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Niels Van Tomme

Constructing Histories: Johan Gimonprez Discusses Double Take

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The reason for my lack of enthusiasm for this Alfred Hitchcock lookalike contest will be apparent when I tell you that I entered and was eliminated in the first round.

Alfred Hitchcock in The Alfred Hitchcock Hour, Episode #57: The Gentleman Caller, broadcast on April 10, 1964



Constructing Histories: Johan Grimonprez discusses *Double Take*

with Niels Van Tomme

Niels Van Tomme: In your essay film *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, 1997, you explored the subject of hijacking in order to hijack the media. You also used the writings of Don DeLillo to comment on the images you appropriated. Your new film, *Double Take*, 2009, is inspired by Jorge Luis Borges' short story "August 25, 1983," 1983. For someone who has been called "a child of the TV generation," that's a lot of literary influences. What role does literature play in your work?

Johan Grimonprez: In *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, but also in DeLillo's novel *Mao II*, 1991, several characters talk simultaneously: the novelist in dialogue with a terrorist, one embodying the book, the other TV. The writer declares the death of the novel, because the terrorist is able to play the media much better. The bomb-maker replaces the novelist. That's the thesis of *Mao II*, but not necessarily of the film, because *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* suggests that the media hijack the terrorist in return. Ironically, the film is based on a book that declares the death of the novel, while it is a collaboration with its writer. *Double Take* operates somewhat similarly. I worked with novelist Tom McCarthy to adapt a short story by Borges. That's what takes you into the film. Whereas, in the short story, you have Borges meeting Borges, in the film, it's Hitchcock

meeting Hitchcock. In essence, it's a metaphor for a lot of things, hence the title *Double Take*. On a literary level, Borges called it the tautology of language, which is always a doubling of reality. The story touches upon many philosophical questions. It is also a way of getting into Hitchcock's work: Hitchcock the filmmaker versus Hitchcock the TV personality.

NVT: In the original short story, one of the two Borges characters utters a phrase that could function as the motto of your film: "We've lied to each other, because we feel that we are two, not one. The truth is that we are two yet we are one." Many parallel worlds and events develop simultaneously in *Double Take*. But what is the film actually about?

JG: It's funny that you took that particular phrase from the Borges story, because the notion of lying is indeed very interesting. The film is also about media manipulation; it's all about the lies that proliferate. When Borges is having this conversation with Borges, the former only knows that the latter is the true Borges by lying to him. When the other one says, "I know you're lying," he knows it's the real one. I like those paradoxes, that there is a contradiction. When I talked with Tom McCarthy about that particular moment in the Borges story, we were trying to find an

analogy with Hitchcock. It could have been the masquerading, a lot of Hitchcock's films deal with mistaken identity and it mimics that as well. There is a Hitchcockian plot projected onto the Borges story. If you talk about the Iraq war, or many things that are in the news these days, it's all being manipulated. It's like the so-called weapons of mass destruction that were used to drill fear into people. That's maybe also what the film is about on another level, the lie that, so blatantly there, becomes either transparent or opaque.

NVT: *Double Take* analyzes how fear and catastrophe are fed into the American household by television. In a way, you constructed a mimetic machine—your film—which re-appropriates television and its inherent ideologies.

JG: I worked together with film theorist Thomas Elsaesser for the book *Looking for Alfred*, 2007, in which he writes about the ontological shift produced in relation to 9/11. He ends up with Foucault's notion of "similitude." With digital cloning, we are now in a phase where the original has disappeared. We are left with digital clones that all look the same. You don't have to talk about an original anymore. This ontological shift occurred



when we were confronted with 9/11. At that point, there were already so many images out there in the world, in Hollywood, and in the media, that mimicked the event. When we saw 9/11 live on television, we looked at it as if it were unreal, as if fiction were running ahead of reality. Elsaesser also writes about the proliferation of Hitchcock, the fact that no other director has been so intensely copied and is so omnipresent. In cinema studies, you have Nietzschean Hitchcock, Heideggerian Hitchcock, Foucauldian Hitchcock and so on. Everyone has his or her own interpretation of Hitchcock. This proliferation of Hitchcock is, in a sense, the cloning of Hitchcock. When Elsaesser was writing in relation to *Double Take*, I thought there was an interesting analogy; Hitchcock has become monstrously big, just like fear and catastrophe.

