

**Vasif Kortun:** Gabriel' let's start with the simple question: The idea of fragmentation throughout your work.

**Gabriel Lester:** Good question. It is true that most (if not all) of my work has at least this quality? Namely the fragmentation of the image into a sequence, a rhythm or even a story... But first let me speak a little about how the way I work has come to its present form. Until only recently (about three years ago) I had no real ambition to become a visual artist, at least not in the sense of the type of artist I am now (museums, gallery, art spaces, magazines, fairs and festivals). However this may be the case, my background has provided me with quite a lot of experience with art and maybe if this does not sound too pretentious: knowledge.

After focusing mainly on writing and music (sampled music, such as hip hop) and the performance of the two for a reasonably long time, at age 22 /23 I decided I should study. I thought that neither writing nor music would be the academic fields for me. So amongst the clouds of marijuana, adolescence and a tottering relationship, I set out to find the best education, Thinking of becoming a film director I studied a year audio-visual at an art academy and then a year at a film school. Both were academically speaking successful but I did not feel I was in the right place. Then, through all kinds of shifts and circumstances I ended up in the Rijks Academy in Amsterdam, thinking I would make some short films. However some time during the first year at the Rijks I concluded that I had something to add (or say) in the field of contemporary art and things sort of took off from there.

**VK:** What kind of video work were you doing at the time? Did they thread the link between art and film?

**GL:** When I started to work with film and video, I soon understood that trying to make the stories in my imagination, without the proper financial and technical support, would be destined to fail. So, I focused solely on short, and small projects where one experience or one emotion, atmosphere is dealt with. This is why most of my early investigations into cinema look a lot more like art works. What fascinated me was how one simple image or scene could

produce fantasies, emotions and associations. I remember talking passionately about the difference between telling a story in images and images that tell stories. Some of the better cinematographic works are a combination of the two: Pasolini, Godard, Bergman, Antonioni, Tarkovsky, Renais, Welles, Wenders, Hertzog, Kurosawa, Lynch and so forth, have proven that one single image or scene can tell a lot, more than any outspoken dialogue or succession of pure narrative images. The audience gets involved in the story by letting the images work on a different level than the explicit story line. So I set out on a journey to find and create images that tell stories, and provoke fantasies. This then has much to do with psychoanalysis (knowing about how humans perceive the world around them through the senses, their conditions, and the codes that construct the conditions), and of course semiotics. So one of my first films was a "long-shot" of a parking lot where one person was standing. Every now and then somebody would pass him and greet him, say something or make some gesture. What I was looking for with this image was how in one scene the message or narrative or atmosphere can change according to the people who enter the scene. Maybe a film about human conditions. In a way this was a rather effective video work, since the "story" surrounding the man on the parking lot was shaped by him meeting others. Nothing else! And without telling a linear story, some strong narrative was shaped? More of such experiments, such as a film with dialogue where there is no subject, just the dialogue that reacts on the (cut out) subjects. As such I created a film about the relation between several people, through dialogue, but without subject. I made all these video experiments, thinking I would one-day use all the experience I was getting in a regular film. I guess I was looking for the essence of a tension span, a development, a narrative, without becoming too explicit or concrete. And that seems like a very interesting challenge. I had been writing straight stories for so long, I just wanted to know more about the power of image and sound, without really wanting to try and make straight films. People like Kenneth Anger or Chris Marker had influenced me and I had understood that a tension span could easily be created, without the need of an explicit story. The images would provoke the audience fantasies and a highly personal experience. And with that I could create identification and really touch people. At least that is what I thought and what motivated me.

From music and writing to my first videos, I have always sought an image (or scene) that could create a strong experience or provoke (condition or seduce) the audience to find his or her own (fantastic) stories, atmospheres or emotions. The video I described earlier, the man on the parking lot, is one image cut up and sequenced by the succession of people that enter the scene. This creates somewhat of a panoptical experience and it is as if we see the many sides of this one man standing there. And we seem to learn about who he is through the people he meets. Here the spectator is presented with fragments of a person's identity and there is an impulse to construct and shape his identity, motives and personality through the scene.

**VK:** You mentioned music and writing and how they relate to your videos. How have they also informed your present practice?

