REPRESENTING THE UNREPRESENTABLE: ETHICS OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN POST-PHOTOGRAPHIC ERA – POST-DOCUMENTARY OF LUC DELAHAYE, WALID RAAD (THE ATLAS GROUP) AND AERNOUT MIK

By

JONG CHUL CHOI

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2012
To my parents
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Dr. Joyce Tsai, chair of my dissertation committee, for giving me a great academic advice, and for turning my wild drafts into an acceptable form of dissertation. It would have been impossible, though, without my former advisors - Dr. Alexander Alberro, Dr. Eric Segal, and Dr. Shep Steiner - who helped me immensely outline this dissertation. They could not come all the way to this moment, but, wherever they are, my gratitude should be delivered to them. Dr. Melissa Hyde and Dr. Elizabeth Ross also deserve many thanks for being my mentors for the past five years in the University of Florida. They are more than just members of my dissertation committee, as they always have supported me with such a warm, cordial encouragement. I also thank Dr. Gregory Ulmer from UF English department for being my outside committee member. If my readers find any unique dynamics in ways I pose, reason, theorize issues in the dissertation, it is perhaps from his revolutionary lecture that I have taken a few years ago here in Florida. And, the rest of the gratitude should go to my wife Sang Mee Chung and my son Daniel J.Y. Choi who are the reasons of my life.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| Acknowledgments | 4 |
| Abstract | 7 |

## Chapter

1. **Introduction** | 8 |

2. **Cultural Conditions for Post-Documentary** | 14 |
   - Cultural Dilemma of the Post-9/11 Era | 14 |
   - Post-documentary: Between Art and Journalism | 17 |
   - The Confrontation between Art and Politics in the 1980s and the 1990s | 25 |
   - 9/11 and Demand for Cultural Merger | 36 |
   - The Post-Medium Condition | 41 |
   - The Ethical Turn | 46 |
   - The Digital | 50 |
   - Responses | 55 |

   - Documentary’s Aesthetic Adventure | 58 |
   - Critics of Documentary | 60 |
   - Anti-aesthetic View in Criticism and its Underlying Platonism | 66 |
   - Overcoming Platonism: Jacques Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics* | 68 |
   - New Ethics of Image: Georges Didi-Huberman’s *Images In Spite of All* | 73 |
   - Walid Raad: The Atlas Group | 76 |
   - Documentary’s Ethical Emancipation | 88 |

4. **Between Objectivity and Subjectivity: Rehistoricizing Social Documentary – The F.S.A. Project at MOMA** | 90 |
   - Documentary between Art and Politics | 90 |
   - The Great Depression and the Myth of Social Documentary | 91 |
   - Demystifying Documentary’s Objectivity | 97 |
   - Social Documentary as Art | 100 |
   - Documentary as an Expressive Genre: William Stott’s Theory of Documentary | 102 |
   - Between Classical Evans and Anonymous Evans | 106 |
   - Walker Evans at MoMA | 110 |
   - Two Concerns about Documentary-as-Art | 117 |
   - Toward a New Aesthetics of Social Documentary | 123 |
5 THEATER OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND EMANCIPATION OF THE SPECTATOR: AERNOUT MIK’S STAGED DOCUMENTARY AND MICHAEL FRIED’S NEW INSIGHT ................................................................. 127

Aernout Mik at MoMA in 2009 ................................................................. 127
Photography as Theater: Roland Barthes ........................................ 132
Michael Fried: the Dynamics of Theatricality and Anti-Theatricality ...... 136
“To-be-seenness” as “Presentness”: Fried’s Ultimatum ....................... 144
Michael Fried’s New Insight and Photography as a Theater ............... 148
Emancipation of Photography in Theater ............................................ 155
Photography and Ethics ..................................................................... 160

6 REPRESENTING THE UNREPRESENTABLE: LUC DELAHAYE’S HISTORY
AND THE ETHICS OF PHOTOGRAPHY ............................................... 162

Writing of Disaster ............................................................................. 162
Disaster of Writing ............................................................................ 165
Luc Delahaye: History ..................................................................... 167
Image that Thinks ............................................................................. 174
Ethics of Photography ..................................................................... 179
The Poetics of History ..................................................................... 184

APPENDIX LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................. 187

LIST OF REFERENCES ....................................................................... 192

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ................................................................. 200
My research investigates a recent photographic art that has been described as “Post-documentary.” Characteristically, artists in this field (Luc Delahaye, Walid Raad (the Atlas Group), and Aernout Mik) seek to incorporate documentary’s conventional values (close engagement with reality, political consciousness, objectivity, etc.) with various aesthetic sensibilities (large scale picture planes, vivid color, theatrical narratives, etc.) in order to produce more provocative and more engaging visual testimonies of recent histories. But these Post-documentary artists are also subjected to the ethical concern that their arts may involve uncomfortable visual sensationalism of the other’s misery. The primary goal of this research therefore is to produce a critical framework in which Post-documentary’s polemical involvement in aesthetic styles can be validated both ethically and art historically. With theoretical insights of art historian Michael Fried, philosopher Jacques Rancière, and many other recent critics, I argue that Post-documentary is a new form of visual communication that brings an effective merger between art and politics in this new age of image war.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Since 9/11, artists and art historians have often been confronted with cultural pressures to redefine art’s relationship to political realities. While such pressures demand a reconsideration of art’s role in the post-9/11 era, they also draw concern that art’s intervention in political realities may result in irresponsible aesthetic pluralism, formal abstraction, and visual sensationalism. For the past ten years in the United States, this concern has been observed to create a cultural dilemma in which art’s viability for representing reality is radically diminished in favor of national security, and thereby, 9/11 in this lack of visual reflection turns into what Giorgio Agamben has described as the “myth of unrepresentability.”

Photographic and filmic representations, in particular, face a deeper dilemma for two reasons; first, as Jean Baudrillard has argued, 9/11’s “symbolic visuality” yielded a disturbing parallel between the terrorist attack and its visual representation in media,

\[\text{1} \text{ See critical magazine } \text{October} \text{'s winter 2008 special issue, published “to evaluate and explain the seeming absence of visible opposition to the Iraq War during the past years within the milieu of cultural producers working in the sphere of contemporary visual culture.” Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Rachel Churner, } \text{October} 123 \text{ (Winter 2008).} \]


\[\text{For theoretical elaboration of this concern, see also Martha Rosler, “Post-Documentary, Post-Photography?” In Decoy and Disruptions: Selected Writings 1975-2001 (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2004), 211-} \]

spawning an idea that those media images re-terrorize and re-victimize the viewer⁴; secondly, U.S. wartime censorship and the change in the mode of military operations to “smart,” digital warfare have rendered photojournalism incapable to bring first-hand visual evidence of socio-political conflicts.⁵

In this situation, recent photographic artists such as Luc Delahaye, Aernout Mik, Walid Raad (the Atlas Group), Jim Goldberg, Juul Hondius, or Richard Mosse, offer an opportunity to overcome the stagnancy of the post 9/11 visual culture by bringing together political sensitivity and aesthetic sensibility in their visually provocative and politically attuned pictorial documentation that has been identified as Post-documentary.

Many critical assessments have been made for this Post-documentary practice. Artist/critic Martha Rosler argues that documentary’s “mutation into ephemeral aesthetic form and its maker into an artist is a ‘threat’ to this genre” because this “poetic reception of facts” may promote “an escape” from “reportorial responsibility and accuracy.”⁶ While critical concerns as such reiterate the lingering anxiety about documentary’s aesthetic indulgence, institutional critiques try to domesticate this new hybrid art into an exclusive aesthetic form. In particular, Michael Fried’s recent book, Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before (2008), provides a forceful argument about Post-documentary’s pictorial genealogy based on the dynamics of “absorption” and “anti-theatricality,” a

---

tradition originated from the eighteenth century French Salon painting. In this critique, however, documentary’s socio-political association is deliberately obligated to ensure its art historical continuity and aesthetic autonomy.

My research challenges both critical perspectives that arguably fail to address Post-documentary’s true potential in the post 9/11 era. Instead, I will argue that Post-documentary offers more productive reconciliation between documentary’s political responsibility and aesthetic creativity in its strategic application of pictorial composition, theatrical sensibility, and digital technology that all serve to vivify the often invisible political catastrophes and their victims.

My dissertation is organized in five chapters which have been drafted in an individual essay format with particular case studies and theories. But, the five chapters together make a collaborative voice in theorizing the Post-documentary as a new ethical form of art that represent the unrepresentable.

The first chapter, “Cultural Conditions for Post-documentary,” offers a critical investigation of the cultural and historical conditions that have affected the formation of Post-documentary during the first decade of the 21st century. Throughout this chapter, I investigate the historical conditions that have paved the way for the reunion of art and politics in recent photography, how this aesthetically articulated photography can also find its place in political arenas without further ethical complication, and what are the current cultural conditions that have played a pivotal role in establishing the Post-documentary practice in this new age of war and terrorism.

---

7 Michael Fried, Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008)
The second chapter, “Platonism in Theory and Pseudos of Post-documentary: The Atlas Group (Walid Raad)” is a theoretical examination in which ethical concerns about documentary’s aesthetic venture are revisited and challenged. In this chapter, I rehearse critical texts that have been recognized as the most influential ethical frameworks in photographic discourses for the past several decades – texts of Susan Sontag, John Tagg, Martha Rosler, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau. In this rehearsal, I argue that there is a pervasive Platonic anxiety in these ethical requests that unconsciously single out photography’s visual desire. This ethical anxiety finds theoretical resolution in the works of Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Rancière, and Georges Didi-Huberman who insist respectively on the priority of simulacra, the equality of the sensible, and necessity of images in an era where Platonic truth claim loses its cultural validity.

The third chapter, “Between Objectivity and Subjectivity: Rehistoricizing Social Documentary – The F.S.A. Project at MoMA” examines documentary’s aesthetic turn, following the footsteps of the thirties’ social documentary. In this chapter, I will review the cultural history of the US social documentary, with a particular focus on the FSA project. After this review, I will discuss the ways in which this social documentary was transformed into an art form by early art institutions where documentary’s all-encompassing aesthetics proximity was reduced and limited in their problematic emphasis on its formality.

The fourth chapter, “Theater of Photography and Emancipation of The Spectator: Aernout Mik’s Staged Documentary and Michael Fried’s New Insight,” examines the notion of photographic theatricality with Aernout Mik as a case study. In this chapter,
Michael Fried’s recent theory of photography comes to a particular emphasis; although Fried’s attention in his new book was paid mostly on photography’s anti-theatricality and pictorial quality, the critical details he produces in the book underscore the very theatrical nature of photography, given that all of his critical terms emphasize an imaginary (theatrical) relationship between the subject and the other. This photographic theatricality will further be elaborated by Rancière’s recent thoughts on new, emancipated spectatorship that echo Fried’s absorptive spectatorship.

The last chapter “Representing The Unrepresentable: Luc Delahaye’s History and The Ethics of Photography” expands and elaborates Fried’s theory of photographic (anti) theatricality with more emphasis on its ethical aspect. In this chapter, I will argue how recent Post-documentary art, Luc Delahaye in particular, overcomes the ethical concern of showing the other’s pain without abandoning its aesthetic potency. Fried’s insight on photographic (anti) theatricality will be applied in my reading of Delahaye. In particular, absorption that Fried considers as a merger between two worlds (the world of the photographed figures and the world of beholders) will be reinterpreted as an ethical encounter between the privileged beholding subject and the marginalized, suffering others in images.

Creatively playing on the limits between art and politics, these “Post-documentary” practices today show how effectively and intuitively photography could address sensitive socio-political agendas without diminishing its aesthetic potency. Moreover, since its characteristic theatricality brings the invisible, voiceless “others” onto an imaginary stage where the ontological distance between privileged viewers and
marginalized others can be negotiated, the Post-documentary emerges today as a new ethical mode of representation.
CHAPTER 2
CULTURAL CONDITIONS FOR POST-DOCUMENTARY

Cultural Dilemma of the Post-9/11 Era

Since 9/11, there has been an increasing concern in U.S. culture that art is no longer viable enough to deal with recent political catastrophes. For instance, in its winter 2008 special issue, October, one of the leading U.S. art journals, offered various artistic and intellectual responses to a questionnaire intended “to evaluate and explain the seeming absence of visible opposition to the Iraq War during the past years within the milieu of cultural producers working in the sphere of contemporary visual culture.”¹ The responders argued, in various ways, that American art lost its critical viability in the aftermath of 9/11 and it was unusual if compared to art’s dynamic role in earlier U.S. history, such as the Vietnam War. Unlike this ‘70s disaster in which American art had a prolific heyday in its vibrant reactions to the nation’s military misadventure in Vietnam, the post-9/11 U.S. society, they argued, seems to keep art and artists from this sensitive area of global politics in the anxiety that art’s intervention in politics might result in irresponsible culture pluralism (Susan Buck-Morss),² formal retrogression (Hans Haacke),³ and uninspiring visual sensationalism (David Joselit).⁴

¹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Rachel Churner, “Introduction” in October 123 (“In what ways have artists, academics, and cultural institutions responded to the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq?”) (Winter 2008): 3.
² Susan Buck-Morss, response (untitled) in October 123 (Winter 2008): 27-30. — Buck-Morss argues, unlike the past (the Vietnam War period) in which a “brilliant solidarity” was realized “uniting diverse socio-economic, racial, and cultural groups around a shared political agenda,” artists in the present day have to work with the lack of political solidarity. “There is,” Buck-Morss goes on, “less commonly articulated cause to express in their work, and art by itself cannot work to create political solidarity without falling into pedantry.”
³ Hans Haacke, response (untitled) in October 123 (Winter 2008): 80-82. — After mentioning Tate Britain’s courageous curatorial work on Mark Wallinger’s installation in which this Turner Prize winner reconstructed British war protester Brian Haw’s monumental encampment objects (consisting of banners, photographs, private messages, etc.) in front of the Houses of Parliament, as a resolute testimony against the war in the Middle East, Haacke asked the
But art is not the only discipline that has gone through difficult situations in the aftermath of 9/11. Photojournalism, documentary, or more broadly media images in general also have faced difficulty in this “new age of image war.” As William J. Mitchell argues, image’ “infectious, viral quality” doubled up by “digital imaging technology and the spread of internet” has entered into “a period of breakout, a global plague of images” since 9/11. This global plague of images, according to Mitchell, “has bred, like any infectious disease, a host of antibodies in the form of counter-images.” Consequently, many news images about 9/11 and the subsequent wars in the Middle East provoked public controversies and governmental bans due to such concerns that these media images might expose the nation to further danger in their “infectious, viral quality.” Controversy surrounding images of the mutilated bodies of four American contractors at Falluja, Iraq in 2004 and President Obama’s 2009 ban on the further release of Abu Ghraib photos for the safety of US troops in the Middle East are just a few examples. Media theorist Fred Ritchin in this regard argues that in this digital era in following simple question: “Is there a director of a museum in the U.S. who would dare – or could afford -- to do anything like this?” He further argued that, “matching the abstinence of American museums, collectors are also refraining from association with works that question the wisdom and morality of current U.S. government actions in Iraq. The widely shared opinion of art critics is that such works do not qualify as art.”

4 David Joselit, response (untitled) in October 123 (Winter 2008): 86-89. – Critic David Joselit mentioned that in the United States, where the overarching impacts of the culture industry make citizenship synonymous with spectatorship, and where civic duty and patriotism are determined by the strategic scenario of war politics, “the middle-class spectator-citizen’s response to their disgust for the Iraq War is to leave the theater and go on to something else.”


6 Ibid., 2.

7 Ibid., 2.


which photography’s credibility has been liquidated by digital *malleability*, photography has come to an end.\(^\text{10}\)

In this situation, recent photographic artists working on the limits between art and photojournalism call forth new critical attention. They represent recent socio-political disasters in the form of documentary. But they also make use of pictorial composition, theatrical staging, or digital modification that is unconventional in documentary traditions. In doing so, these hybrid documentary artists register a new direction of photographic art in an era when both art’s passivity and documentary’s inertia are frequently spelled out. This new direction of photographic art has been labeled “Post-documentary” on the grounds that it originates with the overturning of certain previous documentary paradigms (paradigms based on photographic objectivity and authenticity) and often rallies for the “aftermath” of events, once it appears that photographers are no longer able to break the news in this age of digital warfare.\(^\text{11}\)

Artists participating in this Post-documentary practice include Luc Delahaye, Aernout Mik, Walid Raad (the Atlas Group), Richard Mosse, Jim Goldberg, Juul


\(^{11}\) In current discourses, the term, “post-documentary” (or *post-photography*) has been used in two slightly different contexts. The first usage comes from a supposition that documentary’s protocols (its objectivity and authenticity) are no longer viable enough to define this genre, due to the digital modification technologies that have radically eroded these earlier protocols, and therefore, documentary photography’s practice and discourse should find another set of post-protocols to deal with this crisis. This supposition has been addressed by Fred Ritchin (*After Photography*, 2009), and Martha Rosler (“Post-Documentary, Post-Photography?” 2004). The other usage comes from a situation that some recent photographers are drawn more to the “aftermath” of socio-political disasters, rather than going directly into the real-time situations. This “late photography” is “not the trace of an event, but the trace of the trace of an event,” and it is often more empathetic, discursive, and visually appealing than conventional war reportages. This point is addressed by David Campany (“Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on Problems of ‘Late Photography,’” in *The Cinematic*, ed. David Campany (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 185-188.) (detailed bibliographical information for the rest will be provided throughout the dissertation)
Hondius, and many others whose works are frequently highlighted in many international art venues, calling for a new discourse that can explain Post-documentary’s cross-disciplinary position between art and politics.

