

George Fragopoulos • Liliana M. Naydan
Editors

Terror in Global Narrative

Representations of 9/11 in the Age of Late-Late
Capitalism

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Editors

George Fragopoulos
Queensborough Community College
CUNY, Bayside, New York, USA

Liliana M. Naydan
Penn State Abington
Abington, Pennsylvania, USA

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Gerhard Richter's *September* and the Politics of Ambivalence

Mafalda Dámaso

INTRODUCTION

The 9/11 attacks renewed the pertinence of traditional discussions regarding the representation of terror. In this essay, however, I will focus instead on the question of mediation, that is on the potential role that artworks can play as intermediaries between viewers and violent events. Famous among the multiple aesthetic responses to this event is a 2005 painting by the German artist Gerhard Richter titled *September*. In his monograph, *September: A History Painting by Gerhard Richter*, art historian Robert Storr sees the painting as illustrating the artist's position as an active interpreter of historical events. Particularly, in a chapter that discusses Richter's work in relation to recent German history, Storr claims

Richter's unwillingness to accuse or excuse, his strict abstinence from special pleading, and his refusal to create false equivalencies between what Germans did to others and what Allied bombers did to Germans is in fact a staunch moral position, one equivalent to Goya's harrowing impartial declaration in the *Disasters of War*, "I saw this". (70)

Storr's enquiry is important in light of the fact that 9/11 was an event designed to be visible in the context of the global and capitalist cir-

M. Dámaso (✉)
Goldsmiths, University of London, London, England

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ulation of imagery. This said, and although I align myself with Storr's conclusion that Richter's *September* has the potential to be a catalyst for reflection, his analysis raises a crucial question. What is it about the appropriation of this specific image, one of the most ubiquitous images of the New York attacks, that creates the conditions for a viewing position that, rather than being determined by the original intentions of the terrorists (that is to shock and terrorize), might lead to a reflection upon their historical and social context?

The goal of this essay is to answer this question, which I will do by stressing the significance of what Storr identifies as the "uncertainty, contradiction, and ambivalence the viewer brings to [the painting]" (71), a position that also exists in the formal conditions of the painting itself. Kaja Silverman's remarks on Richter's work as highlighting the mutual implication between painting and photography are instructive here: the former not only derives from but might also say something new about the latter. Silverman notes, "Richter says that a photograph is the first stage in the development of an image but that this image is not fully developed until the photograph becomes a painting" ("Unfinished Business").

In particular, the ambivalence of *September*, identified by Robert Storr as central to the viewing experience of the painting, provides the opportunity for viewers to consider 9/11 not merely as a terrorist attack but also as a political act that is framed by a long history of economic and cultural exchanges. The difference between the representation and the mediation of terror here is crucial: the latter is precisely what may introduce this historical element in the viewing of an image. Proving this hypothesis presupposes demonstrating a relation between the ambiguity of the painting, as the work of Jacques Derrida has shown, and the political, understood in the manner of Jacques Rancière via a reading by Thomas Keenan. Finally, this discussion will lead to a new question, which will remain open: does the increased importance played by images in our daily lives require a new understanding of citizenship and, if so, might that also encompass the experience of contemporary art?

CONTEXTUALIZING RICHTER'S *SEPTEMBER*

Seemingly abstract, a close engagement with the painting reveals the depiction of the second plane as it hits the south tower of the World Trade Center. At first sight, the small oil painting, a 52 cm by 72 cm canvas in

tones of gray, blue, and white, is similar to other squeegee abstracts by Richter. The difference, however, is that Richter didn't use a spatula or a squeegee to produce the horizontal rubbing of the painting; rather, he used a knife to scratch its surface, in what could be read as an echo of the violence caused by the horizontal intersection of the two planes with the buildings.

