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Counter-Memory, Heterochronia, and “History Painting” (After Géricault)

Dierk Schmidt’s *SIEV-X—On a Case of Intensified
Refugee Politics*

Veronica Tello

Abstract

This essay examines the disruption of linear time in experimental forms of “history painting” as represented by Dierk Schmidt’s *SIEV-X—On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics* (2001-2005). It analyses how the aesthetics of heterochronia—multiple temporalities—play a crucial role in the development of a new understanding of the politics of “history painting.” As Schmidt’s work reveals, a radical conception of history exists outside the “singular moment,” and in dialogue with heterogenous visual cultures (news media, art history, advertising). In attempting to understand the import of Schmidt’s work, this essay considers his methodologies for creating a heterochronous mode of history painting, particularly his anachronistic engagement with the work of Theodore Géricault and the iconic history painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*. Unlike previous critical responses to Schmidt’s work, this paper argues that (after Géricault) the artist’s use of investigative “journalistic” methodologies for *SIEV-X—On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics* do not generate an aesthetics of exposé but rather an aesthetics of “fictionalization.” This aesthetic is defined by the recalibration of documentary and speculative data as a means to reconceive the landscape of the perceptual. The findings of this research demonstrate that the use of disparate fragments—or data—to visualize otherwise diminishing historical events underpins contemporary history painting’s capacity for advancing a distinct economy of affect that circumvents the limitations of the news media and its “monopoly on reality.”

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Departing from the Indonesian port of Bandar Lampung on October 19, 2001, a small, unseaworthy, and overcrowded ferry carrying 398 Iraqi and Afghani refugees sunk on its way to Australia’s offshore territory, Christmas Island. Over a period of 21 hours, 353 refugees drowned in the Indian Ocean, while 45 survived after being rescued by Indonesian fishermen. The shipwreck occurred in Australian waters—a point initially denied by the Australian Government—in an area heavily patrolled by the Australian Navy under the auspices of the nation’s border protection regime, “Operation Relex.” Many survivors reported the “appearance of military type vessels which failed

to rescue” them while in the water, yet the Australian Government claimed that the Navy had not detected the ramshackle ferry or its shipwrecked remains. Survivors also asserted that they were forced onto the boat at gunpoint by 30 armed Indonesian police officers: during 2001 the Indonesian Government and Police had worked in collaboration with the Australian Government to “stop the boats” arriving at Christmas Island. In turn, speculation arose that the Australian Government had intentionally orchestrated the maritime tragedy in order to deter boats from coming to Australia.¹ In the face of these accusations, the Australian Government consistently evaded any suggestion of responsibility towards the fate of the refugees.

In its aftermath, many questions remained with regard to how history would record the maritime disaster. The Australian Government set limitations on what information would be released to the public. The names of the drowned refugees were suppressed and refused to family members, members of the Australian community, and artists who wished to produce a memorial for those who had drowned.² There was no publicly available photograph or rendering of the boat, even though claims that such material existed circulated in public discourse. What little was known about SIEV-X largely hinged on survivor accounts and the work of activists and journalists who sought to draw attention to the event.³

Working to contest and reflect on the Australian Government’s control of information, in October 2001 the German, Berlin-based artist Dierk Schmidt began work on the project *SIEV-X—On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics* (2001-5). This project, which spanned four

¹ See Tony Kevin, *A Certain Maritime Incident: The Sinking of SIEV-X* (Melbourne, Scribe Publications 2004), 11-12.

² See the collective, The Boatpeople’s memorial for SIEV-X made in 2002, or the SIEV-X Memorial Project. For the latter see <http://www.sievxmemorial.com/the-memorial.html>

³ SIEV is an acronym for Suspected Irregular Entry Vessel, the operational term used by the Australian Defence Force for maritime vessels that appear to be attempting to reach Australia without authorization. Dierk Schmidt, “One Cannot Maintain this Sort of Policy While Continuing to Be a Democracy,” in *SIEV-X: On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, Dierk Schmidt, ed. (Berlin: b_books, 2005), 12.

years, would comprise a 19-part “history painting,” in the form of an image cycle, which would attend to the various official and unofficial reports on SIEV-X.⁴

A key influence on Schmidt’s work on SIEV-X was Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* (1816–19). As the artist explains, the nineteenth century artwork would come to deeply mediate his perspective of the event:

[In October 2001] I came across an item in the weekly paper ‘Jungle World’ reporting on a boat accident that in terms of the way it was externally described bore a striking resemblance to the raft of Géricault. The dimensions of the boat corresponded almost exactly to those of the raft Géricault depicted, and the manner in which the people were forced onboard was also similar. It was shocking that this boat accident, despite its dimension, remained all but invisible in the media. The image that this cryptic newspaper produced described circumstances that seem[ed] to stem from the 19th century.⁵

