

Between Mimetic Exacerbation and Abstraction

Images of Atrocity in Contemporary Art

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It is by now a truism that pictures of atrocity play a major role in human rights campaigns. Images depicting acts of violence aim to provoke empathy and compassion for the others; they shock viewers in order to persuade them to take action against blatant human rights violations. Several historians have pointed out how in eighteenth century Europe the circulation of visual and literary testimonies of acts of torture was crucial to the formation of a culture of human rights and how, in turn, this culture influenced the first legislations aimed to fight slavery (Hunt 2007; Sliwinski 2011). While activist movements have continued to rely on the use of graphic images of atrocity, since the 1980s most contemporary artists engaged with the representation of human rights violations and using photography, film and video have refused to visualize violence and pain in a direct manner. Internationally renowned artists such as Walid Raad, Alfredo Jaar, Zarina Bhimji, Anne Ferran, Melik Ohanian, and Susan Hiller – to mention but a few – have addressed traumatic histories without exposing viewers to direct images of atrocities.

Consider the series *Let There Be Light: The Rwanda Project 1994-1998* of Chilean-born Alfredo Jaar, which for me exemplifies the way in which several contemporary artists deploy photographs of atrocities. In this series Jaar refuses to let his audience see the mutilated and massacred bodies of the victims of the Rwanda genocide.

Instead, he relies on captions and voiceovers to describe this human right catastrophe. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has remarked, the artist “rejected the notion of a purely photographic content as adequate for political comprehension” and in his work “the obscenity of the [Rwanda] genocide is located off-scene” (Solomon-Godeau 2005, 40). Other contemporary artists have relied on anti-expressionistic strategies borrowed from the tradition of conceptual photography and its obsessive fascination with seriality and deadpan banality. The work of the Lebanese-born Walid Raad is emblematic of this tendency. The videos, films and photo-collages included in his project *The Atlas Group Archive* (1999-2004) describes the hallucinatory experience of living in Beirut during the Civil Wars (1975-1990) through the repetitive accumulation of banal images portraying dentist surgeries (*No, Illness is Neither Here Nor There*) or sunsets on the city boardwalk (*I Only Wish that I Could Weep*) (Magagnoli 2011). As photography historian Geoffrey Batchen has pointed out, works by contemporary artists convey the experience of violence less through the direct representation of bodies that have been subjected to torture, massacre, burning or desecration than through the fragment, the barely discernible trace, or absurd narratives such as those deployed by Raad. As a result, they “remain empty of significant or identifiable subject matter” and they “immerse us in a visual experience that is at once calm and implacable, empty of ‘content’ but all the more powerful for it” (Batchen 2012, 238). One of the reasons for the rise of this aesthetics of absence and mourning can be traced back to the radical critique of liberal documentary photography articulated, during the 1970s and 1980s, by writers such as Susan Sontag and John Berger. Shortly, this critique accused documentary photography to aestheticise viewers against the horror of mass deaths and sufferings, to depoliticize violence turning it into an universal human tragedy, and to exploit its victims by spectacularizing their pain (Sontag 1977; Barthes 1976; Berger 1972; Sekula 1981; Rosler, 1981).

In this essay, I want to look at a less discussed strand in contemporary art, which has taken an approach to the representation of human rights violations opposite to the one described above. I am referring to the work of artists and activists Thomas Hirschhorn and Paul Chan. In the works they produced in response to G. W. Bush’s War on Terror, Hirschhorn and Chan do not immerse us in a visual

experience that is calm and detached but expose the audience to crude images of massacred, kidnapped and maimed bodies, following a strategy that recalls Dada's "mimetic adaptation" or "mimetic exacerbation" (Foster 2003, 166).¹ Ultimately Chan and Hirschhorn's fascination with violence opens up serious questions regarding the use of images of physical abuse in order to garner interest in the politics of human rights. Is the depiction of violence necessary in order to provoke spectators and induce them to protest against human rights violations or, alternatively, is graphic violence always voyeuristic and a further degradation of the victim?

