

TURNING ON ITS OWNERS: AZIZ + CUCHER'S POLITICAL UNCANNY BY LISA D. FREIMAN

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“This uncanny, is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. . . . The uncanny [is] something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.”

--Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, 1919

Some people fleeing some other people.

In some country under the sun

and some clouds.

--Wislawe Szymborska's *Some People*

We all live with a constant barrage in the media of graphic images about war and violence in the Middle East, which paradoxically have desensitized us about the human dimension of the conflict. As artists it is impossible to compete with the spectacle of the media, but it is possible to attempt to create a poetic vision which depends more on allusion and non-linear thinking rather than on fidelity to a documentary truth.

--Anthony Aziz and Sammy Cucher, Interview with Richard Meyer

After twenty years of working and living together, the collaborative duo Anthony Aziz and Sammy Cucher continue to address the major dilemmas of our time through large format digitally enhanced photographs and video installations. Living in New York during the aftermath of 9/11, Aziz + Cucher have tackled a pressing historical subject that few artists have had the desire or convincing aesthetic ability to confront—the ongoing

and relentless violent engagements between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Both artists have familial and cultural roots in the Middle East. As confirmed Zionists, Cucher's entire family recently immigrated or made *aliyah* to Israel and his nephews serve in the Israeli army; while Aziz has cousins and extended family scattered across Lebanon. After witnessing first-hand the terror of 9/11 in New York, as well as the subsequent barrage of re-presented media images of violence related to the Middle East, they began to feel that they no longer could remain silent as artists and needed to confront the historic endless cycle of human self-destruction. The new body of work that they have created in response to this subject— *The Time of the Empress, In Some Country Under a Sun and Some Clouds, Report from the Front, and By Aporia Pure and Simple* – represents a powerful aesthetic response to this seemingly unexpected personal recognition--one might even say it characterizes a psychoanalytic working through of the artists own histories--after a career in which they mostly have distanced (or repressed) overt consideration of their personal identities in their work.

This personal repression is not surprising given the critical and historical exhaustion with political art after the rise of feminist art, queer art, black art and multiculturalism between the 1970s and mid-1990s. After the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which infamously privileged identity politics, there was a profound backlash against personal or political work; many artists subsequently avoided it because this subject matter was suspect. In *Time* magazine, Robert Hughes called the 1993 politically-correct Whitney Biennial a “fiesta of whining”[\[4\]](#) and although Roberta Smith was more generous in *The New York Times*, she admitted “there are only a few instances where the political and visual join force with real effectiveness.”[\[5\]](#) The Whitney Biennial

eventually became a temporary bookend for socio-political art, a cautionary tale for artists.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks created a dire breach in our understanding of the basis of our reality as Americans. In the years since 9/11, artists gradually have been responding to this historic break, and as recently as July 2011, MoMA P.S. 1 featured one of the first major museum exhibitions that, according to curator Peter Eely, “aims to think about how 9/11 continues to shape how we see the world retrospectively.”^[6] Literary theorist Brian Jarvis has written about the aftermath of 9/11– its senselessness, how it subsequently became a “black hole of meaning, impossible to escape.”^[7] He explained, “As the urban uncanny, Ground Zero may thus be described as a space full of unknowing, a locus haunted, in Wallace Steven’s chilling phrase, by the ‘nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.’”^[8] Jarvis goes on to discuss how Ground Zero and its consequent unrepresentability has become associated with the literature of trauma. He explains, the “ur-text is the Holocaust, [and] the radical negativity of trauma is often mirrored in writing that circles around its own impossibility and seeks to refuse the ‘obscenity of understanding’.”^[9] Aziz + Cucher recognized the danger and difficulty of creating work that addressed historical trauma--in this case the longstanding Arab-Israeli conflict—as well as their doubly problematic position as outsiders trying to comment on this very context, but by 2006 they had reached a point of no return: they were ready not only to take on the struggle full force, but they were open to considering their complex personal relationship to it in their work.