The events of SIEV-X would recall the nineteenth century maritime disaster involving the frigate *Medusa*. In 1816, the *Medusa* ran aground in shallow waters near the West African coast before reaching its destination: the new French colony of Senegal. Government officials onboard attempted to save themselves by departing in the available lifeboats, briefly towing 150 French citizens on a makeshift raft, before cutting the ropes. Banished out to sea, over a period of two weeks, the rafters were subjected to the violence of the sea, murder, and cannibalism before a passing ship rescued the sole 10 survivors. The French government unsuccessfully attempted to prevent news of the catastrophe reaching Paris. But a frustrated government representative leaked a survivor’s account of the disaster to the anti-Government broadsheet *Journal de débats*. The survivor account, written by the surgeon Jean Baptiste Henri Savigny, evoked a disturbing image of the Government and its conduct and brought to the fore the traumatizing and brutal events of the raft. The government was quick to challenge Savigny’s account, in particular his claim that the captain had cut the ropes towing the raft.⁶ In an attempt to discredit the surgeon, it emphasized Savigny’s role in leading the rafters to commit murder and cannibalism. But with Alexandre Corréard, another survivor of the raft, Savigny would eventually produce an independent account of his and Corréard’s experiences and version of events in the book *Narrative of a Voyage to Senegal* (1818).

Upon his encounter with the article in *Journal de débats* in 1816 Géricault immediately began work on constructing an image—a history painting—which reflected the survivors’ reports. Over two years, Géricault researched every minute detail of the shipwreck of the *Medusa*, interviewing Savigny and Corréard, becoming involved in the anti-slavery movement tied to the authors’ bookshop, attending hospitals to study dying men and severed limbs and heads, visiting the ocean to study the waves, and commissioning a reconstruction of the raft to be built in his studio based on survivor accounts. Via his extensive fieldwork, Schmidt observes:

⁴ Schmidt puts “history painting” in inverted commas to make plain that he is not engaging with a naïve form of this outmoded genre and is aware of the contentiousness of this term in contemporary art discourse. See for example: Dierk Schmidt, “What I Am Theoretically Interested in Is the Connection between Violence, Traumatization and the Loss of Speech: Conversation with Philosopher and Journalist Carolin Emcke, Berlin, September 2004,” in Schmidt, ed., *On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, 45–56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 52–53.



Figure 1

Dierk Schmidt, *Xenophobe—Shipwreck Scene, Dedicated to the 353 Drowned Asylum Seekers That Died in the Indian Ocean on the Morning of October 19, 2001*, 2001-2002. From the series *SIEV-X—On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, 2001-2005. Oil on PVC, 176 x 229.6 cm. Copyright VG Bild Kunst, courtesy the artist and Städel Museum, Frankfurt/Main.

[Géricault stepped] outside of the so-called studio, out of the conditions of production customary at the time [... He] manoeuvred along the borders of the 'institution of art' in order to temporarily cooperate with—today one would say—an NGO [that is, Corréard and Savigny's bookshop]. In some respects, he almost worked in a journalistic manner.⁷

The effect, as Schmidt saw it, was the production of a critical mode of history painting—something akin to counter-memory—capable of addressing the “excess” of homogenous historical narratives. *The Raft* completely excised the sovereign as its subject and stressed the survival of the disenfranchised. In the *Raft*, argues Schmidt, the rescuing ship appears no larger than a “butterfly” in the large-scale image. It de-emphasizes Government action and the rescue operation.⁸ Instead, it stresses the “state of emergency” that was opened up by way of the sinking of the frigate *Medusa* and its commander's actions, whereby the castaways came to occupy the status of “bare life.”⁹ *The Raft*, in other words, proposes a dialectic between the ruled and rulers, the victors and the vanquished, allowing for a critical tension between the two groups. If the image produces “the non-existence of the government in the ‘government painting,’” or history painting, it also acts as a means to catalyze conflicting priorities and vantage points.¹⁰ For Schmidt, *The Raft* represented a means to make manifest the politics of memory—who is remembered and why—under the conditions of government repression, a timely project in light of the events of SIEV-X.