NVT: Is reality copying film history?

JG: Well, it goes back and forth. There is always an existing paradigm. Science evolves because a certain power structure defines what is being researched, which in turn redraws the perimeter of reality. It's co-constructed; reality is also always shifting. It changes constantly. Take, for example, weapons of mass destruction. Even if their presence in Iraq was a lie, the war became a reality and changed the country. I'm talking politics now, but fictions always proliferate. And at one point, they tip over into reality or vice versa. I am interested in how that tipping over occurs, and *Double Take* very much explores this. Hitchcock's film *Topaz*, 1969, is introduced by a parade, and the footage looks like documentary propaganda footage. It's part of a fiction film. But when I insert it in *Double Take* at a moment when the Cuban Missile Crisis happens, it becomes a piece of documentary. That's what I'm really interested in: playing different genres against one another, and how fiction comes to stand for reality or the other way around.

It's interesting that you pick up on the word mimesis. In *Mimesis and Alterity*, 1992, Michael Taussig explores how mimesis actually empowers the colonial subject. Discussing Jean Rouch's short documentary *Les Maîtres Fous*, 1955, he writes about the colonial subject's adaptation of the colonial gaze to revert it. Here, it is the return gaze that empowers him. It is like holding it up as a mirror, but it goes even further. The colonial and colonized



LEFT: stills from *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, 1997, 68 minutes, video, color (courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York)

subjects are changed simultaneously; it moves back and forth. This goes back to where I come from. With *Kobarweng* or *Where Is Your Helicopter?*, 1992, I was trying to analyze myself as being a part of a scientific gaze while exploring indigenous people, as anthropology being the stepchild of colonialism. The film reconstructs a moment in 1959 when a scientific team dropped down with a helicopter into the remote village of Oksibil, much to the astonishment of the villagers who had never seen the likes before. It signified a total rupture in their history, as they were suddenly thrown into the modern world. When, for example, one informant was saying, "We never tell everything, we always keep something for the next anthropologist," it was as if they were conscious of the fact that they are being looked upon, which means they grabbed control.

McCarthy wrote a book called *Tintin and the Secret of Literature*, 2006, in which he discusses how the characters Thomson and Thompson are always commenting on one another in *Tintin*. He claims that the function of literature is sometimes analogous. That's also what is going on in *Double Take*—the doubling of television at the beginning of the sixties when forty percent of cinemas closed down and Hollywood had to redefine itself; the doubling of television in reality itself; and the commercial doubling as another character that does its entry with television or literally: the Hitchcock double. The film started with a casting; that's how it all came about. We were looking for Hitchcock but we never found him. But by actually not finding him, we found much more. Ron Burrage, the Hitchcock double, who had been performing as Hitchcock for over twenty years in numerous venues, really takes over at the end of *Double Take*. At the Locarno Film Festival, he really becomes Hitchcock and introduces Tippi Hedren at the restored version of *The Birds*, which is, in a way, the doubling of *The Birds*.

NVT: With *Double Take* you reconstruct a history that you did not live, at least not consciously. In a sense you are re-writing history through the media that have produced it. It's not a straightforward way of history-telling. Many clips are repeated, blurred or zoomed into. How do you see your relationship to history writing?

RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: stills from *Double Take*; middle: Tsar Bomba – Biggest Bomb Ever Detonated, Northern Arctic, October 30, 1961; bottom: Nikita Khrushchev – Richard Nixon/ The Kitchen Debate, Moscow, July 24, 1959