This essay offers one reading of their poetic interpretation of the conflict, suggesting that *Some People* can be understood, at least partially, in relation to Anthony Vidler's contemporary "spatial" or "architectural uncanny." In his book, *The Architectural Uncanny*," Vidler describes the uncanny as a metaphor for a certain "unhomely" modern and postmodern condition denoted by estrangement, temporal anxiety, the repeated return of the past, and alienation. He bases his discussion of the uncanny on Freud's 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," which grew out of his wartime interest in psychiatric trauma victims. Vidler explains, "For Freud, 'unhomeliness' was more than a simple sense of not belonging; it was the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream."[\[10\]](#)

What seems important here for Aziz + Cucher's new body of work *Some People* is how Vidler's understanding of the Freudian uncanny is tied to the "barbaric regression" of Western civilization after World War I. That war, and too many others to name here, have produced extreme social anxiety and dread, literally disrupting many cultures and landscapes. Vidler subsequently argues that the modern uncanny did not relate solely to a house or even a city, but defied boundaries, extending throughout the countryside and into the realm of the psychological landscape, essentially leaving nowhere untouched. Vidler suggests that the modern condition was thus defined by a "transcendental homelessness" that resulted from ongoing war, uprooting, exile, forced nomadism, and nostalgia for a "true, natural home."[\[11\]](#) He goes on to describe the postmodern, poststructuralist, or contemporary architectural uncanny as something that is "ambiguous, combining aspects of its fictional history, its psychological analysis, and its cultural manifestations."[\[12\]](#)

The four video installations that comprise *Some People* are non-narrative, but additive, and together they conjure a totalizing, tumultuous, absurd landscape simultaneously representing the past and present, creation and destruction. Throughout the exhibition, the viewer teeters on reality and unreality, on dreams and the everyday, on the common and the strange; the work reminds us of Vidler's proclamation that the Freudian uncanny is defined by the "fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners."[\[13\]](#) The installations here include all of these uncanny spatial tendencies, fusing elements of documentary photography and video, drawing, animation, choreography, sound, performance, costume design, and theater. Each piece exists individually but together they form an overarching metaphorical and psychologically-inflected landscape that invokes Vidler's spatial uncanny.

Aziz attended Boston College, graduating with a BA in philosophy in 1983. Afterwards, he studied art, art history, photography and cinema for four years on a part-time basis at Boston's School of the Museum of Fine Arts and Massachusetts College of Art, and took classes at an independent artist run cooperative called the Boston Film/Video Foundation. He later earned an MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1990. His earliest passion was documentary film and that focus led him to study non-traditional photography. In graduate school, he made large format photographic and text projects focused on the themes of masculinity and power. His work was influenced by feminism and the politics of representation, as well as the impact of AIDS on sexual desire.[\[14\]](#) Aziz met Cucher at his MFA thesis show in May of 1990. He was exhibiting a series of work called *Public Image/Private Sector* in which he included 12 life-size photographs of older white men first in their formal

corporate attire and then naked (fig.). The associated texts incorporated “the kind of power language these individuals would use as a way of marking themselves as a corporation” (fig.).^[15] Cucher was so enamored with the show, he asked a mutual friend to introduce him to Aziz. Soon after they became a couple and began working together.

Cucher received his BFA in 1983 from Tisch School of the Arts at New York University where he studied experimental theater and participated in New York’s avant-garde theater scene until 1985. He explained: “I wanted to create non-linear operatic masterpieces involving music and visuals. Then I went back to Venezuela where I met a number of people in the visual arts who were experimenting with video. I started to work with narrative in video but then the video work became installation, and it jumped into a non-theatrical gallery space.”^[16] Four years later, he left for the San Francisco Art Institute where he focused on video art and received his MFA in 1992.