The source of the painting is revealed in a page from the *Atlas*, a monumental archive of photographs, sketches, and newspaper cuttings assembled by the artist between 1962 and 2013: a photograph of a plane as it hits one of the World Trade Center Towers. In "Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas: The Anomic Archive'", art historian Benjamin Buchloh considers the wider issue of "the photographic legacies of the historical avant-garde" (134). Buchloh discusses the *Atlas* as a mnemonic project that is devoid of any idealist ambitions:

Richter's collection of found amateur photographs combined with journalistic and advertising photography inverts the utopian aspirations of the avant-garde on every level. If some of the Soviet and Weimar practices and theorizations had defined photography in a teleological perspective as a cultural project of enactment and empowerment, of articulation and self-determination, from the very outset Richter contemplates the reigning social uses of photography and their potential artistic functions with an attitude of profound skepticism. [...] Richter's *Atlas* seems to consider photography and its various practices as a system of ideological domination, more precisely, as one of the instruments with which collective amnesia, amnesia, and repression are socially inscribed. (134)

Despite acknowledging this view, the philosopher Peter Osborne proposes that *Atlas* is the most interesting work in Richter's practice, in part because it signals an openness, in a Heideggerian sense of the word, in Richter's work (89). At the same time, partly in opposition to Buchloh's claims, Osborne views *Atlas* as characterized by "stasis, a temporality of the preservation of transience, a temporality of the dead" (90) and hence as "staging—rather than merely participating in—this 'anomic banality', which is not so much 'affectless' as the carrier of a specific set of affects [...], a kind of psychic deadening" (91).

Does such skepticism or unresponsiveness also apply to *September*? Here, it is important to consider Buchloh's analysis on Richter's earlier appropriation of imagery associated with the role played by Germany in

the Second World War. A striking example of such is the series *October 18, 1977*, which depicts the bodies and funerary scenes of the members of the Baader-Meinhof gang. However, there's a clear difference between this series and *September*. Firstly, the artist's position in the former, as well as in some of his other early work, was much clearer—his paintings considered issues of historical responsibility, memory, and trauma. In the case of 9/11, due to historical proximity, one cannot speak of amnesia, and not in the year 2005. Hence, it is difficult to agree with Osborne's assessment of *September* as “an anticipation of the deadening of affect produced by a historical distance to come” (97). Secondly, as Storr notes, “unlike the October cycle, in which Richter eschewed painting any pictures of the RAF's victims, the haze of *September* subsumes those who suffered in the attack along with those who perpetrated it” (71). These two elements are central to the painting's ambivalence.

This said, there are similarities between *September* and Richter's earlier work. The position of the artist is partly similar to that in some of the earlier fragments of *Atlas*. As Buchloh notes with regard to a panel that includes pictures of victims from a concentration camp,

in the eleventh panel of the *Atlas*, presumably dating from around 1964–65, a first set of images suddenly emerges from within the overall banality of the found photographs, rupturing the entire field [...]. It is at this very moment that the *Atlas* also yields its own secret as an image reservoir: a perpetual pendulum between the death of reality in the photograph and the reality of death in the mnemonic image. (143–145)

This permanent oscillation is at the core of archival art practices. Considering them briefly will allow us to better understand to what extent the position of the viewer (vis-à-vis the terrorist attacks as a media consumer and a western citizen) is here embodied by the artist and hence by the painting. In his editorial introduction to *The Archive*, an edited book with canonical texts on and around archival practices, the curator and art historian Charles Merewether notes that although “archival practices originated within state institutions, their examination and contestation by artists have focused on their potential to fragment and destabilize either remembrance as recorded, or history as written, as sufficient means of providing the last word in the account of what has come to pass” (10). A crucial tension is revealed here between, on the one hand, the archive's tendency toward inclusivity and systematization and,

on the other hand, the lacunary character of memory, a point that echoes Buchloh's claims as well. This tension can be traced back to Sigmund Freud's “A Note Upon the Mystic Writing-Pad”, published in 1925, in which the psychoanalyst proposes to view memory as an operation of inscription that makes compatible two opposing functions: its unlimited receptivity and the maintenance of lasting traces. Freud writes “the Pad provides not only a receptive surface that can be used over and over again, like a slate, but also permanent traces of what has been written, like an ordinary paper pad” (231). *September* can hence be interpreted as framed by a long lineage of artistic appropriation of images from public media archives, a practice that articulates these opposing forces. At the same time, however, it also forces us to consider whether the permanent availability of historical images might require a reconsideration of archival practices.