Paul Chan's "Trilogy of War"

The *Tin Drum Trilogy* (2002-2005), Paul Chan's series of video essays, explores three different moments of George W. Bush's war on terrorism: the US decision to invade Afghanistan (*Re: The Operation*, 2002), the life of Baghdad's citizens under Saddam's regime before the US occupation (*Baghdad in No Particular Order*, 2003), and the war at home dividing red (Republican) and blue (Democratic) states (*Now Promise Now Threat*, 2005). *Re: The Operation* is based on a fantasy concocted by Chan that requires us to imagine the members of the Bush cabinet as if they were GIs on the frontline in Afghanistan. The video is divided into chapters, each dedicated to one representative of the Bush administration. The chapters are introduced by animated drawings showing the severed head of the politician bandaged and bloodied, barely alive. *Baghdad in No Particular Order* was produced on the occasion of the artist's trip to Iraq in December 2002, a few months before the beginning of the US invasion, and it was commissioned by the pacifist group Voices in the Wilderness, an NGO protesting against the US-UN sanctions designed to topple the government of Saddam Hussein by denying food and medical supplies to the Iraqi people. *Baghdad in No Particular Order* does not indulge in a rhetoric of victimisation, nor does it provide viewers with detailed facts and meticulous statistics such as would be com-

1 Numerous images in Hirschhorn installations were downloaded from websites such as 'nowthatsfuckedup.com'. Shut down by US federal authorities in 2005, the website was used by American soldiers to post close-up shots of Iraqi insurgents and civilians with their heads blown off, intestines spilling from open wounds and mangled body parts as exchanged for porn images. On the circulation of images of violence and torture on the Internet see Edelstein (2006) and Zornick (2005).

mon in conventional human rights videos. Rather, the video comprises everyday, uneventful scenes: Iraqi families and children are shown merrily dancing, oblivious to the coming war; a young singer with a stunned look strives to improvise a song in front of a silent audience. *Now Promise Now Threat*, made two years later, conveys an image of the Republican midwestern states challenging the assumption that these states are home to religious fanatics and nationalist warmongers by showing nuances among their attitudes towards faith and patriotism. Interviews with the denizens of Omaha, Nebraska, and footage of forlorn suburban landscapes battered by gusty winds and churchgoers attending mass are interrupted by long clips from kidnapping and beheading videos. Downloaded by the artist from jihadi websites, the clips are transformed into fields of undulating colour and sometimes are juxtaposed with the voices of the interviewees.

While the three videos are supposed to offer a critique of the Bush administration's systematic use of violence and destruction, they also display a certain paradoxical attraction to them. The fragmentary form of the three videos, their digital distortions and degradations, together with the repeated references to death, torture and pain, betray an almost obsessive interest in the cultural and psychological effects of violence. In *Now Promise Now Threat* violence simmers below the surface of the dull Nebraska landscape: it emerges from the staged self-defence fights filling the airtime of local television; it impregnates the liturgy of the Evangelical church (Chan's camera focuses on glasses of red wine, symbols of the blood of Christ); it permeates the language of some of the prophetic intertitles ("The good cannot reign over all without an excess emerging whose fatal consequences are revealed to us in tragedy"). More significantly, violence haunts the viewer through the distorted clips of beheadings and kidnappings that are repeated throughout the works. Chan's manipulations have intrinsic beauty and, indeed, one feels mesmerised watching these abstract patches of whites, reds and yellows, nervously expanding and contracting on the screen. Violence also lurks under the apparently lighthearted and feisty atmosphere of Baghdad. In *Baghdad in No Particular Order* a group of middle-aged women brandish guns and sing patriotic songs in honour of Saddam Hussein; a quiet prayer in a cramped mosque steadily escalates into a trance-like noisy dance; the blurred pictures of Iraqi chil-