The architectural uncanny has been a continual presence throughout Aziz + Cucher’s work since they burst onto the art scene in San Francisco as a collaborative in 1992. Their photographic series *Faith, Honor, and Beauty* depicted idealized frontal nudes holding iconic props including machine guns, laptop computers, and babies (figs.). Standing against patriotic backdrops in solid blue or red, the isolated social realist-inspired portraits recalled classical Greek and Roman sculptures with a twist. Using what was then the new, mostly untested Photoshop technology, Aziz + Cucher erased the male and female genitalia of the heroicized figures, leaving their sexual characteristics absent. The subsequent portraits evoked both the rising role of technology and the complex

ensorship battles that were looming large in the world of art and politics, most notably in relation to “the NEA Four”—Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller—who sued the National Endowment for the Arts over its decency clause. But in addition to commenting on recent historical events, these idealized nudes resurrected styles associated with various past moments in art history, and as a result they produced figures that were uncannily familiar, yet strangely alienated from the real. These were ambiguous figures, portraits of instability and anxiety that also alluded to the growing influence of biotechnology and bioethics.

After the success of *Faith, Honor, and Beauty*, the artists pushed their ideas about erasure and censorship in a related series *Dystopia* (1994-1995), which consisted of large color photographic headshots of men and women with their eyes, ears, noses, and mouths digitally erased (fig.). The unnerving portraits, described by one critic as “postapocalyptic meltdowns,” not only depersonalized their subjects, but pointed to censorship, invisibility, the increasing reach of technology into our daily lives, and the body as an *unhomely* container, estranged from and closed off from itself and the world.^[17] *Plasmorphica* (1996-1997), another series that includes six C-Prints and a mixed media installation of fifteen totemic “plasmorphica poles,” pushed bodily defamiliarization to epic proportion (fig.). Aziz + Cucher made over 100 casts of electronic devices that had bodily relationships like computer mice, Gameboys, remote controls, and telephone handsets. They stuffed them into Flesh-tube, a material used to make prosthetic devices, and then shrunk them to shape using a heat gun. The resulting odd photographs resembled stock photography of otherworldly products, strange biomorphic-electronic hybrids with no origins (fig.). Later, they rearranged the “body

parts” into unexpected compositions, poles that linked together different forms to create an immersive environment of *not*-body parts, forcing viewers to think of an unspeakable, but imaginable future (fig.). In *Chimeras* (1998), Aziz + Cucher re-photographed the objects from *Plasmorphica*, digitally manipulating the “skin” so that it seemed unnervingly natural (fig.). Obviously referencing the monstrous multipart *chimeras* of ancient Greek mythology, the objects were further re-cycled with skin covered in recognizable freckles, blotches, and moles. They photographed the unique skins of different people and manipulated the images in the computer so they could cover the multipart objects with an even more convincing looking membrane. Aziz + Cucher viewed these images “as ‘specimens’ in the same way that objects in natural history museums are photographed.”[\[18\]](#)

According to the artists, the original intention of their next project *Interiors* (1999-2000) was to explore the disappearing limits of the body because of the increasing influence of smart technology. The photographs in this series are perhaps the most *unhomely* of all of Aziz + Cucher’s projects to date because they represent uninhabitable architectural spaces, both actual and imagined, that have been digitally altered so that skin textures now overtake all of the interior building surfaces. Art critic Cay Sophie Rabinowitz acknowledges the inherent sense of the uncanny in one review of the work:

Discrepancy and reversal is built into the work—and exchange of information. The image presents an entirely uncanny solution: living skin transposed onto architecture; the human grafted onto the inhuman. The compositional strategy in Aziz + Cucher’s work involves making an image stand for a state of mind. The equation is based on substitution, whereby the artificial interior situation is modeled after an organic interiorized state.[\[19\]](#)

Furthering the uncanny psychoanalytic reading of the work in his essay, “The Technology We Deserve,” art historian Frazer Ward suggests that these photographs “are metaphors for the abandon and the terror of the collapse of distinctions between human and non-human, the attraction and the repulsion of the dissolution of limits. That is, as much as they are bound to the digital, they are also bound to a preexisting—and longstanding (think of Frankenstein)—set of cultural anxieties.”[\[20\]](#) The horrifically fascinating works in *Interiors* call into question the boundary of the body and how we understand it. These oddly recognizable images, which are at the same time unfamiliar, inevitably evoke the unspeakable barbaric Nazi experiments that used Jewish skin for decorative purposes ranging from lampshades to bookcovers. Although never intended as references by the artists, these actual historical examples perhaps point to a pre-technological manifestation of human-implement fusion that foreshadows the potential technological dissolution of the body considered throughout Aziz + Cucher’s work.