This chapter explores the new cultural conditions for Post-documentary in the post-9/11 era. Throughout this chapter, I will investigate historical circumstances that have brought this reunion between art and politics in photography, the ways in which this aesthetically articulated photography finds its place in political arenas without further ethical complication, and the current cultural conditions that have played a pivotal role in establishing Post-documentary practice in this new age of war and terrorism.

**Post-documentary: Between Art and Journalism**

Contemporary photographic art’s new terrain between aesthetics and politics has been reclaimed by a number of artists during the first decade of the twenty-first century. This new artistic practice, identified as Post-documentary, includes, but not limited to, the works of Luc Delahaye, Aernout Mik, Walid Raad (the Atlas Group), Jim Goldberg, Juul Hondius, and Richard Mosse, whose visually provocative, politically concerned photographic testimony of recent catastrophic events have established a new model of politico-aesthetic representation.

In fact, contemporary photographic artists’ application of documentary approaches has already been exemplified by Jeff Wall, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Demand, and other artists whose pictorial, museum-friendly, and “near documentary” style photographic tableaus have provided a new syntax of documentary-
as-art.\textsuperscript{12} But while these earlier models’ swift institutionalization appears to diminish their subject matter’s intrinsic political significance, Post-documentary’s unwavering emphasis on both political and journalistic consciousness distinguishes it from the earlier models.

This political and journalistic consciousness derives mainly from the Post-documentary artists’ extensive journalistic backgrounds. For example, Luc Delahaye is a former Magnum photographer and has been affiliated with various media-institutions such as the SIPA agency and \textit{Newsweek}, covering wars in Lebanon, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Chechnya, and Bosnia.\textsuperscript{13} Jim Goldberg has been a member of the Magnum agency since 2006 and has photographed immigrants, refugees, and trafficked individuals in Greece and Ukraine.\textsuperscript{14} Richard Mosse also has worked for news magazines, photographing conflicts in Haiti, Baghdad, and Beirut.\textsuperscript{15} Even for those without distinctive journalistic careers, journalistic conventions play a significant role in their works, as evidenced in Aernout Mik’s staged-documentary that strategically paraphrases photojournalism’s conventional mise-en-scène, and Walid Raad’s

\textsuperscript{12} For instance, in an interview, Jeff Wall remarked that his picture is an example of “near documentary.” See Robert Enright, “The Consolation of Plausibility,” interview with Jeff Wall, Border Crossings, no. 19 (February 2000): 50.

\textsuperscript{13} Delahaye’s detailed careers will be discussed in chapter 5

\textsuperscript{14} Jim Goldberg is also a winner of Henri Cartier-Bresson Award in 2007 for his project The New Europeans, in which his camera followed the journey of refugees and immigrant who traveled from their devastated countries to Europe to find new opportunities. Born in 1953, Goldberg lives in San Francisco and teaches at California College of Arts and Crafts. See “Goldberg wins HCB award,” \textit{Artweek} 38, no 9 (November 2007): 3.

\textsuperscript{15} Richard Mosse has originally been trained in English Literature and culture studies (he got MA in Culture Study from the London Consortium). After this academic trainings, he worked momentarily for Art Monthly, a British art magazine, as a listings editor consuming gallery press release. (He later recalls this editorial experience turned out to be the best art education for him). After this, he became a photographer working either for his own art or news company until recently. See Richard Mosse and Aaron Schuman, “Sublime Proximity: A Conversation with Richard Mosse,” \textit{Aperture} 203 (Summer 2011), 52-59.
fabricated documentary archive (the Atlas Group), which invites viewers into a rupture between journalism and history.

This journalistic proximity takes a provocative turn, however, when these artists employ distinctive artistic methods such as pictorial composition, theatrical staging, or digital manipulation. Characteristically, the Post-documentary arts involve imposing size, vivid color, captivating clarity, and dramatic mise-en-scène, as evidenced, for instance, in the massive panoramic tableau in Delahaye’s *History* series [Figure 2-1, 2-5] (and see also Chapter 6), Mosse’s colorful, melancholic depiction of war ruins [Figure 2-2, 2-6], and Hondius’s dramatic close-ups of despaired and endangered human beings. [Figure 2-9, 2-10, 2-11]. In other cases, post-documentaries emphasize odd juxtaposition of facts and fictions, ambiguous or ambivalent narratives, shabby style and boring sequences, as a way to resist both mass-media clichés and journalistic conventions. Artists in this category include Walid Raad whose virtual archive, the Atlas Group’s fabricated documentaries of Lebanon Wars reveal psychological disarray between history and individual memory (see Chapter 3); Aernout Mik whose staged documentations of terrorism, illegal immigration, and other political conflicts increase the communicability of the images (see Chapter 5); and Jim Goldberg who produces Polaroid snapshots of political minorities, filled with various textual marks and traces of his photographed figures, effectively reinstating the authority of the photographed over the spectator [Figure 2-7, 2-8].

As a result of this aesthetic reinterpretation, Post-documentary marks a distinctive shift from a rigorous journalistic convention to what Delahaye has recently

---

16 Images are not provided in this version of dissertation due to the copyright issue. Instead, detailed information about the figures are provided in the Appendix of this dissertation.
called documentary’s “poetic form” as a middle term between art and journalism. What is interesting about these poetic documentations is that they appear to increase the ethical proximity of documentary photography, despite the fact that their subject matters reach out to the most problematic human conditions around the globe.

This ethical proximity comes from their particular aesthetic strategies, designed to establish more engaging and more active spectatorship with these sociopolitical imageries. That is, unlike conventional straight photography, characterized by its literal and embarrassingly straight articulations of suffering human beings (such as Nick Ut’s 1972 photo of a naked Vietnamese girl running from a napalm attack [Figure 2-3], or Edward T. Adams’s Saigon Execution in 1968 [Figure 2-4], both of which won the photographers the Pulitzer Prize), the Post-documentary takes more metaphoric, allegorical, or symbolic detours in representing the pain and misery of their subjects. But, these poetic detours do not attenuate sensitivity of their subject matters; rather, they provide, with the aid of aesthetic methods, a deeper beholding experience (in contrast to the quick glance one might give to a newspaper or magazine) in which the painful truth of images is examined, contemplated, and challenged.

As art historian Michael Fried argues in his essay about Delahaye, this detour or detachedness of the image from shock value ironically draws beholders even more closely into the images, according to its particular “balance of opposing forces.”

---

17 For instance, Delahaye says, “documentary photography offers an interesting possibility of achieving a poetic form. For me that is more than an interesting possibility, it is what I’m aiming at.” -- Philippe Dagen, “Luc Delahaye: Snap Decision” (An Interview with Luc Delahaye) Art Press 306 (2004): 33.

18 Michael Fried, “World Merger: Michael Fried on Luc Delahaye,” Artforum International vol. 44 no. 7, (March 2006): 65. -- “The photographs ... involve a balance of opposing forces. So, for example there is in most a strong sense of distance, even withdrawal, on the part of the photographer: the viewer quickly becomes aware that a basic protocol of these images rules out...
other words, if conventional straight photographers achieve their professional goal through violent visual shocks that uncomfortably stir viewers’ minds, the Post-documentary artists achieve the same goal by producing a sort of psychological space in which the viewer can be confronted more empathetically with the victims in the images. This feeling of confrontation prevents the viewer from a quick, pitiless glimpse of the image, or what Susan Sontag called a kind of “tourism” on the other’s pain,¹⁹ because this aesthetically situated confrontation, as Fried argues in his recent study of contemporary photographic art, involves absorptive spectatorship in which beholders are drawn so irresistibly into the pictures by the depicted figures’ complete immersion in their own worlds, or their extraordinary performance as if there are no beholders before them -- one that the eighteenth-century culture critic Denis Diderot considered an ideal of painting and theater, and that now, according to Fried, has been inherited by contemporary art photography.²⁰

Luc Delahaye’s *Taliban* (2001) [Figure 2-5] exemplifies this absorptive spectatorship reinforced by its particular aesthetic sensibility. In the work, a dead Taliban soldier lies in a ditch with his shoes off, eyes half opened, and with dirt all over his khaki colored Taliban uniform. According to Delahaye’s recollection, the image was captured at a mountain valley near Kabul when the U.S. troops’ massive raid in

---

²⁰ See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricity: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), and *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) (I will discuss more on this in Chapter 5)
Afghanistan had just swept the region. But the image does not show a “decisive moment” of this death; instead, it reveals a calm, detached pictorial sensibility which is in fact the result of his use of a large format Linhof Technorama 612 panoramic camera. This detached pictorial composition takes a strange turn when Delahaye makes a few digital modifications to the image; for instance, the straw lying across the soldier’s face was digitally added by Delahaye and it serves to bring the viewer’s attention to the focal point of this tragedy. Therefore, as Fried argues, there is “a balance of opposing forces” in this calm yet alluring photograph: one pushing the viewer out of reality in the image’s calm, detached sensibility, and the other pulling the viewer back into the image by the subtle attraction of the details. In this balanced psychic interaction, the image comes to elicit a deeper visual recognition, and the formerly fixed distance between the photographed reality and the beholder starts being renegotiated and redefined.

Richard Mosse’s Grand Voyager Sunni Triangle (2009) is another example that shows Post-documentary’s dynamics of attached/detachedness. [Figure 2-6] This work features a destroyed van with numerous bullet holes and traces of explosion, and it surely indicate horrifying violence in this notorious war zone of the Sunni Triangle. But there is also a melancholic feeling of ruin in this image precipitated by the subtle tonality.

---

of the retreating brown color. In fact, both ruin and tonality of color are two distinctive features of Mosse’s art intended to evoke the Sublime feeling out of this unimaginable, immeasurable reality; Mosse believes that one of the best ways to communicate in unimaginable realities is to reverse the viewer’s imagination through the power of the sublime, which is in itself a contradiction of feeling one can have out of the unthinkable or the insensible. Indeed, there is a sense of remoteness in the image that forestalls the viewer’s immediate empathy (in Mosse’s works, his deliberate choice of wreckages in the war zone, and their solitude, emptiness, and irreparable damage). And at the same time, there is also a strong sense of attraction coming from the ironic overlap of an exquisite color field with the bombarded car and surrounding air. As a result of these opposing forces, Mosse presents “evocative” testimonies of war and violence without spectacularizing them.

The juxtaposition of opposing powers is also evident in the works of Jim Goldberg, when he photographs marginalized individuals (immigrants, refugees, poor urban workers, etc.) with his Polaroid camera, and then asks them to leave personal marks (a few words with a marker pen) on the pictures that punctuate (in the Barthesian sense) the viewer’s mind. [Figure 2-7, 2-8] The texts, which are the “testimonies” of the subjects, nullify the photographer’s authority over the images, by leading the viewer to a

25 Ibid., 56. – “I feel that the real is only effectively communicated through shocks to the imagination, precipitated by the Sublime.”
26 Richard Mosse, “Sublime Proximity, A Conversation with Richard Mosse,” 58. – In photographing wars, “I’d dreamed that the evocative ruin represented an alternative to the society of the spectacle – that I’d trespassed in the forbidden wreckage of the real.”
direct conversation with the subjects.\textsuperscript{27} Juul Hondius’s captivating large color photographs of immigrants and smugglers, often rendered in sharp-focused, tightly cropped compositions, create the same tension in that their suggestive poetic metonymy of zooming-in and zooming-out lures the viewer both to the world of art and to the world that the subjects belong in.\textsuperscript{28} [Figure 2-9] In most cases, the world of Hondius’s figures is compressed in shabby motor cars that, by extension, symbolize the precarious mobility of the drifting lives.\textsuperscript{29} [Figure 2-10, 2-11] In this overloaded, stifling motorcar, Hondius's figures form “a critical iconography of the present” that calls for a deeper recognition.

These images above all document realities, but they do so neither by the brutal immediacy of certain reportage traditions nor merely by the pictorial artistry of painting, which would attenuate the effect of the real in the images. Instead, the Post-documentary delivers reality in a strategic mediation between the two. In this mediation between documentary’s politics and aesthetics, the Post-documentary comes to establish a new tradition of ethically sound visual representation in an era in which widespread skepticism about the power of images has prevented photography from representing realities deemed unrepresentable.

What then are the cultural and historical conditions of this new era that have contributed to the emergence of Post-documentary? How could this radical reconciliation between art and politics have been made in a documentary form, despite many ethical concerns about exploiting the other’s pain for art? What are the critical

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{27} James Yood, “Conversation: Text and Image,” \textit{Aperture} 176 (Fall 2004): 12-14.
\textsuperscript{28} http://www.juulhondius.com/juulhondius.html
reactions to this new form of political art? The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to discussing these questions.

**The Confrontation between Art and Politics in the 1980s and the 1990s**

Although Post-documentary is the term for a new artistic practice that has emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century, critiquing it requires an in-depth overview of the past two decades prior to the new century, because, if the Post-documentary is a mediation between art and politics, then the 1980s and 1990s were the times in which the confrontation between the two disciplines was initiated and deepened in a *contradictory* structure of culture politics.

The photographic discourses of the 1980s in the United States can be unpacked by what critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau called “the genetic distinction” between *art photography* and *postmodernism’s photographic activity*. Art photography in this distinction refers to the works that “follow in the footsteps of Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston, Walker Evans, or Harry Callahan” which were “predicated on the claim of *[aesthetic] aura.*”³⁰ Postmodern photographic activities, on the other hand, include the works of “Robert Rauschenberg, Ed Ruscha, Andy Warhol and their postmodern descendants” who “posed an explicit challenge to the brand of modernism enshrined in MoMA’s Department of Photography.”³¹ According to Solomon-Godeau, this distinction, however, takes a problematic twist in the 1980s, as postmodern photographic activity fell into its own *contradiction* in which its self-claimed criticality was liquidated in a tautological circuit within the culture system. “Postmodern photographic practices,”

---

³¹ Ibid., 106.
argues Solomon-Godeau, “were critical only within the compass of the art world – the space of exhibition, the market framework, art (or photography) theory and criticism,“\(^{32}\) which revealed “the work's insularity, its adherence to or lack of contestation of, the art-world frame, and its failure to articulate an alternative politics, an alternative vision.”\(^{33,34}\)

Ironically, this particular *contradiction* between photography-as-politics and photography-as-art, as Solomon-Godeau put it, reinforced the status of the latter (art photography) in the postmodern era, because the former’s (political photography’s) sociopolitical agenda was precisely one “which for generations, art photography have been concerned to disavow.”\(^{35}\) In other words, when postmodern photographic activities failed to address the practical agendas of socio-politics due to their tautological circularity within the art world, art photography effortlessly earned its aesthetic validity, despite its “deep-seated inability” to address “a new photographic agenda in


\(^{33}\) Ibid., 63

\(^{34}\) Often times, the explicit social concerns of photographic works by Dan Graham, Gordon Matta-Clark, Ed Ruscha, Bernd and Hilla Becher, or Hans Haacke, for instance, were dissolved into popular post-modern tropes: *publicity* in Ed Ruscha’s *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (produced first in 1962, yet constantly highlighted over the course of the 80s and 90s), *site-specificity* in the Becher’s *Cooling Towers* (1993), *seriality* in Dan Graham’s *Homes for America* (also produced in 1966, but continued to show up in discussions of post-minimal art), etc. Benjamin Buchloh mentioned this irony in 1989 by saying that, “the work [Ruscha’s *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* or Graham’s *Homes for America*] linked Minimalism’s esoteric and self-reflexive aesthetics of permutation to a perspective on the architecture of mass culture. The minimalists’ detachment from any representation of contemporary social experience … resulted from their attempt to construct models of visual meaning and experience that juxtaposed formal reduction with a structural and phenomenological model of perception. By contrast, Graham’s work argued for an analysis of (visual) meaning that defined signs as both structurally consisted within the relations of language’s system and grounded in the referent of social and political experience.” See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 1999), 521.

\(^{35}\) Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Photography After Art Photography,” 104. – “The properties of photographic imagery that have made it a privileged medium in postmodern art are precisely those which for generations art photographers have been concerned to disavow.”
Thus, Solomon-Godeau viewed art photography’s triumph in the 1980s and 1990s as “the dubious reward,” given without regard to its “hostage situation” to the lingering modern dogma of aesthetic autonomy and institutionalism. Consequently, even if “art photography has systematically engineered its own irrelevance and triviality” against modernism’s grand narratives, concludes Solomon-Godeau, it ends up like someone “all dressed up with nowhere to go.”

If photography in the postmodern era found itself with “nowhere to go,” it is more precisely because there were too many directions to choose from. As critic Hal Foster pointed out, American art during the 1980s was saturated with the sugared promises of (institutional) pluralism. This pluralism certainly gave postmodern artists tremendous encouragement for more viable resistance to high modernism’s dogmatic singularity. But to some extent, it also fostered a distorted vanguardism that yielded an idea that anything could be an artwork if it met the criteria of art institutions. For Foster, this utopian vanguardism seemed to disperse postmodernism’s critical coherence, and instead, produce “an alibi” for art institutions’ eclectic interventions in both art production and criticism. In Foster’s view, this institutional pluralism only resulted in “an eccentricity that leads, in art as in politics, to a new conformity: pluralism as an institution.” It is this “eccentric conformity” that has brought about “the failure of criticism,” writes Foster. That is, once the tradition of authorized and consented aesthetic criteria was dismantled by institutions’ strategic promotion of pluralism, art

36 Ibid., 106, 113.
37 Ibid., 80.
39 Ibid., 13.
40 Ibid., 15.
41 Ibid., 16.
institutions began to produce countless tongue-in-cheek criticisms supported by tacit consent of artists, which eventually blunted the sharp edges of criticism.