For some critics, Schmidt's work would intervene in how history recorded SIEV-X, generating an exposé of the Australian Government's misconduct. Analyzing *Xenophobe—Shipwreck Scene* (fig.1)—widely considered to be the most important of all the images in the cycle—Hilde Van Gelder argues: “Painting reconstructs something that really happened but that was not registered in any way at all by a photographic nor filmic camera.”¹¹ Similarly, Angela Lampe states:

Dierk Schmidt is trying to find a contemporary language for a vivid disclosure of manipulated realities with the means of painting. This is preceded by arduous years of research—as in the case of the Australian refugee tragedy—until finally bit-by-bit the cover-ups and involvements of the Australian government came to light, which had made helpless people hostages of a refugee policy based on deterrence.¹²

⁷ Schmidt, ed., *On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, 46-47.

⁸ As Schmidt observes, in a preliminary sketch, Géricault had drawn an image of the crew of the *Argus* assisting the raft survivors on board but decided not to use this image. *Ibid.*, 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Hilde Van Gelder, “Allan Sekula: The Documenta 12 Project (and Beyond),” accessed February 10, 2012. http://www.academia.edu/1059343/Allan_Sekula_The_Documenta_12_Project_and_beyond. Originally published in: Hilde Van Gelder, “Allan Sekula: The Documenta 12 Project (and Beyond),” *A Prior* 15 (Summer, 2007): 210-253.

¹² Angela, Lampe, “Dierk Schmidt: *Geiseln*,” *Kunstforum International* 175 (April-May, 2005): 273. Author's copy translated by Alex Lauscheke. Lampe's argument reflects a common understanding of Schmidt's work: “Schmidt's painting is a result of an investigative process [the artist] focuses on a form of contemporary painting [based] on research and active participation.” Städel Museum, “Press Release: Dierk Schmidt's *SIEV-X—On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics* or Géricault and the Question Concerning the Construction of History: April 9 – September 6, 2009, Städel Museum, Rotunda,” (Frankfurt, Städel Museum, 2009), np.



Figure 2

Installation view: Dierk Schmidt, *SIEV-X—On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, 2001-2005, the artist's studio, circa 2005. Photograph by Dierk Schmidt. Copyright VG Bild Kunst, courtesy the artist.

Schmidt's supposed commitment to an aesthetics of exposé was hinged, such critics argued, on his adaptation of Géricault's "investigative-like" methods. As Lars Bang Larsen argued:

In his publication, we see [Schmidt working] as an investigative reporter doggedly browsing archives, comparing sources and pursuing witnesses and experts through interviews and text production . . . the people he talks to and the facts he amasses, the texts he writes, the analyses he provides and the travels he undertakes—this is the work that must be done in order to get within reach of the real.¹³

Certainly, in a publication Schmidt released in 2005 entitled *SIEV-X: On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, he would emphasize the vigor of his research (as a means of aligning his practice with Géricault's). In order to "come to new findings" on SIEV-X, argued Schmidt, he would initiate conversations and interview personnel from the Australian

¹³ Lars Bang Larsen, "Dierk Schmidt: Packing the Hard Potatoes," *Afterall* 29 (Spring, 2012): 120.

embassy in Germany and the UNHRC in Geneva.¹⁴ In the same publication he would also reproduce some of his archival research (for example, sketches of the SIEV-X boat he drafted based on survivor accounts, photographic sources of survivors from CNN and BBC reports) juxtaposing it with Géricault's research and sketches for *The Raft of the Medusa* (fig. 2). Such juxtapositions would certainly have influenced critics' perceptions that, after Géricault, Schmidt had adopted "investigatory" methods for his work on SIEV-X, and that, after Géricault, he could expose "the cover-ups and involvements of the Australian government."

But Schmidt's research was far from being an exposé of any kind. Although barely acknowledge by critics, his attempts to contact the UNHRC and the Australian embassy produced no new information.¹⁵ In fact, his attempts to gather more information with regard to SIEV-X were generally unsuccessful. Self-reflexive about the limited information that structure the public's knowledge of SIEV-X, the artist argued:

It was not my aim to achieve a "reconstruction" [of the sinking of the SIEV-X] in the sense of an illusionistic TV news image. Whereby it was remarkable that a boat accident of this dimension—recorded as the one with the most deaths off the coast of Australia as far as the news media reaches back—didn't make it to a TV image.¹⁶

While the rise of "history painting" in contemporary art may well be aligned with a resistance toward government control of information, it is important to emphasize that artists such as Schmidt do not intend to provide informational correctives to government misconduct.¹⁷ Instead, drawing on the poetic and affective capacities of art and aesthetics, they evoke a far more ambiguous and elusive sense of what has been. In this light, Schmidt's work—which is, by the artist's own admission, based on limited, mostly Internet-based research and his own speculations about the events of SIEV-X—is not intended to generate an evidentiary or straightforward version of events.¹⁸ Rather, it brings to the fore

¹⁴ Schmidt, "Introduction," in *SIEV-X: On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, 5. Within the publication *SIEV-X: On a case of intensified refugee politics*, there are also numerous interviews with refugee activists such as Tony Kevin, Carolin Emcke and Paolo Cuttina. However, it's crucial to observe that these interviews took place during mid 2004, almost three years after the sinking of SIEV-X and the commencement of Schmidt's corresponding project, and a year after Schmidt's final painting for the image-cycle. As such these interviews were a means to elaborate on the project's concept, rather than a means for the artist to "gather information" for the image-cycle.