Having literally turned the body inside-out, the pinnacle of the uncanny, in their next project *Synaptic Bliss* (2003-2006), Aziz + Cucher further eliminated the bounding condition of skin, focusing instead on that which runs through all of us, our life force (fig.). *Synaptic Bliss* is perhaps Aziz + Cucher’s most overtly personal work; Cucher had been extremely sick with a serious illness and survived. He felt a sense of amazement in the mystery of the body’s resilience: “there is something so powerful that keeps you alive that you have to investigate it. . . and give expression to it.”[\[21\]](#) Aziz + Cucher began to imagine how it would look if this force could be liberated from the body and fused with the environment. They began experimenting with health and beauty aids that bubbled and oozed like shampoo, shaving cream, hair gel, Alka Seltzer, and Pepto Bismol in order to

produce a “kind of artificial nature.”^[22] They also photographed and filmed live footage of people in the landscape in Parc de la Vilette in Paris, and combined all of the footage into a colorful, impressionistic video installation that intentionally blurs the boundaries between the inside and outside. Cucher explained: “If the body disappears – if you want to create a narrative out of this – the body becomes integrated into the architecture, it completely disappears in terms of lipids and all that – what’s left is this consciousness that’s observing and seeing and thinking, and how does that consciousness see the technological conscious?”^[23] Reviewing the work, critic Jeffrey Walkowiak observed “The images imply a material breakdown of the world around us in a hallucinatory fashion that recalls psychedelic states of mind that enhance a certain philosophical clarity. *Synaptic Bliss* represents the artists’ shift in focus from the body to the landscape while capturing the body evaporating into the outer limits of the universe.”^[24]

Aziz + Cucher’s intensely focused exploration of the uncanny space of the body and consciousness finds its logical culmination in *Some People*, a project that moves towards a more generalized investigation of the spatial uncanny in relation to an actual politicized landscape of conflict. The combination of 9/11, the 2006 war between Israel, Hezbollah, and Lebanon, and the War in Iraq pushed Aziz + Cucher to grapple with something that was the polar opposite of *Synaptic Bliss*’s life force. How could they understand and elaborate their combined sense of existential dread, depression, and hopelessness felt in response to never-ending human conflict? In 2009, nearly twenty years after they first met in San Francisco, Aziz + Cucher acknowledged that they needed to develop a new body of work that took seriously their respective familial and aesthetic roots. Both artists were wary of the immensity of this task. How exactly could an artist

represent the centuries of contested land ownership, extreme nationalist and religious ideologies, and historical prejudices that abound throughout the Middle East? One example came to them indirectly through an encounter with a poem in a bookstore. Cucher picked up a copy of the Polish Nobel Laureate Wislawa Szymborska's *Poems New and Collected* after having read and enjoyed a number of her works published in the *New Yorker*. Inside the book, he discovered a poem called "Some People" and he was so moved by its "poetic distillation" of war, that he showed it to Aziz, suggesting that it might point to a future direction in their practice. Cucher explained: "The work 'Some People' takes the conflict in the Middle East as a point of departure, but at the same time . . . [it speaks] . . . to a more general human condition. It's about a general state of mind that produces conflict, a "stuck-ness" into a certain belief or belonging to a specific group."[\[25\]](#)

With Szymborska's poem in hand, Aziz + Cucher eventually set off on a six month sabbatical from teaching at Parsons School of Art & Design funded by a Liechtenstein-based organization called C-Collection. They traveled extensively throughout Israel, Lebanon, and the Balkans, where they took countless photographs and video footage of the landscape, architectural ruins, an archaeological dig, daily life, and museum displays of historic cultural relics, some of which they published in their travelblog and book, *Residency*.[\[26\]](#) One double-page spread at the beginning of the book depicts the vast seemingly serene landscape of the Negev desert (fig.) that belies the paradoxical history of violent conflicts that have transpired there throughout the centuries. It subtly suggests the artifice of geographical boundaries that are invisible, yet politically charged. Aziz + Cucher's previous investigation into the shifting, fluid notions

of the limits of the human body here have been brought to bear on the landscape itself, where lines of demarcation are socially constructed, contested, and continually redrawn in the endless struggles for ownership. Two photomontages included in the book—one a compilation of photographs of various mythological battles painted throughout history and shot at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (fig.), and the other a collage of photographs of television footage of war seen throughout their travels (fig.)—point to the omnipresence of conflict represented throughout art history and the popular media in daily life today.

