EARLY ON IN RENÉE GREEN’S WORK *Wavelinks: A Different Reality*, 2002, the artist Arthur Jafa is on camera, musing animatedly about his efforts to connect with the past, to establish a “felt relationship to something that has been done prior to your existence in the world.” Soon after, a man is hazily seen through a window, changing filthy filters for the air-conditioning unit of an office building. This mundane maintenance is accompanied by an audio track: two unseen conversants voicing their disbelief about the severe buildup of waste on the filters. What might seem like casual chatter may also encourage moments of remembrance of the dust-laden atmosphere of post-9/11 New York, especially for those, like myself, who had first-hand encounters with floating debris and accumulating ash in downtown Manhattan. Minutes later, I relive these moments of numbed shock in a far more vivid way: Green momentarily shows the act of peeling the skin off a pepper, revealing its vulnerable guts, a brief, bloody episode that unexpectedly triggers an intensely immediate and involuntary impression of the horror of those days. September 11, never overtly evoked, is nevertheless one of several layers of implicit content that Green has juxtaposed in *Wavelinks*. Her meandering narrative, with its interwoven references to dirty air and the problem of memory, encourages viewers to open up to the possibility of this association.

Yet my own visceral reaction would not have occurred if I had not, on some basic level, envisioned Green in the role of the straight documentarian, seeking with sincerity to uncover some unknown truth. Working across many media, Green has long been known for an engaging critique of institutional and normative notions of history, and in particular of how individual agents and
amateurs may productively stray from authoritative accounts. (Green's production company is called Free Agent Media.) Much of her oeuvre may be read as an effort to facilitate the retrieval of and confrontation with memories, especially those tied to controversial sites and moments. Events in her work are not so much experienced as reexperienced (September 11, 2001, returns in 2002 or 2010), with varying degrees of familiarity, fantasy, and fiction mixed in. Green thus raises awareness of the role of fiction in constructing narrative—no matter how rhetorically convincing as truth a given narrative may seem. These (re)enactments of memory manage to avoid the pacifying melodrama and moral absolutism that so often infect industries of mournful commemoration employed in, say, the service of Bush-era warmongering.

In terms of subject matter, Green is devoted to the struggle of remembering unpleasant things: terrorist attacks, racial bigotry, ethnic conflict, and other forms of oppression and repression that are at once the products and the causes of historical ignorance and misrepresentation. For Green, these serious subjects call for a sustained scholarly enterprise that requires the gathering of gargantuan quantities of material—much of it fragmentary, degraded, and, according to academic standards, useless—ranging from archival film footage to excerpts from a broad array of philosophical and art-historical sources. But it is more fruitful to read Green as a recollector than as a collector. She resolutely arranges information, sounds, images, and texts in a layered and partial fashion that counters the fetishistic focus on whole objects—objects that may be marketed as collectibles or assigned high value with ease—inherent in the term souvenir. In this sense, Green's methods recall those of Dada collagists such as Hannah Höch and Kurt Schwitters, who were similarly preoccupied with the juxtapositions of semantically disconnected elements and with the process of remembrance in the face of ideological deception and trauma. Green has often been associated with the “documentary turn” in recent art practice—a tendency she has undoubtedly influenced—but such a reading is reductive. It does not give enough weight to the intricacies of her compositional approach nor to her dialogue with past avant-garde attempts (and failures) to reactivate and imagine history. Above all, it is the relatively nonreferential and noninformational aspects of Green's work—the peeling of the pepper, the prolonged shots of ocean waves or of snow falling—that have been neglected and are integral to understanding the critical value of her project.

Two survey exhibitions—one held late last year at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland, the other currently on view at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco—elucidated Green's project within aesthetically enlivening spaces in which one might dwell, for prolonged periods, to view videos on a multitude of monitors. The shows might be viewed in the context of a cluster of recent exhibitions, from artists as diverse as Lutz Bacher and Philippe Parreno, that have subverted the institutional standard for the monographic retrospective, striving to problematize the very act of narrativizing an artist's production as a coherent “oeuvre.” Green powerfully made a point of resisting such conventions early on, notably with a labyrinthine nonchronological installation at the Wiener Secession in 1999. In Lausanne and San Francisco she designed, in collaboration with curators Nicole Schweizer and Betti-Sue Hertz, respectively, environments that, though expansive in scale, provided a setting suitable for her particular brand of nonprescriptive and performative recalling of events, including those of her own twenty-year-long career. Hence “historical” efforts are permitted to speak with refreshing directness in concert with recent works. Partially Buried, 1996, for instance, commences with the pivotal question “How does one return to a place that reeks of remembered sensations?” As when viewing Wavelinks, at first I clung interpretively to a relatively rooted and centered discursive place in which a “neutral” documentary intent could be defined: Green is investigating the circumstances of Robert Smithson's Partially Buried Woodshed, 1970, installed at Kent State University in Ohio. In the service of this (illusory) intent, she provides an interview with an art professor who reliably recounts events dating back a quarter century.