Adrian Piper, in her 1983 essay, “Power Relation within existing Art Institutions,” termed this phenomenon “aesthetic acculturation,” a process that has systematically recruited artists to invest their work with “institutions’ major concerns with beauty, form, abstraction, and innovations in media, to which political and social subject matter is either largely subordinate or completely absent.”

Securing the art institutions’ control over artists in “a condition of bondage,” this aesthetic acculturation has established a critical tendency that has discouraged American arts from addressing socio-political subject matters.

This aesthetic acculturation has surely been an underlying motif for photography’s rapid institutionalization over the past several decades in the United States. Peter Galassi, for instance, remarked in 1981 that, “photography was not a bastard left by science on the doorstep of art, but a legitimate child of the Western pictorial tradition.” Considering Galassi’s leading role in MoMA’s photography department over the past thirty years, this remark reveals institution’s great ambition and confidence regarding photography’s aestheticization during the 1980s and 1990s. For the institution, this aesthetic legitimation of photography might have guaranteed its

---


44 Galassi was first appointed as the director of MoMA’s photography department in 1991. For the ten years prior to that, he had been an associate director in that department (1981-1991), working with John Szarkowski, a chief director at the moment and a legendary figure of photographic modernism. (see chapter 3) Based on his career and position, it is undeniable that Galassi had been one of the central figures in photography’s aesthetic acculturation until his recent retirement in March 2011.
dominant cultural position even after its old inventories’ (painting’s and sculpture’s) aesthetic value ran out. But as Douglas Crimp argued, while institutionally legitimized photographic art was increasing the institution’s life span, photography’s sociopolitical relation and responsibility were unconditionally suspended.  

While art institutions were becoming more and more depoliticized in their predilection for aesthetic discourses, there was also a counter-reaction against this aestheticism in many artistic practices and theories during the same period. Nicholas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* (1998 French / 2002 English version) remaps the political topography of international art in the 1980s and 1990s. In this text, Bourriaud coins the term, *relational aesthetics* to characterize “art of the 90s taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space,” For Bourriaud, modernism’s predilection for autonomy, originality, or medium-specificity seemed to bring a suspension of productive possibilities of human interaction, participation, and communication. Thus, instead of these modernist slogans, he poses a “micro-utopian”

---


46 The term, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Relational Aesthetics), first appeared in Bourriaud’s catalog for the exhibition, *Traffic* (1996) held at CAPA musée d’art contemporain de Bordeaux. He used the term to make a new approach to art that ceases “to take shelter behind Sixties art history.”


48 Nicolas Bourriaud once called this particular antagonism against monotheistic modernism (based on the singularity of the subject) in art the “altar-modernism” that is a “moment when it became possible for us to produce something that made sense starting from an assumed heterochrony … from a view of human history as constituted of multiple temporalities, disdaining a nostalgia for the avant-garde and indeed for any era – a positive vision of chaos and complexity.” Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altarmodern: Tale Triennial* (London: Tate, 2009), 13.
model of relational art characterized by “inter-human relations”, “dialogues”, or “looped information.”

Relational art as such has been embodied in, for instance: Rirkrit Tiravanija’s cooking show (Untitled [occasionally, Free], 1992) at 303 Gallery, New York, [Figure 2-12] in which the artist and audience shared food, talk, and other daily rituals in the gallery, and therein, the gallery as a high culture institution turned into a space for more intimate conversation and inter-personal relation: Philippe Parreno’s party project at Le Consortium in Dijon, France (January 1995) that consisted of a two hour long party in which the cluster of individuals around art objects produced various temporal, relational forms: Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s Untitled (1990), a work shown at MoMA [Figure 2-13] consisting of a pile of candies that gradually disappeared as the audience took a grab on a permission of the artist, and thereby metaphorized mortality and mutability of human beings and their relationship with others.

These relational arts in their particular promotion of utopian relations become a “social interstice” in which “the encounter between beholder and art” constitutes a necessary condition that produces “the collective elaboration of meaning, in its specific sociability.” As Bourriaud elaborates, the relational art is “a state of encounter,” or “a dot in a line” that continually reinstates a transitory community based on democratic interactions and exchanges of communicable information.

Relational aesthetics, by seeking “a transitory community as a social interstice,” follows in the political footsteps of Guy Debord who argued in his manifesto for Situationist International (1960):

---

49 Nicholas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, 24.
50 Ibid., 16
51 Nicholas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, 18.
Our central purpose is the construction of situations, that is, the concrete construction of temporary settings of life and their transformation into a higher, passionate nature. We must develop an intervention directly by the complicated factors of two great components in perpetual interaction: the material setting of life and the behaviors that it incites and that overturn it.52

But while Debord found art ineffective and incapable of constructing such situations due to its “non-interventional,” “separational,” and “eternity-seeking” nature,53 Bourriaud believed that art is capable of creating inter-subjective relationships and of helping to maintain them in a capitalist society; therefore, he argued that relational aesthetics is “an important update and reconciliation of Situationism.”54

Bourriaud finds photographic media (including video and film) particularly vital in the relational paradigm, because they have “a generative power” that can “turn their retrospective role as a trace into an active role as a program.”55 Gonzalez-Torres’s photographic billboards (Untitled, 1992) [Figure 2-14], for example, demonstrate photography’s capacity in the relational paradigm to “create the awareness about the particular life patterns that reflect our civilization.”56 This temporal and multi-locational (installed in twenty-four locations in New York city in 1992) photographic billboard installation features the image of an empty, but recently occupied bed, taken after the

53 Ibid., 99. - “The construction of situations begins on the other side of the modern collapse of the idea of the theater. It is easy to see to what extent the very principle of the theater –non-intervention – is attached to the alienation of the old world. Inversely, we see how the most valid of revolutionary cultural explorations have sought to break the spectator’s psychological identification with the hero, se as to incite this spectator into activity by provoking his capacities to revolutionize his own life. The situation is thus made to be lived by its constructors.” (p. 98)
54 Nicholas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, 85.
55 Ibid., 70
56 Ibid., 71
death of the artist’s long-time partner, Ross Laycock, from AIDS. This massive photographic image of an empty bed speaks of both the absence of a man and his indexical presence or what Roland Barthes called “the absent presence” in photography. This photographic illustration of a man’s absence/presence thus evokes an issue of sexual minorities (such as Laycock) whose right and privilege to have a legitimate relationship with others is often either unacknowledged or threatened. The billboards in this regard are a solicitation for recognition, an effort to re-locate him in another web of relations. Therefore, rather than being an individual piece of work to be looked at, the photo-billboards play as a series of dots in the city to link the people within it, constructing a psychological community in which the invisible patterns of the marginalized life are recalled and questioned.

Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics emerged as a useful framework to discuss the political motif of art in the 1980s and 1990s. But critical receptions of the relational aesthetics have not always been hospitable. In her 2004 October article, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” Claire Bishop, for example, argues that the relational aesthetics is grounded on an insecure structure that yields “an erratic relationship to the work’s ostensible subject matter, or content.” Bishop agrees that relational aesthetics is “an important first step in identifying tendencies in contemporary art.” However, these tendencies, she argues, are “unhinged both from artistic intentionality and consideration of the broader context in which they operate,” and therefore become “a

58 Nicholas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, 17 - “Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavors to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue”
60 Ibid., 53
constantly changing portrait of the heterogeneity of everyday life, and do not examine their relationship to it."^61

What troubles Bishop is not the relation itself but “the quality of the relation that is never examined or called into question.”^62 Often, this question about the relation’s quality has been answered by Bourriaud himself, based on the notion of relation as an intrinsically democratic modus operandi. But according to Bishop, “the relations set up by relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic, as Bourriaud suggests, since they rest too comfortably within an ideal of subjectivity as whole and of community as immanent togetherness.”^63

Hal Foster presents another critique of relational aesthetics. According to Foster, the idealism of utopian community and naïve belief in togetherness gives rise to “a ‘promiscuity of collaborations’ in which the postmodernist complications of originality and authorship are pushed beyond the pale.”^64 This promiscuity of collaboration has been incubated, as Foster argues, in the increasing positivism of international art communities such as Documenta and the Biennials held in Venice, São Paulo, Istanbul, Johannesburg, and Gwangju. These global art fairs, in Foster’s argument, promoted “a promiscuity of installation” or a “messy juxtapositions of projects” upon the curatorial dream space of “kiosk,” “platform,” or “station,” which are “more chaotic than communicative.”^65 In Foster’s perspective, these new patterns and spaces of collaboration cause even more complicated conceptual dissolution and formal

---

^61 Ibid., 64
^62 Ibid., 65.
^63 Ibid., 67.
^65 Ibid., 192.
Thus, Foster concludes that the relational arts “risk a weird formalism of discursivity and sociability pursued for their own sakes,” and in this vague, incoherent community, pacified by “simply getting together,” relational art registers “an art world version of ‘flash mobs.’”

The critical concerns and skepticism surrounding relational aesthetics speak to a deeply rooted anxiety about art’s capacity to bring together aesthetic form and political content. While relational art emerges as a new model of inter-subjective political art that effectively establishes art's new tasks and role in a society, many critics find it redundant, distractive, and threatening to a certain tradition of art, as Foster’s account demonstrates:

[the relational arts’] formlessness in society might be a condition to contest rather than to celebrate in art – a condition to make over into form for the purpose of reflection and resistance.

In any case, this critical discrepancy has influenced the ways in which each camp (the political and the aesthetic) has treated photography. While the relational camp finds the photographic medium to be “an instrument of emancipation” and “a political tool

---

66 Ibid., 193-194 – “These possibilities of ‘relational aesthetics’ seem clear enough, but there are problems too. Sometimes politics are ascribed to such art on the basis of a shaky analogy between an open work and an inclusive society, as if a desultory form might evoke a democratic community, or a non-hierarchical installation predict an egalitarian world. Hirschhorn sees his projects as ‘never-ending construction sites’, while Tiravanija rejects ‘the need to fix a moment where everything is complete.’ But surely one thing that art can still do is to take a stand, and to do this in a concrete register that brings together the aesthetic, the cognitive and the critical. And formlessness in society might be a condition to contest rather than to celebrate in art – a condition to make over into form for the purpose of reflection and resistance.”

67 Ibid., 194.

68 Bishop says “[The book relational aesthetics] also comes at a time when many academics in Britain and the U.S. seem reluctant to move on from the politicized agendas and intellectual battles of 1980s art (indeed, for many, of 1960s art), and condemn everything from installation art to ironic painting as a depoliticized celebration of surface, complicitous with consumer spectacle.” Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 53.

69 Hal Foster, “Chat Rooms,” 194.

70 Nicholas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, 78
aimed at the liberation of forms of subjectivity,”\textsuperscript{71} this tactical use of photography also draws a critical reaction that prioritizes photography’s pictorial affinity and its rich formality, as manifested in the 1980s and 1990s by art institutions that found photography to be “a legitimate child of the Western pictorial tradition” (Galassi).

Arguably, it is this mutual antagonism between the aesthetic discourse and the political discourse that has kept photography from exercising its true potential to bring together aesthetic forms and political contents until recently. But on the other hand, this antagonism and polarity have also incubated a desire for another leap in photographic practice, because not only did this antagonism expose each other’s own aesthetic criteria, but it also revealed their own dilemma -- art photography’s passivity in political reality and political photography’s indifference to formal traditions.

This dilemma was recognized and widely discussed in the 80s and 90s, as some of them have been already addressed in this chapter. But it became all the more visible in the first decade of the twenty-first century when the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, broke the seeming stability of culture, to an extent that art photography’s pursuit \textit{for its own sake} could no longer make any cultural resonance in public minds, and postmodern critical photography swamped in the tautological circuit within the art world appeared to make no better impression than media spectacles in this new age of image war.

This new recognition arguably brought a radical compromise in photographic disciplines. It urged photographic artists to get out of their safe aesthetic sanctuary and talk about society’s most troubling political realities. But more importantly, this political turn did not completely leave behind the aesthetic attitude that photographers had

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 70.
developed for many decades, because there was also a growing recognition of the power of the image in the aftermath of 9/11 that led photographers to a competition with other media spectacles. In other words, once 9/11 upended certain traditions of (photographic) realism in its disturbing and repetitive visual terrorism, photographers such as Luc Delahaye, Aernout Mik, or Walid Raad, started reconsidering the shock of images and finding a new way to represent disasters in both politically more responsible and aesthetically more powerful forms. Post-documentary’s mediation between art and politics, I argue, needs to be understood as a response to these historical demands after 9/11.

9/11 and Demand for Cultural Merger

As many scholars have noted, 9/11 was a political disaster resulting from the failure of a US-led post-Cold War world order based on diplomatic unilateralism and military interventionism. But, the media expansion of the past twenty years (with the advent of mobile phones, digital cameras, and global news channels) turned 9/11 into a media event, in which the terrorist attacks were rapidly duplicated and amplified by real-time global media networks. This media explosion increased the parameters of the disaster’s psychological aftershocks to the extent that the 9/11 terrorist attacks gained a symbolic (or iconic) status, creating cult effects around the world.

---


74 According to Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites’s study, 9/11 images and subsequent visual resources such as Abu Ghraib photographs and dead bin Laden images all acquire iconic status, on the ground that those images “are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activating emotional identification or response, and are
“The collapse of the towers is the major symbolic event. … The towers, which were the emblem of that [global] power, still embody it in their dramatic end,”75 Jean Baudrillard wrote in 2002 as part of his ongoing theoretical elaborations about this culture of simulacra dominated not by reality but by its effect. This account, by extension, summarizes pervasive assumptions that the terrorist attacks were somehow choreographed to increase the symbolic impact on the masses. Indeed, the airplanes’ penetration of the towers, causing them to collapse into an enormous pile of rubble, smoke, and ashes seemed programmed in advance to maximize the scale of terror. The visual power of the crumbling towers thus led British artist Damien Hirst to remark, “the thing about 9/11 is that it’s kind of an art work in its own right. It was wicked, but it was devised in this way for this kind of impact. It was devised visually.”76

As Judith Butler remarks, this unsettling connection led to a nation-wide “political paranoia” in which intellectual or cultural “explanations” about the disaster’s true cause and effect were “considered either complicitous with terrorism or as constituting a ‘weak link’ in the fight against it.”77 Consequently, images were censored, freedom of speech was suspended, and cultural pluralism and political relativism became targets of public hysteria.78 For many Americans, the curtailment of their civil right was considered a

---

78 To name a few, cancelation of the construction plan of the cultural institutions on Ground Zero for their pluralistic art exhibitions in 2005, Vandalism and attack to the gallery owner at the Capobianco Gallery in San Francisco for its display of an anti-American painting in 2005,
necessary step to recovering the national security. But while the U.S. public voluntarily surrendered its constitutional rights, the vitality of U.S. culture was rapidly extinguished.

While this cultural dilemma brought a noticeable decline in post-9/11 US culture, many critical articulations that concerned the political and cultural decline of US society have been heard from both inside and outside of the country. \(^{79}\) Judith Butler, in particular, makes one of the most compelling inside voices that call for more constructive changes in the United States' both political and cultural attitudes. Pointing out the unprecedented absence of critical reflections in the United States after 9/11, Butler argues that the blind patriotism of post-9/11 U.S. society has systematically subdued both intellectual and cultural “explanations” that might help clarify the true causes and effects of terrorism; \(^{80}\) American unilateralism, unwillingness to understand terrorism’s mutuality, and a blind First World doctrine have continually emerged from this absence of explanation. Subduing explanations, she continues, brings up an effect

---

Rockefeller Center’s removal of Eric Fischl’s sculpture Tumbling Woman due to uncomfortable reminder of 9/11 victims in 2002, and several media bans of US military casualties (such as Falluja military contractor mutilation image or US military coffin image at Dover) and moral depravity (such as Abu Ghraib) are the examples of this public/national hysteria. These few incidents, of course, cannot represent the general mentality of post-9/11 US culture. But they surely reveal an anxiety about image’s uncontrollable power.

\(^{79}\) Jacques Derrida, for example, compared this cultural conservatism with body’s “auto-immunity process” which is, in essence, ‘quasi-suicidal’ self-destruction to immunize itself against its own immunity.’ By decimating, in advance, the potential danger, a danger ‘to come’ in his words, the post-9/11 America perpetually nurtures “the very monstrosity it claims to overcome,” Derrida argued.

