

This essay accompanies the exhibition Mark Boulos: *No Permanent Address*  
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## Before Disillusion: Mark Boulos's Video Works

by Juan Gaitán

Does he exhaust the possible because he is himself exhausted, or is he exhausted because he has exhausted the possible?

– Gilles Deleuze, “The Exhausted”

### *Introductions to the Subject*

Mark Boulos's *The Word Was God* (2006) features a group of people gathered inside an unassuming house of worship. Communally, even collaboratively, the congregants begin to speak in tongues. Starting with a low, absorbed hum, they gradually raise their voices, their mutterings becoming louder and louder, ascending into rhapsodies of collective ecstasy, before falling back again into low, introspective murmurs. The worshippers experience this rapture alone, but their experience on earth is methodical and reciprocal. It seems that by the sway or sways of collective action they are propelled out of history into the space of the divine. An allegory?

The congregation belongs to a Christian movement generally known as Pentecostalism (a blanket term), the practice of which includes such instances of glossolalia: the uttering of sounds that resemble speech and which, in this case, is meant to reveal a language unknown to the believer – a primordial and divine language, unmediated and thus unintelligible, even to the one producing it. In Boulos's work, however, the historical complexities of this religious practice remain deliberately unexplained or, more accurately, underexplained. What we need to know about this practice is what the image itself already shows: there is a congregation; each one of the congregants is playing a vital (but replaceable) part in a collective effort; this effort follows rhythmic movements, the rhythm itself framing the encounter of the individual with the collective. A frame within a frame.

Formative explanations are a common characteristic of documentary filmmaking. In documentary filmmaking,

images are usually conceived as information, or even as background for information, supplements – their information quotient overdetermining other aesthetic or subjective quotients. Yet we know that in order to convey a fact, let alone to represent a truth (an even more daunting task), images need more than just themselves. They require a discourse that affirms their indexical immediateness, and this discourse can only be established through the written and spoken word. The further away an image is from the viewer's present, the more testimony is needed to its origin, which is to say, to its subjects' own place and time – the moment of the photograph. According to this well-visited discourse, whose main references are Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin, images don't address a fixed subject. They fix their subjects in a present that immediately becomes the past, releasing their semblance into a string of future presents, each of which becomes a site for the subject's affirmation and repetition. The capturing of an image is therefore already an abstraction of the subject from the environment in which it can act as a subject. The question thus becomes not how to return the subject to its environment (or the environment to its subject) but rather how to ensure that the image and its subject remain unreconciled, lingering in a space of nondeterminacy in which they (subject and environment, or the subject and its conditions) can become, as Benjamin would have put it, something new.

By withholding “sufficient” explanations, it seems that Boulos's engagement with documentary filmmaking opposes this genre's paranoiac treatment of the image, and its subsequently hostile relationship to the image's

structural indeterminacy. For to allow the image to remain undetermined is to also allow it to speak otherwise; otherwise it remains within the space of a hyper-codified “aesthetic of objectivity,” to recall a critique by Trinh T. Minh-ha, caught in “the development of comprehensive technologies of truth capable of promoting what is right and what is wrong.” Boulos’s Pentecostals (or, as this computer’s autocorrect function recommended, *Pentecost lists*) seem to suggest the contrary, namely that such discernments between right and wrong cannot be made through the language given to us, whose (scientific) grammar is fraught by the contingencies of mediation, technological or otherwise. Thus, setting aside the specifically religious phenomenon that it frames and marks out, this image refers us to a space that remains beyond the reach of Reason and signification – a horizon, so to speak, not of religion but of politics.

Like the work of several of his contemporaries (artists and intellectuals whose political thinking is set against the rhizomatic relativization of causes and interests that make up today’s public sphere), Mark Boulos’s work emerges out of a need to grapple with a current (and surely historical) impasse: the impossibility of discerning what is right and what is wrong from among an indefinitely disjointed series of possibilities and truths, especially in terms of political action. One could approach this impasse by way of nostalgia: travel into time to revisit a moment when it seemed possible to distinguish good from bad political practices – a time in which the word “revolution” still had a relatively stable meaning. But, of course, the impulse to go back

to such an historical moment has first to contend with the fantasies that make one think, or hope, that such a moment indeed existed; then with the problem of whether the right conditions for it could, and *should*, emerge again. While it now seems clear that the rudely dialectical order that dominated “the short twentieth century” made it at least conceivable to take absolutist views with respect to political action and thought, today’s politics and ethics seem to emerge, as it were, “liberated” from such strict methodological and ideological ordinances. And yet the effects of this semantic liberation, this relativization, seem to include a current incapacity to produce the image of collective affirmation that (albeit with an extrahistorical purpose in mind) the Pentecostals allegorize in Boulos’s work – the image of individual investments and interests strategically and necessarily assembled into a moment of collective action. To make the point in a rather axiomatic way, we seem to be in the space of Deleuze’s second clause, *exhausted because we have exhausted the possible*, when we should ideally (politically) be in the space of the first clause, *exhausting the possible because we are exhausted*.