JG: In *Sans Soleil*, 1983, Chris Marker talks about his search for an image that would best describe something he had lived in reality which led him to a fiction film, *Vertigo*, 1958. Robert Flaherty is considered one of the fathers of documentary, but his *Nanook of The North*, 1922, is totally fictionalized. The wives of Nanook play his mistresses; the igloo is doubled in size and cut in half because it's a film set; and there is a fictional script about man fighting nature. From its very inception, the documentary relies on an artificial construction. When you talk about the media, you are talking about a structure, which has much to do with who owns and produces it. When you talk about truth in history, you have to include plural histories. It's about epistemology: where are we situated? Because truth exists within a paradigm. Walter Benjamin said that the victor writes history, the official story of the war is always written by the winner. It's crucial to unravel this narrative enterprise and create ruptures—Brechtian ruptures in a sense. But it is also crucial to realize fiction sometimes feels closer to truth or reality than historical

events. Sometimes, you feel removed when somebody dies, as with 9/11. But, if you add the lament of violins and the image of towering infernos, you can more easily have true feelings than you would have with the actual true event.

A Hitchcock scholar told me that Hitchcock always claimed that *The Birds* had nothing to do with catastrophe culture. But consider the date of its release: 1963. This is an eventful time: Telstar, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy's assassination, and satellite television's invasion of the home from the sky. *The Birds* was made at the time when all those things were happening. If you examine that period, you inevitably come up with an analogy. These things form a constellation. They intersect, and an intertextual reading reveals more than it actually obscures. You might also read *The Birds* partly as non-fiction, because the fear it shows was true: the motif of an invasion from the sky could stand for the fear of intercontinental ballistic missiles. Likewise, the theme of an alien offensive from Mars—the red planet—could be read as a metaphor for Commies invading America.

Fiction, like the Hollywood films made in the 1960s by Hitchcock, could suddenly stand for a time period. As such, it could actually expose something that is very documentary. Or on the opposite side, JFK being shot or the Cuban Missile Crisis could suddenly come to stand for portions of a fiction film. I like that crossover, but it's not straightforward history writing. Quite the contrary. I do zoom in on or blur certain images, but I'm using those techniques to reveal something: I'm showing the tools that I use to write history. While *Double Take* is about the late fifties and early sixties, it mimics what's going on today. Histories are relevant to what you live today. History is never straightforward; it's always part of a power structure.

NVT: As I was preparing this interview, I watched *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* again. That film, it seems, was more of an intellectual construction, whereas *Double Take* also works on an empathic and emotional level.

JG: With *Double Take*, I set forth to extend my vocabulary more towards film. While I was researching television, I wanted to carve out a bigger world. But Hitchcock brought me back to television. I worked very closely with Tom McCarthy from the very beginning. I was introduced to him when he gave a talk on *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* at the British Film Institute. He projected the dramatic triangle onto media figures. I thought that was interesting—how literary theory can dramatize relations in a work, and be used to analyze them. With *Double Take*, the big hook is the fiction story—it creates a whole world that may be a more personal world.