To return to Buchloh, his discussion of artistic engagements with the archive since 1945 leads him, as we have seen, to identify a historical shift from the optimism associated with technologies of reproduction during the inter-war period to forms of archiving “collective social memory” characterized by “the destruction of [...] historical thought altogether” (136). In a sense, this destruction is analogous to the disappearance of historical alternatives proclaimed by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man*. But does this analysis also apply to the position of Richter when he paints an image representing 9/11? Evidence seems to suggest it doesn't. Rather, as Storr also implies, Richter is also an active viewer of historical events. This enquiry is particularly important due to the fact that the attackers planned the World Trade Center attacks in view of the global circulation of imagery and as an event to be remembered in the future. It is worth quoting Storr at length here:

[*September*] is faintly perceptible in the contrasting trays that dominate the canvas [...] for despite first appearances, it is a picture and not one of Richter's monochrome abstractions, a *Bild* and not an *Abstraktes Bild* [...]. Tones and tints permeate each other while patches and tiny nodes of white percolate throughout in what may initially seem to be a quasi-photographic dissolve, but which, to the viewer's dreadful amazement, instead depicts an entirely physical one. [...]. In sum, viewers must mentally reconstitute a likeness that is in effect disintegrating before their eyes. In that way, the process of wet-into-wet oil painting and Richter's longstanding practice of inpainting (*Vermalung* in German) his pictures suck

viewers into the vortex of the undoing of the image and thus into the destruction of the WTC, for that is what they are looking at: the explosion of United Airlines Flight 175 from Boston as it slammed into the South Tower. (47–48, emphasis in the original)

Storr believes that the result of this technique (that is forcing the viewers to reconstitute the original image) is crucial to disrupt a passive viewing position. Crucially, Rancière also argues in favor of a theory of the viewer that moves beyond the opposition between active artistic production and passive reception. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, and using theater as his main example, Rancière argues that the traditional association of spectatorship with ignorance and passivity is symptomatic of wider relations of inequality. Rancière argues that artists should investigate the power of the aesthetic to produce political effects, breaking with what he names as “the regime of representation” (*The Politics of Aesthetics*). The result is a practice that doesn’t aim to reveal concealed realities but, rather, to create “different realities, different forms of common sense [...] different spatiotemporal systems, different communities of words and things, forms and meanings” (*The Emancipated Spectator* 102). An example of such alternative “spatiotemporal systems” can be seen in Storr’s point that *September* is

opening meaningful gaps between us and the onsite images we know so well that we may have stopped thinking about them, and, more importantly, that we may have stopped allowing ourselves to engage emotionally. (49–50)

At the same time, however, he stresses that

to exquisitely paint an indescribably ugly subject is not to glamorize something inherently odious but rather to call attention to it by showing tenderness toward something that has been visited by so much brutality [and] to short-circuit its sensational charge. (52–53)

These two points (regarding the reconstitution of the image by the viewer as well as Richter’s demonstration of care) are extremely important. Together, they stress that this specific appropriation of an image of violence takes place not from a detached perspective but from a position of empathy with the suffering that it caused. The use of the knife is here crucial: it attests to the epistemological gap between painting

and the event. Richter’s gesture of cutting through the paint alludes to but is nonetheless incomparable with the crossing of the two airplanes through the buildings, the dismembered bodies and the damaged lives that resulted from it. However, as we will see below, this hiatus can be approached as a point of departure rather than as a limitation.

AMBIVALENCE AS THE SITE OF THE POLITICAL

At this point in the argument, it is helpful to discuss the role of the ambivalence of *September* as a potential catalyst for reflection on 9/11, terrorism and, more broadly, on the ways in which these are framed by a long history of international relations. To do so, I will refer to the work of Jacques Derrida, which will lead me to consider the writings of the literary theorist Thomas Keenan.

The relevance of the ambiguity of the painting—its openness to more than one interpretation and, more specifically, the lack of clarity as to how it is positioned in relation to 9/11—is naturally framed by the wider complexity of the relation between images and their viewers. In a recently published article, “Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn”, art historian Keith Moxey argues that the image should be simultaneously understood as a representation, “a visual construct that betrays the ideological agenda of its makers and whose content is susceptible to manipulation by its receivers” and as a presentation, as an object “endowed with a life of their own” (131). This oscillation of the image as both an object that can be deciphered and an object with agency in itself (and hence beyond full analysis) introduces the power of *September* to be, even if only to a certain extent, generative in itself, beyond or despite the intentions or lack thereof of the painter.