Giorgio Agamben also points to the juridical paradox of the US foreign policy after 9/11 by arguing that the US’s self-declared ‘state of emergency (exception)’ as a justification of its unlimited use of military force in the foreign soils is nothing other than the abuse of its troubling sovereignty. Agamben warned that this kind of overly self-determined juridico-political system can transform itself into “a killing machine.”


of “exoneration” by which the United States’ anti-juridical foreign actions are neutralized and sustained.\(^81\) For Butler, this exoneration is a self-deception that conceals the very selfishness of the logic of self-defense,\(^82\) and it rather increases the tension between the U.S. and the Third World. She thus calls for “collective responsibility as part of an international community based on a commitment to equality and non-violent cooperation” to re-create better social and political conditions around the world; it is a constant questioning of the cause, searching for the new ways of “hearing beyond what we are able to hear,” and “being open to narration that de-centers us from our supremacy.” \(^83\)

Although Butler did not specify the particular roles of art and culture, it seems obvious that her articulations of collective responsibility, achieved by “asking unasked questions, hearing the unheard, and finding narrative decentering,” were to solicit more active interventions of art and cultural community because both have traditionally provided society with such counter-narratives. To be more specific, in another essay, Butler argues that mourning or grief is not a private, depoliticized activity, but something done by “a sense of political community of a complex order” and by “the relational tie that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.” \(^84\) “What grief displays,” continues Butler, “is the thrall in which our

\(^81\) Ibid., 8-9.
\(^82\) Ibid., 17. - “Ignoring its image as the hated enemy for many in the region, the United States has effectively responded to the violence done against it by consolidating its reputation as a militaristic power with no respect for lives outside of the First World.”
\(^83\) Ibid., 17. - “our collective responsibility … as part of, requires that we ask how these conditions came about, and endeavor to re-create social and political conditions on more sustaining grounds. This means, in part, hearing beyond what we are able to hear. And it means as well being open to narration that de-centers us from our supremacy…”
relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways
that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in
ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.\textsuperscript{85}

Here, Butler insightfully suggests that the grief or mourning that followed 9/11
can be an opportunity to make a shift from blind Cold-War unilateralism to a new inter-
subjectivism. Rather than being constantly isolated by violent military solutions, the
nation’s reaction to 9/11 should prioritize communicability and inter-connectivity, to
replace the First World unilateralism that has plunged the U.S. into its current political
predicament.

Asking what the role of art can be is imperative in this shifting moment, given that
art, since 9/11, has played a pivotal role in ways in which the public express grief and
mourning despite the cultural concerns to the artistic expression in the time of disaster;
for instance, philosopher Arthur Danto once described Manhattan for a few weeks after
9/11 as a “massive altarpiece” filled up with makeshift arts and relics created by the
public.\textsuperscript{86} But more importantly, as Retort’s collective thoughts elaborate (Retort is a
group of leftist intellectual writers among whom T.J. Clark is one of the names most
familiar to readers in the art world\textsuperscript{87}), the image’s extraordinary power, as revealed by
visual terrorism, opens up a whole new chapter in visual discourses, in the sense that “a
picture, in the present condition of politics, is itself, if sufficiently well executed, a

\textsuperscript{85} Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” 23.
\textsuperscript{86} Arthur C. Danto, “9/11 ART AS A GLOSS ON WITTGENSTEIN” (a curatorial statement
\textsuperscript{87} Retort is a group of thirty to forty members who meet monthly
to discuss a wide range of political issue. There is no representative for Retort, but T. J. Clark is one of the names that may
be familiar in art history discipline. Retort’s recent publication, Afflicted Power (2005) provides a
rich counter-argument against the US’s recent military misadventures around the globe, with a
particular attention to the power of spectacles.
specific and effective piece of statecraft" and "the image-power, like all other forms of ownership and ascendency under capitalism, … gives the new terror a chance -- to frighten, demoralize, turn the world upside down."88 It is this awareness of the Janus-faced power of image that has made any given political states both vulnerable and ambitious to the image-power.89 But at the same time, this awareness of image-power has also sparked a new cultural aspiration that nourishes the very alliance, the productive merger, between art and politics in post 9/11 U.S. society, despite recurring concerns about representing the unrepresentable disasters. This aspiration, I argue, is large part of the motif of the transition that Post-documentary is making upon the untamed and often distrusted power of media spectacles.

**The Post-Medium Condition**

Why then is this alliance between art and politics much more viable in photographic genres than in other forms of representation? How could photography (as well as film and video) arise as a central medium in an era that has systemically rejected the privilege of a single medium? The ever-growing significance of critic Rosalind Krauss’s “post-medium condition” deserves particular emphasis here because her articulation of the (art) medium’s “chimerical” nature, its heterogeneity, explains the fundamental drive of photography’s transformation in the post-medium era.90

---

89 Ibid., 27. -- “At the level of the image, the state is vulnerable; and that level is now fully part of, necessary to, the state’s apparatus of self-reproduction.”
In Krauss’s accounts, the “Greenbergized” (Krauss’s term) notion of medium-specificity fails to recognize “a recursive structure” (a “layered, complex relationship” to other elements) of art and thus ends up dismissing all possible relations to its outsides:

The specific mediums – painting, sculpture, drawing – had vested their claims to purity in being autonomous, which is to say that in their declaration of being about nothing but their own essence, they were necessarily disengaged from everything outside their frames.91

“The paradox” Krauss argues, “is that this autonomy had proved chimerical, and that abstract art’s very modes of production – its paintings being executed in serial runs, for example – seemed to carry the imprint of the industrially produced commodity object, internalizing within the field of work its own status as interchangeable and thus as pure exchange value.”92 To put it another way, Clement Greenberg’s impossible project of medium specificity succumbed to the very chimerical nature of mediums, and thus, resulted in rapid integration with the culture industry in which a medium as a pure, unique embodiment of subjectivity (art for art’s sake) turned into a media as a web of interchangeable values or inter-subjectivity.

Krauss saw conceptual art’s adaptability to the culture industry as a symptomatic quality that precipitated art’s transition towards the post-medium era. Not only did conceptual art’s abandonment of autonomy emancipate it from art’s limits within the given disciplines and materiality (painting’s autonomy within the unmediated picture plane etc.) but this transition allowed conceptual art to effectively defend its own aesthetic territory from the chaotic diversity of the culture industry.

[B]y abandoning this pretense to artistic autonomy, and by willingly assuming various forms and sites – the mass/distributed printed book, for

92 Ibid., 11
example, or the public billboard – Conceptual art saw itself securing a higher purity for Art, so that in flowing through the channels of commodity distribution it would not only adopt any form it needed but would, by a kind of homeopathic defense, escape the effects of the market itself.93

Marcel Broodthaers was exemplary for Krauss [Figure 2-15]. In his fictional museum, "Museum of Modern Art, Eagle Department," the triumph of medium-centered modernism is ridiculed: “the triumph of the eagle announces not the end of Art but the termination of the individual arts as medium/specific; and it does so by enacting the form that this loss of specificity will now take.”94 What secures art’s specificity then is not the medium itself but the specific condition(s) to which a medium is subjugated, such as at where, of what, for whom, etc.:

In the intermedia loss of specificity to which the eagle submits the individual arts, the bird’s privilege is itself scattered into a multiplicity of sites – each of them now termed “specific” – in which the installations that are constructed will comment, often critically, on the operating conditions of the site itself. To this end, they will have recourse to every material support one can imagine, from picture to words to video to readymade objects to films.95

Although chimerical, conceptualism’s “operating conditions of the site” have never exceeded the parameters of the culture industry and the market-friendly system of art institutions, at least not in the United States. But after 9/11, the cultural parameters within which a medium determines its working territory were abruptly expanded (if not evaporated), and the operating conditions within these parameters came to include a large number of political realities.96

93 Ibid., 11
94 Ibid., 12
95 Ibid., 15
96 Krauss has critically endorsed this expansion in her 80s’ photographic theory by elaborating photography’s “archaeological discursiveness.” In post 9/11 era, now “photography’s discursive space” requires another set of cataloging, and this political catalog remarkably increases ‘the problem of incoherence’ in the photography’s aesthetic discourse. This incoherence comes to destroy the aesthetic alibi that art institutions have relied on to maintain
What happened to photography, then, was not only the collapse of its medium specific discourse constituting photographic modernism, but also the collapse of its membership in art institutions. That is, the ideas that “the vision [of photographers] belongs to no school or theory, but to photography itself … characteristics inherent in the medium.” (John Szarkowski)\(^{97}\) and “photography is a legitimate child of the Western pictorial tradition,” (Peter Galassi)\(^{98}\) became no longer valid for defining the medium’s identity, because the concept of the (photographic) institution was dissolved in the abrupt expansion of the medium in this age of the image war. Therefore, photography now returns to where it originally belonged: society.

Krauss anticipated this situation in her 1982 essay, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces.”\(^{99}\) According to her, when “the space of exhibition” appeared no longer constitutional to photographic discourses, each photographic practice began to recuperate its own “membership in a given family” (documentary as a socio-political apparatus, for instance), and as Krauss expected, this new membership reinstated a Foucaultian mode of photographic archaeology, “an attempt to reveal discursive

---


\(^{97}\) John Szarkowski, “Introduction” in The Photographer’s Eye (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), unpaged. - “The vision they share belongs to no school or aesthetic theory, but to photography itself. The character of this vision was discovered by … photographers’ progressive awareness of characteristics and problems that have seemed inherent in the medium.”


practices in their complexity and density; to show that to speak is to do something – something other than to express what one thinks.”

The post-medium condition sparked this chain-reaction: first, the theoretical grounds of the institution, and then the institution itself. Consequently, this chain reaction led photography to what critic George Baker recently called “photography’s expanded field.” Following Krauss’s early essay, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979), Baker argues, “[Photography] is no longer the privileged middle term between two things that it isn’t. [Photography] is rather only one term on the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities.” What is reassured in this account is that photography’s identity can no longer be determined by its kinship to the fields that have claimed a parental right to the medium. Photography’s expansion, claims Baker, is “not that modernist medium-specificity would simply be dissipated into the pluralist state of anything goes, but rather that such mediums would quite precisely expand, marking out a strategic movement whereby both art and world, or art and the lager cultural field, would stand in new, formerly unimaginable relations to one another.” In this new relation, photography, says Baker, turns into a “way-station” between its expanded form and the cultural realms that this form refers to, and that is precisely where Post-documentary is currently located with its unique neutrality between art and politics.

---

100 Rosalind Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Space,” 298.
102 Ibid., 136.
103 Ibid., 136.
The Ethical Turn

The diminishing power of the art institution that eventually brings photography to a way-station where art and the world intersect, and photography’s radical expansion by which the medium begins to represent events that have been rendered unrepresentable according to previous aesthetic criteria, all indicate what Jacques Rancière has called “the ethical turn of aesthetics and politics” in the current age of catastrophe.

The term ethics in Rancière’s usage has a unique connotation that is particularly useful to explain Post-documentary’s ethical quality. According to Rancière, the term ethics signifies, in contrast to its traditional tie with moral judgments, “the kind of thinking which establishes the identity between an environment, a way of being and a principle of action.” It is, in other words, an effort to annihilate (or at least, reduce) “the distinction between fact and law,” or between “dwelling and the way of life corresponding to this dwelling” in its original sense. Thus hypothetically, the most ethical life is a life in which there is no distinction between one’s actions and his/her rules of action. But this seems hardly ever possible, specifically in this modern era in which various ideologies, rules of governing, claim their own validity for action.

Politics, in Rancière ethical frame, results from this impossibility of the perfect ethical life and is a sort of supplementary technique to bring the best state of indistinctness into life. A good politics therefore is not the one that asserts a perfect match between actions and rules in its coercive illusion of indistinctness (a bad political


\[105\] Ibid., 28.
regime’s hyper-juridical act of violence often results from this illusion\textsuperscript{106}, but the one that operates according to the premise that constant efforts should be made to efface the difference between fact and law, what happens and what should happen, regardless of (im)possibility.\textsuperscript{107}

Art, in Rancière’s thought, follows the same logic on the ground that it (specifically western illusionism) is also a technique of producing a sense of indistinctness between a representation and its reference. In this view, an ethically good art is not an art that declares no distinction between an image and its model (this is what Plato posed in his mimetic theory), but an art that admits the impossibility of this perfect mimetic totality and eagerly challenges it. What defines the current ethical turn of art in this regard is art’s admission to its own illusionary nature and courageous efforts to address, question, and challenge the impossibility of representation’s most fundamental supposition.

This gradual disappearance of the difference of politics and right in an ethical indistinction also defines the present state of the arts and aesthetic reflection. In the same way that politics fades away in the couplet constituted by consensus and infinite justice, arts and aesthetic reflection tend to redistribute themselves between a vision of art dedicated to the service of the social bond and another that de-dedicates it to the interminable witnessing of the catastrophe.\textsuperscript{108}

It has been said that representing disasters such as the Holocaust involves an ethical problem because the Holocaust is, as Jean-François Lyotard argued,

\textsuperscript{106} According to Agamben, the United States’ unregulated practice of ‘hyper-sovereignty’ was promoted by a tactical elasticity of its politics that blurred the distinction between juridical validity and political need. See Giorgio Agamben, \textit{State of Exception}, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

\textsuperscript{107} Thus, by extension, “the growing indistinction between fact and law,” without genuine identity between fact and law as evidenced in the recent US politics, “brings about an unprecedented dramaturgy of infinite evil, justice and redemption,” says Rancière. Jacques Rancière, \textit{“The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics,”} 28.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 36.
immeasurable ("the Holocaust is like an earthquake that destroyed not only lives, buildings and objects but also the very instruments used to measure it."\textsuperscript{109}), and thereby, every representation and every gesture to be a witness or truthful reporter of the disaster will be a "pretension" made out of "the impossibility of measuring the immeasurably enormous sublime event,"\textsuperscript{110} and it will involve "a guilt of falsification and imposture through this very pretension."\textsuperscript{111} This idea suggests that the most ethical representation is \textit{un-representation}, an art that "does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it."\textsuperscript{112} However, while such ethical concerns deny art’s capacity to represent, art's responsibility to visualize catastrophic realities is suspended, and thereby catastrophic events such as 9/11 becomes unrepresentable myths.

Giorgio Agamben once pointed out that the trope of unrepresentability "confers on the genocidal crime the prestige of the mythical."\textsuperscript{113} As in Christian traditions, this unrepresentability hinges on the incomprehensibility of divine mysteries. Thus, the application of this term to such disasters as the Holocaust had the effect, according to Agamben, of enhancing the mystic power of the disaster. Agamben viewed this mystification process as an unconscious repetition of the Nazi atrocity of the Final

\textsuperscript{109} Jean-François Lyotard, \textit{The Differend: Phrases in Dispute}. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988. p. 56

\textsuperscript{110} "The Holocaust was like an epic earthquake whose seismic intensity was so powerful that it destroyed not only lives, buildings and objects, but also the very instruments used to measure it." Jean-François Lyotard , \textit{The Differend: Phrases in Dispute} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 56.

\textsuperscript{111} "No one can – by writing, by painting, by anything – pretend to be witness and truthful reporter, be "equal" to the sublime affection [a feeling of unspeakable, unimaginable, and unrepresentable], without being rendered guilty of falsification and imposture through this very pretension," because sublime is the feeling of the unrecognizable Jean-François Lyotard., \textit{Heidegger and "the Jews"} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 45.

\textsuperscript{112} Jean-François Lyotard , \textit{Heidegger and "the Jews"} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 47.

Solution because mystifying the mass-murder through unimaginable and unspeakable violence was at the core of the Final Solution. Rancière also argues in the same sense that this doctrine of unrepresentability can only “be sustained by a hyperbole that ends up destroying it,” because this hyperbolic notion that “some things are unrepresentable” is a “vacuous idea,” simply “expressing a wish” for what is impossible.

In these accounts, we find a new concept of ethical representation. It is not the art that gives up on its own visuality for the vacuous wish of unrepresentation, but the art that pushes itself to the limits between what is representable and what is not, as an ethical will to reduce the distance between what we think and how we act.

The ethical turn is not the simple appeasement of the dissension between politics and art in the consensual order. It appears rather to be the ultimate form taken by the will to make this dissension absolute.

Post-documentary artists such as Luc Delahaye, Aernout Mik, or Walid Raad play on the limit between what is representable and what is unrepresentable, or between images’ political objectivity and their aesthetic subjectivity. They deny the documentary image’s credibility, its truth claim, or the coerced inseparability between the image and reality that has been a dominant myth of photojournalism for a long time. But they also deny the reckless application of pictorialism, formalism, or aestheticism that has fostered an institutional banality. Post-documentary art functions in this double

\[114\] Ibid. pp. 156-157
\[116\] Ibid., 44.
denial: denial of the journalistic cliché and of aesthetic banality, as evidenced in Aernout Mik’s pseudo-documentary that is neither an authentic testimony nor a pictorial tableau of the real (it is a staged documentary featuring actors). [Figure 2-16]

Occupying a neutral zone between fact and fiction, Mik’s dramatic representations produce an indelible socio-political testimony about the events and beings that otherwise could never have gained sufficient visibility. It is an art of the double negation, an attitude to stay conscious to all the unethical attempts to make a false match between fact and law, an attempt to resist the limits of representation. But precisely for this reason, Mik’s art expands the notion of representation:

An anti-representative art is not an art that no longer represents. It is an art which is no longer limited in the choice of representable subjects or in the means of representation.

In this double negation of the age-old photographic myth of objectivity and authenticity, Post-documentary brings an “ethical turn” to recent culture, despite its seeming dissent to any of the past ethical norms.