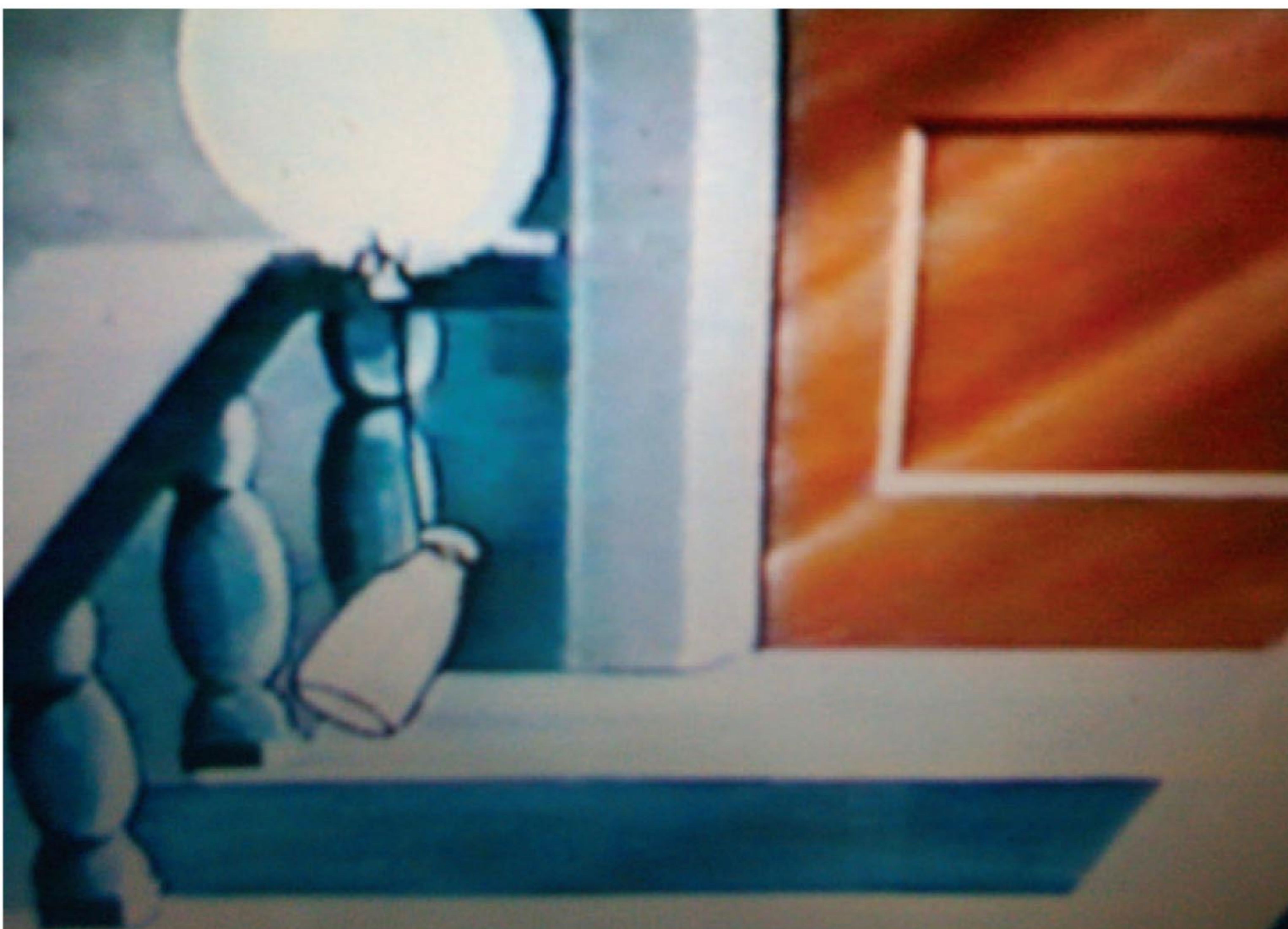
NVT: It's true. The new film gave me the feeling of watching a feature film.

JG: I take that as a compliment.

