

Is the Past Another Country?

KATERINA GREGOS

If there are three key dates in the twentieth century, dates which marked the world for subsequent years, one would be 1918, the other 1945 and the third undoubtedly 1989. Contour 09 thus comes at a timely moment to consider recent history, as it takes place twenty years after this key historical moment in European twentieth century history, now that post-1989 euphoria has evaporated. In these last twenty years momentous political and ideological shifts took place, from the demise of socialism and the collapse of ideological 'certainties', to the consolidation of global capitalism and neoliberalism, at least for the moment. At the same time, Western consumerist culture has increasingly become the desirable norm in the 'planetary casino' of the global market economy, to borrow an expression by philosopher and economist Cornelius Castoriadis, and there has also been a momentous shift in the representation and perception of reality itself; technology having dramatically altered the way in which we conduct our lives and experience reality. For most of us—in the Western networked world—life is lived in an increasingly accelerated, heightened mode. But has there been time to truly

evaluate and understand that which is our elusive present? Do we possess the clarity to anticipate the future aside from the usual blind optimism or rhetorics of catastrophology? According to historian Tony Judt we are living in an unpolitical age of forgetting, one in which there is a prevalent belief that "the past has nothing of interest to teach us. Ours, we insist, is a new world; its risks and opportunities are without precedent",¹ a world where we seek "actively to forget rather than to remember, to deny continuity and proclaim novelty on every possible occasion".² He goes on to say: "In the West we have made haste to dispense whenever possible with the economic, intellectual, and institutional baggage of the twentieth century and encouraged others to do likewise. In the wake of 1989, with boundless confidence and insufficient reflection, we put the twentieth century behind us and strode boldly into its successor swaddled in self-serving half-truths: the triumph of the West, the end of History, the unipolar American moment, the ineluctable march of globalization and the free market...The problem [with all of this] is the message: that all of that is now behind us, that its meaning is clear,

and that we may now advance—unencumbered by past errors—into a different and better era.”³

A generation of politicians and citizens who are oblivious to history are turning the twentieth century into a ‘moral memory palace’, he argues, sacrificing history to myth making and denial over memory. This not only has disturbing implications for the future of democratic governance but also leads to what he calls the “misidentification of the enemy”.⁴ Burgeoning ignorance and amnesia is proving, he argues, calamitous, with the clear prospect of worst to come. A recent case in point would be the war in Iraq. During his time as Prime Minister Tony Blair, in his drive to defend his motion to authorise the war in Parliament, failed to mention Britain’s previous invasion of Iraq in 1914, which was carried out in order to protect its oil interests in the region. Had the British public been informed of Britain’s previous adventure there, the situation would have been better illuminated and would have brought sharply into focus the risk of insurgency and continuing instability after the invasion, and quite possibly changed public opinion and the political consensus on the war.⁵ In his book *Why History Matters*⁶ John Tosh in fact argues that New Labour’s whole political machine was built on amnesia, amnesia that facilitated this very dangerous venture. He warns of the precariousness of hiding historical facts for political purposes, using over-simplified historical analogies to justify public policy decisions, or hand picking arguments to suit courses of action, and advocates the return of the function of history in the public sphere arguing in favour of “the serious employment of history as a tool to support political choices”⁷ as well as to “to explain complex public policy issues that are placed before us without adequate explanation of how they have come into being”.⁸ He goes on to say that “active citizenship in a deliberative democracy stands in much greater need of historical knowledge than is generally recognised”⁹ and that “thinking historically has a crucial part to play in the intellectual equipment of the active, concerned citizen”¹⁰ Finally he suggests that our world would be better governed and administered if a better understanding of the past were available to decision makers and the public. While acknowledging the problems that history as an academic discipline is plagued by, as well as the problematics of historiography and the fact that history may be abused, manipulated or distorted, Contour 09 takes the above premise as its its point of departure and advocates the impor-

tance of history as a tool for furthering knowledge and awareness, supporting the belief in the social use of history, as well as the important role it has to play in battling amnesia, selective memory, forgetfulness, and our culture’s short attention span.