The Digital

The last condition for Post-documentary has to do with the rapid digitalization of the world. With the growing accessibility of digital image modification technology, photography’s credibility has been radically diminished; Photoshop enabled its users to create seamless fake indexes, and 3-D technologies came to nullify the separation

---

118 See chapter 4: Theater Of Social Documentary And Emancipation Of The Spectator: Aernout Mik’s Staged Documentary And Michael Fried’s New Insight
between real and fantasy by creating forceful para-indexes.\textsuperscript{120} Indeed, André Bazin’s account of photography’s ontology as “a fingerprint of being photographed” and Roland Barthes’s phenomenological \textit{noema} of photography as a “there-has-been,” now both seem inadequate to define the digital images that are produced without any spatiotemporal contacts to their models. This diminishment of photographic indexicality in the digital era has reintroduced the question of photographic credibility, to the extent that the long tradition of photography as an indexical medium has, as Fred Ritchin has recently argued, come to an end.\textsuperscript{121} Critic Eric Rosenberg also argues that, with the advent of the digital paradigm that dismantled photography’s traditional tie to reality or truth, photography becomes “a thing of the past.”\textsuperscript{122} “What the present day allows us to see,” continues Rosenberg, “is that photography’s truth is only confirmed in its romance, and its romance is utterly dependent upon conditions obtained primarily in a world in which photography is either nonexistent or unnecessary, in which we are always as much before photography as after or during it.”\textsuperscript{123}

Photojournalism faces particular difficulty in this new digital era. Since the first Gulf War in 1991, the majority of war images have been produced under the military digital imaging system and sanction\textsuperscript{124}; instead of photojournalists going into the battle field to take pictures (a long-held basic protocol of photojournalism), satellite images

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{120} Para indexes are the indexes of things that never existed, such as for instance, the \textit{Autobots} (robotic cars) in Hollywood blockbuster film \textit{Transformers} (Michael Bay, 2007).
\textsuperscript{122} Eric Rosenberg, “Photography Is Over; If You Want It,” in Clark Symposium, Robin Earle Kelsey, and Blake Stimson, \textit{The Meaning of Photography}. Williamstown (Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008), 190.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 190
and smart bombs’ nose cone camera images started occupying newspapers and television. As William J. Mitchell put it already in 1992, in this new digital warfare, “there is no Mathew Brady to show us the bodies on the ground, no Robert Capa to confront us with the human reality of a bullet through the head.” “Instead,” continues Mitchell, “the folks back home were fed carefully selected, electronically captured, digitally processed images of distant and impersonal destruction.”

Consequently, this new digital warfare, according to Fred Ritchin, brought “circumvention or an end to the tradition of war photography.” Moreover, as I discussed earlier, whenever unfiltered images of war casualties and suffering victims of war appear in the public media, they immediately stir controversy of whether they are realities worth viewing or voyeurism and sensationalism that harm the dignity of the victims. These ethical concerns and the change in the mode of military operations to “smart” digital warfare have rendered photojournalism incapable of bringing reliable, first-hand visual evidence of socio-political conflicts.

However, critics in this particular ending narrative also find the crisis to be an opportunity to make both the public and photojournalists rethink photography’s task and role in this troubling time. As Eric Rosenberg argues, “photography’s paralysis, its stillness, is ultimately our own impotence,” and to that extent, this awareness encourages photojournalists to get over the impotence, insofar as “photography is the essence of doing in the face of our being.”

Post-documentary marks this turning point. That is, as Ritchin observes, once newspapers, magazines, or television appear no longer available for photojournalists,

---

125 Ibid., 13.
126 Fred Ritchin, “The End of Photography as We Have Known,” unpaged.
127 Eric Rosenberg “Photography is over; if you want it,” 191.
they start to look for another opportunity in galleries and museums to replace “the glorious tradition of the multi-page photo-essay in which photographers were able to make an in-depth exploration of the world.”

Ritchin views this particular transition of documentary as a “poetic turn” that prioritizes “the poet-artists’ subjective insights” more than “the fact-based, mechanical qualities.” The poetic documentary therefore is not simply something to look at, but to feel, to engage with, and to act upon. Rather than burying the viewer in incontestable facts and realities, Post-documentary’s poetic variety, maximized by digital malleability, brings us to the situations in which “photographs motivate the reader to interrogate their meanings, to solicit alternate voices, in their ambiguity, confusion, and curiosity.”

For Ritchin, to this end, photography’s ending in the digital era is also “an enlarging” toward the terrain of the viewer and the subject. This enlarging comes for two reasons: first, “digital media promises an open-ended conversation with the reader who has enough curiosity,” and second, with the digital camera’s maneuverability, “the subject can see the image immediately and thus becomes a collaborator with the image-producers.” Accordingly, Ritchin argues, with these two conditions of digital journalism, we are facing a new era of “hyper-photography”:

Eventually, digital photography’s relationship to space, to time, to light, to authorship, to other media will make it clear that it represents an essentially different approach than does analog photography. It will be forever linked with others as a component in the interactive, networked interplay of a

---

128 Fred Ritchin, “The End of Photography as We Have Known,” unpaged.
129 Ibid., unpaged.
131 Fred Ritchin, “Into the Digital” in After Photography, 15.
133 Fred Ritchin, “The Social Photograph” in After Photography, 125.
larger metamedia. This is a new paradigm, which ... can be called "hyperphotography."\footnote{Fred Ritchin, “Toward a Hyper Photography,” in \textit{After Photography}, 141.}

The current practice of Post-documentary reflects in many ways this new paradigm of hyper-photography, because Post-documentary, like hyper-photography, reintroduces “the moment to argue for a more thoughtful, less automatic approach to establishing authenticity, including more sustained collaboration with the reader.”\footnote{Fred Ritchin “The Social Photograph,” 139.} This “more thoughtful, less automatic approach” is demonstrated, for instance, in Walid Raad’s fictional documentary archive (The Atlas Group). Since its first foundation in 1999, Raad, a Lebanese-American artist, has questioned the (in)authenticity of the Lebanon War documentaries and histories through both his hyper-photographic online Archive and offline lecture performances. [Figure 2-17] For Raad, the hypermedia digital environment is the very space into which the viewer is invited, “creating discrete and malleable records of the visible (and identifiable) that can and will be linked, transmitted, recontextualized, and fabricated.”\footnote{Fred Ritchin, “Toward a Hyper photography,” in \textit{After Photography}, 141.}

The digital photograph in Raad’s Archive can produce a more elastic sense of time, in which future and past can be strategically intertwined and be as decisive as the present.\footnote{Ibid., 142.} So Raad, rather than being a photographer, (although many images are photographed by Raad himself) becomes a “communicator,” another name for the image-maker in this hyper-photographic era.\footnote{Ibid., 146 - Raad’s ability as a communicator is evident in his mode of presentation. Since its first public presentation in 1998 in a Beirut academic symposium and the annual Ayloul Festival, the archive has functioned as a framework for Raad’s lecture performance. In the performance, which is “part-mock-artist’s talk, part quasi-academic presentation, part deadpan theater of the absurd,” the fictional nature of the Archive is gradually revealed and thereby,}
Responses

The relation between these recent cultural conditions and Post-documentary is not conclusive. But it does offer a useful framework to help us understand how socio-political events, such as 9/11, have affected the formation of a new artistic tradition that embraces sociopolitical realities without abandoning aesthetic values. Considering decades of conventions in both art and journalism that have treated this interdisciplinary collaboration between the aesthetic and the political as a threat, the Post-documentary may appear ironical and contradictory. But this irony and contradiction should also be part of the discourses that critics embrace.

Current accounts of Post-documentary reflect both trust and distrust. Martha Rosler who has long been investigating documentary’s ethical grounds, for instance, views documentary’s “mutation into ephemeral aesthetic form and its maker into an artist” as a “threat” to this genre. In Rosler’s view, while traditional documentary’s investment in a particular moment and specific signifier brings to viewers “a specific spatiotemporal what-is,” the artful documentary causes “a loss of the specific in favor of a more universal appeal, or a certain mythic element.” For Rosler, this is a problem because this “subjectivization of facts” or “poetic reception of facts” may promote “an escape” from “reportorial responsibility and accuracy.” Thus, Rosler concludes “with or without art world theorizing, [social] documentary will continue to negotiate between


140 Ibid., 211.
141 Ibid., 211.
sensationalism on the one hand and instrumentalism on the other,”¹⁴² which means, by extension, the continuation of social documentary regardless of its recent alliance with art.

British critic Maartje van den Heuvel claims, on the contrary, that documentary’s new path and function in the space of the museum need to be understood not “in an isolated (thus transitory) phenomenon,” but “in a much wider context of an increased visual literacy”¹⁴³ In Maartje’s view, contemporary culture has been so saturated in visual modes of communication that the communications now take place not in “verbal literacy” – an ability to deal critically and knowledgeably with written and spoken texts – but in “visual literacy” which she explains as an ability to deal intuitively with highly complex codes and mechanisms.¹⁴⁴

Visual literacy refers to the competence of image-makers in employing a more and more complex visual language and of viewers in being able to understand, fathom, and interpret this. Visually literate people are able to critically distinguish the codes and mechanisms that the media uses in photography, film and video and to fathom their meaning.¹⁴⁵

Therefore, visually literate people prefer to work with rich visual sources, rather than limited textual materials, in order to sort out, analyze, and understand particular socio-political agendas. The artistic turn of documentary, in this regard, is not a

---

¹⁴² Ibid., 240.
¹⁴³ Maartje van den Heuvel, “Mirror of Visual Culture: Discussing Documentary,” in Gierstberg, Frits. Documentary Now!: Contemporary Strategies in Photography, Film and the Visual Arts (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2005), 105. – “Developments in documentary photography and film and the advance of the documentary image in art … are the signs of an increased role of the media in how reality is experienced in our western society. They indicate an increased ‘visual literacy’ on the part of image makers-artists, photographers and filmmakers – as well as viewers.”
¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 106.
¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 106.
corruption of documentary to be overcome, but a consequence of culture’s continual progression.

Responses to the Post-documentary as such certainly reveal paradigmatic uncertainty regarding documentary's capacity to represent unrepresentable realities. At this point, it is hard to make a conclusive assertion as to whether documentary’s aestheticization is “a threat to this genre” or a cultural “progress” toward the era of “visual literacy.” But it is in this uncertainty or in a struggle to stay independent from all the past norms and protocols that Post-documentary finds its position in this age of war and terrorism. Documentary’s transformation is still in progress and is in need of further critical investigation to determine what its task and role should be today. In the meantime, it is our responsibility to overcome our old moral anxieties and start to confront the painful truths in images, of which we are all responsible.
CHAPTER 3
PLATONISM IN THEORY AND PSEUDOS OF POST-DOCUMENTARY: THE ATLAS GROUP (WALID RAAD)

Documentary’s Aesthetic Adventure

In summer 2011, PS 1 (MoMA’s Long Island media art branch), mounted an exhibition, entitled “Only the Lonely One,” featuring the works of Laurel Nakadate, a thirty-five year-old Yale alumna who had previously made a sensational debut in the 2002 Amory Show. This show offered a comprehensive overview of Nakadate’s works that hinged on sexual voyeurism, collapse of inter-human relation and the manipulative power of the camera. In that same summer, MoMA presented a retrospective of Ukrainian master Boris Mikhailov, entitled “Case History,” in which Mikhailov’s camera delved into the socio-economical devastation of Ukrainian lives after the fall of the Soviet Union.

These two shows drew immediate media attention and many reviews noted the two artists’ notorious reputation for manipulating and exploiting their subjects. Nakadate’s photographs, for instance, featured the artist with several middle-age men in staged sexual orgies and uncomfortable physical harassment, foregrounding the question of how willingly the public would be to tolerate this visual sadomasochism in the name of art. [Figure 3-1] Mikhailov also has been criticized for his inappropriate cash reward to his models for posing before the camera, despite their unrepresentable misery in the devastated ideological dystopia. [Figure 3-2,3-3]

Richard Woodward, in his review for The Wall Street Journal, underscores the public concerns of their moral dilemma between the “inevitability of exploitation” and
“the convenience of the excuse” in representing socio-political catastrophes.¹ After mentioning a cynical axiom of our culture in which “truth or objectivity is gone and thus exploitation is inevitable,” Woodward writes, “when this axiom of no-truth/no objectivity is conveniently spelled out in the coercive power of the camera (and the artist), artists, by exaggerating the ills of the world, and using techniques of the very society they are trying to mock, can always find shelter in museums and art galleries while their subjects still look like fools.”²

Woodward’s account pinpoints the artists’ reckless treatments of existent social ills as little more than fodder for the production of artwork, and the museum as an accomplice and host to these artists, while the tragedies that serve as the subject matter for these artists still remain unsolved. What is troubling to him is precisely that this collaboration between artists and the museum appears not to give voice to the lives they purport to represent. The distance between the uneasiness of the misery and its “convenient use” in museums, thus, brings about another grotesque cultural scene, as Woodward writes, “in the context of MoMA, these [Mikhailov’s] leering men and women weave toward us like a gang of foul-smelling bums who have crashed a party in a luxury apartment and built a campfire on the living room carpet.”³

What is the point in a museum as luxurious as MoMA throwing this million dollar party to those who “expose their sagging genitals and ugly rashes on their buttocks, wearing soiled clothes, holding out their unappetizing daily fare for the viewer to savor,”⁴

² Ibid., np.
³ Ibid., np.
⁴ Ibid., np.
if not to rescue them? Why does MoMA allow “the foul-smelling bums” to make “a campfire on its living room carpet,” if not to warm up their frozen feet? These are tough questions to answer but not entirely new to us. Critics have brought the same charge to such photographers as Diane Arbus, Sally Mann, Sebastião Salgado, and Luc Delahaye, all of whom have explicitly engaged with the question of the other’s pain in their art. Photojournalism, war reportage, and social documentary have also encountered the same ethical issues of beautifying calamity and making profit out of someone else’s pain. This chapter explores these concerns and anxiety about documentary’s aesthetic adventure in order to see first where the concerns originated, and secondly how we can find a solution for this anxiety.

**Critics of Documentary**

In the past several decades, some of the most recognizable critical articulations on the ethics of documentary have been produced in both explicit and implicit awareness of image’s exploitative visual nature. The ethics of documentary therefore involves a dilemma in which documentary’s emphasis on ethics diminishes its aesthetic vitality. In particular, critical texts that have been said to be the most rigorous ethical frameworks in documentary discourses – texts of Susan Sontag, John Tagg, Martha Rosler, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, to name some of the most recognizable\(^5\) – have posed explicit concerns about social documentary’s commitment in aesthetic pleasure, and therefore, arguably promoted a lamentable negation of photographic art.

On the one hand, with the acute recognition of documentary’s inseparable relation to ideologies, these critiques have contributed to revealing how vulnerably these documentary images have been subjugated to the issues of “hegemonic social

---

\(^5\) These texts will be discussed throughout this chapter and chapter 4.
surveillance” (John Tagg), “a new genre of victimhood” (Martha Rosler), and “exoticism or familiarization of the other’s pain” (Susan Sontag), despite their self-claimed authenticity and objectivity. One of the frustrations that these critiques are articulating is that social documentary photography fabricates, distorts, and thus re-victimizes the subject, in its pitiless formal attention. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has put it, this formal attention causes “an inevitable slippage from the political to the anecdotal or the emblematic.”

There is little doubt that these critical efforts have provided criteria within which documentary, photojournalism, and photographic realism in art find their ethical responsibility. But it should also be said that these ethical tendencies in documentary discourses have gained their critical legitimacy by stigmatizing documentary’s impulse to speak through visual images, or by ignoring the fact that “the documentary (film) is a richer form of art” (John Grierson, the man considered the father of documentary film) and it is “an approach which makes use of the artistic faculties to give vivification to fact” (Beaumont Newhall).

What these critics emphasize is that the desire to see, to be seen, and to show expressed in social documentary can be led to an inappropriate and irresponsible

---

aesthetic indulgence that may spawn "exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, trophy hunting and careerism," as Martha Rosler points out. For Rosler, as long as the visual impact becomes a primary appeal in social documentaries, they are like "horror movies, putting a face on fear and transforming threat into fantasy, into imagery." Here, the term, imagery, is devaluated as something that liquidates the practicality of threats in image’s dubious reality-effects. This photographic liquidation of practical threats, encouraged by the irresponsible optical desire, appears to be as shameful as the threat itself. For instance, when South African photographer Kevin Carter captured in 2004 an image of an emaciated Sudanese girl being watched (and thus threatened) by a vulture behind her, people ferociously accused him of predatory attention to the girl with his camera, of looking at her as if a “man-vulture.” This disturbing equivalence eventually led this gifted Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer to suicide out of the shame of being called a “man-vulture.” It might have been a tragedy of a photographer having failed in his moral codes, as many would see it. But at the same time, it demonstrates how photographers also suffer in this dichotomy of aesthetics and politics that conveniently defines photographer’s aesthetic venture as abominable.