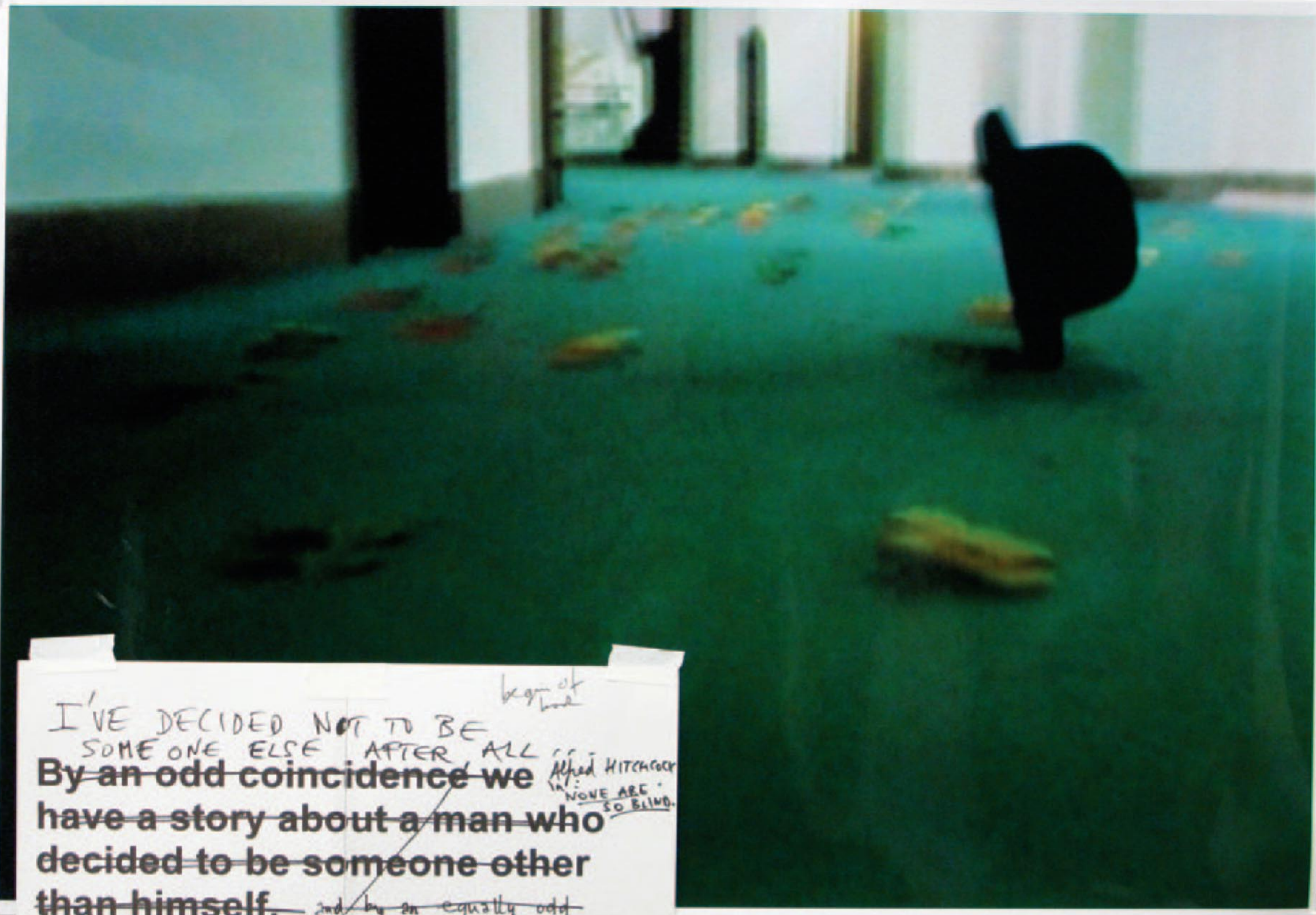
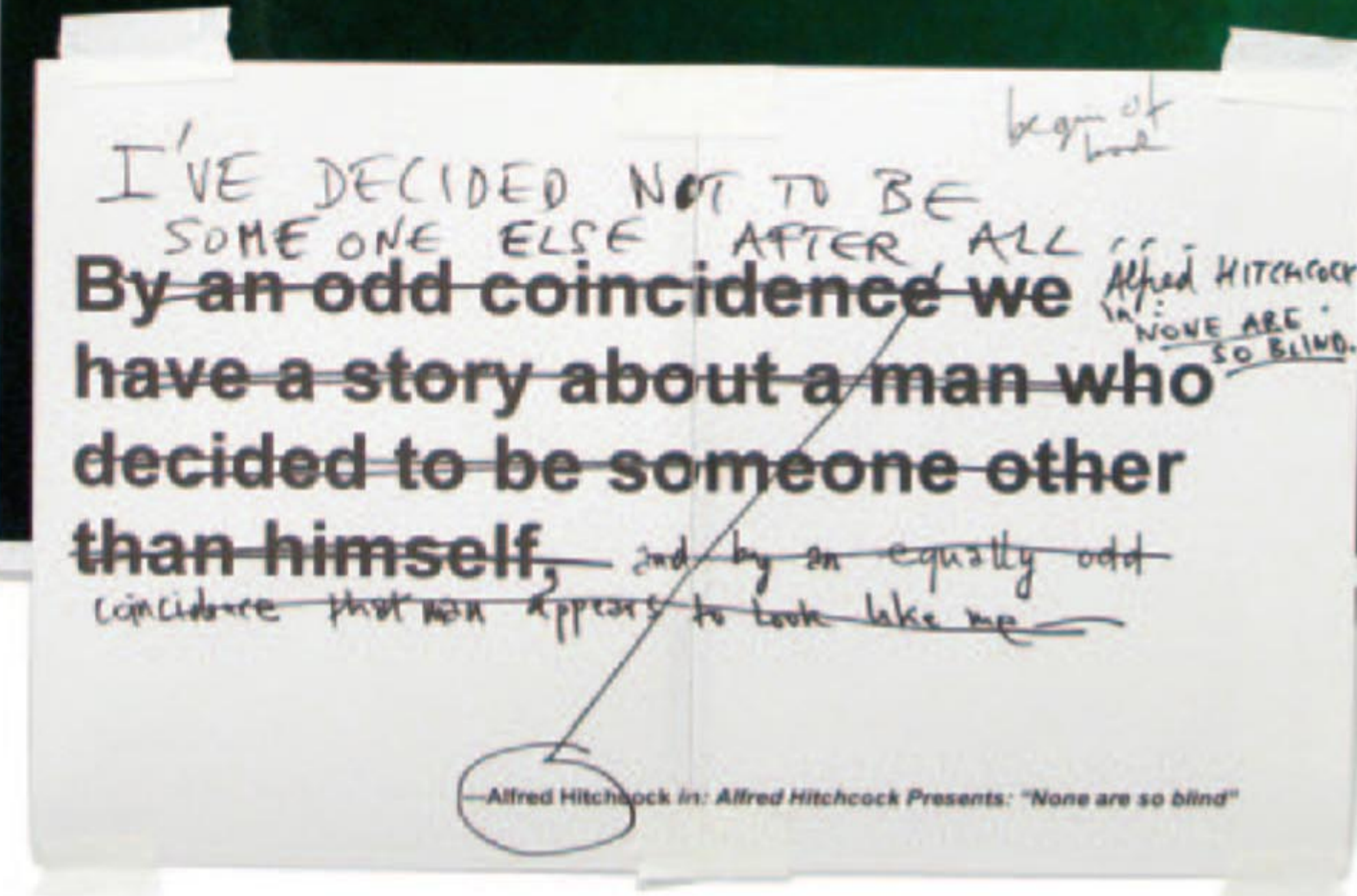
NVT: It is a compliment!