The speed with which events occur, are transmitted, consumed and then brushed aside nowadays entails that our understanding of the present is now, perhaps more than ever, temporary and ephemeral not to mention partial. This accelerated momentum with which we experience contemporary life is causing a great deal of anxiety, confusion and disorientation. How do we cope in today’s hurried, information overloaded, perpetually networked, Blackberried society which ceaselessly demands instant gratification? One could say that to a great degree, our culture seems dominated by ‘presentism’ or ‘short-termism’—the tendency to focus on the narrow conditions of the moment—and to uncritically embrace modernity, technology and progress as being an undoubted boon to society. This no doubt fosters amnesia and selective memory, not to mention ignorance. In the maze and wake of information overload and global event saturation, it now seems even more important to recall history and past events as a key to unlocking contemporary identities and psyches, and positing visions of the future. As Eric Hobsbawm, one of the greatest historians of our time has unequivocally put it, “History alone provides orientation and anyone who faces the future without it is not only blind but dangerous, especially in the era of high technology”.¹¹ Though the present is often envisaged as being utterly divorced or cut off from the past, we tend to forget that, in reality, the past is a “collective continuity of experience”.¹² In the continuum that constitutes time “The past is a permanent dimension of the human consciousness... to be a member of any human community is to situate oneself with regards to ones past, if only by rejecting it”.¹³ Hobsbawm also points out that, “For the greater part of history we deal with societies and communities for which the past is essentially the pattern for the present”.¹⁴ It now appears that for the first time, we have begun moving further and further away from this idea.

The Cambridge University historian Christopher Andrew has termed this increasing prevalence of historical denial ‘Historical Attention Span Deficit Disorder’ (HASDD).¹⁵ He maintains that this “disrespect for the long-term past produces two serious intellectual disorders. First, the delusion that what is newest is necessarily most advanced—not a

proposition which anyone with even an outline knowledge of the thousand years which followed the fall of the Roman Empire would take seriously. It took about fifteen hundred years before western plumbing and bathrooms, for example, got back to the standards set by the Romans. And second, the belief that interpreting the past and forecasting the future require an understanding only of the recent past. Little of real importance about future trends, however, can be deduced from the study of a mere generation of human experience. This kind of intellectual parochialism has, for example, led to the common belief that globalisation is an off-shoot of American capitalism rather than a product of a long and complex interaction between the West and other cultures."¹⁶ In light of this situation, it is thus perhaps an opportune moment to re-iterate what in fact should be obvious: that the concept of history plays a fundamental role in human thought. It invokes notions of human agency, change, the role of material circumstances in human affairs, and the putative meaning of historical events. It raises the possibility of learning from past events. And it suggests the possibility of better understanding ourselves in the present, by understanding the forces, choices, and circumstances that brought us to our current situation. Indeed, as numerous thinkers have maintained over time, it is necessary to understand what has come before in order to understand the present as well as posit visions for the future. Eric Hobsbawm states that, "Paradoxically the past remains the most useful analytical tool for coping with constant change, but in a novel form";¹⁷ in that sense it is a key to understanding the present. He takes the argument further, defending the "indispensable role of historical rationality in assessing the future and the human action required to meet it".¹⁸ In any case, an understanding of history – or *histories*, as is perhaps more correct a term – is paramount as it entails an understanding of social and cultural being. David Cannadine explains the function of history as a discipline that "makes plain the complexity of human affairs, the range and variety of human experience, which teaches proportion, perspective, reflectiveness, breadth of view, tolerance of differing opinions and thus a greater sense of self knowledge".¹⁹ By extent, it is a truism to say that one can only really know who one is, if one knows where one comes from; it is no coincidence that so many people who have suffered displacement due to personal circumstances customarily try to trace back their origins or find their roots;

like the adopted child who eventually wants to find out who its true parents are.

The Hegelian notion of history as an inevitable form of progress or development that, in turn, is related to the idea of the perfectability of humanity – was shattered by the violence and 'Total War' of the twentieth century, to borrow the title of Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint's homonymous, seminal book. Moreover, those who were quick to proclaim 'The End of History' (Francis Fukuyama included) and who hastened to announce the victory of Western liberal democracy as the final form of government have had to adopt a more moderate, reserved stance about their sweeping declarations in the light of the rise of authoritarian non-democratic powers (even if they appear in 'quasi-capitalist' guise), nationalism, xenophobia, and radical Islam. These are also reasons why Peter Tosh advocates, "that we need to pay more attention to teaching people to think historically. That is to say, to grasp what is the nature of understanding the past in a historical sense, and the ways it could be useful, in an open-ended way" because the difficulty with all these agendas whether national, religious or otherwise is that they are "closed agendas" with only "one outcome in mind, and that's a denial of what history can primarily offer".²⁰