That said, the most relevant point to take from Moxey’s argument to my own analysis concerns his discussion of the work of Jacques Derrida. Following W. J. T. Mitchell, Moxey expands Derrida’s assertions regarding the lack of referentiality in language and considers the meaning of images as unstable. It’s in light of this idea that Moxey writes that “the context in which [images] are enunciated fills them with presence, while ensuring that their meaning cannot be fixed” (142). In view of this analysis, the painting emerges once again as a presence that cannot be dismissed as unimportant, notwithstanding the crucial hiatus between the experience of horror and its artistic representation—an issue that many other scholars have addressed. In fact, in an analogous manner, Derrida

argues in an interview published in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, a book of interviews reflecting on the 9/11 attacks, and referring broadly to any terrorist attack, that

The event is made up of the “thing” itself (that which happens or comes) and the impression (itself at once “spontaneous” and “controlled”) that is given, left, or made by the so-called “thing”. (Borradori et al. 89)

To fully understand this quote, it’s important to mention that, as readers of his work know, Derrida develops two fundamental, yet connected, lines of enquiry: on the one hand, genealogical analyses of the history of a concept or theme (for example in *Of Grammatology*, with regards to the concept of writing); and on the other hand, in his later work, examinations of ahistorical paradoxes or aporias. For example, in “Force of Law” (included in *Acts of Religion*) he considers the complex relation between law (always founded on violence) and justice. It is important to stress, however, that the latter’s impossibility doesn’t mean that justice ought to be understood as a Kantian ideal. On the contrary, Derrida articulates a figure of simultaneous opening and closure, using the Greek etymology of the word “horizon” (*Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* 26–28).

This figure of immanence and deferment describes very acutely a problem concerning the nature of international borders and cultural difference. Discussing hospitality with regards to the European Union (*Of Hospitality*), Derrida argues that an unconditional openness of the borders is impossible by definition and that hospitality itself is always accompanied by violence (in the form of the decision as to whom is granted permission to enter: the very limit of hospitality itself). Consequently, full hospitality is permanently unachievable, permanently to come in the future (“*l’avenir*”, meaning “the future” or “that which is to come”): the result is a “structural messianism, a messianism without religion” (*Specters of Marx* 59).

This tension is also evident in Derrida’s work on television and its effects. In the essay “Artifactualities”, included in *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, Derrida argues that “actuality” is always a form of “artifactuality”, that is the result of a long process of selection and editing. However, in an indirect reference to the work of Baudrillard, he stresses that one must indeed pay attention to the illusion of actuality that is produced by live forms of media broadcast,

While taking the deconstruction of artifactuality as far as possible, we must [...] do everything in our power to guard against this critical neoidealism and remember, not only that a consistent deconstruction is a thinking of singularity, and therefore of the event, of what it ultimately preserves of the irreducible, but also that “information” is a contradictory and heterogeneous process. It can and must be transformed, it can and it must serve, as it has often done, knowledge, truth, and the cause of democracy to come. (6, emphasis in the original)

One can derive from this twofold claim the urgency to effect, firstly, a change in the rhythm of the media. Only then will it be possible for politics to retain a sense of the unanticipated, of unconditional hospitality, and hence to keep its reference to justice (*Acts of Religion* 11). This said, *September* demonstrates that this potential can also be enacted by artistic practices. The painting contributes to the widening of public discussions regarding historical knowledge; more particularly, it confronts the viewers with the lack of certainty regarding the orthodox explanations of historical events such as 9/11 as ahistorical and apolitical. This said, it should be very clear that this affirmation does not deny the horror of the event—rather, it approaches such horror as originating from the decision to aggress an enemy. However, as is well known, the terrorists who planned and committed the 9/11 attacks were promptly identified by American politicians as part of an external force—either as members of the terrorist group al-Qaeda or as agents of what latter become known as the Axis of Evil—committed, due to their heinous nature, to the destruction of Western civilization.