In Haifa in June 2009, the artists worked with a Palestinian-Israeli artist to arrange to film the slaughter of a real lamb (fig.). The biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac has been represented throughout art history in 14th century illustrated manuscripts and noted 17th century paintings by Rembrandt and Caravaggio. But in Aziz + Cucher's graphic video, there is little interpretation in the footage other than the choice of framing and the proximity of the camera to the slaughter. At that time, the artists did not know how the film would play into their new work, but it clearly affected them, and they wrote about the experience in their blog discussing their profound difficulty witnessing the death up close. Typically, when one refers to a sacrificial lamb, one is referencing a person or animal who sacrifices for the common good, a scapegoat, or a victim. A sacrificial lamb also carries the biblical inference of an offering or sacrifice, something that becomes a substitute for something else as an act of atonement. The fact that this was the only prearranged documentary shoot during the artist's residency points to the importance of the film in relation to the artists' residency and their developing ideas about the new body of work. It seems to have functioned as a kind of symbolic offering by the artists, a way

of acknowledging their own distance from the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as their own need to confront it.

In Berlin during the final two months of their residency, the artists worked in a rented studio with a green room, collaborating with dancers, actors, and choreographers in order to begin developing a gestural choreographed language that could convey their various experiences, their complicated familial histories, and the eternal condition of struggle and renewal that characterizes humanity. Writing in their travel blog on September 15, 2009, the artists explained:

Surprisingly, our work is becoming personal. For years, we have steered away from using ourselves and our own voices directly . . . but after being so deeply affected by the many moving stories we heard and the people we met while traveling, we realize that this can no longer be the case. Something has shifted dramatically in the way we perceive our own practice and what we need to accomplish as artists at this particular moment. This attempt at putting ourselves in the work, to be as honest as we can about what we are attempting to do, began this week in a very literal way by us taking turns interviewing each other for the camera. Somewhat awkwardly at first, we managed to draw stories and emotions and reflections out of each other that we hope can act as a framework or a kind of script for the narrative structure we ultimately want to develop into a multi-channel media landscape.[\[27\]](#)

In Berlin, Aziz and Cucher continued their exploration of the Arab-Israeli conflict. For the first time in their relationship, they interviewed each other, sitting vulnerably between a green screen and camera. Uncostumed in this minimal environment, they initiated an unexpected interpersonal interrogation and discussed their thoughts about their own identities and familial histories (fig). This was a pivotal moment in their development of the new work as it allowed them to enter into the work directly, although not always literally.

Aziz + Cucher had both read Marguerite Yourcenar's fictional autobiography *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951) and many of the ideas in this text resonated for the artists. In the chapter titled "The Emperor's Discourse," Yourcenar writes about power, destruction, and renewal throughout history:

Catastrophe and ruin will come; disorder will triumph, but order will too, from time to time. Peace will again establish itself between two periods of war; the words *humanity*, *liberty*, and *justice* will here and there regain the meaning which we have tried to give them. Not all our books will perish, nor our statues, if broken, lie unrepaired; other domes and other pediments will arise from our domes and pediments...[\[28\]](#)