### *Into History*

There are three projections in Mark Boulos’s most recent video installation, *No Permanent Address* (2010), so that each scene is split in three, a triptych. Most shots focus on individual subjects – men, boys, women – the majority of whom belong to the New People’s Army (NPA), the armed faction of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). At times, all three screens display the same image, but only briefly, as one or two



Comrade Teteng, production still, *No Permanent Address*, detail, 2010. Courtesy of Galerie Diana Stigter.

of the screens soon drift toward other time frames, anticipating another scene, or toward entirely different subjects. Some shots, betraying an ethnographic tradition, are set on scenes of daily life – people cleaning weapons, chopping wood, cooking, lying on hammocks, sleeping – but they are never left to represent this reality alone. One is never allowed to forget that these scenes do not represent some “native” life. Most, but not all, scenes show people talking about joining the army, about how and why they enlisted, what life they’ve left behind, and about love. That these lives left behind are not shown is already a sign of an eye – a filmmaker’s eye – that refuses to indulge too much in the crude opposition between “bourgeois” and “revolutionary,” on whose insistence rests much of the inability of the Left to respond to the contemporary world and its representations. Nevertheless, there are glimpses in the film of the role that such oppositions continue to play in the minds of young militants – a role that may be more structural than ideological. Through these glimpses one sees a world that stares at us as if from another time.

Many of the people in Boulos’s film are shown holding machine guns, which they handle in a way that seems “natural” to their daily lives. Notably, only men, women, and boys – often much younger than the women – are present; there are no girls. Intellectual and tactical leadership seems to rest on the shoulders of women.

In the opening scene, a boy answers questions about his love life: “If you are asking about romance,” he says, “it’s not on my mind right now.” He laughs. “But I am aware of the Party’s regulations.” The regulations

regarding love are as clear as they are simple. Should there be interest in someone, inform the comrades. Make sure that love doesn’t turn you into a civilian. Do your best to ensure that love brings more civilians into the revolutionary fold.

A boy declares that he is gay; he likes other men. “It was difficult at first. I wasn’t used to explosives. I wasn’t used to long runs or battlefields. But in time,” he says with a nodding frown, “I barely noticed my sexual preference during battles. I am a real man in times of encounter ... In everyday life my sexual preference is very much apparent. But in battle I am a real man.” A real man in battle, a men-loving man in his private life.

It is clear that the title of Boulos’s piece, *No Permanent Address*, references the fact that the subjects he interviews live as nomads in the jungle. Among the things that they have left behind, among their sacrifices, is their address, which is to say their home (that great allegory of the modern *socius*). If one is to trust traditional anthropology, for centuries this is how nomads from so-called Third World countries have lived their lives: hiding in the jungle, acquainting themselves with “the plant and animal kingdoms,” becoming “an intrinsic part of [their] environment ... continually [studying their] surroundings,” so that the jungle *becomes* their home. Guerrilla groups are also nomads, but of a different kind than the empiricists that Lévi-Strauss had in mind. The nomadism of guerrilla warfare, which hardly ever moves beyond a militaristic relationship to space and nature, is here coupled with a more metaphorical notion of the nomad: women who have chosen to leave



Red Alert, production still, *No Permanent Address*, detail, 2010. Courtesy of Galerie Diana Stigter.

their husbands and children behind; men who love men. Women and boys who in the moment of encounter become men, warriors. A veritable *nomadology*, if one is still allowed this concept.