Secondly, to return to the painting, what is of central importance in Derrida’s argument is the idea that both representation and meaning are made possible by—and emerge through—*différance*, a process of continuous iteration that reinscribes and alters the original as trace. Following this view, the ambiguity of *September* can be considered both as an acknowledgment of the difficulty of representing horror and as an embodiment of an excess, that is, of what Derrida sees as the permanent remainder of signification. As such, and following the previous discussion, the painting functions not only as a reminder of a permanently delayed future of global understanding and peace—as is evident in 9/11—but also as a catalyst for a reflection upon the complex ways in which the explanations of violence are influenced by the mediated discourses through which global viewers are given access to conflicts.

Third, to focus explicitly on the position of the viewer of *September*, Derrida's work allows us to understand the addressee of any statement (or, I would argue, of any image, and hence the spectator of a visual rhetorical address) as a future potentiality. This discussion leads us back to Moxey's point regarding the importance of the context of an image. Just like words, as noted by Derrida, are written in view of their future reader, so were the attacks devised for their future viewers. *September* illustrates that appropriating such images may influence their expected consequences.

Before concluding this section, moving briefly to the work of Thomas Keenan will allow us to understand the detailed mechanism of the ways in which the instability that is inherent to ambiguity becomes generative. In the text "Translation, or: Can Things Get Any Worse?" Keenan discusses the possibility of seeing war and violence, including the attacks of 9/11, as a form of language. Specifically, the author opposes the argument of the scholar Saskia Sassen regarding the attacks as a form of communication that overcomes traditional problems of linguistic and cultural mediation. In this view, which he opposes, Keenan argues that terror is understood as clear language in the manner of the argument developed by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*. Barthes sees writing, Keenan explains, as

an act, without mediation or image, operating an immediate transformation [...]. If I speak, and if my speech coincides with my action, if it "presents" (instead of representing, as "image" or as referent) [...], then it is "political" speech, which is to say "operative" language. Barthes effectively makes this definitional: what is political is what is operative, active, transformative, destructive [...]. Indeed "action" means, in this case, the radical erasure of distance, mediation, reference, representation—[...] the elimination of any hermeneutic or interpretive dimension. (12–13)

However, Keenan diverges—and I share his view—with this understanding of the political, which presupposes that disagreement is temporary and correctable rather than, as we have learned from Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, something that reflects the nature of the social as a permanent competition. Returning to Derrida, for whom meaning must be reconstructed and is permanently deferred—as is, hence, the possibility of full agreement—offers us the chance to see the ambiguity of *September* as reiterating the political and the historical as a site of disagreement.

THE POLITICS OF RANCIÈRE'S AESTHETICS

Rancière's understanding of the political, which he develops in books such as *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, also opposes this view of the political as that which overcomes mediation. Rather, as Keenan states,

Jacques Rancière has suggested that translation—a radical translation, an active relation between and within languages, not the attempt to overcome language altogether—is the event for which the name politics ought to be reserved. Disagreement, misunderstanding, *mésentente*, discordant objects of reference between speakers, are for him different names for the political experience as such: neither an enforced consensus, nor the destruction of the political stage, but its active deconstruction and transformation. (15–17)

In this view, as I said earlier, it is precisely *because September* places at its center the instability of the modes of representation of horror, and hence of any form of historical representation, that the painting can be understood as potentially contributing to the debate regarding the wider historical, economic and cultural imbalances that might have framed the 9/11 attacks. Keenan continues:

The principle of political interlocution is thus disagreement; that is, it is the discordant understanding of both the objects of reference and the speaking subjects. In order to enter into political exchange, it becomes necessary to invent the scene upon which spoken words may be audible, in which objects may be visible, and individuals themselves may be recognized [...]. This inaugural mimesis or copying, citation, returns us [...] to Derrida's unusual claim that a right to irony or to fiction or the simulacrum "opens public space" [...]. There could be no politics without irony, without copying, without enigma, and without drift. (48–51)

By avoiding to make clear the position of the painting with regard to the original photograph, Richter stresses the potential for disagreement between the painter, the viewer and the politician vis-à-vis how to understand and narrate 9/11. The ambiguity that characterizes *September* can be seen, then, as a visual enactment of political disagreement. I am here also agreeing with the art historian Johannes Meinhardt, who affirms in the article "Illusionism in Painting and the *Punctum* of Photography" (which argues that Richter's paintings, like a *punctum*, disturb "the certainty [...]

of what is depicted, what has occurred, with the negativity of reflection", 148), speaking of Richter's *Gray Pictures*, that

Richter had [...] broken with the idea of intentional expression or meaning in painting, with painting as conveyor or mediator of meanings that have been articulated in the work by the artist. [...] These paintings do not convey to the viewer any iconic, symbolic, or even aesthetic meanings. They avoid all communication, and they resist being perceived as signs: they do not represent; they do not signify; they do not mean. (139)

And yet, Meinhardt notes that this denial is productive of something else.

