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Christoph Draeger, *Black September*¹

On September 5, 2002, Christoph Draeger's solo show opened at the Magnus Müller Gallery in Berlin. The exhibition consisted of a video installation entitled *Black September*,² which Draeger made in New York at the end of the year 2001.³ The opening date of the show, as the artist intended, was by no means accidental, but on the contrary, deeply meaningful, on different historical levels. First, it signaled the thirtieth anniversary of the hostage-taking and subsequent killing of eleven Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, by the Palestinian terrorist group known as Black September.⁴ Draeger's work is titled after the latter, as it focuses on this terrorist act which spoke for the rising of international terrorism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Second, September 2002 marked the first-year anniversary of 9/11, the most blatant

¹ I would like to thank Christoph Draeger for meeting with me in April 2006 as I was working on this paper. Christoph's answers to my questions regarding *Black September* and his work in general were full of insight and extremely helpful to me.

² Other exhibition venues of *Black September* notably include Roebbling Hall (New York), Susanne Vielmetter Projects (Los Angeles), Montevideo (Amsterdam), Art Unlimited (Basel), Consejeria de las artes (Madrid.) Up-coming venues include Poland and Oldenburg, Germany.

³ Christoph Draeger was born in Zurich in 1965. After graduating from the School of Visual Arts in Luzern and from the *École nationale supérieure des Arts Visuels de la Cambre* in Brussels, he joined, in 1996, the International Studio Program at P.S.1 in New York. He has been living and working there since. He is represented by Roebbling Hall Gallery in New York.

⁴ On the night of September 4, eight members of Black September entered the Olympics Village. Two Israeli athletes – Moshe Weinberg and Yossef Romano – were killed during the initial break-in. The terrorists then managed to take hostage nine Israeli athletes and demanded the release of 234 Palestinians jailed in Israel. After a series of fruitless negotiations, they asked for a plane to fly them to Cairo. German snipers went to the airport, with the intention to assault the terrorists there. However, the rescue failed: all Israeli athletes, as well as five members of Black September and a German police officer, were killed.

terrorist attack ever, performed on the North-American territory and accountable for the killing of nearly 3,000 people.

In addition to their terrorist nature, both events, consistently with one of the inner motivations of terrorism – namely, receiving the largest public attention possible – were widely covered by the media, including live television transmission: as spectators stared for hours, through their TV screen, at the exterior façade of the hotel where the Israeli athletes were held hostages, so they witnessed live, some thirty years later, the collapse of the towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. In this context, *Black September* can be qualified as a post-9/11 work, insofar as it addresses, in the aftermath of 9/11, the interplay between terrorism and media.⁵ More specifically, it does so through the lens of a comparable event which occurred just a generation earlier, but that has been somewhat occulted. In terms of artistic strategy, *Black September* therefore denotes a historical impulse, since it reflects on a recent and traumatizing event by looking back on a historical precedent; in other words, it retraces the genesis of this event and inscribes it within a larger historical context, while the evocation of the Munich events also echoes the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As an installation, *Black September* essentially consists of a fourteen-minute color video, combining archival footage from the media coverage of the attack with a fictional reconstruction of what happened within the hotel room where the hostages were being held. In addition, the work includes an actual reconstruction of the hotel room, leading to a dark room where the video is projected. A passageway between the two rooms allows

⁵ Draeger claims this designation. Compared to some other artists, such as Tony Oursler, who released in 2001 a video untitled *9/11* which documented the unfolding of this event from the day of the attack through its subsequent repercussions on New Yorkers, Draeger's response was slightly delayed. It was not an immediate reaction, but one that emerged in the course of the aftermath of the attack.

the visitor to watch the video projection as he/she stands in the hotel reconstruction area (fig. 1, 2, 3.)