dren who died during a US bombing after the first Iraqi war remind us of the tragic recent history of the country. It is, however, on the website published alongside the video that Chan hints at the possible critical and redemptive value of destruction. In it a picture shows the terrifying picture of an Iraqi baby his face completely disfigured. The caption of the photograph, written by the artist, states that the baby was hit by a depleted uranium shell and concludes: "The hope is always that the pain inflicted upon the body will yield new insights and pleasures that will teach us to outgrow our madness" (Chan 2003). As the caption suggests, Chan seems to believe that violence could bring forth some kind of revelation. In one short essay, written for the collective exhibition *Greater New York* (2010) at MoMa PS1, he suggested that pain can have a positive and generative dimension by using the term *kairos* to describe his ideal notion of art (from the Greek *καιρος*, meaning the "propitious or supreme moment"). *Kairos* is "a vital or lethal place in the body ... where mortality resides," the artist wrote (Chan 2010, 84).

Violence is eroticised in *Re: The Operation*. In this fantasy of the Bush administration fighting in Afghanistan, references to forbidden sexual desires abound. "Who, besides men," asks Condoleezza Rice, "doesn't think that sex is a kind of low intensity warfare exercise?" The theme of a perverse fetishistic desire dominates George Bush's chapter. "I feel evil from the work and dirty from the pleasure of passivity that duty demands," reads Bush's letter to his wife, Laura, while low-resolution pixelated images of S&M practices appear on screen. In a nondescript living room, a woman wears leather clothes, her mouth gagged and her legs tied up; a man strokes his crotch while we hear creepy moans, screams and synthesised music. Numerous images of wounds, body parts and scars crop up throughout *Re: The Operation*, a veiled reference to the logic of sexual fetishism, as well as to the title of the work, evoking military action as well as surgery. This fascination for eroticised violence turns *Re: The Operation* into a remake of Pier Paolo Pasolini's notorious film *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (*Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, 1975). In *Re: The Operation* Cheney, Rumsfeld and other members of the Bush cabinet recall Pasolini's perverse libertines as they quote passages from Heidegger, Hegel others. Eroticised violence likewise appears in *Baghdad in No Particular Order*. The adolescent girls belly-dancing in front of the camera resemble *Salò's* adoles-

cents. Possibly soon-to-be victims of the imminent war, these teenagers look straight at us, inciting a certain voyeuristic pleasure on our part while also addressing our complicity, as media viewers, in the spectacularisation of war.

While, as we have seen, Chan addresses the problematic power relationships that characterise the consumption of images of violence, he also seems, perhaps dangerously, to argue in favour of a certain use of violence and destruction. In a conversation in 2005 with Martha Rosler, he passionately debated the benefit of watching Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), claiming that despite the director's conservative political agenda, the film was to be seen since its spectacle of cruelty provided a key to understand and deconstruct the ideology of the rightwing. "What's the point of making the audience suffer?" Rosler asked Chan. "I think it is another factor with which you provoke people," Chan replied, "boredom is one of them, and intense suffering that comes from bodily suffering could be another" (Chan and Rosler 2006, 20). In other words, for Chan, a certain use of violence can be welcome as the shock produced by it can activate the viewer's thought and political awareness.

Thomas Hirschhorn's "Superficial Engagement"

Somehow slightly contained in Chan's video trilogy, the sheer scale of the violence of the War on Terror is laid bare in Hirschhorn's installation *Superficial Engagement*. Exhibited in New York at Gladstone Gallery in 2006, it comprised a plurality of media and objects equally distributed on wooden risers and floats. Pictures of atrocities committed in Iraq and Afghanistan by US military, female shop manikins in torso or whole figure, studded with builder's nails as in the bogey man of Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*, facsimiles of the works of the visionary Swiss healer-and abstract painter Emma Kunz, images of African sacred objects, and headlines cut out from various newspapers appeared in the kaleidoscopic and claustrophobic installation.¹ Of various sizes and scotch-taped to old planks or scraps of carton everywhere in the exhibition, the gruesome photographs showed destroyed bodies, their faces burned, their heads severed, their bones tearing through flesh. Taped to the walls were seemingly endless Xeroxed and blown-up newspaper headlines such as: "No Place is Safe," "It Is Real," "Too Young To Die," "Hot Times,"

“Death Threat,” and “No Cause for Panic.” Scattered through the gallery were rough wooden posts into which the audience was invited to drill screws and hammer nails with an attached screw gun.

