

## MARCEL ODENBACH

KIMMERICH AND ANTON KERN  
by nancy princethal



**New York** The titles of a pair of videos by Marcel Odenbach shown simultaneously at two Manhattan galleries could easily have been reversed: *Disturbed Places* (2007, 34 minutes), shot in various locations in India, has a circular structure; *Turning Circles* (2009, approx. 16 minutes) was filmed at a Holocaust memorial in Poland. The former (shown at Kimmerich) begins in a textile shop, with a young man behind the counter—the camera positions viewers as customers—meditating skeptically on the narratives to follow. “Who knows,” he asks, “which images I can still trust?” Yet he considers the act of story-telling—entirely visual after this spoken prologue—to be a lifeline. He concludes by claiming, “If I turn the camera off, I would no longer exist for you. It would almost be like a suicide.”

Leisurely footage proceeds to take us on a tour of several scenes, both urban and rural, with stereotypical elements, including rickshaw carriers in a quiet then a terrifyingly busy street, and a Hindu shrine extravagantly rich in color and visual incident. *Disturbed Places* concludes with a young man sitting in the bow of an empty ferry on a broad river, typing, on an old manual machine, the same monologue that introduced the video. A circle is closed.

*Turning Circles* (shown at Kern) is mostly confined to one very claustrophobic place: a massive memorial to victims of the Majdanek concentration camp, outside Lublin. This time, the prologue involves two adolescent boys frolicking in a meadow. Soon, we are pressed up against the walls of the memorial, as the camera scans the structure’s rough-hewn surfaces in an agonizingly long shot that makes it impossible to tell whether we are advancing or simply turning in place.

Eventually we emerge at ground level with the brooding, domed memorial. Superimposed over further shots of its walls is faint, World War II-era footage of hurrying children and women, and then of a uniformed man urging them on. At the video’s conclusion, which has offered only a single further, heartbreakingly brief glimpse of open countryside, the two boys return, strolling the monument’s circular walkway and speculating with naive enthusiasm about the ill luck that, “by a hair,” left no one to grieve for Majdanek’s victims.

Both videos orbit their subjects at a measured pace that breaks down at sudden moments—to grim statistics delivered by a few laconic title frames in *Turning Circles*, and to fast-cut, frenzied images evocative of spiritual ecstasy in *Disturbed Places*. Odenbach, a German artist who has been making politically engaged videos since the 1970s, also ruptures surfaces to dramatic effect in two big, mosaiclike collages that accompanied the videos. *China Collage* (2008, at Kimmerich) shows an outdoor flower nursery, *The Place is Brought Close to Us* (2010, at Kern) a courtroom. Both are composed of thousands of tiny photographs. At very close range, you see Mao, Kafka and emaciated, shirtless prisoners in striped pants. The courtroom, press materials reveal, was used for a trial of officials at Auschwitz-Birkenau; the nursery served to ready the 40 million flowers that would transform Tiananmen Square for the 2008 Olympics.

Dazzling in their detail, these collages reprise Odenbach’s frequent use of archival and found footage in his videos. They also underscore the way he manipulates viewers’ physical and psychological positions to make us more aware of just where, politically, we stand.

*Photo: Marcel Odenbach: Turning Circles, 2009, DVD, approx. 16 minutes; at Anton Kern.*