The first installation in *Some People*, entitled *The Time of the Empress*, functions as a prologue for the exhibition. It consists of three 72"x127" freestanding double-sided screens suspended from the ceiling, creating an immersive minimalist environment reminiscent of the large screens in *Synaptic Bliss*. But here, there is no color or joyful impressionism, just stark black and white. The large vertical screens contain austere digitally animated architectural drawings that are in a constant paradoxical cycle of growth and disintegration (figs.). In total there are twenty international style skyscrapers projected against white backdrops that are depicted in different sequences across the screens so that they always vary and are never empty. The buildings, according to the artists, "refer to modernist architecture, as a way to subsume even the present and the recent past in the flow of History." They are comprised of repeated units that can be aggregated, and were designed in relation to various façades that were vaguely inspired by iconic modernist architects such as Mies Van der Rohe, Pier Luigi Nervi, Norman Foster, and Archigram. Aziz + Cucher spent many hours choreographing the motion,

“deciding on things like the speed of the decay, the weight of the downward motion, the timing of the build up and collapse.”[\[29\]](#)

As an American viewer, these tall, detailed projections evoke the Twin Towers and the endlessly recycled media footage of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York. Although the artists insist this association was unintentional, they have recognized its inescapability:

We could not avoid it and [needed] to [acknowledge] that we live in this world after this event. . . . We don't present it explicitly, but we make you want to think about it; at the same time we don't want to make you think about it in a completely negative way, but it's kind of more the historical perspective in which things disappear, they are destroyed, and they grow again.[\[30\]](#)

Certainly their residency helped reinforce this understanding of the ongoing cycles of decay and renewal, not just in the United States, but throughout the Middle East and Balkans, as well as the consequent anxiety and unsettledness that come with living in the midst of traumatic ruins while going about daily life. During their residency, Aziz+Cucher photographed countless bombed out and bullet-ridden buildings (figs.) and they began to understand the experience of modern life in these cities as having a “normality effect,” which essentially allows people to maintain a veneer of calm denial alongside an awareness that at any moment a bomb might drop.

In Mostar [a divided town with an invisible demarcation line between the Croatian Catholic side and the Bosnian Muslim side], there are physical reminders of brutality everywhere, so the juxtaposition of a normal life with the memories of the war attain a particular surreal level. One building, for example, is completely pockmarked and half destroyed by shells, yet two of its floors have been renovated and are inhabited, while the middle floor remains, a wreck. . .[\[31\]](#)

Here we can see a temporal architectural uncanny, a synthesis of the past and the present, two seemingly impossible realities absurdly juxtaposed side by side. Brian Jarvis has described this crisis in temporality in terms of the catastrophic city post- 9/11. People experience this state as an uncanny déjà vu, because the attacks have been represented endlessly in the media and in our memories.[\[32\]](#) This postmodern recycling of trauma, the nature of remembering and forgetting, is temporarily repressed, for example, in a posh terrace lounge where a crowd of young hipsters have drinks and rock to the music of a live band from another city plagued by crisis, Belgrade (fig.).

After experiencing the silence of *In the Time of the Empress*, the viewer enters an adjacent gallery that features *In Some Country Under a Sun and Some Clouds*, an eight channel video and sound installation that gets its title from the second and third lines of Szymborska's poem. Aziz + Cucher's installation is both an example of Vidler's "transcendental homelessness" and a respectful homage to Szymborska's influential poetic vision; it alludes to the legacy of war, trauma, and instability, conjuring the related conditions of uprootedness, forced nomadism, and homelessness through mise en scene, costume, gesture, movement, and sound. The video depicts eight individuals struggling to move against the backdrop of a vast desert landscape of biblical proportions. Projected on three walls encompassing the viewer, the transhistorical figures wear earth-toned clothes styled by Beto Guedez in a "tribal-post-apocalyptic pastiche" that represents no specific culture, gender, place or time. The artists started working on this project in Berlin, collaborating with the Israeli dancer and choreographer Maya Lipsker. In the workshop, they emphasized specific tasks, such as "exploring gestures around gravity and the pull of the earth, being stuck and struggling to move, attraction and repulsion, fighting an