In the third or fourth scene, an unmasked woman interviews two boys wearing balaclavas. She asks the boys about their age. "I will be nineteen in October," says Comrade Anding. "How about you, Comrade Domeng?" "I will turn eighteen on May 28." The CPP stipulates that all soldiers must be more than eighteen years old at the time of enrolment, and enlisting must be voluntary and consensual. Infamously, the age of consent in the Philippines remains twelve years of age. Does the age of the two boys reflect the laxity with which the NPA treats such stipulations? Is almost eighteen good enough? These are questions asked from the point of view of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The comrades have different concerns. They are concerned about intentions, and maturity, which have little to do with the legal status that their age confers. Why do they wish to join the NPA? They answer with what they think the NPA wants to hear: "Because we want to get rid of all the rich people here. They own all the land, like the greedy *haciendero* you drove away." But it also turns out that one of them, Comrade Domeng, has problems with his father. He is convinced his father will not change. It is futile to try to reason with him. What is his father like? Is his father aware of his own insignificance? We don't know. She doesn't know. She doesn't need to know. She is certain, however, that the boy should overcome this dialectic of fathers and sons. That it doesn't produce strong soldiers and warriors. That it leads to self-alienated drop-outs, unable to make the rent, nihilists, or worse. The NPA needs strong warriors who are also loving men. Spartan warriors. He must go to his father. He must learn to discern between "Father" and "Nation." *Their* Nation is not a stand-in for *his* father. His father is, in fact, a small version of the State. If he can't resolve his most basic problems, if he can't stand up to his own father, she asks him, how can he expect to stand up to power? "It's easier to confront society's problems if you can confront your personal problems first."

In this (that) world, context, and time, Truth is the truth of the Party, as we learn from a lesson on theory and ideology that a woman gives a group of peasant labourers, mostly women who appear to be in their sixties. The instructor is the same woman who had been in charge of recruiting the two young boys in balaclavas – Comrade Anding and Comrade Domeng, whom she has

sent off to meet with his father. Judging by the number of words already scrawled on the lesson board, we are brought into the lesson relatively late. She writes "MARXISMO, LENINISMO, MAOISMO" on the board, pronouncing each word slowly and clearly. The Party follows the ideology of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, the three great fathers of the revolution, who duly compensate for the absence of fathers in this world that is being run, as Boulos shows, predominantly by women. Is this, perhaps, one of the aspects of the CPP/NPA's Second Great Rectification? One might recall that in 1996 the Zapatista movement in Mexico appointed a tiny Mayan woman, Comandante Ramona, as their spokesperson, a woman whose stature seems representative, indeed allegorical, of an indigenous society. In her lessons, the NPA woman explains, for those baffled by this language, which is both foreign and, to a Westernized ear like mine, arcane, that the existence of the Party depends on the theoretical links between Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism, and also on the links between



Commander Ivy, production still, *No Permanent Address*, detail, 2010. Courtesy of Galerie Diana Stigter.

the many movements worldwide that are rooted in this theory. Without theory, there is no Party, because this theory is the truth of the movement, its guiding light. And it is not a local truth; it is universal, meaning global – meaning that it is a Truth that spreads across the earth. And how is this truth manifest? No one seems to have asked, but she has anticipated the question, projecting it *out into* history, by an oracular system, into a future that has not yet passed: it manifested itself "when you took your land back."

### *Out of History*

In 2008 Boulos made *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, a work that follows a group of rebels whose aim it is to take back the natural resources of the Niger River delta (especially its oil) from the hands of transnational corporate interests.

As in *No Permanent Address*, the group of insurgents is surprisingly small and, thus, seemingly harmless. How could eight or nine young soldiers challenge Empire? Yet these small detachments (if they are, in fact, detachments of a larger movement, which is less clear than it was in the case of the NPA) have tactical advantages, the most important being surreptitiousness, a defining



Comrade Suleiman, production still, *No Permanent Address*, detail, 2010. Courtesy of Galerie Diana Stigter.

characteristic of guerrilla warfare. Here we encounter a different sense of nostalgia for another (former?) world: a history – if not a tradition – of insurrection that is particular to the latter half of the twentieth century, and which produced an idea of the world that only incidentally included the First World and the Communist Bloc. This is a "third world" (not *the* Third World), which cannot be contemplated as a whole, but which nonetheless has existed, if not as geopolitical entity, at least as a series of ideas (agrarian, economic, cultural, cinematic, aesthetic, political, and revolutionary) that have not always been compatible with each other, or even ideologically aligned. Like the jungle in the Philippines, the Niger River delta represents an inner margin contained by that larger marginal world – the "great minority," as my Colombian colleagues like to say.