Munich and 9/11, roughly spanning a generation, indicate how television, through its steady, growing invasion of Western homes, has become responsible for the way in which our relationship to reality is defined. Accordingly, Carrie Lambert-Beatty has pointed out our inescapable condition of “citizens of the mediascape.” This remark resonates with Guy Debord’s notion of the *spectacle*. Indeed, as Jonathan Crary argued, the emergence of the spectacle in the 1960s notably implied the rise of mass media and communication technology, insofar as the spectacle stood for all modes of social relations generated by modern societies.⁶ In this context, television obviously occupied a privileged place.

From an art historical perspective, the assessment of our immersion in the media environment has generated a myriad of critical responses from a wide range of artists: from Nam June Paik’s mid-1960s optimistic outlook on the artistic potential of television and constant reinvention of its use as a means of communication and sculptural object, to Draeger’s recent sociological and political critique of television news, particularly in terms of TV’s handling of catastrophic events and its implications on the formation of the collective consciousness. For arguably, television does exert a certain monopoly on our perception of disasters, from earthquakes to plane crashes, from famines to genocides, from war events to terrorist attacks – all of which are dealt with by television on the basis of a careful rhetoric and specific visual syntax claiming objectivity, but also revealing a

⁶ Jonathan Crary, “Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory,” *October*, No. 50, Autumn 1989, p. 96-107.

constant chasing after audiences. TV channels' battle over audiences notably implies, as it is recurrently criticized, an escalation in terms of the exploitation of the disaster in its immediate spectacular force. Then, this acute moment of attention is followed by an abrupt disengagement from that disaster, for the purpose of keeping the audience tuned. Indeed, TV audiences have been precisely trained by the media to quickly shift their attention from one event to another. In other words, rather than processing an event, television audiences are invited to merely consume it, that is, to give in to an amnesic relationship to catastrophe. This media effect was singled out early on by artists, particularly when the Vietnam War – “the living room war” as Michael Arlen from the *New Yorker* called it in 1966 – hit homes through televised images. For instance, in her 1968 statement, Yvonne Rainer wrote expressively: “[This statement] is a reflection of a state of mind that reacts with horror and disbelief upon seeing a Vietnamese shot dead on TV – not at the sight of death, however, but at the fact that the TV can be shut off afterwards as after a bad Western.”⁷

Thus, Draeger's work is inscribed within the larger artistic current, going back to the origins of video art, characterized by a formal and conceptual deconstruction of news and information discourse in relation to violence. Works such as *The Eternal Frame* (Ant Farm, 1975), *Hey Bud* (Julie Zando, 1987) and *Video Violence* (Peter Bogers, 1998), covering three successive decades, speak for artists' persistent effort in this sense. As for Draeger, his explicit critical angle is that of the media approach in respect to recent and contemporary disasters. As a result, his work appears to be driven by a conceptual triad, involving history, reality and temporality.

⁷ Yvonne Rainer, “Statement,” March 1968, in: Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961-73*, Halifax and New York: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, New York University Press, 1974.

Draeger's work notably includes video, video installation, and photography. Among his photographic work is the series entitled *Voyages Apocalyptiques*, which speaks eloquently for the interaction between past and present inherent in his work. Draeger undertook *Voyages Apocalyptiques* in 1994 and it is a work-in-progress.⁸ It consists of photographs taken in places around the world where a disaster once occurred: Hiroshima (Japan), the Furiani stadium (Bastia, Corsica), Cape Canaveral (Florida), the Tunnel of the Mont-Blanc (Chamonix, France), among others. However, Draeger purposely traveled to these sites long after the catastrophes happened. As a result, traces of the disasters have disappeared from the landscape, though they remain in the consciousness of those hit by it. In fact, the landscape has often recovered an idyllic quality which conceals its traumatized past. *Voyages Apocalyptiques* thus operates on a mnemonic level, counter-acting the forgetful media, resolutely committed to address presentness. In this sense, the viewing of the *Voyages Apocalyptiques* is anything but passive, as opposed to watching/consuming news on television. For the photographs prompt the viewer to a mental, historical reconstruction of the event that once occurred in this site.