¹⁵ Schmidt, "One Cannot Maintain This Sort of Policy While Continuing to Be A Democracy," 12; Schmidt, "What I Am Theoretically Interested in Is the Connection between Violence, Traumatization and the Loss of Speech," 55; and Clemens Krümmel, "The Raft of the Historical Image: Dierk Schmidt's Painting against Painting," in *SIEV-X - On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, 83.

¹⁶ Schmidt, "What I Am Theoretically Interested in Is the Connection between Violence, Traumatization and the Loss of Speech," 55. It is not quite true that SIEV-X "didn't make it to a TV image" because video reports of the survivors were documented and disseminated by the global news agencies BBC and CNN (of which the artists was well aware). Moreover, footage of the SIEV-X survivors and their families were broadly disseminated in Australia. Thus when Schmidt refers to the lack of television images for SIEV-X he is referring to the dearth of documentation related to the shipwreck, and the victims of this tragedy.

¹⁷ See T. J. Demos, "Moving Images of Globalization," *Grey Room* 37 (Fall, 2009): 10; Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility." *October* 129 (Summer, 2009): 51-84; and Jill Bennett, *Practical Aesthetics: Events, Affects and Art after 9/11* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 33.

¹⁸ See Schmidt, "What I Am Theoretically Interested in Is the Connection between Violence, Traumatization and the Loss of Speech," 46-55; and Clemens Krümmel, "The Raft of the Historical Image: Dierk Schmidt's Painting against Painting," 83.

the contingencies of his imagery of SIEV-X, while exploring the possibilities of an ambiguous and thoroughly fragmented history.¹⁹

It was not the artist's intention to create an "illusionistic" or photographic-like image for an event marked by a lack of imagery and information.²⁰ Instead, he would thematize this "lack" by using black pond sheeting as the "ground" for *Xenophobe—Shipwreck Scene* (fig. 1).²¹ A difficult medium to paint on, it would take several coats before any image began to appear on this ground.²² Sparsely painted white lines would appear wherever Schmidt could source witness statements and compare information (sourced from the Internet) in order to, for example, estimate the shape of the boat, or to draw outlines of Indonesian police officers carrying machine guns forcing refugees onto SIEV-X, as mentioned in survivor statements.²³ Color would only be applied where photographic material could be located, such as portraits of some of the survivors that the artist sourced from a CNN and BBC online video report on SIEV-X.²⁴ But even these images are schematically painted in *Xenophobe—Shipwreck Scene* in a manner that emphasizes and exaggerates the pixelated, low-resolution, and mass distributed digital images from which the artist was working.²⁵ By all accounts, while attempting to contest the void of information that marked SIEV-X, Schmidt's image of this event was self-reflexively incomplete and marked by absences.

What is more, Schmidt's work is an explicit composite of multiple sources. In *Xenophobe—Shipwreck Scene*, Schmidt combines and visualizes found data in order to create an otherwise unavailable image of SIEV-X: an image that photography itself could not produce and which bears critical differences to photography. Unlike photography, Schmidt's "history painting" condenses multiple temporalities that go, in the artist's words, "beyond the snapshot."²⁶ Such work refuses the singular moment and a synthetic analysis of information. Its fragmentation renders the image an incomplete and open-ended surface.²⁷ The rough

¹⁹ It is worth observing that Schmidt intended to critically reflect on the limitations of his research. What would be the implications of Schmidt's engagement with Internet-based research and subsequent construction of a history painting from the geographical distance of Germany? As Schmidt stated: "What does it mean to deal with the reconstruction of an event in the Indian Ocean from such a great distance - seen from Europe, exactly the opposite side of the globe? What does it mean to deal from here in Europe with a boat accident that could have been prevented and with the tightened Australian refugee policy? Instead of Christmas Island, it could have been Lampedusa in the Mediterranean. Completely different site-related research work would have been possible and necessary . . . Can a spatial distance also bring advantages with it?" See Schmidt, "Introduction," 5.

²⁰ Schmidt, "What I Am Theoretically Interested in Is the Connection between Violence, Traumatization and the Loss of Speech," 55.