Apart from the fact that arguing in favour of the 'end of history' seems a rather myopic view to take, as it does not take into account the passage of time and historical circumstances beyond our own lives, it also completely ignores the unpredictability of historical events. Who could have possibly imagined what happened on 9/11, for example? It also does not take into account the millions of people all over the world, that do not enjoy the comfort and relative security of a secular free market democracy. True, it can be argued that democracies are probably better at dealing with poverty but, on the other hand, as Jacques Derrida has pointed out (in response to Fukuyama) never have violence, poverty and inequality affected as many human beings in the history of humanity as now: "Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on

earth".²¹ That point aside, one cannot speak of history in such absolute, mono-theoristic terms as those of 'the end of history' simply because, as Alexander Herzen, the father of Russian socialism, aptly put it "History has no Libretto". The future, Herzen maintained, was the offspring of accident and wilfulness. There was no libretto or destination, and there was always as much in front as behind.²²

In light of these developments it hardly seems a coincidence that, in recent years, an increasing number of artists are trying to re-capture this historical sense, to re-claim its importance and are making work that is referring back to history and dealing with notions of time, memory, and bygone events. The work of these artists demonstrates a keen desire to connect with and understand the past *in order to make sense of the present*. As a result, historical and archival research and representation are now a prevalent tendency in some areas of contemporary art. This use and re-use of documents and archives not only sheds new light on important or overlooked aspects of historiography, but also makes cultural and historical attributions shift, highlighting the variable mechanisms of memory and reception. Likewise, in film and video practices many strands of historical reference have emerged, as these media are among the most appropriate for the deployment of narrative strategies that historical subject matter invariably relies on, and because lens based practices are, in any case, records of things that were registered in the past tense. Perhaps it is the collapse of erstwhile steadfast ideologies, belief systems or political certainties, and the demise of the utopian quest that has caused artists to look back in time, to search for "sheltering perspectives". In the early and mid-twentieth there seemed to be a vision of how to advance in the future, in art as well as in politics, something that cannot be said of today.

In Eastern Europe the 'return of history'²³ – to borrow the title of Robert Kagan's recent book – in art practice probably relates to the fact that history was violently repressed and historical representation was banished during Communist times whereas in the Western world the renewed interest perhaps comes from the critical realisation that history has tended to be increasingly tied to the leisure agenda, and the entertainment and culture industries and hence has been subjected to commodification, romanticisation, nostalgification, and spectacularisation (as opposed to being seriously studied). As Tony Judt Points out "today...we wear the last century rather lightly. To be sure, we have

memorialised it everywhere: shrines, inscriptions, 'heritage sites', even historical theme parks are all public reminders of 'the Past'. But there is a strikingly selective quality to the twentieth century that we have chosen to commemorate."²⁴ Despite the abundance of 'history as light entertainment' and its consumption in the form of theme parks, museums, heritage sites, and costume dramas on TV and in cinema, it is doubtful whether these forms contribute to historical knowledge or awareness; moreover they clearly have been inadequate for forging a historically well-informed public. Ludmilla Jordanova suggests that, "if we want to change public cultures connected with history, the ways in which it is presented currently need to be reconsidered".²⁵ It is within this light that 'the artist as historian' has a role to play.

This interest in history and historiography stems from a need to formulate an understanding of the present, to find *meaning* in the present and, in some cases, from a desire to imagine the future. Walter Benjamin talked about the 'vanishing point of history' as always being in the present moment. As Susan Buck-Morss has pointed out, "He understood historical 'perspective' as a focus on the past that made the present, as 'revolutionary now time', its vanishing point. He kept his eyes on this beacon and his interpreters would do well to follow suit."²⁶ As Matthew Buckingham, one of the artists in the exhibition has pointed out, "when we reconsider past events we are not so much going back to another time and retrieving events and material from that time; rather we are re-staging those events *here and now* in order to think about what is *happening here and now*, to think about the present."²⁷ The inter-connectedness of past and present is further expounded upon by Benjamin: "The past carries a secret index with it, by which it is referred to its resurrection. Are we not touched by the same breath of air which was among that which came before? Is there not an echo of those who have been silenced in the voices to which we lend our ears today?...If so, there is a secret protocol between generations of the past and that of our own".²⁸ So, in effect, this retreat to the past is not an escape from the present but rather a way in which to confront or comprehend it.