The floats almost completely filled the exhibition space, leaving only narrow passages for viewers to walk through. “Everything is in your face” (Saltz 2006). Critic Jerry Saltz remarked in a review of the show. Even more than in Chan’s works, in Hirschhorn’s confrontational installations viewers are assaulted by a multiplicity of images, texts, and other visual information (Lafuente 2005; Foster 2011). As Hirschhorn has declared, his installations do not offer a space “where one can stand back and maintain distance” (Buchloh 2005, 94). “I want people to be inside my work,” he has declared, “I want spectators to be a part of this world surrounding them in this moment. Then they have to deal with it” (Buchloh 2005, 95). Challenging Kantian notions of aesthetic experience as a sensory perception based on disinterestedness and critical detachment, his art follows the logic of total involvement of media spectacle. Nonetheless, Hirschhorn appropriates the strategies of the media in a hyperbolic manner subverting them through parody and excess. If violence is in your face in *Superficial Engagement* it is also grotesque.

The ironic dimension of the artist’s work exposes it to misunderstanding and, sometimes, harsh criticism. David Cohen of the *New York Sun* lambasted the show as an “adolescent crapfest” that evinces “a puerile addiction to the macabre and the scatological” (Cohen 2006). Other critics defined Hirschhorn’s *Superficial Engagement* as a “one-way abusive kind of theatre” that does not “cultivate the viewer’s perceptive and intellectual experience so much as bury her in a glut of globalized chaos” (Westcott 2007, 173). William Kaizen rebuked Hirschhorn’s work and defined it as “war porn,” a “colorful, playful celebration” of violence (Kaizen 2006). However, the artist’s head-on approach can be seen as a tactics through which he addresses our own complicity with war and our own indifference to its painful consequences. The wooden posts into which the audience were asked to hammer nails represented a device through which the installation subtly implicated the viewer. The nails were a reference to a practice popular in Germany during WWI whereby citizens “could pay money to pound a nail in a wooden figure, supporting the troops by building symbolic armor” (Scott 2006). Thus, by asking the audience to screw nails into these

posts Hirschhorn alluded to our cooperation to the war in Iraq as passive but nevertheless complicit spectators.

As in Chan's work, *Superficial Engagement* paired ghastly images of violence with geometric abstraction. Replicas of the drawings of Swiss-born outsider artist Emma Kunz were everywhere in the installation. Born at the end of the nineteenth century, Kunz is known for her abstract drawings based on the mystical symbolism of the pentagram and other star-shaped forms. Within the gruesome context of Hirschhorn's installation the drawings alluded to the destruction of human bodies. "The destroyed human body," the artist remarked, "reaches a degree of abstraction, beyond the imaginable" (Douglas 2007). Yet, in *Superficial Engagement* – as in Chan's work – abstraction is invested with contradictory meanings. On the hand it symbolized the extreme disintegration of the body, on the other it signified art as a healing and cathartic tool. Hirschhorn's appropriation of Kunz's pictures added another layer of meaning to abstraction. Kunz considered her drawings to be "cognitive mapping of energy fields from which she could formulate diagnoses for her patients" (De Zegher 2005, 29). She was not only an artist, but a healer who established a medical practice in her home village of Brittnau functioning "somewhere between a physician and a shaman" (Teicher 2005, 128). The ambivalent and somehow contradictory meanings of violence and abstraction in Hirschhorn's work truly marks the limit of his provocative practice. To his defence, Hirschhorn has declared that ambivalence is a way to avoid a didactic and journalistic approach (Buchloh 2005). However, we may wonder whether the task of the radical artist is not only to name the symptoms of violence's pervasive presence in contemporary societies but also that to illuminate its causes. As art historian Siona Wilson remarks, "the political work that the installation so firmly evokes can only suggest a completion by others and elsewhere. Political or analytical closure, Hirschhorn seems to suggest, is not the task of the work of art" (Wilson 2009, 137).