²¹ "This black picture ground", argued Schmidt, "principally translates and forms the ground of the 'lack' [of knowledge] as a theme, as the motivation to replace with an image a situation where there was no image, where its existence was prevented." Schmidt, "What I Am Theoretically Interested in Is the Connection between Violence, Traumatization and the Loss of Speech," 55.

²² Dierk Schmidt, interview by author, Berlin, July 20, 2009, audio and transcript on file with author.

²³ Schmidt, "What I Am Theoretically Interested in Is the Connection between Violence, Traumatization and the Loss of Speech," 55.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Accordingly, Sabine Vogel has claimed that there "is something sketch like about [Schmidt's] paintings" of SIEV-X. Vogel, "Dierk Schmidt," 182.

²⁶ Schmidt, "What I Am Theoretically Interested in Is the Connection between Violence, Traumatization and the Loss of Speech," 56.

²⁷ Ibid.

brushstrokes that structure the painting expose the seams that bind these sundry citations together.

Schmidt would intensify the aesthetics of fragmentation in *On A Case of Intensified Politics* by juxtaposing numerous, and at times incongruous, citations throughout the image cycle (fig. 2). We see, for example, schematic portraits of the then Australian Prime Minister John Howard, news reports on other Australian refugee histories, and Impressionist-like seascapes referencing the site of the SIEV-X disaster. Manifesting as a series of film stills, when hung on the gallery wall the cycle reflects a spatial arrangement not dissimilar to that found in the montages of experimental video historiographies such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1989-98). If in *Histoire(s)* we see a "chains of pictures" flowing not sequentially but projected simultaneously to produce a series of resonances and analogies—concatenations—then this aesthetic effect would be similarly embodied by Schmidt's nineteen-part "history painting."²⁸

Through its montaging of disparate sources, Schmidt's fragmentary work reflects a non-linear, experimental conception of a contested historical event: a strategy which resonates with the aesthetics of counter-memory.²⁹ As Michel Foucault has argued, counter-memory offers a differential conception of time/history that brings together repressed archives and documents that correlate with power.³⁰ As a dialectical structure, counter-memory critiques teleological notions of history, the notion of the singular monument born of a single origin. It maps our existence amongst myriad forgotten events, as opposed to a distinct "landmark," splintering the monolithic into a thousand fragments.

The fragmentary and heterogeneous notion of time that underpins Foucault's conception of counter-memory has largely been overlooked in visual culture studies. Critics tend to reduce the notion of counter-memory down to a conflictual arrangement of dominant and marginalized historical narratives, with little attendance to concepts of fragmented time associated with this notion.³¹ In contrast, Schmidt's work reveals that the stakes and politics of counter-memory are contingent not only on a willingness to memorialize diminishing histories, but also on heterochronia, that is, the invocation of multiple, layered temporalities (or temporal fragments) as a means of refusing homogeneous, synthetic readings of the historical event.³²

²⁸ On Godard see Hito Steyerl, "The Articulation of Protest," in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Stenberg Press, 2012), 87.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History (1971)," in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, Epistemology* ed. James D. Faubion (London: Penguin, 1998), 369-392. Also published in: Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977). Also see C. Colwell, "Deleuze and Foucault: Series, Event, Genealogy," *Theory & Event* 1, no.2 (1997): 1-9.

³⁰ Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History (1971)," 369-392.

³¹ See for example: Joan Gibbons, "Revisions: The Reassembling of 'History'," in *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris 2009), 52-72; Maria Sturken, "The Politics of Video Memory: Electronic Erasures and Inscriptions," in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov and Erica Suderburg, (Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press 1996), 1-12; Katherine Dieckmann, "Godard's Counter-Memory," *Art in America* 81 (October, 1993): 65-67.

³² For an analysis of heterochronia in contemporary art, see Mieke Bal, "Heterochrony in the Act: The Migratory Politics of Time," in *Proceedings of the Second Encuentro Murcia-Amsterdam on Migratory Aesthetics, September 19-21, 2007*, 203.

The aesthetics of heterochronia (fragmented shards of time) that underpin Schmidt's work is a condition of the era out of which the work emerges. Contemporaneity, argues Terry Smith, is marked by a disruption to beliefs in teleological time in the face of a range of antinomies: competing colonial and postcolonial discourses, narratives of modernity and counter-modernity, and narratives of globalization and counter-globalization.³³ The sense that we are living with "many times" rather than "a time" is further intensified through asynchronous, often traumatic, historical events that occupy screen media, manifesting an unprecedented consciousness of the past in the present.³⁴ With this in mind, it is perhaps no surprise that the by now deeply outmoded genre of history painting has seen a return in contemporary art practices.³⁵ This is seen, for example, in the work of Isaac Julien, who, like Schmidt, also adopts an experimental, heterochronous conception of time. Julien's nine-channel video installation *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) juxtaposes police search-and-rescue footage of Chinese refugees missing at sea near the UK's Morecambe Bay, documentary images of the rural landscapes of Guangxi province, the urban-scapes of Shanghai, archival footage from Chinese cinematic history, and fictionalized images of a sixteenth-century Chinese fable in which the goddess Mazu saves fishermen in distress, leading them to the mythical island of Yishan. Like Schmidt, Julien does not visualize the historical event as a singular decisive moment, but rather as a network of intermingling temporalities and as a series of flows.