Draeger's *Jigsaws* proceed from a similar approach. They consist of actual images of destruction (TWA Flight 800 crash, WTC Ground Zero, etc.) made into jigsaws of 4,000 to 8,000 pieces. The jigsaws are exhibited in their completed form. However, their potential de-semblage and subsequent re-semblage, which would

⁸ A selection of the *Voyages Apocalyptiques* is currently on view at P.S.1, New York, in the group show entitled "Reprocessing Reality," curated by Claudia Spinelli (closes May 29, 2006). Some *Voyages Apocalyptiques* were also recently exhibited at the Galerie Anne de Villepoix, Paris (Jan. 19-Feb. 26, 2006), which represents the artist.

involve considerable time given the number of pieces constituting the jigsaw, would engage the viewer in a temporal experience resembling a symbolic act of remembrance of the tragedy, whereby the destruction that it entailed would be paradoxically reconstructed, that is, consciously acknowledged.

Draeger's work can be described as performing an archaeology of the present in its catastrophic dimension, thwarting the fleeting message transmitted by the media, governed by the tyranny of the "here and now" and controlled by an oppressive "next." As mentioned already, the attention that artists have paid to the language of television can be traced back to the 1970s and extends to today, as Draeger's work evidences. However, Draeger's focus on the representation of contemporary and recent catastrophes also reaches back to an earlier artistic model. That is, a particular vein of early nineteenth-century history painting, which abandoned edifying subject-matters coming from mythology, Christianity and glorifying history, to the benefit of the representation of current tragic events, unveiling the dark side of humanity: the casualties of military campaigns, the victims of political assassinations, the actors of outrageous acts of cannibalism. The artist suggested through the enumeration of these terrifying subject-matters coming from his own contemporary history is Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), who forcefully transgressed the academic standards of history painting when he depicted, in 1819, the gruesome *fait divers* of the Raft of the Medusa. Interestingly, in 2004, Christoph Draeger conceived a video installation whose title, *The Raft of the Macumba*,

made expressly reference to Géricault's painting.⁹ While this reference creates a local link between the two artists, greater resonances seem to be at stake, including an aesthetic based on the real.

The hostage-taking at the 1972 Olympic Games occupies an important place in media history since it is among the first events where political violence was performed on TV and experienced as such by thousands of spectators. Indeed, the members of Black September planned their attack knowing that the media would already be on location and that most likely, it would not resist to report live on their action, dominated by violence and intensified by unexpectedness. The role of TV as a platform for terrorist actions has been emphasized before. As expert on international terrorism Brian Jenkins put it:

“Terrorists choreograph their violence. Terrorism is theater.”¹⁰ Walter Laqueur, for his part, argued:

Terrorists have learned that the media are of paramount importance in their campaigns, that the terrorist act by itself is next to nothing, whereas publicity is all. But the media, constantly in need of diversity and new angles, make fickle friends. Terrorists will always have to be innovative. They are, in some respects, the super-entertainers of our time.¹¹

This statement from the late 1970s significantly resonates with the way in which 9/11 unfolded, insofar as the visual impact of the images was tremendous partly because it involved a great deal of theatricality, somehow pushing to the extreme Walter Benjamin's notion of the “aesthetization of politics.” Similarly, in *Black September*, the

⁹ *The Raft of the Macumba* was shown at Les Abbatoirs, Toulouse, France, on the occasion of the festival “Le Printemps de Septembre” in 2004. The reference to Géricault essentially applies to the title.

¹⁰ Brian M. Jenkins, “Responsibilities of the News Media,” *Terrorism and the Media*, London: International Press Institute, 1980 (unpaged).

