

One Day in September

Sebastian Cichocki interviews with [Christoph Draeger](#)

Christoph Draeger was born 1965 in Zurich, he lives and works in New York. He is author of video films, installations and photographs, focusing on images of catastrophic events and acts of violence in mass media as well as in disaster films. In his works, he uses authentic materials or fabricates them himself. Frequently, his works resemble reconstructions of events based on on-site police data. Draeger shows violence as a source of fascination and a kind of entertainment, becoming in fact a part of mainstream culture. The theme of his most known installation called "Black September" (2002) is the murder of the Israeli Olympic team by Palestinian terrorists in Munich in 1972. The terrorists were members of an organization called the Black September. The artist reconstructed the hotel room where the sportsmen were held prisoner. A TV set showed authentic BBC news coverage from 1972. In a separate room, there was a projection of TV news combined with a reconstruction of events in the hotel. The artist himself played one of the terrorists. The 1972 event became a media spectacle. It was for the first time that media had such profound impact on the situation – the terrorists planned their next steps on the basis of information they heard on TV and they had sought media publicity for their actions themselves. "Black September" is neither a simulation nor reconstruction, as the artist did not aim at a 100% faithful representation of facts. It is intended to imitate the truth, create an aura of authenticity. The feeling of artificiality intertwines with the realization that it is a real story. This peculiar relation between fiction and reality draws our attention to the fact that live media coverage of disasters makes them seem unreal elements of a media spectacle. Draeger's work has lost none of its relevance, touching upon conflicts still raging in the Middle East and Europe. This topic was also pursued by Steven Spielberg in his latest film "Munich" (2006), with similar reconstruction of authentic events used in the film's initial scenes.

the note was written by Exgirls



Sebastian Cichocki: I'll start with a question asked many times to the New Yorkers: where were you and what were you doing when the Twin Towers collapsed?

Christoph Draeger: I was in my bed in Brooklyn, in my loft with a direct view to the WTC but I didn't see anything because first I was asleep and then I was talking on the phone to my friend in Switzerland who didn't know what was going on either. I had my back to the window with the view of the WTC and everything I saw were the people outside getting out on the roads. I was wondering what they were doing there. When I finished my phone call the telephone rang again and it was a friend of mine who told me what had happened at the WTC. First time I actually saw this the second plane had already struck and there was a huge blue plume of smoke coming out. At first I was trying to get the TV going but the only transmitter was located on the WTC so you couldn't get any channels. I watched the whole thing unfold in Spanish, because it was the only TV channel that was functioning. So I had this whole thing in double vision. The real image which was more or less silent and the Spanish commentary and close up shots. My friend who was pretty close was telling me over the phone what he was seeing when one of the towers collapsed. He panicked and all I could hear in my phone was that he just started to scream. That was basically my morning. In the afternoon, when we thought it was more or less over, my girlfriend and me went to Manhattan with the other subway. I walked back over to Manhattan Bridge which was littered with the things of people who had been rescued earlier in the day. And there was still this enormous plume of smoke over there. One of the things that struck me the most was the calm of the afternoon. People were sitting in cafes in the East Village enjoying the

traffic free day. There were no cars apart from TV cars but also they were not very frequent. It was incredible, people were drinking beer in the streets. It was very weird.

Sebastian Cichocki: I'm asking because you included one of the burning Manhattan photos in "Voyages Apocalypitques". What was the reason for gathering all these pictures? Their gloomy "aura" or anything else?

Christoph Draeger: "Voyages Apocalypitques" is actually a project about the invisibility of memory of disasters. When a place has been struck with disaster and you come there later you cannot see anything. That was the overall idea. The concept in the strict sense of the word was that I will just take pictures of places where disasters happened when I'm there. Usually that would be years or centuries later but in this particular case I was there at the same day. The ironic fact is that no 48 coming right before the image of the WTC is Pompeii, which is 2000 years away. I took the pictures of the WTC when I went over to Manhattan Bridge without really knowing that I was making pictures for what would later be "Voyages Apocalypitques". It only struck me later when I saw the images that I had the right conceptually to include them in my work. It's interesting because every time I exhibit the project people are asking me to do this in a completely different way. They say this is the day of the disaster and you can actually see the disaster when in all the other pictures the signs, traces of the events are much more subtle. Maybe there's some commemorative sign or maybe there's a little bit of a structure left that hasn't been rebuilt. But in the case of the WTC there is this huge plume of smoke and the sky is apocalyptically brown and yellow. For me it was very special because for once I was very close. Usually disasters happen far from New York but this one happened right there and it was huge and absolutely incredible. Not only because 3 thousand people died but also because of the boldness of the attack, because nobody had expected it and it happened in the heart of the American society, in its financial center. And right now we have the time before 9.11 and after 9.11 which is true not only for New York but also for the entire world.

Sebastian Cichocki: Are you seduced by the horror of catastrophes? Why do you think we are all charmed and seduced by the horrors of the reality?