invisible enemy.”[\[33\]](#) Afterwards, they isolated a few gestures and invited some of the dancers to a green-screen shoot where they continued to improvise (fig.). The video footage from this shoot became the basis for the artists to experiment with manipulating the movements digitally, “isolating very small units and looping them, testing the tension between the natural movement and the mechanical repetition, seeing how the movements could become tragic or comical depending on the timing.”[\[34\]](#) Eventually Aziz + Cucher realized they needed to restage the dancers in a bigger studio that could accommodate group folk dances, and this footage eventually appears in the final video. In June 2010, Lipsker visited Aziz + Cucher in New York and together they recruited nine performers who participated in a two day workshop along with the dancer Pedro Osorio. They studied the Berlin shoots and developed a choreographed phrase that could be taught to the dancers in subsequent rehearsals. The result was a collection of ten gestures that each dancer could perform and interpret over approximately twelve minutes. After the New York workshops, Aziz + Cucher began “re-choreographing each sequence, pairing them in the landscapes, and then composing further groupings.”[\[35\]](#)

The resulting writhing, jerking, desperate-seeming bodies seen in the video installation seem to be caught in an eternal state of paralysis and indecision. This condition is amplified by the fact that each of the twelve minute video projections forms a repetitive loop that reiterates the tension between the simultaneous desire and inability to escape their current predicament. The figures are at once tragic and absurd, but they also veer on pathetic and silly, generating an overall disquieting sense for the viewer. Like the costumes and choreography, the soundtrack has also been created through unexpected combinations, creating an atmospheric collage of voices and sounds from

different places and times – epic Balkan singers, Jewish folk music, Serbian wedding music, and field recordings. These anachronistic recordings are interspersed with a ticking sound that becomes an intense unifying motif for the entire landscape.

Moving into the next gallery, a visitor shifts from what is clearly a wholly manufactured and fictional landscape to what seems at first to be an ordinary active archeological site in Israel. *Report from the Front* is a five-minute single-channel video filmed during Aziz + Cucher’s residency that documents American Christian college students who are digging for evidence of the life of Jesus in a Roman-Jewish town on the border of Lebanon and Syria (fig.). In this work, Aziz’s early fascination with documentary film and political propaganda returns with a vengeance in what becomes a parody of the documentary genre itself. Cucher’s forceful authoritarian-sounding voiceover issues a fallacious and nonsensical “report” on an unspecified “front” or former battlefield, using quasi-scientific, militaristic language and threatening rhetoric: “RDM and eco-sonograph probes have been commanded to prove that the ashes remaining on the floor testify to fire that destroyed the city gate and is ascribed to the Assyrian King Tiglath Pileser III.”

The script intentionally comments on historic land ownership and the search for archaeological proof of such claims, but in a completely ridiculous manner. This false narrative becomes a representation of the contemporary archaeological uncanny, suggesting spatial and historical instabilities, perplexity, and the fine line between truth and fiction.

The final room of the exhibition features a large single-channel video projection and six flatscreens that can be viewed as the artists' first self-portrait in their twenty-year collaboration. *By Aporia Pure and Simple* represents a day in the studio life of Aziz + Cucher (fig.). The artists emerge from the 23 St-Ely Avenue subway stop in Long Island City dressed up not in their normal attire, but as two clowns: Aziz wears a militaristic costume with a giant floppy kaffia bowtie and Cucher appears ridiculously cosmopolitan, sporting an outfit comprised of different textiles from around the world including a large tie with two Stars of David. Although they had the costumes designed by Yahi Tabassoni while they were still in Berlin, Aziz + Cucher were unsure how they would incorporate them into their new work. While reviewing all of the material that they had generated once they were back in the States, they came up with the idea of the video. They explained: "We really felt . . . like clowns. Going around Israel and Palestine with the little video camera, and talking to people and recording voices."[\[1\]](#) The clowns became a vehicle through which they could self-critically insert themselves into this material: ". . . [T]he clown is always that character [who] tries to fix something that's broken and breaks it even more, he never gives up because he's so determined, but wrong. So we felt that was us."[\[2\]](#)

The 9-minute single channel video begins with the familiar sounds of NPR's Morning Edition with Linda Werthheimer and Steve Inskeep reporting on the Middle East conflict. We see Aziz + Cucher walking through the streets with the familiar skyline of New York behind them. They take the elevator up into their studio where we hear a barrage of media reports about the suspension of direct peace talks between the Arabs and Israelis. Throughout the condensed day there is a dizzying stream of media reports in