¹¹ Walter Laqueur, *Terrorism*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977, p. 223.

emphasis is very much placed on how the media completed the terrorists' action. The video starts with an archival shot of the hotel façade, introducing the general context of the narrative. Then the viewer is immediately brought into the fictional hotel room where the hostages are locked in. One of the terrorists enters the room and his first words to his accomplice are: "Switch on the TV." The *ABC* logo shows up on the screen and sports journalist Jim McKay, who became famous for covering the Munich events, announces that he is reporting to us *live* from the *ABC* headquarters in Munich, West Germany. From this point on, TV news remains a consistent presence/actor during the entire duration of *Black September*. Its occurrence is either visual or audible, with Jim McKay's face or voice incessantly punctuating the five sequences constituting the video: the cohabitation of the hostages and terrorists in the room (sometimes involving confrontation); the extension of the initial deadline; the suspension of the games; the failure of "Operation Sunshine;" and the hostages and terrorists' departure from the hotel to reach the airport. Thus, the video keeps as its focus the series of events that happened within the hotel room, including the shooting of weightlifter Yossef Romano, and does not extend to the final shooting at the airport. For what primarily interested Draeger in the Munich events was the unique feedback situation, involving the media occupying the exterior of the hotel and directing its gaze towards the hotel façade; the interior of the hotel room where the hostages and terrorists were – a space to which the media did not have access; and the TV set, in the hotel room, retransmitting live to the terrorists and hostages what was happening outside the hotel.

One of the main media concepts addressed by *Black September* is that of live TV, a word that keeps popping up in the archival footage included in the video: McKay, as well as people directly involved in the event, including a member of “Operation Sunshine,” use it. This indicates that in the 1970s, the liveness of TV was already a crucial aspect of television specificity. Media theorists have discussed this issue at length and logically identified temporality, and more specifically the present, as the pivot of liveness. TV’s capacity to show an event in real time, *i.e.*, as it is happening right at this moment somewhere in the world, secures, as Robert Stam noted, a kind of instant gratification in respect to the viewer’s incessant desire for narrative pleasure. Indeed, television holds great power over this desire since “live transmission makes possible real, as opposed to fabricated, suspense.”¹² Similarly, Janet Feuer argued: “Television as an ideological apparatus positions the spectator into its ‘imaginary’ of presence and immediacy.”¹³

This quest for presentness, inseparable from a consciousness of the constant fleeting present, goes back to one of the main challenges that painting set for itself in the age of modernity, that is, the representation of the present. The paradox inherent to this attempt was pointed out by Charles Baudelaire in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” in which the author stresses the impossible coexistence of the painter’s commitment to the present with its representation.¹⁴ For the process of representation

¹² Robert Stam, “Television News and Its Spectator,” *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, Maryland: University Publications of America, and the American Film Institute, 1983, p. 23.

¹³ Janet Feuer, “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” *Regarding Television*, *ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴ Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon, 1964, p. 1-40. Written in 1859, first published in 1863.

implies a moment of looking back, of return, putting in question the coming into being of the present. Television, endowed with the power of liveness, resolves this paradox, which, according to Baudelaire, was addressed in the work of artist Constantin Guys. In this context, what is crucial in the feedback situation that Draeger brings to bear in *Black September* is the potential perversity of live TV, or danger that may involve the representation of the present, made possible by the technological capabilities of television and publicized as its internal strength. Indeed, the live coverage of the Munich events had a major consequence: as a group of German volunteers prepared to assault by surprise the hotel room in which the terrorists kept the athletes, the members of the so-called “Operation Sunshine” suddenly realized that TV cameras were filming them as they were approaching the room, and that all of their moves were being retransmitted live on TV. And as it happened, each hotel room was equipped with a TV set: the terrorists could therefore follow the preparation of the assault from the very room where they were holding the hostages. Meanwhile, the media was achieving live suspense in the greatest possible form, keeping all audiences tuned. In view of the situation, “Operation Sunshine” was eventually stopped before the Germans hit the room.¹⁵ The failure of “Operation Sunshine” signaled a success for the terrorists – one that all terrorist attacks ultimately seek: using the media to exacerbate the dysfunctional quality of the territory attacked. As Philip Schlesinger argued, this process generated the concept of “the guilty media,” for television tends to succumb, for commercial reasons, to cover stories that, in the end, suit the terrorists. Schlesinger wrote: “From an official point of view, one of the greatest threats represented by terrorism is the way it undermines the credibility of the