Like Benjamin's view of the historian, the artists in this exhibition "record the constellation" with which their "own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one",²⁹ with a view to addressing present day realities and concerns. It has recently been suggested by an esteemed colleague that

contemporary art history may in retrospect appear “frivolously, irresponsibly obsessed with the past” and that the current interest in historiography is escapist indicating art’s “inability to grasp or even look at the present, much less to *excavate the future*”.³⁰ I would argue the opposite. It is extremely irresponsible *not* to be interested in the past, for if we are to be able to “grasp or even look at the present” or “think or simply imagine the future” we can only do so with the benefit of hindsight. We need *more* not *less* history, and it is careless and dangerous to disregard it. In contemporary art we all-too-often see this problem emerge in the shortcomings of art education, for example – the ignorance of students who don’t have a past knowledge of art history that they should; works being blindly churned out without knowledge of their genealogy and what has been done before. In any case, however, the current interest in history is not something we can dismiss as one of those ‘trends’ that occur in contemporary art; it is a serious intellectual pursuit of diachronic value. The present is, in any case, ungraspable. *Everything* we do becomes history, almost immediately, even the time I am now writing these words in will be history in seconds. That aside, we have no idea what the future can be so we could not possibly “excavate” it, much less predict it, we can only imagine it. In *The Poverty of Historicism* Karl Popper argues that no society can predict, scientifically, its own future states of knowledge, and as a result there can be no predictive science. Therefore, prediction over the course of history is nothing more than a fantasy. And this assertion is based on the principle that the events/persons responsible for changes are themselves affected by these same changes.³¹

The importance of history is of course inextricably tied to the importance of memory. The neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks has often written about how devastating the loss of memory can be, reiterating the immense value of something we take for granted. In his book *Musicoophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* he writes about an amnesiac musicologist incapable of remembering anything that happened after the lapse of seconds.³² The book is based on a true story, that of Clive Wear- ing who suffered a debilitating brain disease that left him with a memory span of only seven seconds – the most devastating case of amnesia ever recorded. In her memoir, his wife poignantly tries to intimate this agonising, perpetually disorienting experience, “His ability to perceive what he saw

and heard was unimpaired. But he did not seem to be able to retain any impression of anything for more than a blink. Indeed, if he did blink, his eye- lids parted to reveal a new scene. The view before the blink was utterly forgotten. Each blink, each glance away and back, brought him an entirely new view. I tried to imagine how it was for him... Something akin to a film with bad continuity, the glass half empty, then full, the cigarette suddenly longer, the actor’s hair now tousled, now smooth. But this was real life, a room changing in ways that were physically impossible.”³³ An extreme case, to be sure, but one that reminds us in unequivocal terms of the importance of memory.

In any case, this ‘historiographic turn’ in art is not a mere trend as I have tried to suggest further above, but something that is also rooted in the historical circumstances of our recent past; nor indeed is it an entirely new phenomenon that arose in the post-1989 era (though it has indeed been fostered by recent developments). In his essay “The Artist as Historian” Mark Godfrey points out that already since the end of the 1970s, “historical research and representation appear central to contemporary art. There are an increasing number of artists whose practice starts with research in archives, and others who deploy what has been termed an archival form of research”.³⁴ He goes on to elaborate on the two strands that exist within this genre of artists using history: on the one hand, there is a pre-occupation with the “history of mediums and forms” but more importantly, his main point about the “artist as historian” concerns methodology: “Coming to historical representation outside the context of academic history, and aware of the critiques made of this discipline, the artist as historian is able to work with a methodological freedom and creativity without sacrificing rigour”.³⁵ To that I would add the freedom to engage in what Roland Barthes called “the constant opposition between the discourses of poetry and the novel, the fictional narrative and the historical narrative”.³⁶

Contour 2009, which bears the title *Hidden in Remembrance is the Silent Memory of our Future*³⁷ probes various aspects of history – whether social, political, cultural or personal – advocates its importance and explores questions of historical representation and historiography, investigating the persisting complex entanglements between past and present. The artists exhibit works that investigate differing aspects of history and its representation, bringing to the fore the historical sense we need in order to understand where we came from, who

we are and where we are going. They question the relationship between past and present, personal and collective history and memory; official, grass roots or alternative histories, as well as the grey areas between fact, interpretation, and fiction in historiography. In doing so they raise related questions of authorship, ownership, subjectivity, objectivity and identification. Their work foregrounds practices of retrieval, researching, referencing, recycling and finally interpreting historical material anew or creates contemporary historical fictions to uncover repressed narratives, confront forgotten historical events and explore the different ways in which the past is represented but with a view towards highlighting the relevance of their historical material for today. They subject historical narratives to critical scrutiny; they negotiate history through film and video and the performance of social space; they dig up vintage cultural artefacts, probe the political legacy of historical discourses, examine the significance of forgotten monuments, recall the phantasms of history and of historical figures whose position is unresolved, to address the problem of selective memory, challenge dominant narratives of history and counteract amnesia. The exhibition reflects the widening of the field of history, perhaps best typified by the rise of social history. Many of these artists also question the role that memory plays in contemporary life, pinpointing how the past is 'manufactured' for consumption by the nostalgia industry, the media, and political powers.