We see two crucial precedents for the nexus of heterochronia and history painting in the work of Warhol and Richter. Warhol memorializes the 1963 Birmingham Civil Rights riots in *Red Race Riots* (1963), invoking the aesthetics of the time-lapse by showing the climactic moment and the scenes both before and after to represent a pivotal historical era for American race relations.³⁶ Richter deploys the aesthetics of the image-cycle in *October 18, 1977* (1988) to represent a series of interconnected fragments bound to the controversial events of and surrounding the deaths of the Baader-Meinhof group while in the custody of the German state.³⁷ Here, as in Schmidt's work, history appears as a field of fragments.

However, the work of Warhol and Richter needs to be differentiated from the work of Schmidt (and more broadly from contemporary artists engaged in historical representation) in one crucial way. Hal Foster has argued that in their engagement with experimental forms of history painting and archival processes, artists such as Warhol and Richter dwelled on the inevitable "anomie" of memory-making systems and the loss of affect in the era of mass media.³⁸ In contrast, the contemporary history painter, or in Foster's terms archival artist, is

³³ Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 5-7.

³⁴ See Keith Moxey, "Contemporaneity's Heterochronicity," *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 37-50; and Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5-9.

³⁵ For analysis of "history painting" in contemporary art see, for example: Robert Bailey, "Unknown Knowns," *October* 142 (Fall, 2012), 144-161; Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005), 124-148; and Jill Bennett, *Practical Aesthetics: Events, Affects and Art after 9/11*, 33.

³⁶ See Anne Wagner, "Warhol Paints History, or Race in America," in "Race and Representations: Affirmative Action," special issue, *Representations* 55 (Summer, 1996): 100-101.

³⁷ See Benjamin Buchloh, "A Note on Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977*," *October* 48 (Spring 1989): 97. Also see David Green, "From History Painting to the History of Painting and Back Again: Reflections on the Work of Gerhard Richter," in *History Painting Reassessed: The Representation of History in Contemporary Art*, eds. David Green and Peter Seddon, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 31-49.

³⁸ Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall, 2004), 21-22.



Figure 3

Dierk Schmidt, "Operation Relex" . . . Acting without Perpetrators (I), 2003. Oil on PVC, 23 x 30.5 cm. From the series *SIEV-X—On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, 2001-2005. Copyright VG Bild Kunst, courtesy the artist and Städel Museum, Frankfurt/Main.

characterized by a desire to animate and construct new ways of seeing news media fragments, and invokes a differential account of history.

For Foster, a key strategy of such contemporary artists is montage. The archival artist, he argues, creates "tendentious, even preposterous" connections between documents, building "a matrix of citations," so that something that would otherwise remain invisible or diminished becomes visible (and thinkable).³⁹ In turn, the contemporary "archival impulse"—the will to collect and re-contextualize data in the digital era—is not only a form of counter-memory, it is also a mode of paranoia: "for what is paranoia if not a practice of forced connections and bad combinations, of my own private archive, of my own notes from the underground, put on display."⁴⁰ The contemporary manifestation of the archival impulse is, then, marked by a desire to contest what is possible to see, say, and feel, driven by the artist's generation of an affective field of unexpected associations, which open up new lines of enquiry.