¹⁵ This was the first failed rescue attempt on Germany’s part. It is not confirmed whether the terrorists actually did watch “Operation Sunshine” on TV, but it is likely.

government and its perceived ability to maintain the secure functioning of the social order.”¹⁶

The liveness that governed the unfolding of the Munich events is evoked in the installation version of *Black September*. The reconstituted hotel room is messy as though the terrorists and hostages had just left. There are stains of blood on the floor and sports gear all over the room. The TV is still on, showing archival news footage synchronized with the events shot by Draeger in his own *Black September* video, which is projected in the adjacent room. The collision between the archival footage, insisting on the live transmission, and the reenactment of the action within the hotel room, revealing what was happening inside the hotel as the media was covering the story, prompts the viewer, to re-live, to some extent, the event. In fact, early in the first sequence of the video, a single shot shows a juxtaposition of the outside and inside of the hotel; this choice of montage signifies for the viewer the supposed temporal simultaneity of the two types of images – documentary and fictional – that he/she is invited to watch. In actuality, different temporalities coexist in *Black September*: the German volunteer’s testimony on the outcome of “Operation Sunshine” suggests a looking back on the situation, after the fact. However, the passageway between the reconstruction of the hotel room and the projection room insinuates the actual presence of the terrorists and hostages: their life-size projection within the environment now occupied by the visitor limits the temporal disjunction between the past presence of the actors playing the terrorists and the hostages at the time of the video shooting, and the experience of the viewer happening in his/her own present.

¹⁶ Philip Schlesinger, Graham Murdock, Philip Elliott, *Televising ‘Terrorism’: Political violence in Popular Culture*, London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1983, p. 11.

A direct implication of the instantaneous feedback that characterized the Munich events, which is critically examined in *Black September*, is the correlation between catastrophe and technology. Plane hijacks are an obvious example of this link. In an essay entitled “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” Mary Ann Doane argued: “Catastrophe does always seem to have something to do with technology and its potential collapse (...) Catastrophe is thus, through its association with industrialization and the advance of technology, ineluctably linked with the idea of Progress.”¹⁷ This remark is supported by Lynn Spigel’s examination of choices in TV programming in the days, weeks and months following 9/11. She noted that on *ABC*, on September 15, 2001, a series of historical documentaries were broadcasted. Spigel commented:

Interestingly, given the breakdown in surveillance, aviation, and communication technologies that enabled the [9/11] attacks, all of the chosen histories [the historical documentaries broadcasted that afternoon] were about great achievements of great men using great technologies, especially transportation and communications technologies.¹⁸

In *Black September*, the tension between technological progress and disaster is directly connected to television technology. This is worth noting in view of other events of historical scope, where TV was involved but not responsible for causing or increasing a disaster. The Romanian Revolution of December 1989, “a televised event,”¹⁹ is exemplary in this sense, as Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica’s video titled *Videogramme*

¹⁷ Mary Ann Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” *Logics of Television. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 229-230.

¹⁸ Lynn Spigel, “Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 2, June 2004, p. 241.

¹⁹ Christa Blümlinger, “Harun Farocki ou l’art de traiter les entre-deux,” *Reconnaître et Poursuivre. Textes d’Harun Farocki*, Paris: TH. TY, 2002, p. 15.

einer Revolution (1992) emphasized. Indeed, the filmmakers recreated with TV and amateur footage a visual chronicle of the uprising that led to the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu, including the besieging of the TV headquarters by the Romanians – a symbolic act considering TV’s relation to political power. However, the political contexts within which the Munich events and the 1989 Romanian Revolution occurred should be differentiated – West Germany in contrast to a country under the control of an authoritarian regime. While both events foregrounded the interplay between power and television, in the case of Munich, it was the logic of capitalism which was at work: although the TV reporters certainly did not intend to impair the hostages’ rescue attempt, audience was obviously an issue. In this context, *Black September* performs a critique of media that specifically applies to the way in which it functioned in the West in the 1970s (and continues to do so),²⁰ while the set of political parameters characterizing Romania in the late 1980s were entirely different and the media subjected to complete political control and censorship.

