

Videos for Post-Truth Times

BY REBECCA CLOSE

Revisiting the AIDS-related work of Pratibha Parmar and Isaac Julien



PRATIBHA PARMAR, *Reframing AIDS*, 1987, stills from video: 35 min. Courtesy the artist.

“Capital. It’s our lifeblood. It flows through our city,” says a slick assistant to his boss, a trumpet-playing hedge-fund manager, in the opening scenes of Isaac Julien’s *Playtime* (2014). The 70-minute multichannel installation, which was recently installed at Seoul’s Platform-L, offers a snapshot of the daily lives of this and five other fictional characters (an artist, an auctioneer, a domestic worker, an art dealer, and a reporter) as they move through their respective cities, each selected by Julien for his or her unique role in a story about globalized capital: London, a city transformed by financial deregulation; Reykjavik, where the 2008 economic crisis hit hard; and Dubai, one of the Middle East’s burgeoning markets. Julien’s focus on the diversity of city life’s experiences across gender and class lines echoes Marxist geographer David Harvey’s

popular analysis of neoliberalism as the political and economic project in which money is encouraged to “flow” through global city centers, which, the author argues in a 2016 interview, consequently become “the main center of discontent.” The chain of associations that Julien’s characters establish, between capital flow and “lifeblood”—collapsing city and body—have broken out across current media discourses in a kind of linguistic epidemic, infecting commentaries on topics from gentrification to national border crises. Capital as “lifeblood” has metaphorical associations with the body: any obstruction is likely to be seen as a virus to be eliminated, or a rebel cell in need of quarantining.

We are “living in post-truth times,” as Platform-L’s press release for “Playtime” stated. “Post-truth” refers to the trend

whereby prominent public figures declare their distaste for traditional fact-based journalism or even empirical knowledge itself. The suspicion of “fake news” often accompanies the dismissal of any project geared toward the empowerment of minorities across the public sphere. The effectiveness of post-truth propaganda has led to a subversion of the once-accepted notion that democracy is necessarily inclusive. On the contrary, inclusive projects—from inner-city equality initiatives to the antiracist or decolonial perspectives associated with current refugee and migrant activism—are depicted as threats to democratic life: viruses and rebel cells.

We’ve been here before. Let’s rewind to an earlier post-truth moment: 1987, the year Kenyan-born UK artist and filmmaker Pratibha Parmar’s 37-minute experimental video documentary, *Reframing AIDS*, was released. The work is an ensemble of interviews with a number of British artists and activists (including Julien, Stuart Marshall and Sunil Gupta) and clips from video artworks, including Super 8 sequences shot by Parmar and Julien’s *This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement* (1987). It also features British and Australian government-funded advertisements on the syndrome. In one, a grim reaper rolls a bowling ball that knocks over three blonde toddlers, while the caption reads “AIDS.” While not the first global epidemic, AIDS was the first globally mediated disease whose inseparability from television led critics to call it a crisis in signification. “Thatcherism,” a term coined by Jamaican-born cultural-studies pioneer Stuart Hall to refer to the moral dimensions of the Margaret Thatcher administration (1979–90), relied heavily on the representational structure of the AIDS crisis for the implementation of its authoritarian program on race and immigration, economic privatization and sexuality.

The appropriation of advertising in Parmar’s documentary is characteristic of the intersection between contemporary AIDS activism and video art: both were guided by the premise that televisual discourse was a necessary site of artistic intervention. It was into the hostile climate of Thatcherism that the “Black British” arts and cultural movement intervened, with artists such as Parmar and Julien (both associated with the Sankofa Film and Video

Collective, founded in 1983), critiquing the structural racism and homophobia of the cultural sphere. By quoting fragments of government AIDS advertising, Parmar underlines what is arbitrary and banal in media discourse: showing how communication is reduced to the repetition of individual particles of information, divorced from context. This technique of critique is a staple in video art: in a 2002 interview, US artist Dara Birnbaum wrote of her 1978–79 work *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*: “I could capture Wonder Woman and disassemble the ‘her’ from a seamless flow.”

In her work, Parmar disassembles representations of sexual and racial identity forged by media coverage of the AIDS epidemic. By intervening into the visual syntax of AIDS with a chorus of “talking heads” from among the artistic, activist, Black British and LGBT communities, Parmar fragments the dominant subject of the epidemic and successfully explores the wider implications of the crisis in terms of what David Harvey has called the increasingly contested “politics of daily life.”

