves rolled, and jeans, walks away, the camera following them, picking them out from the dispersed crowd of factory walkers in *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades* (2006). September 2014. *Parallel II* (2014). In my laptop screen, on my cheap IKEA table, an animated man is standing; in an uncouth gesture, he reaches down to adjust the position of his testicles in the crotch of his baggy khaki trousers. From an unseen monitor in an exhibition space that I fail to recognize, I hear Cynthia Beate's serene voice analyzing missiles travelling in opposing directions in the garish promotional video integrated into *Eye/Machine* (2000). Lichtenberg. December 2008. Hearing the massed monolith march of a flat drum, a single repeating guitar, a violin bowing and droning, repeating and building, implacably. Faust and Tony Conrad playing on the soundtrack for *The Taste of Life* (1979). Lichtenberg. January 2009. *The Words of The Chairman* (1967) plays on Farocki and Ehmann's television set. A paper plane splashes the black-and-white blood of tomato soup on a face drawn on a paper bag that lurches back as if shot by a bullet fired by

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Harun Farocki, *The Expression of Hands*, 1997. Film still.

montage.

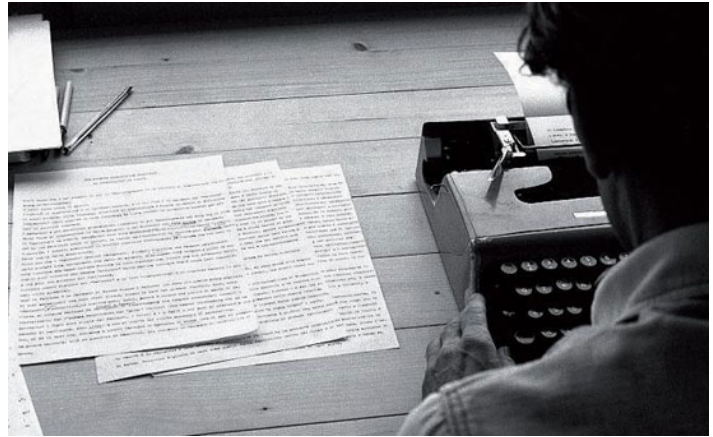
Within this itinerary of medial-memory implants can be glimpsed moments from other works that were neither directed nor written by Farocki but which he admired and recommended, which he learnt from and thought with. This kind of text or film or record triggered a process from which a concept might emerge that would in turn become operative as a method. To look at any of these works is to go under the hood of Farocki's thinking in order to approach the operating system whose commitments he never ceased to upgrade. 2009. June. I pull the heavy volume *Pier Paolo Pasolini: corpi e luoghi* (1981), clad in its black slipcase, from the lowest shelf in Farocki and Ehmann's front room. I sit on the sofa and open its pages at random. Farocki appears, gently takes the tome from my hands, and begins to point to a sequence of eight images in the book, arranged in two columns of four.

Page 129. A man holds a mirror to his tongue in *Pigsty* (1969). A student bites his thumb in *Notes towards an African Oresteia* (1970). A woman gnaws her nail in *Theorem* (1968). A man covers his mouth with all his fingers in a gesture of apology. *Pigsty*. A man presses his finger against his lip in *Accatone* (1961). A monk presses his finger to his mouth in an impudent gesture of silence in *Hawks and Sparrows* (1966). A man covers his mouth in surprise in *The Decameron* (1971). Another man instructs an offscreen presence to be silent in *The Decameron*. Page 155. Two images at top left. One depicts a man with badly misshapen teeth from *The Gospel According to Saint Mathew* (1964). The second is a man with decayed front teeth from *La Ricotta* (1963). The third fills the lower third of the page. A man thumbs back the upper lip of a young woman to reveal her single decaying upper tooth in *Salo* (1975).⁵ These stills represent a fraction of the 1,800 frame stills which constitute the *Pasolini Antropologo* of *Pier Paolo Pasolini: corpi e luoghi*.

In their catalogue essay for their "Cinema like never before" exhibition, Farocki and Ehmann described the *Pasolini Antropologo* as "containing photograms ... organized according to theme" – quoting visual motifs that recur throughout Pasolini's films, such as "unburied bodies" and "cannibalism, victim's remains." They conclude that *Pier Paolo Pasolini: corpi e luoghi* relies on "the successively juxtaposed images to form relations, on the images to comment on images."⁶ In other words, it studies the image by means of the image itself. The immanent logic of the *Pasolini Antropologo* seemed to have overcome the "peculiar unquotability" of writing on film that faced film theorists like Raymond Bellour from the 1970s

onwards.⁷ It seemed to speak about film using the same techniques as film itself. It looks forward to the cross-section epic of *A Day in the Life of A Consumer* (1993) or the "elementary motif analysis" of *The Expression of Hands* (1997). It is a *summa logica* of Farockian soft montage.

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Pier Paolo Pasolini writing his unfinished novel *Petrolio* (Oil).

