

Amanda Gutiérrez

Time Topographies: Liverpool

by Omar Kholeif

Amanda Gutiérrez is a contemporary artist whose recent work questions the authenticity of the documentary form. Operating predominantly with video and performance, Gutiérrez's approach examines how manifestations of the 'truth' are positioned, adopted and interpreted from various standpoints. Through a recent series, *A Brief History of Fictions* (2010), the artist merged her research interest in both theatre and video, proposing that the most natural symbiosis between theatre and film is found in the question that underpins 'documentary truth'. Gutiérrez has also cited Bill Nichols' ideas of documentary strategies, in particular, the notion that it is the body's position in front of the camera, which exposes truthfulness. With this in mind, Gutiérrez seeks to produce work that dis(embodies) – simultaneously distancing as it is intimately stimulating.

These semiotic tactics can be found in her most recent series, *Time Topographies* (2011 – ongoing). At the root of this project is an interest in the gestures of testimonial. For it is through testament that truth is validated. At first, Gutiérrez's working process seems simple. She chooses a site and seeks to interview a series of local residents. These narratives are collated, transcribed, scripted and presented as a triptych – either a video installation or performance.

Scratch underneath the surface and Gutiérrez's study is much more complex. Each character that the artist has chosen is in fact an emigrant, and each act of testimonial is individually re-articulated through scripting. Moreover, instead of witnessing the traditional face of the person presenting her or his testimonial – the viewer is forced to relate, not to a person, but to a series of disembodied images. These visuals are often fragments from memories, and re-imaginings of situations that are as equally traumatic as they are utopian. This sense of separation is further complicated by the vocalisation of the characters – each of which has their script recited by a different actor.

These densely layered constructions, the artist argues, form part of a desire to expose ideologies through the fictional act, in this case, constructing a character out of fragments. By compiling segments of truth into an overlaid fiction, Gutiérrez seeks to pose questions about what is authentic and factual. These permutations can be interpreted as disruptions into the conventional one-way process of flow generated by large integrated media outlets. If one focuses on the endless streams of 24/7 news channels, and the instantaneous RSS (Really Simple Syndication) updates of major news sources alone, one can begin to find a uniform set of problems within these documents. Writers such as Judith Butler, Lina Khatib and Paul Virilio have all, at different points, critiqued these hierarchies, arguing that the apparatus and editorial of hegemonic news outlets often cast the subject in a disoriented position. Indeed, the documented subject becomes an object of scrutiny to be commented on. The notion of the object is key here; as each subject becomes a tokenistic form for commentators to direct anger at, show sympathy for, or to use as an excuse for military intervention.

It is these linear tactics which Gutiérrez seeks to critique with her latest body of work. Gutiérrez's process however, functions in reverse order from the aforementioned model. Instead of witnessing the subject's face and offering it up as a platform for 'an expert' to mouth over, the artist has chosen to offer the most intimate of oral narratives, and juxtaposes it against imagery that can at times be alienating, while at other times, filled with satirical humour.

When I was first presented by Gutiérrez's proposal for *Time Topographies*: Liverpooland heard that she would like to interview members of different migrant communities, I became intensely drawn to the idea. Liverpool, more than any city in the UK, is infamous as a site for immigrants. Often considered to be the second city of the British Empire, this port town has been known for its connections to the Slave Trade, for housing the oldest Chinatown in Europe, the oldest Black African community in the UK, for being the location of the Toxteth race riots in the 1980s, and also for holding one of the most densely concentrated British Yemeni communities. Coincidentally, it also happens to be the administrative hub for the UK's immigration services. This rich history, coupled with Liverpool's cinematic post-industrial architecture seemed inseparable from Gutiérrez's motivation.

Amanda Gutiérrez's initial proposal was that she would interview as many migrants as she could in the period of her residency and to ask them questions, which explored issues relating to adaptation in their new environment. She would then synthesise this material into a script that would lead her to make decisions about the various landscapes, which she would film in Liverpool. Finally, she would juxtapose the three narratives against each other, utilising a voice-over performed by unsuspecting actors.

At first, Gutiérrez sought to develop relationships with the most historically noted emigrants to the city. She put out a call for an Irish, Caribbean and Chinese migrant, but no one responded to the open letter. The process that would ensue would have to become much more intimate and engaged. Gutiérrez visited community centres and became embedded in the heart of the Welsh Streets of Toxteth – living on a semi-abandoned street in a house belonging to the artist and activist Nina Edge. Gutiérrez's pursuits found her knocking on the doors of shop keepers and restaurant owners, many of whom turned her away, perhaps afraid of the expository act of opening up to a stranger, who didn't profess to bear any credentials beyond that of an artist.

This started to changewith the help of two guiding lights: Taher Qassim of the Liverpool Arabic Centre, who is a noted civic figure in the city, and Moira Kenny of The Sound Agents, an experimental sound collective, which also captures oral histories. After collating numerous stories, Gutiérrez settled on three: Xia Lu, Nahida, and AbdulRahman. Xia Lu, an architect from China, fled her country during the Cultural Revolutionthat occurred under Mao's staunch ideological regime. Nahida, who coincidentally happens to be the same age as Xia Lu, is a Palestinian writer and activist born in a small village near Jerusalem. She also escaped her birthplace during tumultuous political strife; in her case, it was the Six-Day War of 1967. Abdul Rahman, born in Yemen and the oldest of the three subjects, was propelled to Liverpool because of his career as a travelling seaman.

In Gutiérrez's three-channel installation of the work, the narratives of the three immigrants start to unfold in a non-linear fashion. Moments of disorderly unrest are paralleled with memories of euphoric youth, and juxtaposed against imagery of abandoned furniture in a public park in Liverpool at one point, and an industrial warehouse painted with an ebullient pop art mural, in another. The temporalities continue to shift as hopeful ambition becomes sullied by cultural alienation. At one point we hear a voice of a young girl articulating Abdul Rahman's narrative: "I always had an inner belief that I was destined to travel and do something different, my older brother Ahmed had long since left the village in search of better opportunities and was now working as a seaman travelling the world." Moments later, the voice of a young Liverpoolian man is heard echoing Nahida's adaptation process: "I came from another culture, a Middle East culture, where people are more open to human relationships, people can be loud, make friends very easily. Just the human interaction it is completely different. I was shocked to see the human interaction just in England as a whole."

It is these nuanced dissonances that make Gutiérrez's work so compelling. As the loose narrative associations start to form within the artist's work, my mind turns to the disconcerting British headlines that find the status quo attacking immigrant communities. Violence and blind hatred brim to the fore of my memory. Amanda Gutiérrez's complex versioning in *Time Topographies* complicates these singular narratives, and begs, if only to suggest, that there is never only one version of the truth.

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