Christoph Draeger: I think I'm the only one who is not seduced. No, I'm just kidding. The second part of the question actually contains answers to the first part. I think everybody bears fascination with disasters. They are events completely out of the ordinary life. They're very special. They're huge break in everyday life which is sometimes boring. They create new conditions by destroying the old society and initiating new ones. That is one of the reasons why we are so fascinated – because disasters are something we don't have everyday. But on the other hand they're also something that we hope will never happen. I think that the secret hope is that they will and the obvious hop is that they won't. And we get satisfaction when they happen because we watch all those tragedies happening in the global village on TV. The disasters are in New Orleans, Bangladesh, China or in Baghdad but usually not right in front of our doorstep. That is a very nice feeling people get sitting on the coach and watching the news on TV knowing that they are definitely not among victims but among those who were spared. It's almost like entertainment to a certain point. Of course CNN or Fox News would never exist without bad news or disasters and Hollywood would not survive only on romantic comedies, either. I think that the fascination with disasters and tragedies is characteristic for all humankind. It's all very human and I think

disasters and tragedies is characteristic for all humankind. It's all very human and I think that's the reason why I'm fascinated just like everybody else. But the fascination goes just a little further with me because I investigate disasters and try to develop an artistic point about them.

Sebastian Cichocki: Your approach to violence and bad news, can be also more cynical and funny, as it was in "Apocalypso Place" or "Last News". Can a catastrophe, and especially its media coverage, be fun?

Christoph Draeger: We did "Last News" as a reaction to the news coverage of 9.11. People couldn't believe what was happening and they often did not react professionally. I saw some journalist interviewing somebody else while in the background you could see the second tower falling. So the journalist asked the person who was being interviewed if this was a live image. I remember it very well as it was such a ridiculous question. What was happening there was the very definition of 'live'. But she couldn't believe it. And then very quickly the news channels started to analyze the scope of the disaster and the future possibilities. This was obviously a huge opportunity for them and they took it. There were candles, patriotic rock music and marches, flags over the rubble and so on – Hollywood-like images. Hollywood said "now we can't do any disaster movies for about 10 years". And now after only 5 years we have this Oliver Stone film about the WTC and another about the United 93. We took this idea of Hollywood 'predictions'. Hollywood as if predicted the disaster making all those end of the century films. We mixed this idea with this reporter who speaks about the disaster in a very exaggerated way. Of course, I agree that it's cynical to a certain degree but I think also that the network TV coverage is cynical because everything is used to make money, especially in the networks.

Sebastian Cichocki: Let's talk about the "Black September" installation now. I'm curious to know how you came up with the idea of re-staging those events and what such a tragic history-based repetition means to you.

Christoph Draeger: When I did 'Last News' I went to the media store a lot to rent video tapes about disasters, movies like "Armageddon" or "Independence Day". But I was also interested in getting a little more real image, so I turned to the documentaries section. I found a film called "One day in September" which grabbed my attention because September 11 was also "One day in September". So I rented this tape and it was about the 1972 Munich events which still loomed in my memory. I was fascinated with the media coverage used in this documentary. It was probably the first global terrorist event which was transmitted live to the world and the live coverage actually changed the course of the events because both the terrorists and the hostages were able to watch their own drama live on television. The terrorists were prepared for the attack and the German action failed. So television was taken to a new level in this event and the same was true about 9.11.

It was just one year after 9.11 when I was preparing a solo show in Germany, Berlin, referring to 9.11. I thought it proper to join these two events and dig in the past which has a lot to say about the presence, about the origins of terrorism. I scheduled my opening for the 5 September 2002 hoping that there would be some commemoration of the 30 anniversary in Munich and in Germany. I was very surprised to find that not even the news mentioned it on 5 September. Maybe there was a small mention but no big coverage.

nothing on TV. People were silent about bad memories. I was really glad that I did this piece which revealed so much about the present state of mind. It gave a more global overview of the issue of terrorism. People tend to be rather shortsighted. They treat 9.11 as a single event and may also remember Osama Bin Laden's attacks in Tanzania and Kenya. But they don't think of the problems with the Palestinians in the 1960s or the creation of the Jewish state in 1948.



Sebastian Cichocki: Do you feel that as the German proverb says “Einmal ist keinmal” and all those dramatic events must be somehow repeated, as it happened in your work, to stress their importance?

Christoph Draeger: I don't think that "Einmal ist keinmal" is a very good proverb as a matter of fact. I don't think you can really apply it to disasters or that it describes the attitude of the Germans. Because if we adopted this "Einmal ist keinmal" approach then we could all forget about the Auschwitz and the 2 World War. I don't think that restaging is comparable to the real event. It's definitely not a repetition of the real event. It's a ritual. You take something that already exists and you imitate, simulate it. It's a simulation of an event and of course as in every historical movie the event is being celebrated to a certain degree so as not to be forgotten. But still I don't believe in the importance of this "once is never". Everything can be excused if "Einmal is keinmal".

08.2006