Let the Atrocious Images Haunt Us

A profound ambivalence characterizes Chan and Hirschhorn's similar approaches to the representation of violence. On the one hand, their works address and condemn the atrocities committed during the war on terror. On the other hand, they seem to indulge in the

spectacle of violence. Whilst they may be accused to aestheticise the pain of others, Hirschhorn and Chan's practices should not be dismissed so quickly. In my view, they demand critical attention since they prompt us to revise the common argument against the aestheticization of pain. In fact, what if the critique of 'aestheticizing violence' may end up serving the very power that demands immunity from human rights law?

Jacques Rancière has remarked that one of the problems of this argument against the representation of atrocities is that it betrays a patronizing attitude to the audience. As he points out, we need more rather than less images bearing witness to the horror of human rights violations. The "accusation of 'aestheticizing horror' is too convenient," Rancière explains, "[it] shows too much ignorance of the complex entanglement between the aesthetic intensity of the exceptional situation taken in by the gaze, and the ethical or political concern to bear witness to the horror of a reality nobody is bothering to see" (Rancière 2007, 79). Rancière's defence of the right to produce and circulate images of violence contains an implicit critique of the mass media. Contemporary news-media, Rancière suggests, without further elaborating his point, do not adequately represent historical events whereby human rights violations have been committed. Whilst not advocating for more sensationalism, Rancière suggests that an effective politics of human rights requires the "construction of a sensory arrangement that restores the powers of attention itself" (Rancière 2007, 76). Such a sensory arrangement is produced by Chan and Hirschhorn's installations. That is, these contemporary artists tap into the spectacular vocabulary of popular culture in order to draw critical attention to the human rights abuse perpetrated by the US military in Iraq. They use the language of spectacle to raise awareness of - and not indifference to - human rights violations.

Chan and Hirschhorn's visual strategies invite us to revise the critique of the aestheticization of violence and to adapt it to the current historical context. This critique emerged during the Vietnam War – one of the most photographed conflicts in history (Aulich and Walsh 1989). In fact, one of the post-Vietnam developments in the United States and Britain has been an astoundingly tight control over war coverage by governments and the military and, consequently, images of dead soldiers and civilians rarely appeared during

the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. The official excuse for this limited reporting has often been that graphic depictions of violence and death would hurt the audience and degrade the victims. It can be argued, then, that the media have appropriated the 1970s critique of the aestheticization of violence to justify a sanitized, partisan coverage of the war on terror. Hirschhorn and Chan's practices provocatively point a finger at the media censorship of the human rights violations perpetrated by the US military during this war. They try to achieve what Susan Sontag and Judith Butler, commenting on the scandal of the Abu Ghraib pictures, cried out for:² They let the images of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars haunt us, warning against government censorship and political correctness.

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² Butler observed that, after their discovery, the circulation and re-framing of the Abu Ghraib pictures in magazine publications and museums meant that grief and outrage were scattered among the public with the result that the images from instruments of degradation were transformed into an indictment for the violation of human dignity. "The exhibition of the photographs," writes Butler, "with caption and commentary on the history of their publication and reception becomes a way of exposing and countering the closed circuit of triumphalist and sadistic exchange that formed the original scene of the photograph itself" (Butler 2007, 96). Likewise, in her latest work Susan Sontag revised her initial scepticism regarding photographs of pain and called for the circulation of images such as those of the tortured Iraqi prisoners (Sontag 2003). She wrote: "In our digital hall of mirrors, the pictures aren't going to go away. Yes, it seems that one picture is worth a thousand words. And even if our leaders choose not to look at them, there will be thousands more snapshots and videos" (Sontag 2004, 24).

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