

## **Eric Baudelaire: The Music of Ramón Raquello and his Orchestra**

Witte de With, Rotterdam, 27. 1. – 7. 5. 2017

by Jens Maier-Rothe

In Witte de With, as though by chance, Ramón Raquello's "Star Dust" wafts through the open staircase. Anyone familiar with the music from the radio play "The War of the Worlds" (1938) knows that at any moment, a fictional newscaster, in an emergency broadcast, will announce the beginning of the end of the world. And so it's all the more surprising when his voice fails to arrive. Eric Baudelaire removed all news bulletins and restored the harmless innocence of Bernard Herrmann's original music. No threat to the world, neither Martians nor "fake news"—it's as though nothing at all had happened. The gesture is as subtle as it is timely, considering the factual content of news reports has never been the subject of as much doubt as it is today.

What may seem like an incidental feature, is a keen sense of zeitgeist that adds significantly to Baudelaire's success. Ever since his first full-length film "The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi and 27 Years without Images" (2011),<sup>[1]</sup> it's been exhibition after exhibition, including solo shows in Delme (2011), London (2012), Beirut (2013), Paris, and Kassel (both 2014). Last December, he presented his first Berlin gallery exhibition at Barbara Wien, and in the blockbuster art year 2017, his name is on the list of numerous biennials. For his largest monographic show to date at Witte de With, Baudelaire announced the completion of a new feature-length film, and the expectations ahead of the opening in Rotterdam were accordingly high.

The exhibition brings together collages, photographs, videos, films, and installations from the past ten years, spread across the space and anchored by two installations featuring "The Anabasis ..." and the brand new "Also Known As Jihadi" (2017) on large screens. The two films share two components, the so-called "landscape theory" (in Japanese *fukeiron*) and the narrative figure of the Anabasis. The "landscape theory" was first introduced in the film "A.K.A. Serial Killer" (1969), co-directed by Japanese experimental filmmaker Masao Adachi. Instead of filming a convicted serial killer, Masao and his allies decided to point the camera at the landscapes their subject has seen during his life. This somewhat radical move formulates an inquiry into how power relations exert an alienating force by inscribing themselves into everyday environments. The figure of the Anabasis dates back to the Greek military commander and author Xenophon. It describes an unexpected loss of orientation in an unknown territory and the subsequent quest to return, which may or may not lead back to the point of origin.

With "The Anabasis ...", this quest became a cyclically recurring leitmotif in Baudelaire's work. Using personal recollections, political propaganda, and television imagery, "The Anabasis ..." conjures a kind of collective memory around Adachi's past as a radical filmmaker and member of the terrorist Japanese Red Army. In part juxtaposed with present-day landscape images from Tokyo and Beirut, the film also subjects Adachi's "landscape theory" to renewed scrutiny. Here, at the very latest, Baudelaire's conversation with Adachi becomes productively ambivalent. While Baudelaire adopts Adachi's concept into his own film, he also exposes it as an outdated and deterministic dogma. This

kind of productive dissent plays a decisive role in his working method and his proclaimed aim to understand and not to understand at the same time.

Even more deliberately, “Also Known As Jihadi” tests the “landscape theory” over the course of 99 minutes. The film follows in the tracks of the young Parisian Abdel Aziz Mekki, who travelled to Syria via Egypt in 2012 to become a member of the terrorist Al-Nusra front. As though searching for evidence, the hand-held camera documents places in Aziz’s life and stations along his journey, from the empty sidewalks of a Parisian suburb to Aleppo and back again. Aziz himself does not appear in the film. The only thing we know about him and his trip has been pulled from court files, such as a psychological dossier or the interrogation of a friend. Like pieces of a puzzle, these documents appear every four to seven minutes as intertitle frames, and gradually draw a criminological portrait of Aziz. Obviously, however, the actual subject at hand is the socio-political context that marginalizes and alienates an entire generation that, in turn, seeks remedy in radical violence.

In contrast to his previous films, this time Baudelaire had no direct contact with his protagonist. His works often emanate from transactions with others, in which he borrows fragments of his collaborators’ biographies and weaves them dialectically together with other real, personal, or historical stories. Instead of dissipating their heterogeneous powers in the process, he subtly charges them in opposition to one another. The resulting tension between objective and subjective poles is usually further intensified by narrating voices or text. Thus, by “juxtaposing fictions that have documentary tendencies with documents that open fictional spaces”,<sup>[2]</sup> Baudelaire distils a third plane and possible space for a shared condition.

In a similar vein, the exhibition wants to distil a shared condition for a decade of artistic work. Scattered across the space, without walls or curtains, the individual works are in conversation at all times, and two windows provide a view to the urban landscape outside. In some cases this fails to succeed, and certain objects seem somewhat lost in the space. For instance, a short section from “A.K.A. Serial Killer” (1969) seems shrunk to a footnote on a monitor on the floor, while an expansive wallpaper featuring 413 charts and graphs on the theme of terrorism (“FRAEMWROK FRMAWREOK FAMREWROK ...”, 2016) oddly renders Baudelaire’s deep tie to the social and political sciences into décor. In the end, however, Baudelaire remains true to his semiotic compass, and, as “Also Known As Jihadi” suggests, the needle points unmistakably to the *cinéma militant* of the 1960s. And so Baudelaire’s own Anabasis as an artist continues. All things considered, that's pretty good news.

Translation from German: Andrea Scrima

[1] On this, cf. the essay by Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, “Eric Baudelaire: Narrative, Form, and Metaphor in ‘The Anabases’”, in: *Camera Austria International*, No. 123/2013, pp. 13–24. The film was also shown at “once documentary”, Camera Austria, Graz, 6.6. – 7.9.2014.

[2] Defne Ayas, Natasha Hoare, Samuel Saelemakers (eds.), *Witte de With Visitor’s Guide January–May 2017*, Rotterdam: Witte de With 2017, n p.