At the same time, there are some strong similarities between Farocki/Ujica’s and Draeger’s videos, not only in terms of the examination of how television may be intertwined with the unfolding of events, but in respect to TV’s participation in the writing of the historical narrative. Philippe Azoury noted about *Videogramme einer Revolution*: “In a sense, this one and a half hour film [sic] holds in one image: this amateur pan shot, moving from the window of an apartment in the center of Bucharest (from which one can see the protestors’ banners) to the TV screen retransmitting live the

²⁰ The relation between TV and capitalism is discussed by Lynn Spigel in her essay “Entertainment Wars,” op. cit., p. 242 and following.

sound of a revolution.’²¹ This remark echoes the instant feedback situation that caught Draeger’s attention in the first place when he looked into the Munich events and which his installation underscores. But in addition, in both cases, TV was one of the main sources to access the events in question, no matter how inflected its language might be, in spite of its pretense of objectivity. Indeed, TV footage is key to both videos. And importantly, as far as artistic strategies and conceptual intentions are concerned, the use of footage by the artists is similar, insofar as through the editing, TV footage is the means through which the artists manage to recover as much as possible of the event and are able to reconstruct the linear arch of the narrative. In *Videogramme einer Revolution*, Ujica and Farocki made a tremendous work of re-assemblage of all the TV and amateur footage they were able to put their hands on, in order to give a full account of the uprising that started when Ceausescu gave what turned out to be his last speech. For the TV staff was precisely instructed to stop the live transmission of Ceausescu’s speech when the sound of protesters began to increase and eventually became too perceptible (TV claimed a technical problem). Likewise, in *Black September*, the reconstruction of what happened within the hotel room, although fictional, is kept to the strict minimum, aiming at sticking as closely as possible to what may have actually happened there, on the basis of established information. On several occasions, the editing aims at restoring continuity: for instance, when the video shows the footage of the masked terrorist standing on the balcony, then returning inside the room – the most emblematic image of the Munich events (fig. 4) – the following shot shows him (his surrogate) inside the room: linearity and completeness are clearly intended. In a sense, the fictional reconstruction in *Black*

²¹ Philippe Azoury, “Videogramme einer Revolution,” *Reconnaître et Poursuivre*, op. cit. p. 116. My translation from French.

September replaces the missing footage, the one that existed in the case of the Romanian Revolution, thanks to amateurs.

All the footage appearing in *Black September* comes from 1999 Kevin Mac Donald's documentary *One Day in September*, a somehow mainstream Hollywood film reporting on the Munich events, whose dramatic music is also featured in *Black September*.²² The confrontation between *One Day in September* and *Black September* brings forth the antagonism of the narrative modes adopted by Mac Donald and Draeger: the latter delivers an uninflected, plain account of the events, whereas the former reveals a one-sided perspective. In this context, *Black September* also embodies a critique of certain aspects of the documentary, a genre often endowed with ideological claims and that has recently gained great currency as Spigel noted. By contrast, the effort of looking back and the work of reconstruction that drove Farocki/Ujica's and Draeger's respective projects proceed from a method dismissing the "spotlight effect"²³ to the profit of proper historical attention.

Commenting on *Videogramme einer Revolution*, Harun Farocki wrote: "Fall 1989 is engraved in our memory through its succession of visual events: Prague, Berlin, Bucharest. Judging by the images, it was the return of History. We were seeing revolutions."²⁴ Farocki's tone shows a certain ardor in view of major historical events that signaled the possibility of actual political and social transformation. Similarly, his video conveys the sense of liberation resulting from the overthrow of Ceausescu's

²² *One day in September* was awarded the Oscar for best documentary at the 2000 Academy Awards.

²³ Alfred Guzzetti's term.

