

Accident As Art And Artifice

A Media Mixer
Creates Uneasy
Rubberneckerers

By SEWELL CHAN

An overturned bus lies on a rural highway, split open like a disjointed limb. Emergency workers slowly mill about, but the purpose of their activity is not clear. A line of cars stretches into the distance, their occupants gazing nonchalantly on this putative accident.

The images come from "Refraction," a video installation by the Dutch artist Aernout Mik that opens tomorrow at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in Chelsea. The solo exhibition could bring about a new prominence for Mr. Mik, whose work has been shown with increasing frequency in Europe during the last decade but is not widely known in the United States.

Nothing in "Refraction" is quite what it seems. The images are dreamlike, but shot in high-definition video that suggests a newscast gone eerily awry. The video is about 30



Courtesy of Aernout Mik and Florian Braun

minutes long, with no sound; it runs in a continuous loop and has anything but a narrative arc. It was shot in a single day on a lonely road in rural Romania using participants who received only vague instructions on how to act.

The work raises questions about our responses to catastrophe, tragedy

and even that most pedestrian of concerns, traffic congestion. Mr. Mik says that "collective consciousness" is an important theme of his work, and he seems to approach his subjects as a sociologist — or entomologist — might.

"It's not about character," he said in an interview, after flying in from

Amsterdam for the opening of the exhibition. "It's always about the individual in a relatively small, or relatively bigger group, being in its environment."

The images hint at contemporary anxieties, but cannot be easily fixed in space or time.

Perhaps the most haunting aspect

of the video is the view of men dressed in protective white bodysuits, wearing green vests and plucking, with tweezers, at the detritus inside the toppled bus. They appear to be placing the debris into clear plastic sample bags. A possible bioterrorist attack? No other cues provide an answer.



Aernout Mik/Carlier Gebauer; and Projectile Gallery

Dial 911 for anxiety: video stills from "Refraction," Aernout Mik's staged disaster orchestrated for video, which opens tomorrow at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in Chelsea.

Mr. Mik at first intended to make his accident entirely victimless, but at the last moment, he said, he decided to produce shots of a few people who, presumably, were on the bus. Several are wrapped in blue flannel blankets; one woman is in a shiny metallic sheet as an aid worker speaks to her. No one appears traumatized, so the extent and nature of these victims' injuries are unknown.

Less depressing, but equally memorable, is a moment when a herd of sheep and goats amble from the surrounding fields onto the road. Their origins and destination are unexplained, but the comparison to the human flock is pretty clear.

Mr. Mik, who is 42 and based in Amsterdam, has had several dozen solo exhibitions across Europe since 1995, but until this year his work has been displayed in the United States only a handful of times.

"Refraction" will also be shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago starting on Tuesday and

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running through Sept. 25. (It runs through Sept. 10 in New York.) It will travel to the Hammer Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the fall of 2006. Mr. Mik is scheduled to have other works exhibited in San Diego and Los Angeles this year.

Along with the usual difficulties of foreign artists attracting notice, perhaps one reason Mr. Mik is not better known in the United States is his fixation on the societal mass rather than the individual, said Andrea Inselmann, a curator at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University.

"He sort of questions this idea of human agency, and this idea that we are in control of our destiny, which is just very much part of the American makeup," she said in a telephone interview. "Europeans don't buy into that as much."

Dan Cameron, who organized the current exhibition, said he was "stunned" when he first encountered Mr. Mik's work at a show in Switzerland several years ago.

"One of the compelling things about his videos is that you can't really tell what the people are doing, but they seem to know," Mr. Cameron, senior curator at large at the New Museum, said. "It's a very bizarre tension that he creates in the viewer, where you want, in a way, to get in, or understand what's happening."

"Refraction" occupies most of the New Museum's ground-floor gallery. The video consists of three simultaneously projected images, forming a single panorama — about 5 feet 8 inches high and four times as wide — that is ever so slightly disrupted by the angles of the connected screens.

Viewers can walk behind the screen and observe the three projection devices, as well as the mirror image of the video. The two-sided projection screen is simply a translucent plastic fabric bolted onto a wooden support wall.

"There is a certain fragility to that



Courtesy of Aernout Mik and Florian Braun

Following the herd: "Refraction" raises questions about catastrophe, tragedy and traffic congestion.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Guessing game: The Dutch artist Aernout Mik only hints at a narrative.

which I like and which I'm looking for in the work," said Mr. Mik, who sets precise specifications for the installation of his works. "An element of entropy, of things falling apart, is a very essential part of every step in the piece."

Mr. Mik made the video with a small production crew and two cameras. They drove the bus from the Netherlands to Romania, and bargained with local Gypsies to borrow the 400 or so livestock that appear in the work.

"Everyone will say it's a piece about an accident, but I wanted a title that pulls you in a slightly different direction," Mr. Mik said. "It relates to the angle the screen makes. The accident is not just a breaking point, a fundamental breaking point, but a reorganization, a slight change of direction."

Mr. Mik has done photography, but prefers video to film. "There is something nonromantic about a video, which somehow suits my work," he said.

He resists being called a video artist, however, and prefers to describe the work as a mixture of media. "I don't consider it as just video," he said. "I sometimes call myself, provocatively, a sculptor, because I really bring the moving image to the space. It's very much a spatial intervention instead of just film projected somewhere."