



Pierre Huyghe's musical *A Journey That Wasn't*, 2005, was performed at Wollman Rink in Central Park. **INSET** The penguin.

ON A RAIN-SOAKED NIGHT IN NEW YORK LAST fall, hundreds of people turned out to watch *A Journey That Wasn't*, French artist Pierre Huyghe's re-creation of his purported journey to Antarctica in search of a rare albino penguin. They gathered in Central Park at Wollman Rink, which

the performance was being filmed. A dozen umbrellas snapped closed. Mist swirled over the water as an orchestra played on a floating stage. After several minutes, a fog-shrouded apparition—which may or may not have been the elusive penguin—appeared on the rocks.

TOP 10 TRENDS

Penguins, Lies, and Videotape

In the spirit of the mockumentary, edgy videos blur the line between fact and fiction

BY CARLY BERWICK

had been transformed into a steaming, prehistoric-looking landscape of rocky outcroppings and black water.

Tom Eccles—the former director of the Public Art Fund, one of the event's organizers—instructed audience members to act naturally and, if possible, to put down their umbrellas, as

Whether or not an actual penguin was seen, either by Huyghe or by audience members, the event constituted a genuine adventure for intrepid art appreciators. Huyghe is part of the vanguard of artists who, using film and traditionally filmic narratives, play at the slippery edge of fact and fiction. Their work is related less to the performance-based video art of the 1970s than to a century's worth of popular-cinema history, says Chrissie Iles, a curator at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. Iles is cocurator of this year's Whitney Biennial, which opens next month; among the works included will be the film of Huyghe's Central Park performance.

For the first time, the biennial has a title, "Day for Night," taken from François Truffaut's 1973 film of the same name, the story of a fictional director (played by Truffaut) trying to make a movie. The exhibition will focus in part on artists like Huyghe, who have been influenced by and adopted some of the tactics of French New Wave cinema and of independent filmmakers since the 1960s. These strategies include exposing or playing with traditional rules of storytelling and filmmaking—such as a seamless narrative or illusionistic perspective. "People have moved on from appropriating Hollywood, and a lot of artists are becoming filmmak-

ers as a weird hybrid," says Iles. "The fiction-reality blur occurs within the narrative of film."

Today, Iles notes, "people know everything has the potential to be manipulated. The sense of what's real and what's not is in the culture more than it's ever been before." Documentaries are increasingly successful at the box office, even as viewers are more aware of subjectivity in films by Michael Moore or Werner Herzog. Billed as "the first movie mystery to actually solve a murder," Errol Morris's 1988 film *The Thin Blue Line* pioneered the use of reenactments in nonfiction filmmaking, while Christopher Guest's *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) and *Best in Show* (2000) have made the mockumentary an established cinematic subgenre. At the same time, artists from Huyghe to Douglas Gordon to Walid Raad are using film and video in order to probe—and often collapse—the gap between reality and invention. This blurring of fact and fiction allows artists to comment on world events in a less polemical way, says Debra Singer, chief curator and executive director of The Kitchen in New York: "The fictional documentary form is really open to addressing history."

In 1999 Raad, a New York-based, Lebanon-born artist, founded "The Atlas Group" project, which produces works that tweak history and bring buried stories to the fore. Selections from the group's archive, on view at The Kitchen through next month, include the video installation *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2001), in which a Lebanese hostage named Souheil Bachar is inserted into the well-documented story of the five Americans held captive in Beirut in the mid-1980s. Bachar's name and image appear alongside the Americans' in revised news feeds. "The stories one tells to do justice to these experiences can sometimes be pure fantasy, but the fantasy acquires the weight of the real," says Raad.

Even less traumatic experiences, such as travel, can paradoxically seem more authentic when reimagined through fictional documentation. Patty Chang's video *Shangri-La* (2005), which will be on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago this summer, begins like a tourist's vacation video, but morphs into something peculiar. The artist traveled to the rural Chinese town of Zhongdian, near Tibet, which in 1997 renamed itself Shangri-La after the fictional Himalayan paradise in James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. The town has dramatic mountain scenery but little else, and the recurring image of a mountain became Chang's point of entry into the overlap between fantasy and fact. In her video, Chang has local workers fabricate a mountain range out of Styrofoam and build a model of a local peak in mirror-faced plywood that reflects the surrounding landscape. She commissions a bakery to make a cake decorated with mountains and films monks exploring the fake rock outcroppings in the atrium of a new Chinese hotel. "The video lends itself to this documentary sense and the idea of traveling and actually seeing something," says Chang. "But the unreality of it seeps through." (Chang is represented by New York's Tilton Gallery, where her photographs sell for \$3,500 to \$5,000.)

Omer Fast also traveled to a tourist attraction to explore the collision of invented story and reality. His video *Godville*

TOP Still from Walid Raad's single-channel video installation, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (#17 and #31), 2001, which reworks the story of the five Americans held captive in Beirut in the mid-1980s.
BOTTOM Patti Chang's *Shangri-La* "wedding."



(2004) is based on interviews with character actors at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, which he cut and spliced to create new stories. "I'm interested in places where the real has been left behind or been absorbed into something involving performance," says Fast. In the audio portions of one segment of the piece, for example, it is no longer clear whether the interviewee, who is talking about being a militia member, is an 18th-century revolutionary or a 21st-century one. *Godville* was recently shown at Postmasters Gallery in New York, where Fast's work sells for between \$6,000 and \$40,000.

For an earlier video, *Spielberg's List* (2003), Fast went to Kraków, Poland, where the locations used for Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List* have become destinations for American tourists. Fast interviewed the locals about their bit parts in the movie, but in the video it is unclear that these are actors and not Holocaust survivors. The format resembles the survivor interviews from the archives of Spielberg's own Shoah Foundation, but the subjects are strangely upbeat. "It does encourage a new perception and new reality, when people come to see historical remains but also to see film remains," says Fast. Real lives are altered by enacted fictions.

Imagine this: someone tells you a rare, exotic bird will appear one night in an urban park. You enter the dark woods and find yourself surrounded by hundreds of other breathless, excited pilgrims. There is music and smoke and lots of rain, and everyone waits for the bird, but in the end the bird matters less than the actual experience. ■

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