²⁴ Harun Farocki quoted in: *Programme Cinéma Centre Pompidou*, Sept., Oct., Nov. 2004, p. 76.

regime, in spite of the clashes and violence that it entailed. The nature of the Munich events is of course different: one is dealing with terrorism, not with revolution. In this context, Draeger's outlook on the Munich events is unsurprisingly disillusioned, sometimes out of step. This is palpable in the video: the language of the reenactment is raw and unsophisticated. On the one hand, the set shows some authenticity, insofar as the clothes and the room match the information one can get from the archival images, but the "actors" are not really credible (the terrorist wearing the pink suit is actually played by Draeger himself and the rest of the cast consists of his friends). The language used by the hostages, such as "You have to give us fucking water, man" is unlikely, given the cultural context. The sense of drama is mostly conveyed through the music (coming from *One Day in September*) and the slow motion, used on several occasions, rather than by the acting. Tension is tangible, especially with the killing of Yossef Romano, but overall, there is an absurd quality to the reenactment which leaves the viewer puzzled. In addition, the constant back and forth between the TV footage and the reenactment, each governed by entirely different languages but nevertheless assembled, prevents the viewer from associating the video with a specific genre. Alternatively dominated by the language of the news, the B crime movie and the reality show, *Black September* is an unclassifiable work, juggling with various television idioms. In this respect, as it has been noted earlier, *Black September* goes back to the strategy of media deconstruction undertaken by a number of artists since the inception of video as an artistic medium, and notably challenges how emotions are conventionally transmitted by television. Indeed, based on the way in which the events are reenacted in *Black September*, it is hard for the

viewer to identify with a feeling of drama, fear or irony. By contrast, when we watch TV, the emotion we are supposed to feel is very transparently conveyed.

Beyond its formal and conceptual specificities, the subject-matter of *Black September* and of Draeger's work in general – catastrophe – is inscribed within a category of contemporary art which came to the fore around 2000 and whose coordinates are history and reality. The profusion of videos conceived by visual artists, approaching and challenging the genre of the documentary, speaks for this new tendency. A rapid glance at recent international exhibitions shows its scope, including *Manifesta 3* (Ljubljana, 2000), the 49th *Venice Biennale* (2001) and *Documenta 11* (2002). In fact, the title of the group exhibition currently on view at P.S.1, *Reprocessing Reality*, in which Draeger's work is included, illustrates perfectly this interaction between history and reality that contemporary artists are presently at work with. In a recent catalogue essay, Nicolas Bourriaud condemned this expanding artistic inclination:

The question of the representation of reality in contemporary art is inevitably voided in the format of the documentary film alone. This format indeed allows one to affirm a 'concern' for the political that in too many cases ill masks the formal and ideological indolence by the artists using it (...) This domination of the documentary figures as a symptom, that of a loss of confidence in the power of art as a signifying system capable of expressing through its own means our relationship with the world. For many artists, but also for a growing majority of theoreticians and curators, *CNN* thus represents both the formal matrix of art today and the system with which it 'competes' (...) Both the urgency of current events and the spectacular, which one would assume are incompatible with art's own agenda, have in fact invaded it.²⁵

²⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, "Topocritique: contemporary art and geographic inquiry," *Global Navigation System*, catalogue of an exhibition held at the Palais de Tokyo, June 5-Sept. 7, 2003, p. 13-14.

Beyond Bourriaud's somewhat quick assertion that artists' relationship to reality materializes only through the documentary film format, one of the art historical questions that arises from his remark is why such a significant group of artists suddenly expresses a common need to confront recent and contemporary events, by means of a visual language denoting a documentary quality; what are the causes of this "symptom." According to Bourriaud, the main cause is that artists, willing to attract audiences, are succumbing to using mainstream communication means: "The actors in the art milieu realize that they are surrounded by means of expression based on an industrial apparatus (fashion, cinema, television) that benefits from an incredible impact on the public."²⁶ However, the question could also be approached from an art historical angle, which would require to look at earlier artistic manifestations focusing on this intersection between history and reality.