In email correspondence with me in May, Parmar summarized the video project: “I wanted to show how lesbians and gays of color in the UK have been affected by the government’s responses to the AIDS crisis, which includes increased state surveillance, police harassment and more immigration-control mechanisms.” While television is Parmar’s target, the artist’s context of intervention is the city center. Here we can see how the intersection between video art and AIDS activism is not incidental to the history of city life. Nor is the AIDS crisis a footnote in neoliberalism’s development.

Critical for understanding these overlapping phenomenon is film professor Martin Barker’s conception of “new racism,”

a project set into motion by Thatcherism. In his view, this type of racism operated specifically by not condemning individuals as “threats” or “foreign invaders” but rather picking and choosing dangerous elements through differentiation between the “well-behaved” and the “promiscuous” homosexual; the “integrated” and the “radical” black citizen. These strategies of differentiation deployed by the Thatcher administration were contradictory, to the extent that a chain of associations could be constructed between black activists and artists, Irish immigrants living in England, leftist intellectuals, feminists and lesbians—each constructed as “threats.”

Parmar’s irreverent use of artistic, sociological and pop-culture material creates an assemblage that is “diasporic,” to the extent that it fragments a unified or single “black,” “gay” or “lesbian” subject. This interruption to the seamless flow of “identity” is underscored by Parmar’s repeated use of a particular scene from Julien’s *This is Not an AIDS Advertisement*, a work that consists of video-manipulated Super 8 sequences of the Grand Canal in Venice, Julien with his lover, and images of the work’s title flashing in neon lights—all set to a soundtrack that repeats the lyrics “feel no guilt in your desire.” Parmar’s use of Julien’s river sequence in *Reframing AIDS* underscores her discursive proposal: if sexual and racial identity were couched in the language of desire—that is, if they appeared to be as discontinuous as a river or even as video syntax itself—they would be more difficult to even partially exclude.

We should remember that in the case of video—as opposed to the linear structure of film—the impression of pictoriality occurs when two interlocking “half images” meet, which never occurs absolutely. The video

image is necessarily discontinuous. In this sequence from *Reframing AIDS*, Julien makes adjustments to frequency, manipulates voltage, and transforms black-and-white into color values and then back again, accentuating video’s inherent “error.” The effect underlines the discursive project of assemblage and discontinuity, a technique that is designed to contest the “seamless flow” of race and sexuality at the beginning of the neoliberal era.

Configuring identity through discontinuous fluctuations of electronic signals vulnerable to amplification, sequences open to feedback looping, frequency and luminescence available for modification, is what the “diasporic assemblage” of Parmar’s and Julien’s works do: the non-fixity of video elides the constructs of “queerness” or “diaspora” as racial or sexual categories of identification, assembling them instead through technical features or as aesthetic strategies. In her 2005 essay *Queer Times, Queer Assemblages*, theorist Jasbir K. Puar rejects the notion of “diaspora” as either a demographic, a geographic place or as something represented primarily through history, memory or trauma. Diaspora, she writes, “is cohered through sensation, vibration, echoes, speed, feedback loops and recursive folds and feelings, coalescing through corporealities, affectivities and multiple and contingent temporalities.” Doesn’t this sound like video?

Much has been said about the links between AIDS, art and activism; the history of video art; and the art-historical and political contributions of the Black British cultural movement. Yet little work has been done to render legible the artist practices that sit at the borders—the work that explores AIDS, along with other mediatized public health crises of the 21st century, not only as “crises” of representation, but, and above all, as crises of colonial capital. How to interrupt the flow?

As Julien’s *Playtime* aptly describes, neoliberalism’s differentiation strategies are being updated, creating new composite identities such as hipster auctioneer and professional tourist or others destined for partial if not absolute exclusion—the domestic worker, the refugee, the migrant, the radical trans. At one point in *Playtime*, James Franco, playing a demagogic art dealer who argues that the 2008 economic crisis had unprecedented benefits for the art market, turns to the camera and says: “Who knows, maybe even video art will bring in a healthy sum to the next eagle-eyed investor of today.” More intense and increasingly fragmented feedback looping, voltage modification and electronic signal shifts are perhaps required for making diasporic assemblages fit for post-truth times.

*Visit our Digital Library at library.artasiapacific.com for more articles on Isaac Julien.



ISAAC JULIEN, *This is Not an AIDS Advertisement*, 1987, still from video-manipulated Super 8 sequences: 11 min. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London.