Some of them also draw on older aesthetic forms and or recall past art historical styles to create distinct 'chronotopes' and their own unique language, while others employ a synergy of languages and styles to form new modes of expression. All share an interest in the exploration of the continuum between the historical and the present-day. By extent, one of the exhibition's important sub-texts is that of the negotiation of the notion of time. Many of the artists disrupt the notion of time as a linear un-interrupted flow, and create suspended, deliberately confused or ambiguous temporal spaces. Some of the works are hard to place chronologically, occupying an 'achronous' space, others conflate different periods of time and create a sense of temporal layering or disorientation in order to investigate how memory is mediated or collective consciousness is represented.

They borrow images, stories, practices and aesthetics from the past to create different narrative methodologies and build bridges with the present, but also raise awareness of alternative or margin-

alised narratives, narratives that have been swept aside in the wake of History with a capital 'H'. As Fernand Braudel – the foremost French historian of the post-war era – has observed, this "*histoire obscure de tout le monde*" is the history towards which all historiography tends at present.³⁸ This is no coincidence given that for the most part 'History' was up until now written by those in power, the 'winners' or those at the forefront of ruling class politics.³⁹ "With whom does the historical writer of historicism actually empathize?" Walter Benjamin asked? "The answer is irrefutably with the victor. Those who currently rule are however the heirs of all those who have ever been victorious. Empathy with the victors thus comes to benefit the current rulers every time".⁴⁰ He goes on to add: "There has never been a document of culture which is not simultaneously one of barbarism".⁴¹ These so called 'grand' or 'master' narratives – and the myths and 'barbarism' they often perpetuate and sustain have not only been promulgated by ruling class politics but also, in modern times, by the media and culture industries.

In that respect, Braudel's and the Annalists contribution to post-war historiographic practices has been indispensable, as it has helped to further the study of history on those aspects of it, which have been brushed aside, repressed or left unsaid. Braudel also correctly pointed out that, "There is no unilateral history"⁴² and warned about the perils of drawing sweeping conclusions about historical events. While historical events are often seen as being perpetually consolidated, one never knows what the outcome will be further down the road. Braudel therefore argues that it is only through study of the *longue durée* that one can discern structure, the supports and obstacles, the limits man and his experience cannot escape.⁴³ He used the *longue durée* approach to argue in favour of historical social science and the plurality of historical time and to stress the slow, and often imperceptible effects of space, climate and technology on the actions of human beings in the past. The *longue durée* is "an experimental approach to the theoretical reconstruction of long-term, large-scale historical change" which "represents a temporal rhythm so slow and stable that it approximates physical geography. It forms at the interface of the natural physical world and human social activity – of physical space and human space. The *longue durée* provided the unifying elements of human history."⁴⁴ The media in particular and political opportunists of sorts have been oblivious to the

long-term effects of various historical parameters, promoting instead the idea of 'event history' which Braudel finds totally lacking in time density. Annaliste historians, grass roots history and 'history from the bottom up'⁴⁵ have, to a certain extent, alleviated this "barbarism" of omission that Benjamin refers to.

The other problem that plagues the historical scholar is the persistence of deep-held myths about the past, selective memory and the effects of these on collective consciousness. This can be better grasped on the micro-level, in terms of family and personal life, for example. "When it comes to families, there is frequently little consensus on the key story and their interpretations. There may not even be a shared account about the nature and timing of key events. People constantly make myths that take deep roots and use existing myths that relate to their past. Myths are dense and apparently simple stories, which speak to core human issues, such as origins, forms of dominance and distribution of power. All these points apply to history in the more formal sense".⁴⁶