Accordingly, Schmidt produces tendentious, paranoid connections in his images for SIEV-X. In *"Operation Relex"...Acting without Perpetrators (I)* (2003), for example, Schmidt crops and edits photographs sourced from the online media galleries of the Australian government and stills from news outlets to create a fabricated scenario (fig. 3). The composite image situates former Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock and Prime Minister John Howard at a meeting (surrounded by anonymous figures who appear only as white outlines) that tentatively implicates them in the SIEV-X disaster. This is signified via the painting's title and subtitle *"Operation Relex"...Acting without Perpetrators*, referencing the Australian government's policy (Operation Relex), which charged the Navy with the task of patrolling the country's borders and "turning back" any boats that entered without authorization. The painting's subtitle, *Acting without Perpetrators*, brings into question the legality of the Operation Relex program amidst SIEV-X survivor statements that revealed "military type" vessels had drifted past and failed to rescue them while in the water. Schmidt's montaged images play a crucial role in attending to survivor statements and the implication of the Australian government's involvement in the sinking of SIEV-X. But they are nothing if not a result of paranoia that sees the artist piecing together, and at times intentionally displacing, available citations and data scraps in speculative configurations that allow what is otherwise invisible to enter the public domain via the aesthetic realm. *"Operation Relex"...Acting without Perpetrators* brings together, for example, a found portrait of then Prime Minister John Howard and a 2002 press photograph of Philip Ruddock meeting Indigenous leaders in the Northern Territory (the latter group completely omitted from Schmidt's image). Painting here comes to conjoin and manipulate existing sources as means of working through the lack of imagery for the SIEV-X catastrophe and unacknowledged survivor reports which (however tendentiously and schematically) implicate the Australian government in the event.

To this extent, we may say that Schmidt's work reflects modes of paranoia consistent with the artist as archivist, but he also advances another related strategy: fictionalization. As Jacques Rancière has argued, fictionalizing "does not mean telling stories, it means constructing another sense of reality, another set of connections between spaces and times, between words and visual forms, spoken word and written words, between a here and an

³⁹ Foster, "An Archival Impulse."

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.



Figure 4

Dierk Schmidt, *Freedom*, 2001-2002. Oil on PVC, 99.3 x 126 cm. From the series *SIEV-X—On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, 2001-2005. Copyright VG Bild Kunst, courtesy the artist and Städel Museum, Frankfurt/Main.



Figure 5

Dierk Schmidt, left to right, clockwise: *Franchising the Border*, 2001, *Supersymbol (III)*, 2002, *Supersymbol (I)*, 2001, *Supersymbol (II)*, 2001. From the series *SIEV-X—On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, 2001-2005. Copyright VG Bild Kunst, courtesy the artist and Städel Museum, Frankfurt/Main.



Figure 6

Installation view: Dierk Schmidt, *SIEV-X—On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, 2001-2005. In *Hostages*, Galerie Ursula Walbröl, Düsseldorf, Germany, March 7 – April 19, 2003. Photo: Achim Kukulies. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Ursula Walbröl.

elsewhere, and a now and a then."⁴¹ It gives way to new connections and semiosis, new flows and associations that diverge from the continuum of the "sensible," allowing artists to negotiate the global news media's and other dominant visual culture's (e.g. advertising) presentation of "reality."⁴²

Schmidt engages diverse visual cultures to offer a fictionalized account of SIEV-X, contextualizing the event in a richly layered network of affective signifiers. In *Freedom* (and the interrelated fragments *Franchising the Border* and *Supersymbol (I-III)*), we see schematic reproductions of stills from a 1998 Nike television advertisement featuring the Brazilian football team gliding in and out of airport security checkpoints and barriers (figs 4 and 5). Juxtaposed with Schmidt's schematic construction of the sinking of SIEV-X in *Xenophobe—Shipwreck Scene* (fig. 6), the unbounded gestures of the football players signify an idealized mode of global mobility, immune to the law, and ignorant of the intimidation of security checkpoints. Meanwhile *Xenophobe—Shipwreck Scene* relays the consequences of stymied refugee flows and the effective imposition of border protection regimes. Hanging next to the latter, *Untitled (Louvre)* represents a schematic reproduction of Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* in situ at the 1819 Salon and, less importantly, at the Louvre in 2001 (figs 6 and 7). Focusing on the former, Schmidt depicts a gesticulating crowd—men in single and double breasted waistcoats and frockcoats, cravats, high collar shirts, pantaloons, top hats and canes—debating the events of and surrounding the shipwreck, while standing below the monumental and loftily hung image of *The Raft*. The image directly reflects Peter Weiss's account of *The Raft's* reception at the 1819 Salon as found in his experimental novel, *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975-81):

The moment depicted by the painter, in which the mast of the saving frigate appears on the horizon, was charged with such despair and such turmoil that the representatives of the Bourbon restoration rightly interpreted it as a first step of a revolt against their regime [... Géricault] stood unrecognized

⁴¹ Jacques Rancière, "What Makes Images Unacceptable?," (Paper presented at Pacific North West College of the Arts, Portland, Oregon, February 29, 2008), accessed October 1, 2010. <http://homeroom.pnca.edu/inline/46842.mov>. See also Jacques Rancière, "Documentary Fiction: Marker and the Fiction of Memory," in *Film Fables* (New York; Oxford: Berg, 2006), 157-170.