English, Hebrew and Arabic alongside TV news reports about the Middle East that appear on a monitor. Reinforcing this palimpsest of newscasts, Aziz + Cucher also layer other sounds to conjure “the confused mash-up in [their] heads,” including Israeli folk music, Lebanese ancestral songs, recordings of the Koran and Hebrew Psalms, a flutist playing Israel’s national anthem, *Hatikvah*, and a Dub track given to them by their Bosnian guide. To increase the sense of disorientation, they sometimes play the folk music backwards or speed it up so that it is unnaturally fast and bewildering. The radio, television, and sound components simulate the media bombardment and related desensitization that Americans experience daily regarding news about the Middle East.

As we watch the artists hang up stills of photographs taken during the residency and edit their selections with black Sharpies, the camera zooms in closely on various collected unrelated images including an urban watermelon stand and a peacock waiting in the middle of a road. Throughout the video, the camera pans from photographs that fill the camera frame entirely to more distanced shots showing the artists evaluating their documentary material. In this way, the video points to Aziz + Cucher’s simultaneous immersion within the Middle East landscape while also underscoring the artist’s physical distance from the crisis. In one section we see young Israeli army inductees who march out of synch during a ceremony taking place in front of the Western Wall. Each receives a gift of a rifle and the Bible. The camera zooms in on their uncoordinated footwork, eventually cutting to a segment where Aziz + Cucher humorously approximate the militaristic movements. Their colorful clown costumes blur against the white walls of their studio as they march and spin frenetically, suggesting the overall disorientation induced by the cacophonous soundtrack and the bombardment of imagery from different

cultures, locations, and temporalities. Throughout the video, we see glimpses of sketches that became portions of each of the works included in the exhibition – a building from *The Time of the Empress*, developing stills from *In Some Country*, documentary footage from *Report from the Front*. The video is itself a palimpsest of their journey through this new body of work, an accumulation of observations, images, sounds, and experiences that metaphorically conjure the space of the transcendental uncanny.

At the conclusion of the video, in contrast to the hysterical, unstable sensorial barrage, Cucher stares quietly looking out the studio window into the industrial landscape of Queens; Aziz collapses exhaustedly into a chair. They reunite to pose for their self-portrait in front of a group of cameras while holding a copy of their book, *Residency*, and then they leave the studio, walking down the street toward the distant subway tracks and city. The normalcy of their day is accentuated in six flatscreen monitors that depict long takes of people seen throughout their residency engaged in daily activities. They walk down the streets, swim at the beach, and shop in markets, demonstrating an uncanny resilience and “normalcy” in the face of constant threats. As Tami Katz-Freiman suggests in her essay, the title of this work *By Aporia, Pure and Simple* derives from a short story by Samuel Beckett: “One of Beckett’s characters rhetorically asks himself: ‘How do you go on living?’ and answers: ‘By Aporia, pure and simple.’” According to Katz-Freiman: “The word ‘aporia’ has a typically Beckettian meaning, referring as it does to an irresolvable internal contradiction or disjunction.”^[3] *By Aporia Pure and Simple*, and by extension all of the work in *Some People*, acknowledges this precise existential conundrum, creating an aesthetic metaphor for the contemporary spatial uncanny comprised of ambiguity, odd juxtapositions of reality and fiction, and the effect of

“transcendental homelessness.” *Some People* forces us to ask, in the midst of such senselessness, what else can we do but repress the horror until it turns on us once again? Szyborska’s poem closes with a stanza that recognizes this “old-established” uncanny and its inevitable eventual return despite our desire to forget it:

Something else will happen, only where and what.

Someone will come at them, only when and who,

In how many shapes, with what intentions.

If he has a choice,

maybe he won’t be the enemy

and will let them live some sort of life.[\[4\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Interview with LF

[\[2\]](#) Ibid.

[\[3\]](#) Tami Katz-Freiman, “From Body Politics to Conflict Politics: Aziz + Cucher Come Out of the (Biography) Closet,” xxxx add appropriate reference related to this book here.

[\[4\]](#) Szyborska, 262.