Reviewing the second *Greater New York* show which took place at P.S.1 in Spring 2005, which notably featured Draeger's work, Eleanor Heartney questioned whether the show indicated a "return to the real."²⁷ While this formulation implies that the real has been an artistic issue before, Heartney did not reference any specific artistic movements. The work of Géricault, however, appears as a crucial precedent in respect to the emergence of the real in its contemporary tragic dimension within the artistic realm, and as a result, as a lens through which to think about Draeger's work in art historical terms.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 14.

²⁷ Eleanor Heartney, "Return to the Real?" *Art in America*, June-July 2005, p. 84-89.

The association of Géricault's work with the notion the real, *i.e.*, with the representation of the actuality of the contemporary world, was first emphasized on the occasion of the conference devoted to the artist in 1991.²⁸ Géricault's most famous project, *The Raft of the Medusa* (Salon of 1819, fig. 5), exemplifies not only the artist's preoccupation with the intrusion of the real in the realm of painting, but his conception of this notion, implying the depiction of a disastrous recent event (Summer of 1816) engaging with a range of social and political issues: in addition to the cannibalism scandal, the shipwreck of the *Medusa*, which happened in the year following the establishment of the Bourbons Restoration, shamefully spoke for the compromised nature of the regime, which irresponsibly chose a captain not on the basis of his competence, but because he was close to the power in place. Géricault's project therefore amounted to reveal the world *as it is*, *i.e.*, cruel, corrupted, shattering. The works that Géricault executed in 1818-19 on the topic of Napoleon's troops retreating from Russia (1812) and its aftermath also express the real in its *gericaultian* understanding: in *Cart of Wounded Soldiers* (fig. 6), the painter visually demystified the Napoleonic campaigns, while in *The Swiss Sentinel at the Louvre* (fig. 7), he depicted an ex-soldier, once a Napoleonic hero but now a mere invalid, mockingly glanced at by a Restoration's sympathizer. Another eloquent example of Géricault's focus on the most hostile aspects of his epoch is his 1817 series of drawings representing the assassination of Antoine-Bernardin Fualdès, presumably by some Royalists who blamed him for tracking down the actors of the second *White Terror* in the Summer of 1815, directed against the Bonapartists and the

²⁸ See: *Actes du Colloque Géricault 14-17 Nov., 1991*, ed. Régis Michel, Paris: La Documentation Française, 1996.

Republicans. Fualdès' throat was cut, and a pig was brought in to drink the man's blood (fig. 8).

Taken as a whole, Géricault's subject-matters brutally point out to the deep sense of political instability that characterized the French post-Revolutionary period, epitomized by the national trauma resulting from the collapse of the Napoleonic adventure and the complete disenchantment that the Bourbons Restoration embodied for those who believed in the Republic. The radical rupture that the ideals of 1789 initiated were naturally still very much inscribed in the collective consciousness in the early nineteenth century, and consequently, the Restoration represented an obvious failure. The strong feeling of disillusionment that contaminated this period is tangible in Géricault's work, as his sinister subject-matters and his violent visual language, disclosing the ugly, the tragic, the unspeakable, evidence. These elements are also at the core of Draeger's work, which, like Géricault's, can be assimilated to an aesthetic of the real in its devastating dimension. Therefore, rather than associating Draeger's appropriation of the language of the real with a weak submission to the means of mass communication, it might be more productive to examine the set of historical conditions that may motivate his scrutiny of the actuality of the contemporary world and his attempt to inscribe it within a historical perspective – a strategy that echoes Géricault's project, also topical and historical in essence. In other words, in an attempt to understand why today's artistic tendency broadly designated as "documentary" has become a major voice of contemporary art in the past few years as the work of Christoph Draeger shows, a closer exploration of the historical context in which this artist is working, in view of Géricault's response to his own contemporary context, may help understanding why

artists have recently demonstrated an increasing concern with revealing the real – a question that will be the focus of a subsequent paper.