⁴² Rancière, "What Makes Images Unacceptable?" Here, "reality" means the language of politicians, and the images distributed by the mass media—as such, its recalibration or "fictionalization" is contingent on the re-assemblage of such images and texts.

in the Salon Care between the festively clad ladies and gents of the high society, the court, the crowd of critics. But when he heard the cries of dismay in face of the rough, unconcealed attacks against all tradition, when he saw how they were startled by this stark despair and heard the derogatory comments [...] he was filled with satisfaction and pride.⁴³

Reflecting on the (much mythologized) impact of Géricault's work in the Salon, Schmidt argued that *Xenophobe—Shipwreck Scene* would "take up" the place of *The Raft* and intervene in public perceptions of a contemporary maritime disaster.⁴⁴ It would do so, he would suggest, by placing this image within the Australian Parliament (rather than the Salon): a notion he simply gestures to by schematically painting a border around *Xenophobe—Shipwreck Scene*, which references the wooden paneling found in the offices of the Australian Parliament.⁴⁵ Aware of the shifting roles of history painting between the nineteenth century and today, Schmidt's strategies suggest that the politics of this genre rests on its capacity to fictionalize. That is, to draw unexpected flows between visual cultures as means to re-think the politics and aesthetics of art today.

We may better understand the politics of fictionalization that underpin Schmidt's work by further considering contemporary art's (heterochronous) relationship to outmoded and current visual and knowledge regimes. Whereas in previous eras artists played a pivotal role in representing contemporary moral dilemmas and historical events, today the global news media is by far the more pervasive image and knowledge system. We do not wait for the heroic gestures of a Géricault in order to witness acts of terror and government malaise.⁴⁶ But we do wait for the artist to offer a different sense of reality, to open up new perspectives on political events, and map an alternative set of possibilities (however seemingly unthinkable). Fictionalizing, in other words, offers something that is simultaneously distinct from and in dialogue with a factual report on the state of events.

In this light, the work of Dierk Schmidt, which emerges some two hundred years after Géricault, must be seen as a vital turning point in discussions of the relevance of "history painting" to contemporary art. The conditions of government censorship and control of information today, alongside the circulation of alternative modes of information through the Internet, have given rise to a particular dialectic. Whereas the mass media and governments may repress or ignore contested historical narratives, the digital era is marked by resilient curiosity and a desire to counter and intervene in dominant visual and knowledge regimes. It does so, however, through fragmented images that reveal their contingency and limitations, and that embrace their schematic aberrations. At the same time, history, as the work of Schmidt reveals, cannot be delimited to a singular event, a climactic and definitive moment, but is rather susceptible to a process of flows. Contemporaneity, after all, is marked by

⁴³ Peter Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, (Frankfurt, Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), 426 and 483; quoted in Schmidt, *SIEV-X – On a case of intensified refugee politics*, np.

⁴⁴ I say mythology because as Thomas Crow argues, by the time the image was shown, the Government had punished those involved with the crime of the *Medusa* and reform was already under way: "the scandal [as propagated by Savigny and Corrérad] had done its work: the captain had been disgraced, the governor and minister removed." With this in mind, Géricault had hoped that his image, which symbolised government reformation, would attract the state's purchase. While to Géricault's disappointment this never manifested, "contrary to legend", argues Crow, the painting was highly ranked within the Salon's competition and granted a medal. Crow, "Classicism in Crisis: Gros to Delacroix," in *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History*, (New York, N.Y and London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 70-71.

⁴⁵ Schmidt, interview.

⁴⁶ Boris Groys, "Art and Politic," in *Where Art Worlds Meet: Multiple Modernities and the Global Salon*, ed. Robert Storr (Venice: Marsilio, 2005), 252.



Figure 7

Dierk Schmidt, *Untitled (Louvre)*, 2001-2002. Oil on canvas, 54 x 73 cm. From the series *SIEV-X—On a Case of Intensified Refugee Politics*, 2001-2005. Copyright VG Bild Kunst, courtesy the artist and Städel Museum, Frankfurt/Main.

heterochronia, by the sense that we live with “many times” (and engage with diverse visual cultures). This is why, as Schmidt’s work suggests, contemporary modes of “history painting” may best be formulated as a series of fragments that overlap, clash and loop into each other, reflecting the relentless unfolding of past, present, and future temporalities and forms of knowledge that mark our current era. But the aesthetics of heterochronia in Schmidt’s work bears another, crucial effect, too. It presents an innovative mode of counter-memory. More than just a means to contest eroded histories, counter-memory conjures multiple, dialogical temporalities and visual cultures which refuse a singular perspective of the past and open up the possibility of fictions—unexpected connections between disparate citations—as a means to contest any monopoly on reality.



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