The practice of writing history is indeed not an easy one, as it is marked by questions epistemological as well as moral; from the authoritative or subjective voice of the historian to the voiceless position of the subject may stem a whole host of misunderstandings and misrepresentations. How 'objective' can the recounting of history be anyway, and whose 'History' is it? At what point does truth collapse and fiction take over? Roland Barthes posed the very important question: "Does the narration of past events, which, in our culture from the time of the Greeks onwards, has generally been subject to the sanction of 'historical science', bound to the unending standard of the 'real', and justified by the principles of 'rational' exposition – does this form of narration really differ, in some specific trait, in some indubitably distinctive feature from imaginary narration, as we find it in the epic, the novel and the drama?"⁴⁷ True, the historian must organise his own discourse and in doing so may sacrifice objectivity and what Fustel de Coulanges called the 'chastity of history'. Barthes defines the historian not so much as a "collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers; that is to say, he organises them with the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningless series".⁴⁸ Braudel, on the other hand, pointed out that history does not exist independently of the historian's perspectives and that the historian intervenes at every stage in the making

of history. The Annalists – Braudel included – who applied social scientific methods into history, and emphasized social rather than political or diplomatic themes – exercised a critique that maintained that organising history into narrative imposes an interpretive structure that depends on the observer's interests.⁴⁹ They rejected narrative history because of its focus on 'event history', seeing it more as an epistemic rather than literary endeavour, with emphasis on structure. All these considerations are in one way or another related to two fundamental questions in the philosophy of history: Is there a fixed historical reality, independent from later representations of the facts? Or is history intrinsically constructed, with no objective reality independent from the ways in which it is constructed? Whether one subscribes to the objectivist, empiricist, positivist or structuralist view, in this writer's opinion, there is truth in both the aforementioned statements. The event *did happen* but you get *different stories* of it. There is an *outside reality* outside the *reality of language* and what is in our heads. To illustrate my point: the twin towers *did* collapse, there is no doubt about that. How this fact is subsequently interpreted by different parties is another matter altogether. So, in that sense, E. H. Carr is correct to say that "the historian is neither the humble slave nor the tyrannical master of his facts".⁵⁰ Moreover he points out the problems in both the "...untenable theory of history as an objective compilation of facts...and an equally untenable theory of history as the subjective product of the mind of the historian".⁵¹

History, therefore – as well as the study of it – are slippery, complex concepts. History does not only mean *the past* but it is also *an account of the past*, for we do not just want to know what happened but also how and why. We might ask what is the purpose of history? Do we study it for its own sake, do we try to find out the truth about the past, do we try to comprehend where we came from, do we try to understand why a particular event happened, do we want to discover historical laws or do we wish to justify present actions? While historical events are occurrences, history is manmade. It involves matters of authorship, availability and reliability of source material, the interpretation of it, personal interpretation and bias. And it needs an audience too. Every historian works in a historiographical tradition, be it Marxist history, political history, emphasis on social rather than political or diplomatic themes, or use of scientific methods, etc. So any account of the past will

be ideologically coloured. Historical knowledge is real, because there is material evidence that certain events did occur. But it can be relative as well, because the evidence might be interpreted differently by different historians and in different times. It is objective insofar as there is physical proof of the existence of a past and it is subjective in so far as there is an historian involved who establishes the narrative. In any case, "history is not a cut-and-dried set of arguments and facts; it lives through debate and argument."⁵²

Taking all these issues into account Contour 09 is thus not governed by an overbearing historical curatorial concept which instrumentalises artistic practice under one rubric, but allows room for artists to present multiple perspectives on subjects of their interest along the chosen theme – whether social, political or personal – perspectives that will shed light on the 'jigsaw that is history',⁵³ as E. H. Carr famously called his discipline. Thus the biennial is not an exhibition *about* a specific historical period or subject, but rather a series of reflections on different aspects of the historical and historiographic, that relate to our present in some way. The exhibition presents different narrative methodologies relating to historical representation and aims to give an idea of the diversity of historical enquiry in lens based media, which serve as records of things that in any case occurred in the past. Overall, it has been my goal to maintain a balance between four areas: new aesthetic or formal practices, poetic-political or documentary film 'with a twist', cinematic practices, and the legacy of experimental film. The artists navigate between these different categories and genres of film making, often creating highly individualistic hybrid filmic forms. I have opted for works that are conceptually dense, featuring complex layered narratives and distinct, memorable visual languages and less on amateurish, documentary approaches,