**GL:** Well, both music and writing have a similar quality as my works. Namely that their form is constructed out of different layers or even, as with sampling music, out of fragments, reshaped to a new tune. Maybe this experience with sampled music has been an influence. In my first work in the Rijks I created a light show that had all the harmonic ingredients (sound and music) of a regular Hollywood movie, that were supported by a cinematographic edit of light. I had the idealistic notion that sound and light would challenge the spectators understanding of reality. Since the light and the sound produced "solid" "real" images in the mind (actual scenes, parts of stories, memories, etc.) I imagined one could question his or her perception of what is real. Some people did, some just saw a very entertaining thing. To create all the ingredients of a real experience that comes to exist in the mind of the spectator is one of the big themes of my work. This is is not only a pleasurable and identifiable experience also a metaphysical one. To experience the existence of things through the impulse an image provides. I could say that the way we create something substantial out of life is just a mental construction of the parts that we have collected. For example: I was asked to do something at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. I had little time, so I proposed to open the show with a performance. I wrote a very critical speech, read it, recorded it and pressed it onto vinyl. At the opening two deejays remixed the speech. The effect and the idea are quite clear: a deejay-

show that fragmented a speech, leaving the audience with parts to construct a story in their mind.

Well, I just want to make what is called a spectacle (a watching game, or how it is called in philosophy: the Socratic-method: not to deposit the truth to the other, but letting the other reason the material and as such find the truth).

Aaaaaah, probably there is a lot more and even a lot clearer things to say. I just sat down now and also needed to write a bit.

**VK:** Platform's exhibition space is like the Stedelijk Bureau in Amsterdam. Like the Bureau we function as a project space. But that's where the similarities end. We receive about 2,000 visitors on a regular Saturday in a city where exhibition hopping is not the norm. So, our visitors are from all walks of life. I find this particularly inspirational in the context of the exhibition here because you allow the spectator to negotiate his or her freedom without the anxiety of tradition. Hence, what is most clear to me now is that you are not an artists' artist. There is a generosity in the work. If you allow me to twist the fate of our conversation, I want to know what you think about the art world. This is not a general question, as think it implicates you, because although you take what you do seriously you may not keep on doing it all your life.

**GL:** Once I was asked to write a text for a book on contemporary art and what should be. The text I wrote was named "Awareness is panic." Of course I was joking, but what I meant was that to be too aware of things can lead to indecisiveness, over calculation and even panic. And, one does not need to get affirmation of one's ideas from art history. The artists I like seem to have found a personal and independent vocabulary and their knowledge of art and art history seems to be as important as their life experience and knowledge of other arts. Once an art academy teacher told me that I should be careful not to invent the wheel again. But, who is to say that if would indeed invent it all over again it would lead to the same application.

I am quite confident that I do it my way and not anybody else's way. Of course I have ventured in directions paved by others before me, but then I have no desire to comment on what others have done, but am quite comfortable with what it can produce for me.

Anyway, I think when I started to make art I had built up a fruitful reservoir of ideas and I just started to realize them the past years. So actually I have been trying, learning and exhibiting at the same time. As for now, I feel art has maybe become somewhat of a burden and I am too preoccupied with it. So I understood I need to fill up the reservoir every now and then. And I will do just that very soon.

**VK:** You are going on a long journey and putting a break on the exhibition frenzy. But, my question was about something longer than a time out.

**GL:** Well, what I think about the art world? It is ambiguous, of course I would like to be respected and acknowledged. And in many ways I have become financially dependent on it. But then again I do not want to make art for the art world, and I certainly like music, cinema, literature and architecture much more. I might just as well turn in any of those directions one day. But then I think I will still be an artist. Maybe not one that sticks to one medium or idea all his life, but one who touches a lot of different things. My best works could be a selection of the many things I have done. Sometimes this troubles me and I think I should stick to something and go deeper into it. But then at other times I know I am the type of person that needs to reinvent himself all the time.

I want to make art I would myself like to see and be generous and communicative to all kinds of people. Not in a populist sense but with some intelligence and in no way superficial.

**VK:** Your installation "Gift of Gab" at Platform is just that. You are constructing a set of visual anchors and experiences with regards to Istanbul that is in no way linear or illustrative. You have employed a similar vocabulary in the Gemeentemuseum in the Hague towards a totally different effect.

**GB:** That seemed to quote formalist art. I cannot deny that it had some influence, but then again I went about picking the objects and shapes just like I pick the secondhand objects that I have used and displayed in other installations. And for this there is some implicit logic. Someone who would go with me to a market could probably not predict what objects I would buy, but to me my choices are clear. And then I do have some kind of profile in mind, I mean I know why I need certain things in my work, so I know what to look for. But is not an explicit knowing, I would say more like cooking; I add, taste, add, taste and finally come to the right recipe. And I have referred to my installations as such – could be viewed as a well-dressed table. Usually there is a main force, but all the side dishes; the drinks and dessert should be well made too...

**VK:** Like a king's table.