This skeptical view on documentary photographer’s aesthetic venture thus calls for a radical relocation of the main axis of documentary discourse: from photography

---


13 Ibid., 306.

14 This famous photograph first appeared in The New York Times, March 3, 1993, 3. – In a news article “Sudan Is Described as Trying to Placate the West” by Donatella Lorch. More details of the tragic story of Kevin Carter can be found in TIME Domestic vol. 144, no.11 (September 12, 1994) “The Life and Death of Kevin Carter” by Scott MacLeod, Johannesburg. retrieved February 19, 2006. The term “man vulture” first appeared in The St. Petersburg Times (Florida); it reads "The man adjusting his lens to take just the right frame of her suffering might just as well be a predator, another vulture on the scene." Ibid.
and photographers to the photographed people and their catastrophic situations. In her essay “Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography,” Abigail Solomon-Godeau poses a question, “whether the documentary act does not involve a double act of subjugation: first, in the social world that has produced its victims; and second, in the regime of the image produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions it then re-presents.”\textsuperscript{15} Here too, “the regime of the image” is considered as a demonic space in which a double act of subjugation takes place. In this image-regime, “[t]he photographer’s desire to build pathos or sympathy into the image, to invest the subject with either an emblematic or an archetypal importance, to visually dignify labor or poverty, is a problem to the extent that such strategies eclipse or obscure the political sphere whose determinations, actions, and instrumentalities are not in themselves visual.”\textsuperscript{16}

What matters in this critique is that documentary’s ethical discourses function only upon the premise of structural dichotomy. At one side, there are unrepresentable socio-political tragedies of which representation is a shame. On the other side, there are “the photographer’s eye and the photographer’s art” that is “nostalgic, generalized, and selfish” enough to make this shameful representation.\textsuperscript{17} Rosler reframes them in documentary’s two moments: first, “the immediate, instrumental one, as testimony, evidence arguing for a social practice and its ideological supports,” and then, “the

\textsuperscript{15} Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography,” 176.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 179.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 179.
conventional aesthetic-historical moment, afforded by the aesthetic rightness or well-formedness of the image.\(^\text{18}\)

Consequently, this structural dichotomy between form and content creates an uneasy confrontation between art and politics in documentary discourses. In this confrontation, the pleasing variety of aesthetic documentary is the very evidence of its political or ethical indifference, as Rosler argues in the following account:

this covert appreciation of images is dangerous insofar as it accept not a dialectical relation between political and formal meaning, not their interpretation, but a hazier, more reified relation, one in which topicality drops away as epochs fade, and the aesthetic aspect is, if anything, enhanced by the loss of specific reference.\(^\text{19}\)

In this hazier practice of documentary, or in prioritizing “sensuousness, classical beauty, and transcendental form,” writes Rosler, “the world is merely the stepping-off point into aesthetic eternality,” and therefore, “photographer’s involvement with the work itself becomes ‘impatient’ exploitiveness.”\(^\text{20}\)

Criticism against documentary’s formal attention, perhaps, takes the most aggressive voice in Susan Sontag’s canonical texts on photography. For Sontag, problems begin with our cognitive inability to handle all the visual inputs, the very Platonic problem, with which her book, *On Photography*, begins: “Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato’s cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth.”\(^\text{21}\) Sontag’s account implies that we are still prisoners in Plato’s cave, who are unable to distinguish truth from shadowy illusions of culture. In this epistemological

\(^{18}\) Martha Rosler, “In, Around and Afterthought,” 317.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 317.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 317.

plight, “to see images is to corrupt them,” because, by the act of seeing, we subject ourselves to the deceptive power of image in which our misreading constantly undermine the truth of image.

As Sontag’s famous argument goes, in the repetition of viewing, image’s shock value wears off and creates “a certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem more ordinary- making it appear familiar remote, and inevitable.” What the looking and its repetition in time do in photographic experience, for Sontag, is to create “a dead zone of conscience,” in which our responsibility to the other is dissolved in the indulgence of aesthetic pleasure. It is nothing other than “an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted” and “poignant longing for beauty, for an end to probing below the surface, for a redemption and celebration of the body of the world- all these elements of erotic feeling are affirmed in the pleasure we take in photographs,” writes Sontag.

For Sontag, Diane Arbus and her photographs of the abnormal, ugly, and marginal beings were perfect embodiments of the “aesthetic consumerism,” on the ground that Arbus “enrolls in one of art photography’s most vigorous enterprise- concentrating on victims, on the unfortunate- but without the compassionate purpose that such a project is expected to serve.” [Figure 3-5] In Sontag’s view, “Arbus’s

---

22 Ibid., 20.
23 Ibid., 40. – Sontag mentions, “Much of modern art is devoted to lowering the threshold of what is terrible. By getting us used to what we could not bear to see or hear, because it was too shocking, painful, or embarrassing, art changes morals- that body of psychic custom and public sanctions that draws a vague boundary between what is emotionally and spontaneously intolerable and what is not.”
24 Ibid., 20-21.
25 Ibid., 21.
26 Ibid., 24.
27 Ibid., 33.
photographs (of the freak) suggest a naiveté which is both coy and sinister, for it is based on distance, on privilege, on a feeling that what the viewer is asked to look at is really other. This otherness of the subjects and their pitiless “attentiveness” to the camera creates “the moral theater” in which Arbus’s “slow-motion private smashups” and her “discomfort fraternizing with the freaks and the ugly minorities” set up “detachment and autonomy,” from the audience. Not only does this reinstate the noxious aesthetic norms, but it also promotes, in Sontag’s view, “hypocritical” and “aversive” pleasure, “the childlike wonder of the pop mentality.”

**Anti-aesthetic View in Criticism and its Underlying Platonism**

Despite their self-contradictory nature that brings a decline in photography’s particular tradition, these anti-aesthetic criticisms of documentary have constantly expanded their critical boundary, as they have been widely cited in many academic and journalistic articles for the past few decades. This critical expansion however, according to critic David Levi-Strauss, results from “the anesthetic effect of this anti-aesthetic tendency” that produces “an artificially induced unconsciousness to protect oneself from pain, and to protect the “hypocritical frontiers” of propriety and privilege.” That is, one of the underlying assumptions of citing the anti-aesthetic criticisms is an aspiration to remain moral and privileged, despite their incapability and unwillingness to act upon the other’s misery.

As Levi-Strauss observes, these “aestheticization-of-suffering critiques” now enters into “a period of academic mannerism” that prevents us from “the basic needs of

---

28 Ibid., 34.
29 Ibid., 35.
30 Ibid., 41.
seeing images of suffering others to recognize it.” In Levi-Strauss’s view, “the emotional attachment to images is unstable and can be manipulated, certainly, but that doesn’t mean it should be disproportionately censored,” because “every photograph is a complex act of communication” and “aestheticization is socio-cultural encoding to make one legible to others in another culture.”

But, while we remain skeptical in the manneristic assumption that “politics has no place in art, and art has no place in politics” (Levi-Strauss), many brave photographic engagements in the other’s pain – the works, for example, by Boris Mikhailov, Kevin Carter, Sebastião Salgado, or Sally Mann – have been stigmatized in many critical antagonisms that denounced their aesthetic sensibility.

Barbara Maria Stafford argues in her pro-aesthetic text, Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images (1996), that in those critical arguments against photography’s aesthetic venture, “the multiple ramifications of the far-ranging aesthetic process submerged in a culture that, despite its clear reliance on a spate of images, remains ironically mired in a deep logocentrism.” She further argues that it is a “cultural bias, convinced of the superiority of written or propositional language, that devalues sensory, affective, and kinetic forms of communication precisely because they often baffle verbal resolution.” These accounts summarize that the anti-aesthetic criticisms we have discussed is based on the logo-centric prejudice that makes a biased demarcation

33 Ibid. unpaged.
34 David Levi Strauss, Between the Eyes, 8.
37 Ibid., 23.
between art and politics – the very Platonic issue. This logocentrism is problematic because, in “the false severance of how things are presented from what they express,” we are gradually detached from the very truth of image that is conveyed not only in its contents but also in forms. Thus, as Stafford claims, in order to redeem the visuality in social documentary, to rethink anti-aestheticism of documentary discourses, and lastly to reduce the tension between art and politics, we need to “exit from Plato’s cave.”

**Overcoming Platonism: Jacques Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics***

French philosopher Jacque Rancière’s text, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) offers a possible exit from the Platonic dichotomy between politics and aesthetics. In this text, the story of Platonic persecution against mimetic art is addressed as a prototypal tale of later class confrontation in which the doing/making labor class was confronted with intellectual bourgeoisies. By reframing this classical hierarchy, Rancière attempts to restructure the confrontational dichotomy of art and politics into an inseparable community of the sensible in which aesthetic sensibility becomes a motor of political communication.

For Rancière, what caused today’s hegemonic cultural and political confrontation between art and politics was not merely the bourgeoisie’s symbolic deformation of the use value and its ruling over the laboring class, but more prototypical and more paradigmatic rejection of labor-value in antiquity. That is, when Plato placed “doing/making” artisan classes who work with their hands, including painters and sculptors, below intellectual classes such as politicians and philosophers in his

---

38 Ibid., 21.
39 Ibid., 22.
ontological category, based on a classical idea that those manual-laboring technicians would never have sufficient leisure time to make much more valuable intellectual contributions, the hierarchy between art and politics was set in more primordial prejudice.41

Recognizing this intrinsic political nature of Platonic system, Rancière presents a new critical model in which art embraces politics. Here aesthetic forms are considered in their intrinsic political sensibility; “there is an ‘aesthetics’ at the core of politics,”42 writes Rancière, because both the politics and aesthetics share a single principle of what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible.

Originally termed Le partage du sensible (which also could be translated to: 1. The partition of the sensible or the partaking of the sensible, and 2. The share(ing) of the sensible), Rancière’s signature term “the distribution of the sensible” designates “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.”43 This definition ostensibly reveals its double nature that brings together both aesthetics and politics. It is first of all an aesthetic process as long as it is

41 Jacques Rancière, Ibid., 12. and see also Karl R. Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963) – Plato’s (and his theory’s) political inclination has been reviewed by Karl Popper. In Popper’s view, Plato’s repression of simulacra is based on his totalitarian inclination to control the rising liberalism and equalitarianism. By categorizing class roles or by privileging or discriminating certain classes, Plato wanted to prevent any possible delusions for the dangerous class-crossover imagined by artists. Arguably, from Popper’s perspective, Plato was one of the enemies of what he called the open society because to some extent, Platonism, whose prejudicial ontology or class categorization was inherited by Hegel and Marx, later played a malevolent role in the troubling history of hegemonic war, class struggle, and ethnic cleansing. In other words, Platonic antagonism, according to Popper, is a prototypical form of totalitarianism that created the malicious techniques of identification and differentiation, based on ontological prejudices.


43 Ibid., 12.
defined as an attempt to construct a “self evident system of sensory perception.”[^44] But, in the second half of the definition, Rancière makes it clear that this aesthetic system discloses not only quantifiable commonality but also immeasurable heterogeneity of the sensible, betraying traditional definitions of aesthetics based on universality. Due to this heterogeneity (heterology, in Rancière’s own term[^45]), the distribution of the sensible takes up also an implicit law of politics or democracy based on dissent.[^46] When Rancière says that the distribution of the sensible “is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution,”[^47] it certainly reveals a political aspect of this term.

An analogy takes place at this moment, an “a priori” unity between the aesthetic regime and the political regime.[^48] Politics from the beginning has functioned as a systemic control of sensory experience: “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it. Around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.”[^49] Similarly, aesthetics has also dealt with the sensory experience.[^50] The aesthetic regime and the political regime are

---

[^44]: This is what aistheton, a Greek etymological origin of the word, aesthetics, means.

[^45]: Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 63-65. – “the notion of ‘heterology’ refers to the way in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible is disturbed. … It undoes the sensible fabric … and established other networks of the sensible”

[^46]: Ibid., 52. – He says that “equality only generates politics when it is implemented in the specific form of a particular case of dissensus.”

[^47]: Ibid., 12.

[^48]: Ibid., 13. – Rancière argues that “this aesthetics should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, by a consideration of the people qua work of art.” Rather, he says that it is an “a priori system in the Kantian sense.”

[^49]: Ibid., 13.

therefore inseparable, and any critical attempt to elaborate validity of one regime against the other – either political validity of aesthetic discourses or aesthetic validity of political discourse in art – comes at odd because in the end, either way would speak to the validity of the same sensory experiences that encompass both regimes anyway.

This inseparability between two regimes was a fear for Plato who believed, “when each class in the city minds its own business, the money-earning class as well as the auxiliaries and the guardians, then this will be justice.”\(^{51}\) Thus, Plato had brought the two inseparable regimes into a question of capacity - the hierarchical question: politics, the regime of reason, fully capable of addressing truth, whereas art, the regime of the sense, incapable of it, only imitating the address. In other words, if both regimes concern the same problem of the sensory distribution, then only way to separate the two is to make a hierarchy between the two, to make an order according to the biased definition of what they are capable of.\(^{52}\)

As Stafford argues, the ethical concerns of documentary, as well as political art in general, rest on this Platonic bias; that is, when an aesthetic articulation of political realities does not amount to the same efficacy of the politics itself, it appears to tarnish, at some level, the acuteness of the political realities, and therein, produce inferior and statements different from the inventions of art and sometimes even opposed to them. On the other hand, aesthetics has its own politics, or rather its own tension between two opposed politics: between the logic of art that becomes life at the price of abolishing itself as art, and the logic of art that does politics on the explicit condition of not doing it at all.”\(^{51}\) Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, Trans. Francis Macdonald Cornford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 434. Also see Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Popper, 86-118.

\(^{52}\) Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*,17. -- “On the one hand, this logic [Platonic logic of representation] separated the world of artistic imitations from the world of vital concerns and politico-social grandeur. On the other hand, its hierarchical organization - in particular the primacy of living speech/action over depicted images - formed an analogy with the socio-political order.”
simulacra of the realities. But again, this question of capacity in criticism reiterates Plato’s political anxiety that leads the questioners to a biased differentiation between two identical modes of communication, the bias that Rancière’s study is deconstructing by revealing the distribution of the sensible common in both regimes.

This biased logocentric differentiation, Plato’s political dichotomy, was indeed an overarching problem for many post-modern thinkers. For example, Gilles Deleuze, whose philosophy was devoted to revealing Platonic prejudice against the Sense and its untamable differentiation and repetition, claims that “to reverse Platonism” means “to make the simulacra rise and to affirm their rights among icons and copies.”53 In Deleuze’s view, “the simulacrum is not a degraded copy” but something that “harbors a positive power which denies [a distinction between] the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction.”54 “By simulacrum” Deleuze says, “we should not understand a simple imitation but rather the act by which the very idea of a model or privileged position is challenged and overturned,” because “[t]he simulacrum is the instance which includes a difference within itself, such as two divergent series in which it plays, all resemblance abolished so that one can no longer point to the existence of an original and a copy.”55 Indeed, the existence of simulacra reveals that this Platonic division is in

53 Gilles Deleuze, The Logic of Sense (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 262. Also see Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66-69 – “Overturning Platonism means denying the primacy of original over copy, of model over image; glorifying the reign of simulacra and reflections.” Indeed, simulacra’s eternal return was Plato’s greatest fear because the difference of the returning copies and their inevitable repetition would destroy his whole cosmology based on the oneness of truth and the sameness of the world to the Idea. This fear led him to “draw a distinction between ‘the thing itself’ and the simulacra.” But “when eternal return is the power of (formless) Being, the simulacrum is the true character of form- the ‘being’ – of that which is.” Difference and Repetition, 66.

54 Gilles Deleuze, The Logic of Sense, 262.

55 Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, 69.
fact a groundless assumption, because without simulation, no one, including Plato himself, can explain the existence of Idea: “the same and the similar no longer have an essence except as simulated, that is as expressing the functioning of the simulacrum.” Therefore, Deleuze claims, “by rising to the surface, the simulacrum makes the Same and the Similar, the model and the copy, fall under the power of the false (phantasm). It renders the order of participation, the fixity of distribution, the determination of the hierarchy impossible. It establishes the world of nomadic distributions and crowned anarchies.”

**New Ethics of Image: Georges Didi-Huberman’s Images In Spite of All**

Anti-Platonic discourses as such give us an opportunity to rethink all the moral denouncements charged on photographic simulacra. If photographic images appear to miss or violate moral criteria, it is not because the images are incapable of or irresponsible for representing the unrepresentable, but because they are still subjected to the Platonic prejudice of what is representable and what is not. As Rancière argues, this Platonic doctrine of unrepresentability can only “be sustained by a hyperbole that ends up destroying it[self],” because this hyperbole that something is unrepresentable is a “vacuous idea,” simply “expressing a wish” for what is impossible.

The problem is that this vacuous wish for moral privilege makes us unable to see the wish of the photographed, *the wish of the beings who aspire to be photographed.* This problem constitutes a major critical topic in French critic Georges Didi-Huberman’s recent study, *Images In Spite of All* (2008), in which he searches for photography’s own

---

56 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 262.
57 Ibid., 263.
desire to be seen, to remain visible in spite of all controversies of photographing the Holocaust.

In this provocative study about four photographs smuggled out of Auschwitz, Didi-Huberman argues that the photographic images are the only way, in spite of all the negativities, to let people know about how the unimaginable was imagined at the death camp; it is to demystify the tragedy buried under the trope of unspeakability and unimaginability.\(^59\) [Figure 3-6] What the Nazi attempted in gas chambers and crematoria was, according to Didi-Huberman, “to destroy not only life, but also the very form of human and its image with it,”\(^60\) so that “even if some proof remains and some survive, people would never believe the monstrosity of the camp.”\(^61\)

Didi-Huberman points to the camp prisoners’ resistance against the extermination of their existential evidence, of their beingness; they wrote what they went through in rolled papers and buried them in the ground to let others know later who they were, how they suffered, and how they died. They also photographed themselves at great risk, and smuggled out these photographs in a hope that these images, visual testimony of the unimaginable Nazi crime, would bring a rescue. For Didi-Huberman, “it

---

\(^{59}\) Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in spite of all: four photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 38. – “The little piece of film with its four photograms is a limit of this kind. The infra-thin threshold between the impossible by right – “nobody can represent to themselves what happened here” – and the possible, the necessary de facto: we have, thanks to these images, a representation in spite of all, which, henceforth, imposes itself as the representation par excellence, the necessary representation of what was a moment in August 1944 at the crematorium V in Auschwitz.”