facile video registration, or *cinema-verité* style. In that sense, a number of works come close to Tom Gunning's idea of 'a cinema of attractions' through the incitement of 'visual curiosity'. Gunning states, "it is a cinema that bases itself on the quality that Léger celebrated: its *ability to show something*".⁵⁴ By extent, there is also a sense of cinematic literacy underlying many of the works. In many cases, the influence or knowledge of film history is clear. The history of cinema provides not only a rich reservoir of visual material for artists to draw from or refer to, or situate in a new critical or aesthetic context, but also provides valuable knowledge into the mechanics of the construction of a moving image. Moreover the exhibition aims to argue for the deceleration of perception by including works that need to be viewed from beginning to end, works that are more gradually immersive, unfolding over time. It should be furthermore pointed out that the exhibition as a whole is not conceived of as a linear narrative but should be regarded as consisting of autonomous chapters or short stories, which may or may not connect to one another.

KATERINA GREGOS, Brussels, July 2009
Curator, Contour 09

I would like to thank all the artists without whom this project would not have been possible; those who invested time in making a new work as well as those who are presenting already existing work. I would also like to thank the Contour team and all those who worked on the exhibition, especially our super-efficient production manager, Nathalie de Boelpaep. Last, but by no means least, I would like to thank Steven Op de Beeck for his wholehearted support of this project, which went way beyond the call of duty. Special thanks must also go to Jurgen Persijn for his thoughtful approach to the design of this elegant publication.

NOTES

- 1/ Judt, Tony, "The World We Have Lost" in *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, Walter Heinemann, London 2008, p. 2.
- 2/ Ibid.
- 3/ Judt, Tony, "What Have We Learned, If Anything?", *The New York Review of Books*, Volume 55, Number 7, May 1, 2008. See also: www.nybooks.com/articles/21311.
- 4/ Ibid.
- 5/ For more on this repressed history see: Jack Bernstein, *The Mesopotamia Mess*, InterLingua Publishing, 2008. Bernstein argues that the similarities between the British invasion and occupation in 1914, and the current U.S. experience are remarkable and that there were many lessons that U.S. politicians and military could have – and should have – learned before the 2003 invasion.
- 6/ Tosh, John, *Why History Matters*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2008.
- 7/ Lawless, Andrew, "History Matters: Interview with John Tosh", November 2008, www.threemonkeyonline.com/als/why_history_matters_john_tosh_interview.html
- 8/ Tosh, John, "Why History Matters," transcript of speech at Birkbeck College, London, 28 May, 2008, www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-79.html.
- 9/ Ibid.
- 10/ Ibid.
- 11/ Hobsbawm, Eric, "Looking Forward: History and the Future", in *On History*, Abacus, London 2007, p. 69.
- 12/ Ibid, p. 27.
- 13/ Ibid, p. 13.
- 14/ Ibid, p. 14.
- 15/ Andrew, Christopher, "Intelligence analysis needs to look backwards before looking forward", in *History and Policy* www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-23.html
- 16/ Ibid.
- 17/ Hobsbawm, Eric, "Looking Forward: History and the Future", in *On History*, Abacus, London 2007, p. 23.
- 18/ Ibid, p. 71.
- 19/ Cannadine, David, "Making History Now", *History Today*, Vol. 49, July 1999.
See also: www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst?docId=5001275704
For further reading: Cannadine, David, *Making History, Now and Then: Discoveries, Controversies and Explorations*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2009.
- 20/ Lawless, Andrew, "History Matters: Interview with John Tosh", November 2008, www.threemonkeyonline.com/als/why_history_matters_john_tosh_interview.html.
- 21/ Derrida, Jacques *Specters of Marx: State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 85.
- 22/ Stoppard, Tom, "The Forgotten Revolutionary", *The Observer*, Sunday 2 June 2002 ('Features', p. 5).
- 23/ Kagan, Robert, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2008. Kagan argues against 'the end of history' and the idea that liberal democratic ideals and market economics have proved illusory stating instead we are witness to the re-emergence of the great autocratic powers, along with the reactionary forces of Islamic radicalism, forces which threaten to weaken the world order.
See also: Sanger, David "Democracy, Limited", *New York Times*, May 18, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/books/review/Sanger-t.html.
- 24/ Judt, Tony, "The World We Have Lost" in *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, Walter Heinemann, London 2008, p. 3.
- 25/ Jordanova, Ludmilla, "How history matters now", *History and Policy*, www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-80.html. The paper is an expanded version of a speech given by Ludmilla Jordanova at the launch of John Tosh's book *Why History Matters* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) at Birkbeck College, London, on 28 May 2008.
- 26/ Buck-Morss, Susan, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, 1991, p. 339.
- 27/ Quoted from a lecture at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London, November 2006, in "The Artist as Historian", by Mark Godfrey, *October*, vol. 120, Spring 2007, p. 147.
- 28/ Benjamin, Walter, "On the Concept of History", www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm.
- 29/ Ibid.