JG: It's true that *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* is more associative.

NVT: It's more ideological as well.



ABOVE: still from *Double Take*



JG: *Double Take* is not about the seduction of images. Sure, it's partially there, but it's a different kind of commentary on imagery. It really pulls you in and takes you through the story.

NVT: I can imagine that you spend a lot of time in audiovisual archives. How do you start working with such an abundance of material? Do you improvise? Or do you begin with something of a script?

JG: It depends very much on the project. It's true that much of my work entails some excavating—or tracing a genealogy, as Foucault would say. I often try to circumvent a certain theme. Ultimately, by approaching the material through many different viewpoints, the

theme reveals itself in a very fractured way from a different angle. The way I approach subject matter is very intuitive. There's one idea and then it plugs into another thing, I often let things come to me. At one point, I was invited to the UCLA Film and Television Archive. Researching that time period—television's infancy—I stumbled upon the “kitchen debate,” which was the first televised summit; the television staging of the space race; and the Cuban Missile Crisis, which was very much the first live-television drama. In fact, the early 1960s were crucial in television history. The presidential debate had sixty million viewers; it was the biggest television audience ever at the time. It was the moment when television overshadowed the radio, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* became a one-

hour show, and many cinema theaters started closing down. You read into these symptoms, and maybe our temporal distance affords us a better view. History is being made as we're talking, and we are so much a part of it that it's tough to see what is going on.

Niels Van Tomme is a curator, researcher, art critic, and frequent contributor to ART PAPERS. The Director of Arts and Media at Provisions Library in Washington, DC, he lives in New York and Washington. His independently-curated exhibitions have been shown internationally.

ABOVE: *None are so blind*, 2009, collage and drawing in 3 parts, overall dimensions: 28.25 x 42.5 inches (courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York)