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{61}\) Primo Levi transcribes the Nazi SS member’s scornful warning in his *The Drowned and the Saved* – “However the war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed ….” Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 11-12.
is the very image of art that the prisoners will have wished to preserve in spite of all, as if to snatch from hell some shreds of spirit, culture, and survival." Through such acts of representation, the Holocaust is no longer an untouchable, unspeakable myth. Its uniqueness and its remoteness that have implicitly promised our innocence, safe distance from the evilness of the crime is dissipated in looking at the pictures. Now what was formerly conceived to be the unseeable becomes visible by the desire of the subjects, and the mystery of the tragedy becomes an identifiable history: “The image is the eye of history” that makes the cremated and buried atrocity visible. This is the power of image, the power of simulacra that destroys the partitions between myth and history in its eternal returning as an instant of truth as Hannah Arendt wrote:

Lacking the truth, (we) will however find instants of truth, and those instants are in fact all we have available to us to give some order to this chaos of horror. These instants arise spontaneously, like oases in the desert. They are anecdotes and they reveal in the brevity what it is all about.

Finally, in the ruin of history where truths are all exterminated, we discover the instants of truth, the images, to begin another ethical reflection. Why is the instant of truth more ethical than truth? Why are images more inspiring than the real? Why do we need aesthetics for a better ethical consideration? These are the questions that lead us to rethink Kant’s Critique of Judgment, by way of Arendt. Didi-Huberman writes:

---

62 Georges Didi-Huberman, Images in spite of all, 44.
63 Ibid., 39. – “To imagine in spite of all, which calls for a difficult ethics of the image: neither the invisible par excellence (the laziness of the aesthetic), nor the icon of horror (the laziness of the believer), nor the mere document (the laziness of the learned). A simple image: inadequate but necessary, inexact but true. True of a paradoxical truth, of course. I would say that here the image is the eye of history: its tenacious function of making visible. But also that it is in the eye of history: in a very local zone, in a moment of visual suspense, as the “eye” of hurricane (let us remember that this central zone of the storm, capable of a flat claim, “contains nonetheless enough clouds to make its interpretation difficult”)”
64 Recited from Georges Didi-Huberman, Ibid., 31.
the judgment of Adolf Eichmann\textsuperscript{65} \ldots prompted Arendt to reinterpret politically the Kantian “faculty of judgment,” which, as we too often forget, seeks to establish a bridge between aesthetics and ethics. \ldots This is why it was necessary in spite of all to cast an aesthetic gaze in the four photographs of Auschwitz: in order to shed light on the ethical and anthropological content of the trust accorded to those images by the members of the Sonderkommando.\textsuperscript{66}

In recalling Kant, Didi-Huberman reassures that when the practical reason betrays the imperatives of pure reason, aesthetic intervention plays a bridging role in the ethical mediation between the two. Art might risk fabrication or disperse political realities by way of aesthetic pluralism and formal abstraction. But, in spite of all the risks and anxieties, Didi-Huberman argues, we should, and must not give up on the power of image. It is not because images are free from those risks, but because they demand that viewers take responsibility for what they see and remain vigilant to the risks that the action entails.

\textbf{Walid Raad: The Atlas Group}

Image’ new demands for action and responsibility have been articulated by a number of recent documentary photographers who seek to produce an image that promotes a circuit of sensory communication in both political and aesthetic communities. One of the most noticeable characteristics of this Post-documentary is that it discovers and utilizes image’s artistic possibility to maximize its communicability with the viewer. It often takes a form of staged, fabricated, or dramatized documentation of socio-political events and it is presented in museums and galleries. But rather than

\textsuperscript{65} Adolf Eichmann was a high rank Nazi SS member and one of the organizers of the Holocaust. Before he was executed in 1962 in Israel, he defended himself in the famous war crime trial by saying that he was only “following the order,” the same Nuremberg Defense that drove the post war intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt to rethink the relation between the pure reason and practical reason (as an action following the order of the higher reason) of modern (Kantian) philosophy.

\textsuperscript{66} Georges Didi-Huberman, \textit{Images in spite of all}, 162.
being institutionally and generically absorbed into the tradition of the museum, it enlarges parameters of the art institution by incorporating political subject matters with aesthetic sensibility. In Post-documentary, the line between image’s politics and aesthetics are dissipated; thus they offer a model for a new critical art that mediates between the aesthetic domain and political domain. The last part of this essay will discuss a specific example of such Post-documentary practice - The Atlas Group & Walid Raad, to reassure how documentary’s new transformation brings about reconciliation between the aesthetics and politics.

The Atlas Group is a virtual foundation and an archive project founded in 1999 by Walid Raad, a Lebanese-American artist, whose works have been presented and discussed in several high-profile venues including the Moscow Biennial of Contemporary art (2011), Seoul International Biennial of Media Art (2010), Sydney Biennial (2006), Venice Biennial (2003), Documenta 11 (2002), and Whitney Biennial (2002). The Atlas Group project adopts the form of an archive and presents various documents from the contemporary history of Lebanon with particular emphasis on the Lebanese civil wars waged from 1975 to 1990, during which Raad himself spent his adolescent life. Raad collects, parcels out, and reframes the memories of the wars in the archives located in both Beirut and New York, as well as online, so that they can constructs fictional fabrics of history intended to articulate “the hypothesis that the Lebanese Civil War is not a self-evident [historical] episode … [but] is constituted by and through various actions, situations, people, and accounts.”

The archive’s inventories include various forms of photographs, videos, and writings that are categorized in three file types: type A is attributed to specific individuals (such as Fakhouri, Mrad, Bachar, Hussan, and Raad) who hypothetically have provided their own documents of the war time experiences: type FD is found documents that Raad collected from various sources: and type AGP is attributed to the Atlas Group featuring documents arranged in specific tactical orders and formal considerations.  

[Figure 3-7]

The complex web of the archive preserves a certain constellation that becomes more accessible when Raad presents the archive images in his lecture performance. Since its first public presentation in 1998 in a Beirut academic symposium and the annual Ayloul Festival, the archive has functioned as a framework for Raad’s lecture performance. In the performance, which is “part-mock-artist’s talk, part quasi-academic presentation, part deadpan theater of the absurd,” the fictional nature of the Archive is gradually revealed and thereby, Raad’s intention of dismantling the authority and authenticity of history becomes manifested.

Raad’s critical ambition of de-constructing conventional mode of history leads him to a new way of re-constructing non-episodic, non-linear historiography in which the past and the present, or the collective and individual, productively overlap. This reconstruction of history therefore relies less on documentary’s cliché of objectivity and authenticity, and more on image’s semiotic arbitrariness and rhetorical nature. Accordingly, documents in the Archive are either strategic fabrications or rearrangements from its original contexts, but they are intended to produce a

---

68 See the Archive Group website, http://www.theatlasgroup.org/aga.html
meaningful narrative out of the ambiguous and ungraspable history. Raad believes that the official political history of Lebanon could not make a reliable account of what actually happened during the civil wars.\textsuperscript{71} To compensate for the limits of official history, he produced documents and archives in which the formerly unreadable arrays of historical facts find a link in personal memories. Facts are relentlessly condensed and displaced by the dynamism of historical conscious and unconscious in Raad’s forged archive. The archive thus reveals the “questions about subjective impressions and personal experience, about how individuals remember and fabricate ‘history.’”\textsuperscript{72}

“Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese wars,” a notable work in type A, hinges on this very constructive nature of documentary that reveals a dynamic relation between the objective and the subjective, between the public record and the individual memory, and between facts and fictions. [Figure 3-8] The work features a number of notebook pages each of which contains a newspaper photograph of a horse track race and detailed scribbles about the race and gambling by a Lebanese historian named Dr. Fakhoury, a mystic persona made up by Raad himself. In the text accompanied by each document, Raad provides an obscure story of Lebanese war historians’ erratic hobby of gambling at the horse race; the story goes that they (Marxists, Islamists, Maronite nationalists and socialists) met every Sunday at the race track, betting, however, not on the horses but on the track photographers, their subtle failure to capture the precise moment of a horse passing the finish line.\textsuperscript{73}

On top of the page is the scrap of the following day’s newspaper photograph of the winning horse. There are parallel red markings between the horse and the finish line, which indicate the time lapse that a track photographer falsely made up. The photographer should have captured the accurate moment of the horse dashing in the finish line, as a visual evidence of the winning horse. But each and every time, photographers failed to capture it, and the proximity of this failure urged the historian-gamblers to bet on the numeric deviations of the failure for each race.

Scribbles in the middle are the details of the race such as race distance, winning time, and average speed – sine-qua-non of documentary, handwritten by Dr. Fakhouri (thus, in fact by Radd himself). On the right at the bottom, there are brief notes of deviations each historian-gambler bet on, and on the left are satiric descriptions of the winning historian’s naïve and arrogant characters that, for example in one page, read, “uncivil and sullenly rude. Haughty and arrogant.”

Page after page, events as seemingly trivial as the horse track gambling are documented with remarkable seriousness. The pure descriptiveness of the document somehow manages to cut off any emotional intrusion that this sort of private memorandum may involve; its numeric formation with succinct handwritten notations increases credibility of this pseudo-document. But while all those details indicate facts, they also allude to something that the sheer facts cannot address: the constant delay of facts which is inevitable in both history and photography, or the risky endeavor of both historians and photographers to petrify the facts that are in essence durational and relational in time and context.

---

This delay and failure of history brings Raad to an assumption that history is a sort of gambling on the historical proximity, and in this game of history in which the winner takes everything, unsuccessful gamblers gain nothing and their bets sooner or later will submerge into invisibility and oblivion, regardless of measurement and deviation that could also be equally meaningful to understand history. The fictional figure, Dr Fakhouri, who has long been forgotten, or so it is said by Raad, symbolizes this failed effort. Therefore, Raad’s *Notebook series* underscores “historical discourse’s incommensurability between factual events and individual-subjective experience.”

Characteristically, in most of Raad’s works, history is often incorporated with individual memory. In the Archive, for instance, the objectivity of historical narratives and the subjectivity of individual recollections are always brought together. But this does not mean that there is a certain compromise between the two; rather it says that even if both work together, there is a certain area that can never be compromised; Raad’ works play on this area of discordance between established history and raw memory, as evidenced in the work, “We decided to let them say, “we are convinced,” twice.” (2002).

“We decided…” is a set of vintage photographs taken in 1982 and donated to the Atlas group in 2002 by Walid Raad himself. [Figure 3-9, 3-10] Since they remained in negatives for a long time and were taken from a far distance, the images are blurry, scratched, and barely recognizable. According to Raad’s statement in the Archive, he was only fifteen and was on the other side of Beirut, in a parking lot across the street from his mother’s apartment, or some hills around East Beirut, when he photographed the Israeli army assaulting West Beirut where the PLO, along with their Lebanese and

---

Syrian allies were located. The incapability of coming closer to the subject due to his precarious status at the moment, and the uncanny political situation that even further distanced this young observer of pro-Israeli West Beirut from the anti-Israeli East Beirut, resulted in the obscure images.

The obscurity of the images however resides not merely in the physical conditions of photographs, but more in the very elusiveness of Lebanon’s political situation itself. The violence in Lebanon has very complex and sensitive origins that most of his western audience does not know much about; this elusiveness is a part of the work’s appeal, as his lecture performance often begins by answering the pre-arranged questions about the historical background of Lebanon wars. Raad’s remark in the archival statement, which is part of this work, is meaningful:

…East Beirut welcomed the invasion [of the Israeli army], or so it seemed. West Beirut resisted it, or so it seemed. … I was 15 in 1982, and wanted to get as close as possible to the events, or as close as my newly acquired camera and lens permitted me. Clearly not close enough.

This statement conveys two things. The first is that tenor of the part “or it seemed,” following the affirmed political stands of both East and West Beirut, somehow implies that there must have been something else that cannot be fully accounted in this clear-cut historical evaluation of the political attribution of the two states. Secondly, the statement also exposes the discrepancy between young Raad’s desire and his new camera’s desire to come closer to the violent events that frustrated this close engagement. Importantly, this discrepancy is encoded in the photographs as well; in

---

77 In his lecture performance, Raad usually plants someone in the audience to raise questions about the complex history of Lebanon wars. See Lee Smith, “Missing in Action: The Art of the Atlas Group/ Walid Raad,” 126.
close examination, one may notice that the images reveal not only the knowledge and information of the assaults, but the very frustration of capturing the event in spite of the young Raad’s willingness and his new camera’s technical support. Thus, what is really underlined in this work is a certain failure of documentary effectively revealed in juxtaposition with individual memories.

In this juxtaposition, historical facts collide with personal memories and thus create a sort of melancholia, a feeling that nothing can adequately bring the past into the present consciousness. It is this melancholic feeling that deeply underlies Raad’s archive project, reinforcing the idea that history comes into play in this inevitable collision between fact and memory. To this extent, the Archive does not merely store dead facts. It is a vast space of historical fragments that are waiting for a moment in which meanings arise as a certain constellation from this uncountable chaos of facts.

Raad’s critical attention to fragment and repetition for more meaningful rearrangement is manifested in his another work, “My neck is thinner than a hair: Engines” which features one hundred photographs produced by anonymous photojournalists and found by Raad in the archives of An-Nahar Research Center (Beirut, Lebanon) and the Arab Documentation Center (Beirut, Lebanon).79 [Figure 3-11, 3-12]

During the Lebanese civil wars, car bombing was a common tactic deployed by the anti-Israeli militia. While causing many civilian casualties and property damage, the explosions interestingly left the car engines relatively intact; they flew away in unexpected directions, and landed in strange places like other streets miles away, rooftops, or balconies. It led to competition among photojournalists to find the engine

79 Ibid., 96.
faster than other competitors, because the engine shot was considered an exclusive news report. “My neck is thinner….” is a collection of the news images discovered in other archives and rearranged in this repetitive order.

In this particular reformatting with no caption, the news images turn into an ironical array of incomprehensible realities. (The textual documents juxtaposed with the images are the brief notes in the back about the image’s original location, and this too increases the irony and obscurity of this new formatting that nullifies image’s original contexts) They were clear evidence of street warfare in newspapers, but now, the half wrecked car engines, and police or passers-by surrounding them seem incredibly absurd and strange; they look puzzled and awed by this eccentric experience of urban spectacle, and this too speaks about the very vulnerability of documentary that easily lose its meaning in this simple re-contextualization.

Contrary to any other war reportages that attempt to capture “the decisive moment” (Cartier-Bresson), this work never involves any decisiveness despite its remarkable indexation of the car bombing; what is captured is a baffling moment after the fact. Moreover, photographers’ running toward the engine, which is a symbolic enactment of Robert Capa’s famous encouragement, “if your pictures aren’t good enough, you aren't close enough,” negates Capa’s spirit twice; one by the photographers’ farcical running toward engines that are already detached too far from their original body of meaning, and the other by passers-by who silently testify the engine’s remoteness from the violence in their clean suits with one hand in pocket and the other grabbing a cigarette, or by tightly lining up one by one (a child included) to look at the marvelous object coming from nowhere.
In this negation, images descend to the very private level of reception that is abstracted from the actual event. To put it differently, while our perception of the wars is always determined by historical pre-mapping, this specific constellation of images, this detour, or deconstruction of the map, shows us a new route in which we find incredible absurdity in the (Lebanon) wars that have been driving us all into the endless and directionless warfare. In this regard, curator Kassandra Nakas points out, “these non-present spaces and times cannot be grasped simply as a closed past, for these documents are not perforce concerned with recording factual incidents, but rather stand for a concept of time in which the past, non-passing and defying closure, ever continues to have an effect in the present.” By positioning the wars in endless repetitions, and by taking the history out of its consented frames, Raad insists that the wars are not finished yet, as our memories constantly bring them back again, reframing them over and over. The Archive is a symbolic manifestation of this generic expansion of memories that has no center and no margin.

The Atlas Group’s formal arrangement that Alan Gilbert has described as “repetition, allegory and fiction” deserves the final examination. As mentioned earlier, Walid Raad is conscious of how limited history is in its capacity to address an event that is unfinished and complicated. Lebanon wars in Raad’s mind appear to be incomprehensible and unspeakable, and thereby all journalistic attempts to capture an essence of Lebanon’s political problems become a naïve self-deception, intended at

---

80 Britta Schmits, “Not a Search for Truth,” 44.
81 Ibid., 44. – In this work, “the viewer lands neither at a beginning nor an end, but in the thick of the events.”
best to reduce the tension and anxiety of speaking the unspeakable history. As Gilbert succinctly put it, the central question of the Atlas Group is, “how does one historicize a wound that has not closed? How does one write a history blown open?”

This question leads us to the Aristotelian notion of poetry in which he argued “poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history; poetry tends to speak of universals, history of particulars.” Similarly, Gilbert also considers Raad’s formal strategy as a poetic turn that finds universality from the fragmented particularity. In order to overcome the inadequacy of history, Raad’s works transform historical facts into particular compositions in which the dead facts are redeemed with poetic significance. This poetic composition turns the dislocated fragments of history into an arrangement in which they could speak what historians or documentarians could not speak of, due to the political complexity of today’s tension in the Middle East.