But there is also the issue of belief, perhaps the most precarious, as it is the one most difficult to disentangle from its historical association with religion and, thus, from the necessarily negative space it has occupied in the so-called Age of Reason. The soldiers who appear in *All That Is Solid* claim the god Egbisu makes them immune to bullets; their cause is thus divine – or, if not divine, at least beatified and just. Justness of cause is, of course, a precondition for any revolutionary movement to be able to make sense of itself; but the shift from ethical or moral justice to divine or transcendental justice introduces a surplus, an excess, to the revolutionary fold. What does the notion of a superhuman bring to the picture? Is it – and perhaps this is as much as one should allow oneself to speculate in this respect – simply the negative expression of a reality that has become inhuman? Perhaps it is more useful to think of this *nomadology* in terms of the image. Immunity to bullets is an image; it is not a truth but, at the same time, it is not a falsehood. It is the effect of a withdrawal from one reality that produces the rebels as incidental inhabitants of a world that is wanted and run by others, into another reality that they produce themselves, and which must be reconstructed so as to make them, once again, its original inhabitants. In the world in which they are now, they are immune in the same way that diplomats are immune – through an act of exception (an exception that in their case is divine). However they would cease to be immune in the future reality they pursue.

### *In and Out of History*

Immunity to bullets, homosexuality – two excess or surplus qualities of the warrior (revolutionary or otherwise)

that are also the exact opposite of each other. Unlike immunity to bullets, homosexuality is not only external to warfare but, because of a deeply rooted series of misrepresentations, is something that in battle must remain suppressed. But in the case of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its army, homosexuality has been accommodated by revolutionary doctrine, and not because the Party has curtailed its traditional interest in its members' intimate lives (clearly there are rules – inform your comrades, try to bring your loved ones into the fold), but rather because a larger politics of representation has emerged in which same-sex relations are accepted as natural in the present historical moment. Belonging to the present is perhaps the one absolute precondition of revolutionary politics. On the other hand, the supernatural invulnerability of the Niger Delta warrior ejects him from history, placing him in the space of epic memory – memory that is spoken, memory of a time that lies beyond the grasp of history. It is beyond history not because, as the telluric metaphor goes, it lies buried underneath a series of historical strata (the Discovery, Empire, Modernity, and so on), but because the tools of historiography – the mechanisms through which historical truths are established – are incompatible with its sense of time: “Deprived of their original language, the captured and indentured tribes create their own, accreting and secreting fragments of an old, an epic vocabulary, from Asia and from Africa, but to an ancestral, an ecstatic rhythm in the blood that cannot be subdued by slavery or indenture, while nouns are renamed and the given names of places accepted like Felicity village or Choiseul.”

Yet it is clear in Boulos's film that this epic memory, this mythical time, is not set in opposition to historical time. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* is a two-channel video in which two screens face each other, one showing the freedom fighters in the Niger Delta, the other traders at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. The opposite of the mythical time of the bullet-proof warrior is thus another mythical time, the speculative time of capitalism. Installed directly across from each

other, the two channels that comprise *All That Is Solid* represent, from this point of view, two instances of historical detachment, each propelling itself into the future. “I was particularly interested in futures,” says Boulos in an interview, “which are contracts by which people and corporations agree to buy or sell a certain commodity at a certain fixed price in the future ... This contract, this money, this agreement is so far removed from the material reality of the commodities that it is entirely speculative and practically metaphysical.”

But “metaphysics” isn't such a bad word, after all. Boulos's film, he claims, is about the future, or how to produce an image of the future. Here are two, confronting each other: the future as the space of trade and (further, uninterrupted, geopolitically concentrated) capitalist growth; or the future as the space of a “coming community.”

The coming being is whatever being. In the scholastic enumeration of transcendentals (*quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum seu perfectum* – whatever entity is one, true, good, or perfect), the term that, remaining unthought in each, conditions the meaning of all the others is the adjective “*quodlibet*.” The common translation of this term as “whatever” in the sense of “it does not matter which, indifferently” is certainly correct, but in its form the Latin says exactly the opposite: *Quodlibet ens* is not “being, it does not matter which,” but rather “being such that it always matters.”



*All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, two-channel video still, detail, 2008. Collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery.