The reality of such appearance and disappearance in painting fundamentally challenges what we moderns define as reality, the opposition of consciousness and matter: it does not so much reveal another reality as suggest that other realities are possible. (141)

I see this understanding of denial as joining Rancière's notion of the political, that is, as a disturbance—and hence, seemingly paradoxically, as affirmative in itself. Additionally, an important feature of his understanding of contemporary art is the attempt to identify the fundamental modes of articulation between the political and the aesthetic, which he identifies in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Here, the distribution of the sensible (from the French original "*le partage du sensible*", where the word "*partage*" means both to share and to divide) is conceived as both the organization of the sensible regarding what can be said, seen, thought or heard, and as a distribution of images and places.

But how is *September* positioned in this regard? In this view, what is at stake in politics under consideration here is the disruption of the sensible. Moreover, the philosopher argues that it is art's position as a partially independent field—between autonomy and heteronomy, here made evident in the artist's ability to interrupt external narratives—that allows it to be generative of knowledge.

What should also be clear is the fact that, rather than affirming a direct relation between an image or an artwork and political action, Rancière proposes a model in which the boundaries between looking and doing are blurred, and whose political effects are not easily predetermined. For Rancière, the set of relations that constitute the image or the artwork com-

bine to "construct different realities, different forms of common sense—that is to say, different spatiotemporal systems, different communities of words and things, forms and meanings" (*The Emancipated Spectator* 102). I believe that this analysis allows us to finally understand the importance of the ambiguity of *September*, as initially identified by Storr. The dissolution of the meaning of the image as self-evident produces a potential disruption of the sensible—or, in this case, of the conventional understanding of the event as apolitical.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the previous discussion forces me to briefly consider the potential consequences of this analysis to the viewing position that is demanded by the painting, particularly from the point of view of citizenship—an enquiry that I will have to postpone due to space constraints. I am here thinking of the work of the political theorist Jeffrey Edward Green, who proposes in his work, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*, that spectatorship functions as a permanent form of engagement with the political. Green suggests that one should view citizens as "citizen-spectators", a figure "that, as a matter of law and abstract principle, has full political rights but, as a matter of practice, experiences politics primarily as a spectator" (32). Doing so, he states, amounts to a form of empowerment: his main argument is that a vocal understanding of citizenship, that is the "participating citizen, who discusses, acts, joins, protests" (32) does not account for the way in which one experiences democracy today.

But in what ways does this apply to *September*? The model that Green proposes aims to develop a democratic theory based on the figure of the spectator. Such emerging forms of citizenship conflate the positions shared by both the consumer of international images such as those representing 9/11 and the viewer of artworks that appropriate such imagery. Although Green's original analysis considers the domain of the political in strict terms, such as the analysis of political events as they are communicated by the media, it is possible to apply such an approach to the experience of contemporary art as an extended form of participation within the mediated access to political events.

We have seen earlier, via the work of Derrida, Keenan, and Rancière, that the ambiguity of *September* leads it to potentially contribute to a

political understanding of the 9/11 attacks. As such, *September* exemplifies one possible mode of activated viewership vis-à-vis media images of international conflict, such as those associated with 9/11. Drawing on Green, what now also emerges is the urgent need to consider how this effects the position of the viewer herself, who emerges not as a passive media consumer but as exemplifying an emerging form of citizenship, one that challenges preconceived notions of what national belonging is. In this view, the power of the citizen lies not only in the expression of her voice but also on the right to see—and, crucially, to see differently. This right is precisely what ambiguous artworks such as *September*, which interrupt and expand predominant historical and political narratives without guiding the viewer towards a specific direction, encourage.

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