It prompts many questions. What happens when you place images side by side? Face to face? When you put them to work? What capacities for comparison or commentary emerge in the movement from one image to another and back again? If images comment on images, then what kind of commentary do they produce? What are they saying? How do they explain themselves? What are they arguing about? What do they demonstrate? What do they imitate? When do they copy each other? Who do they inhabit? What do they emulate? Who do they rival? Where are they going? What do they possess? Who do they possess?⁸

Images reveal images to be an industrialization of thought that needs to be analyzed on its own terms, which are not human. From 1967 onwards, Farocki pioneered the historical unfolding of images as an "external objectification of thought."⁹ He invents face-to-face encounters between existing images and figurative projects dedicated to their observation. And now it is March 25, 2006. 10 p.m. I walk up the street, away from Cinema Empire Sofil. I can see Farocki's lean silhouette ahead. A cigarette between his fingers, on the way towards his lips. He hadn't stayed to watch his films. He has seen them all before. Four months later, the July War begins between the Israeli Defense Force and Hezbollah forces. The mystifying powers of images and the clarifying powers of montage continually reverse into each other. Farocki's images never stop working. What is an image capable of? It is a question they never stop asking.

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Kodwo Eshun was born and lives and works in London. He studied English Literature at University College, Oxford University, and teaches Aural and Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London. His published work includes critical analysis, catalogue essays, and magazine articles. His art projects include film and video compositions that coalesce around the notions of the audiovisual archive and archaeologies of futurity. He regularly presents papers at international conferences and symposia and has chaired discussions and moderated dialogues and debates. Author of *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (Quartet, 1998), he is a cofounder of the artists' collective The Otolith Group and a regular contributor to the magazines *Frieze*, *The Wire*, and *Sight & Sound*.

“Travelling is Impossible: Harun, Kodwo, and I,” films by Harun Farocki and the Black Audio Film Collective, presented by Kodwo Eshun. Organized by the Lebanese Association for the Plastic Arts, Ashkal Alwan at Cinema Empire Sofil, Beirut, March 23–26, 2006. Preoccupied as I was with presenting three films by Black Audio Film Collective, I was unprepared for the impact of watching double and triple bills of Farocki films over two consecutive nights followed by a quadruple bill over 6 hours and 30 minutes. 2 These exhibitions were Harun Farocki, “Three Early Films,” curated by Bart van der Heide, Antje Ehmman, and myself at Cubitt Gallery from January 17 to February 22, 2009; Harun Farocki, “Against What? Against Whom?,” curated by Alex Sainsbury at Raven Row from November 2009 to February 7, 2010; and Harun Farocki, “22 Films 1968–2009,” curated by Stuart Comer, Antje Ehmman, and The Otolith Group at Tate Modern from November 13 to December 6, 2009. Two weeks into “22 Films,” Comer showed me an email he received from a well-known structuralist filmmaker dismissing Farocki’s films as mere “television” and cautioning him to “remember who his friends were” and “which side he was on.” 3 I discern Farockian thinking in projects and exhibitions such as “Anthropocene Observatory – The Dark Abyss of Time” by Armin Linke, John Palmesino, and Ann-Sofi Rönnskog and Anselm Franke, 2013–ongoing at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin; “Travelling Communiqué” at the Museum of Yugoslav History, Belgrade, conceived and curated by Armin Linke, Doreen Mende, and Milica Tomic, 2014; “Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth” at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, curated by Anselm Franke and Eyal Weizman, 2014; “1979: A Monument to Radical Instants” at La Virreina, Barcelona, curated by Carles Guerra, 2011; and “The Potosi Principle” at Reina Sofia, Madrid, curated by Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann, 2010. 4 Nicole Brenez, “Harun Farocki and the Romantic Genesis of the Principle of Visual Critique,” in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, eds. Antje Ehmman and Kodwo Eshun (London: Raven Row, 2009), 128.

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Pier Paolo Pasolini: corpi e luoghi, a cura di Michele Mancini e Giuseppe Perrela (Theorema edizioni, 1981). Mancini and Perrela worked with Laura Betti for three years to complete the text, and founded their own publishing imprint, Theorema edizione, in order to publish what the editors described as an “antropologiche di corpi e di luoghi” in the form of an “archiviazione di set cinematografici.” Ehmman and Farocki write that the frames are extracted from all twenty-one of

Pasolini’s films, although Pasolini’s films actually number twenty-two. 6 Harun Farocki and Antje Ehmman, “Kino wie noch nie,” in *Kino wie noch nie*, eds. Antje Ehmman and Harun Farocki (Cologne: Generali Foundation and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter Koenig, 2006), 17. Curated by Harun Farocki and Antje Ehmman at Generali Foundation from January 20 to April 23, 2006, the exhibition travelled to Akademie der Kunst in Berlin in May 2007. John Akomfrah, Anjalika Sagar, and I visited “Kino wie noch nie” with Farocki and Ehmman in May 26, 2007. The title “Kino wie noch nie” is an homage to Helmuth Costard’s masterpiece *Fussball wie noch nie* (1970), in which six cameras follow George Best throughout a Manchester United match. 7 Raymond Bellour, “The Unattainable Text” (1975), in *Kino wie noch nie*, eds. Antje Ehmman and Harun Farocki, 118.

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 So exhaustive indeed that I have never reached the conclusion of *Pier Paolo Pasolini: corpi e luoghi* since acquiring a copy at Donlon Books when it was still at Cambridge Heath Road, Bethnal Green, in 2010. It cost £70, which made it the most expensive book I had ever bought, at that time. To this day, I have yet to see the sequences on “unburied bodies” and “cannibalism, victim’s remains” referred to by Ehmman and Farocki in 2007. 9 Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 238.