Viewers who wean themselves off the video's documentary premise may eventually, and abruptly, come to the critical realization that no one, and no amount of empirical evidence, can
comprehensively reconstruct a single (art-)historical event. Partially Buried is rife with supplements to the professor’s testimony, including shots of hands turning pages of books about Smithson, images of album covers from the period, and handheld footage of the artist wandering through a thicket where the woodshed stood. This all contributes to a profound semantic ambiguity. However, in my case, the interpretive clincher took the form of a face-off with a group of jellyfish. Like the peeling of the pepper, the sudden sight of these languorously drifting creatures, accompanied by yet another layer of incongruity—the sounds of children speaking excitedly in German—spurred me to contemplate the many motivations for ideologically abstracting (or drifting from) actual events. The very randomness of such juxtapositions prompts us to see these ostensible subjects—“Smithson,” “Kent State”—as abstractions, empty placeholders that we may fill with associations as we will; and then, reflexively, we find ourselves contemplating our compulsion to project in this way. Green’s project meanders back and forth across a wide spectrum of such motivations, from the innocent to the malevolent, from the blatantly sentimental to the willfully deceptive.

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The spectrum of works on display in Lausanne and San Francisco strongly suggests that it is this mélange of motivations, and the roles they play in the process of recollection, that may be Green’s true subject. Hints of strategic deception are detectable in Climates and Paradoxes, 2005, a work that deals with Albert Einstein or, more specifically, with the bowdlerized, depoliticized nature of Germany’s national memory of Einstein, whose antiwar and internationalist convictions are
typically effaced from official biographies. However, to actually express this process of ideologically motivated distortion, Green juxtaposes bits about Einstein with a host of quotations (from Eduardo Cadava, Jacques Derrida, and Georg Simmel, among others) and references to nature—clouds, sunlit leaves, the sound of flowing water—as well as shots of gleaming Berlin office towers and construction sites, and slowly meandering panning shots of Einstein's vacant summer house in Caputh, Germany. These images, texts, and sounds compel the viewer to speculatively assign them a critical meaning, by envisioning, say, the facades of office buildings as the face of a sanitized corporate culture that has helped orchestrate the suppression of alternative historical understandings in Germany.

It is these abrupt and intuitive insights—based in part on imagery that is not explicitly referential and that strays from the service of a primary documentary premise—that contribute crucially to the effectiveness of Green's practice as cultural criticism and as historiography. But her sort of historical remembrance may only be enacted by those gallery visitors keen on spending a long time with the work. They need to be able to lounge, to study, to actively reflect. Green has responded to this need with a curatorial concern for the presentation of her own art, presentation that often involves innovative seating systems, simple and playful interactive features, and whimsical details, such as brightly colored walls. Multihued, double-sided banners hanging from the ceiling provide a chromatic invitation to peruse her works. With Endless Dreams and Water Between, 2009, for example, the banners bear poetic messages—TO SEEK ABSURDITIES IN HEAVEN'S NAME, WITH DRIPPING MOUTH IT SPEAKS A TRUTH—that might obliquely connect to the work's main subject of investigation: islands, or the role of the concept of islands in colonial fantasies.

As the staggered clusters of banners hanging overhead might indicate, the organizing structure of Green's practice is the constellation—not a network but a decenttered array of adjacencies that beholders may or may not read as a coherent whole. In this respect, the unlikely figure of Aby Warburg, and his Mnemosyne Atlas (1928–29), emerges as a relevant comparison—possibly even a crucial one. Warburg's Atlas was populated by humble photographic reproductions, in some sense comparable to Green's use of disparate video clips, that were similarly intended to enact a reconstruction of social memory through the indirect process of juxtapositions—between present-day technologies and historical objects of study, between high and low source materials, between the operation of the objective archive and the viewer's intuitive and personal reactions to photographic imagery. An atlas, after all, is a compendium of maps and charts by which we may orient ourselves in the world; Green's multivalent atlas puts us in critical relation to a world of fragments and disorientations.