- 30/ Roelstraete, Dieter, "After the Historiographic Turn: Current Findings", e-flux Journal #6, May 2009. www.e-flux.com/journal/view/60
- 31/ Popper, Karl, *The Poverty of Historicism*, Routledge, London, 2002.
- 32/ Sacks, Oliver, *Musophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 2007.
- 33/ Sacks, Oliver "Music and Amnesia", *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2007.
- 34/ Godfrey, Mark, "The Artist as Historian", *October*, vol. 120, Spring 2007, p. 143.
- 35/ Ibid, p. 169–170.
- 36/ Benjamin, Walter, "On the Concept of History", www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm.
- 37/ I am indebted to David Gryn for bringing to my attention the sentence from which this exhibition takes its title. *Hidden in Remembrance is the Silent Memory of Our Future* comes from an Italo Calvino libretto to the Luciano Berio opera *Un re in Ascolto*. As David wrote me "when I saw the English translation at the Royal Opera House in the late 1980s it became etched in my head—as my catch phrase. At the time I was an artist and made paintings referring to my father's experience as a boy in Auschwitz and the loss of his/my family. I wrote the sentence on the top of my studio wall—as it seemed to be so poignant and important. When I got married to my wife Jane—I had a segment of the line inscribed inside my wife's wedding ring 'Silent memory of our future.'" I am very grateful to you David, for sharing this beautiful line with me, and your personal story, which so poignantly illustrates the importance of remembrance. See also: the Italo Calvino short story book *Under the Jaguar Sun* in *A King Listens*.
- 38/ Braudel, Fernand, "Une Parfaite Réussite", reviewing Claude Manceron, *La Révolution qui lève, 1785–1787* (Paris, 1979), in *L'Histoire* 21 (1980), p. 109.
- 39/ Benjamin, Walter, "On the Concept of History", www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm.
- 40/ Ibid.
- 41/ Ibid.
- 42/ Clark, Stewart (Ed.), *The Annales School: Critical Assessments*, Routledge, London & New York, 1999, p. 242.
- 43/ Braudel, Fernand, *On History*, translated by Sarah Matthews, University of Chicago Press/Wiedenfeld & Nicholson, London, 1980.
- 44/ Tomich, Dale, "The Order of Historical Time: The Longue Durée and Micro-history". Paper presented at *The Longue Durée and World Systems Analysis*, colloquium to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Fernand Braudel, *Histoire et Sciences Social: La Longue Durée*, *Annales E.S.C.*, XIII 4, 1958, October 24–45, 2008, Fernand Braudel Centre, Binghampton University, Binghampton, New York, p. 2–3.
- 45/ For further reading: Hobsbawm, Eric, "On History From Below", in *On History*, Abacus, London 2007, pp. 266–286.
- 46/ Jordanova, Ludmilla, "How history matters now", *History and Policy*, www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-80.html. The paper is an expanded version of a speech given by Ludmilla Jordanova at the launch of John Tosh's book *Why History Matters* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) at Birkbeck College, London, on 28 May 2008.
- 47/ "Roland Barthes and the Discourse of History", translated by Stephen Bann. *Comparative Criticism*, 3 (1981): pp. 7–20. See also: <http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/barthes.htm>.
- 48/ Ibid.
- 49/ Clark, Elizabeth A., *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 89.
- 50/ Carr, E. H., *What is History?* The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge, January–March, 1961, Penguin, London, 1990, p. 29.
- 51/ Munslow, Dr. Alan, Review of *What is History* by E.H. Carr (1892-1982), Institute of Historical Research, www.history.ac.uk/reviews/reapp/carr.html.
- 52/ Lawless, Andrew, "History Matters: Interview with John Tosh", November 2008, www.threemonkeyonline.com/als/why_history_matters_john_tosh_interview.html.
- 53/ Carr, E. H., *What is History?* The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge, January– March, 1961, Penguin, London, 1990, p. 13.
- 54/ Gunning, Tom, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde", *Film and Theory: An Anthology*. Editors: Robert Stam & Toby Miller. Blackwell, 2000, pp. 229–235.