#### Endnotes

1. Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Documentary Is/Not a Name,” *October* 52 (Spring 1990): 80.
2. “The short twentieth century” is how, in 1994, historian Eric Hobsbawm defined the period between the beginning of World War I (1914) and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991), a period that he defines in detail – albeit from a very personal and, at times, excessively anecdotal point of view – in his book *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914 – 1991* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1994).
3. As the most famous texts of that period – the manifestos – suggest, “clarity” of thought and action was born out of necessity, and became increasingly necessary in a world in which diplomacy was taking a rather spectacular turn, confirming Michel Foucault's famous inversion of Carl von Clausewitz's axiom that war is the continuation of politics by other means, which under Foucault's pen became “politics is the continuation of war by other means.” Thus the French philosopher of power and the Prussian military thinker stood on opposite grounds, at least when it came to identifying human nature.
4. Gilles Deleuze, “The Exhausted,” *SubStance* 24, no. 3, issue 78 (1995): 3.
5. In 1995, the Communist Party of the Philippines caused a stir when it issued a communiqué legalizing same-sex marriage. Given that it was, and continues to be, unrecognized as a legitimate political party, this communiqué was all the CPP could offer at the time – that and a safe environment in which, ten years later, two men could exchange wedding vows. Education about tolerance, including tolerance of sexual orientation, became part of the Party's new platform. Homosexuality in the Philippines is no more or less taboo than it is in other marginally lenient societies, such as Latin America. People reservedly tolerate it – so long as it is not publicly discussed and it does not “happen” to one's own father or son – and it is forced to remain relatively private, though discretion does not afford protection to homosexuals, who are

frequently targets for hate crimes and violence. That the young gay soldier is able to speak openly about his sexual orientation seems to bear witness to the army's acceptance of homosexuality and, perhaps more importantly, to a relatively unexplored parallel between military and love relations. Given that the population of the Philippines is predominantly Christian (including Catholics, Orthodox, and some Protestants), and that most others belong to a separatist Islamic region in the south-west of the country, it might have been necessary for this marriage, which was the somewhat belated acting-out of the CPP's 1995 communiqué, to take place “nowhere,” and in a nowhere that is, furthermore, militantly protected – a Utopia; and one protected by committed soldiers, not by mercenaries.

6. R.B. Fox, as quoted in Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Science of the Concrete,” in *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 4.
7. Despite a certain essentialization of sedentary existence underlying it, there is an argument that the nomadic tribes who run the Amazon from Venezuela to Brazil were forced into this mode of existence with the conquest of South America. From the point of view of these tribes, colonization is not a process that ended with the formation of the modern nation-state, but which merely changed hands and is now enacted by the State itself. See Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, trans. Robert Hurley with Abe Stein (New York: Zone Books, 1987); Alcida Rita Ramos, *Indigenism: Ethnic Politics in Brazil* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).
8. To give an example, albeit a cursory one, among the most significant moments in Latin American scholarship at the end of the twentieth century was the deconstruction of the mythologizing gaze that had characterized most scholarship on Latin American art and literature. Through this gaze, the continent was seen to be suspended in a transitory state between archaic and modern systems of representation, government, and thought. This new counter-discourse was set against a highly problematic tendency among scholars to reify fantastical



*All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, two-channel video still, detail, 2008. Collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery.

themes and motifs, an academic habit perpetuated by the systematic misreading of literary fictions as truthful representations of Latin American reality. Thus, essays such as those collected in the seminal *Beyond the Fantastic* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996) emerged as a critical reassessment of twentieth-century Latin American cultural and artistic practices, arguing for a rationalism that had not been previously afforded them. Necessary as this historiographic counter-discourse was, one of its casualties was the Theology of Liberation, a left-leaning movement that remains relatively obscure in spite of it being omnipresent and enormously influential in the rise and spread of the Left, especially in rural Latin America, and even in the development of guerrilla movements. Yet still today it is widely accepted that the majority of the population in the region wrongly designated "Latin America" is fervently, even furiously, religious – including

and especially those two entangled crowds, footballers and mafiosi, with their rampant penchant for idolatrous practices.

9. "Derek Walcott – Nobel Lecture," Nobel Prize, accessed July 24, 2011, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-lecture](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-lecture).
10. "Mark Boulos – *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*," Stedelijk Museum, accessed July 24, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BX6rYfNzTJ8>.
11. Ibid.
12. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.

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**Mark Boulos** is an American video-artist who lives and works in Amsterdam and London. He makes multi-screen documentary video installations, mostly about miracles and revolutions. He has filmed Marxist insurgents in the Philippines, oil guerillas in the Niger Delta, commodities traders in Chicago, Christian mystics in Syria, and Islamic jihadists in London and New York. MoMA will mount a solo exhibition of his work as part of their Projects series in March 2012. He has had solo shows at the Miami Art Museum (2011), the Belkin Gallery in Vancouver (2010), Ar-Ge Kunst in Bolzano (2009), and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (2008). *No Permanent Address* was commissioned by and premiered at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver in 2010. It was presented in Smart Project Space in Amsterdam in 2011, as it was long-listed for the Dutch Prix de Rome.

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