“Sweet Talk: The Hilwè commissions” (1992-2004) and “Let’s be honest, the weather helped” (1998) are perhaps the best examples that demonstrate this new poetic formality. In Sweet Talk, the make-up figure Lamia Hilwè who was a dancer and photographer submits over 900 images of Beirut’s landmark buildings and streets in 2004, fourteen years later than her first commission in 1990 (or it is said in the Archive). For the fourteen years, images have been enlarged, cut out, distorted, and colorized by Hilwè, allegorizing both time passed and context changed over time. This rearranged history, its new forms and colors, creates an odd sense of beauty, the beauty of fragments. [Figure 3-13, 3-14]

---

84 Ibid., 116.
In *Let's be honest*, this odd formal beauty (the colorful dots in the photograph of street buildings) comes from Raad’s eccentric childhood hobby. According to the half-factual, half-fictional Archive text, Raad back in the 1980s lived in a city filled up with numerous bullet-holed buildings and cars. Raad, like many of his friends, spent days digging out bullets from the holes. Raad in particular marked the bullet holes in his black and white photographs with different colors matching up with the colors on the bullet tips, as they mesmerized the young boys in the war zone. [Figure 3-15] Raad decades later purchased new bullets from street vendors to make sure of the entire spectrum of colors, and interestingly it proved that his childhood photo-collections cataloged the 23 countries (including U.S., U.K., Saudi Arabia, Israel, France, Switzerland, and China) engaged in the Lebanese wars by either arming various militias and armies or selling ammunitions.

There is indeed a crisscross of facts and fictions in these makeup stories and images that is accentuated by the odd colors and forms. Often times, in this crisscross, facts lose their edges. But this too is a part of Raad’s complex formal process designed to create new meanings out of this destruction and reconstruction of facts. Raad’s formal strategy therefore “evokes a dissociative aspect of the Lebanese political history, its non-representational aspect, by way of its elusiveness, its circling around the event.” Raad in this evocation creates “a personal cosmology rigorously yet pseudo-scientifically recorded in an imaginary archive.”

---

88 Ibid., 126.
90 Ibid., 118.
Documentary’s Ethical Emancipation

The Atlas Group’s pseudo-documentaries, as well as recent Post-documentary practices involving theatrical or poetic reinterpretation of historical facts, manifest the power of simulacra that rejuvenates the sensible monads scattered all over the political minds. As philosopher Jacque Rancière points out, this scattering of the sensible, or in his own term, *the distribution of the sensible*, is an *a priori* essence of democratic community. He claims that the aesthetic regime and the political regime are inseparable in this democratic distribution of the sensible. In Rancière’s formula, for example, political rhetoric and artistic metaphor are inseparably identical, and this inseparability or breakdown of division is no longer an ontological threat once we admit that in this world of simulacra, no one can take an exclusive aesthetic/political privilege over others. Therefore, as long as the exchange of the sensible between the two regimes is promised, this inter-subjective and inter-disciplinary cultural framework plays a significant role in inviting, with remarkable hospitality, what has been unwelcomed in the old cultural frameworks – politically invisible, marginalized minorities. This invitation, in his subsequent book, *The Emancipated Spectator*, is described as a moment of cultural emancipation, which takes place in a symbolic space of theater, because this politico-aesthetic framework encourages the invisible non-protagonists, the others, to enter into the domain of visibility to *act* with the spectator.⁹¹

---

⁹¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London, New York: Verso, 2009), 22. – “Faced with the hyper-theatre that wants to transform representation into presence and passivity into activity, it proposes instead to revoke the privilege of vitality and communitarian power accorded the theatrical stage, so as to restore it to an equal footing with the telling of a story, the reading of a book, or the gaze focused on an image.” (for more discussion about this text, see chapter 4)
The *pseudos* of the Post-documentary exemplifies or *simulates* this ethical emancipation in its highly expanded/distributed networking of the sensible. In the fictions of the Atlas Group which continue to put a spin on our customary view of the Arab world, the conventional divisions between the subject and the other, between fact and fiction, and between intellectuality and sensibility, become dissipated. At this moment, the other’s disastrous political reality produces various sensible echoes. With this echo of the sensible, the singularity of documentary embraces the multiplicity of art.
CHAPTER 4  
BETWEEN OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY: REHISTORICIZING SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY – THE F.S.A. PROJECT AT MOMA

**Documentary between Art and Politics**

John Grierson, who had been considered “father of documentary,” once remarked that, “the penalty of realism is that it is about reality and has to bother forever not about being ‘beautiful’ but about being right.”¹ Grierson here points out documentary’s persistent anxiety about its credibility; despite camera’s “impassive instrumentality” that allows a photograph to “share the essence of its model,”² documentarians are still anxious about proving image’s authenticity that has already been proven. For Grierson, it was a penalty because documentary’s obsession with authenticity turned everything else into excess. The formal beauty of documentary in this regard often appeared as an undesirable byproduct, and it troubled Grierson who believed that, “the documentary (film) is a richer form of art.”³

Grierson’s account summarizes the recurring contradiction of documentary genre. At one side, people believe that documentary is a socio-political apparatus intended to provide a society with objective visual evidence that needs deeper sociological or political attentions. In this belief, art’s intervention is regarded as a distraction that disperses the socio-political attentions by a numbing effect of visual pleasure. The art world, on the other side, claims that documentary’s aesthetic

---


² André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg, (New Haven, Conn: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), 241. -- “[t]he photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.

reformation will bring an expansion to this genre in broader visual contexts. Art institutions therefore have been elaborating documentary’s kinship with art, putting its socio-political responsibility aside.

However, as David Levi-Strauss points out, these opposing doctrines (“politics has no place in art, and art has no place in politics”) are “culturally restricted and historically inaccurate,” because from the outset, social documentary has never been detached from the aesthetic considerations, encoding emotional appeals in every layers of reality it represents. In this chapter, therefore, I will revisit the cultural history of the U.S. social documentary, with a particular focus on the F.S.A. project. After this revisit, I will discuss the ways in which this social documentary was rebranded into art by early art institutions where documentary’s all-encompassing aesthetics proximity was reduced and limited in their problematic emphasis on its formality.

**The Great Depression and the Myth of Social Documentary**

Although not unprecedented, the heyday of social documentary in the United States was the 1930s. The rise of social documentary in the thirties began with a few

---

4 David Levi-Strauss writes “The doctrinaire right contents that politics has no place in art, while the doctrinaire left contents that art has no place in politics. Both takes are culturally restricted and historically inaccurate.” See David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture, 1995), 9.

5 FSA is an acronym for the Farm Security Administration founded in 1935 as part of the New Deal recovery project. The FSA project in particular refers to its highly influential photographic project between 1935 and 1944. The project collected photographic images of rural poverty, originally as supporting details for textual reports, but the images’ excellence became a great inspiration for both the era and for later photographers.

6 Before the 30s, the European model of *film documentaire* performed of course an important role in constructing either “an encyclopedic archive of the (modern) world” to satisfy a growing intellectual curiosity of the modernizing European societies, or “an inventory of (the European) cultural heritages” to preserve the quickly vanishing European legacies on the threshold of the modern times. See Olivier Lugon, “Documentary: Authority and Ambiguity” in *Documentary Now! Contemporary Strategies in Photography, Film and the Visual Arts* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2005), 65-66.
factors. First, the development of new, lightweight 35 mm cameras (Leica, first
developed in 1930 and improved over the decade) brought to the genre a new
possibility of closer and quicker snatch of reality. The emergence of photo-magazines
such as Look or Life during the thirties also fueled demands for photography to illustrate
their articles. Life, in particular, first published in 1936, initiated a new editorial tradition
that required large format pictures and sophisticated photo-essay, increasing
photographer’s formal and social interest. But it is the thirties’ socio-economic crisis
and subsequent efforts to recover the devastated economy and culture that played the
most decisive role in establishing social documentary’s central position in the thirties.

The United States in the 1930s was undergoing a disturbing economic crisis. The
meltdown of the stock market sparked unstoppable chain reactions in the U.S.
economy, and perennial drought in rural farming areas and fragile system of tenancy
and sharecropping aggravated people’s life in this great economic depression. But the
majority of the public had little access to accurate measurement of the crisis for nearly a
year after the stock market crash (October 24, 1929) due to the “idiotic incantations” and

In America during the first decade of the 20th century, Jacob Riis already launched early
version of American social documentary by producing photographic documentation of working
class, immigrants, and poor slum life in order to call for social reformation. But Riis’ “direct and
muscular” way of photographing which was intended to bring an immediate change in the
marginalized lives (often collaborated with police men) did not amount to the inherent logic of
social documentary as a objective, unmediated social fact. See, Liz Wells, Photography: A

Historians generally agree on the idea that documentary’s social turn was made in the
thirties. Liz Wells, for example, argues that “a paradigmatic form of documentary [which cast its
subject within a ‘social problem’ framework, and which argued for a politics of reform, and social
education] was produced during the 1930s. see, Liz Wells, Photography: A Critical Introduction
(London: Routledge, 1997), 77.


Ibid., 76.
futile “optimism” spelled out by both business and political leaders. The public sensed the crisis from the long breadlines appearing in New York, Chicago and other major American cities, but no reliable statistics or reports arrived in time, because “those who should have brought it to public attention – the Hoover government, the business community, and the media – overlooked or minimized it, hoping to restore confidence.”

The print media or newspapers of the thirties, in particular, were “widely distrusted,” as documentary historian William Stott pointed out, because they often “colored, suppressed, and even concocted facts to fit their editorial bias.” Indeed, many newspapers of the thirties were run by privileged members of the society who did not want the meltdown of their market, and they “determined what shall and what shall not be written and how, according to their business and partisan interest.” Thus, “what the press published was generally felt to be a propaganda serving a special (entrepreneurial) interest,” not reality itself.

---

10 Robert C Goldston, *The Great Depression: The United States in the Thirties* (Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett Premier Books, 1970), 46-50. -- By the spring of 1930 - six month after the Crash - over 4 million Americans lost their jobs. But business and political leaders were still responding with “idiotic incantations to prosperities” and rootless “optimism.” For instance, Henry Ford remarked on November 4, 1929 that, “Things are better today than they were yesterday.” Charles M. Schwab of Bethlehem Steel said on December 10, 1929 that, “Never before has American business been as firmly entrenched for prosperity as it is today.” And the President Herbert Hoover said on May 1, 1930 that, “I am convinced we have now passed the worst.” But in that spring of the 1930, breadlines began to appear in New York, Chicago, and other major cities. By December, 1931, unemployment reached 13.5 million - almost one third of the American labor force.

11 Ibid., 47.


13 Ibid., 77.

14 Ibid., 78.

15 Ibid., 77-78. -- Also Franklin Roosevelt later remarked that “85 per cent of America’s daily papers were inculcating fear in this country, and he said, this problem traced back to the newspaper owners who tempered with the news to promote their interest.”

16 Ibid., 77.
This bureaucratic optimism and media conservatism increased the level of uncertainty in the society, making the public even more crave for accurate information. “By the time the Great Depression entered its third (and worst) winter, most Americans had grown skeptical of abstract promises,” writes Stott, and, “more than ever” he continues, “they became worshippers in the cult of experience and believed just what they saw, touched, handled, and the crucial word- felt.”17 Warren Susman in his influential essay, “The Thirties,” (1970) reinterprets this cult of experience as the thirties’ distinctive and groundbreaking “shift to a culture of sight and sound” that “increased our self-awareness as a culture,” and “helped create a unity of response and action not previously possible.”18

In this shifting moment, the camera emerged as “a prime symbol of the thirties’ mind, because the mind aspired to the quality of authenticity, of direct and immediate experience, that the camera captures in all it photographs.”19 Documentary came into a particular focus as Susman argues, given that this “newly developed media and their special kinds of appeal helped reinforce a social order rapidly disintegrating under economic and social pressures that were too great to endure, and helped create an environment in which the sharing of common experience, be they of hunger, dustbowls, or war, made the uniform demand for action and reform more striking and urgent.”20

The photographic campaign of the F.S.A. (the Farm Security Administration) reflects the thirties’ demand for such reinforcement of social order and sharing of

17 Ibid., 73.
19 William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 77.
common experience through the power of documentary. Established in 1935 as part of Roosevelt administration’s New Deal economic recovery campaign, the F.S.A. embarked on a vast survey mission on the nation’s agricultural conditions. Roy Stryker, the head of the photography section, commissioned photographers such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn, and Marion Post Walcott, “to provide images to illustrate and support the written accounts of conditions in agriculture that would be given in official reports.”

This governmental project marked a watershed in the history of social documentary because of its unprecedented scale and excellence that went far beyond the bureaucratic expectation.

The returning images were emblematic of the Great Depression; they showed, as we remember to this day, individuals or families on their desperate travels to a remote low-wage fruit or cotton fields to find jobs after all hopes in their hometown ran out; winds and dusts, eroding their hometown ranches and the roads they were traveling through, also made them look incredibly weary and defenseless; stuffs were roped on the top of their shabby motorcars, reassuring their precarious life; around the straying trucks or makeshift campsite, mothers and children were looking vacantly in the barren field. [Figure 4-1, 4-2]

Not only did these images of struggling rural lives appear, during the thirties, as precise measurements of catastrophic human conditions, but their sheer presence in photographs, no matter how pathetically depicted, also became a therapeutic inspiration

22 The total number of photographs taken for the eight years of the FSA photography section’s existence was more than 270,000 pieces, and over 100,000 of them have been cataloged in the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress. Carl Fleischhauer, and Beverly W. Brannan, *Documenting America, 1935-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 330.
for the New Deal era, demonstrating their indomitable courage for survival in this
catastrophic time. Photographer Edward Steichen wrote in 1939 in his review of the
F.S.A. photographs from the International Photographic Exhibition in New York:

“Now step up folks, and look this way!” Have a look in to the faces of the
men and the women in these pages. Listen to the story they tell and they
will leave you with a living experience you won’t forget; and the babies here,
and the children; weird, hungry, dirty, lovable, heart-breaking images; and
then there are the fierce stories of strong, gaunt men and women in time of
flood and drought.23

Steichen’s early review illustrates how the F.S.A. photographs helped recover the
public morale in the New Deal era in their sheer revealing power. For many people in
the thirties who were getting tired of newspaper propagandas about truth of their time,
these images, at least at the moment, seemed as accurate as reality itself. As Steichen
wrote in the article above, “these documents told stories and told them with such simple
and blunt directness” that they made people forget to ask how they were made up.24

As documentary historian Liz Wells has put it, people in the thirties believed that
“[photography] imposes rather than creating meaning; it disempowers the reader or
spectator from any acts of interpretation vis-a-vis the text.”25 This seeming transparency
of documentary was often believed to “transform the workers and the poor into facts, the
facts that could not be challenged … imposed meaning at a single stroke.”26 This
immediacy and transparency of documentary gaze, the revived myth of photography
since its invention in the nineteenth century, began to take up the thirties again.

(New York: The Beck Engraving Company, 1938), 44.
24 Ibid., 44.
26 Ibid., 78.
Demystifying Documentary’s Objectivity

In the thirties’ context, a photograph was worth a thousand words. While newspaper articles were rendered vulnerable to editorial interferences, documentary photographs seemed to provide incontestable and unalterable facts. But over the course of the twentieth century, this photographic mythology, having revived all over again in the thirties’ social documentary, has been also gradually dismantled by a number of critical articulations that pin down photography’s deceptive propaganda in its social practice.

Critic John Tagg, for instance, argues, “photography has no identity” and “its status varies with the power relations which invest it.”27 Tagg considers that photography’s extensive deployment in socio-political arena has to do with bourgeois ideologies to gain more efficient social controls. In Tagg’s view, this bourgeois ideology of social control came with “the development of the police power” that “needed an instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipotent surveillance, capable of making all visible,”28 and photography was in “complicity in the spreading of network of (police) power” since it gave the power a sort of vantage point that helped “quickly and cheaply record and identify” society’s potential threats.29 Thus, Tagg argues that images belong not to the camera, but to the power behind it, one who has enough control and authority to utilize it:

the representation it [camera] produces are highly coded, and the power it wields is never its own. As a means of record, it arrives on the scene vested with a particular authority to arrest, picture and transform daily life; a power to see and record; a power of surveillance … This is not the power of the

28 Ibid., 71-72.
29 Ibid., 74, 76.
camera but the power of the apparatuses of the local state which deploy it and guarantee the authority of the images it constructs.30

According to Tagg, photography’s complicity in the power of surveillance hinges on “a set of assumption about the reality of photography” which was also a “dominant form of signification in bourgeois society.” 31 As a dominant ideological rhetoric, realism in bourgeois society “offers a fixity in which the signifier is treated as if it were identical with a pre-existent signified and in which the reader’s role is purely that of consumer.”32 Moreover, as Tagg argues, “in realism, the process of production of a signified through the action of a signifying chain is not seen,” and “the complex codes or use of language by which realism is constituted appear of no account.”33 Therefore, reality in bourgeois cultural products only works “by the controlled and limited recall of a reservoir of similar ‘texts’, by a constant repetition, a constant cross-echoing.”34 In other words, photographic reality under the bourgeois control is always overlapped in larger ideological contexts, and this circuit of systematic encoding generates repetitive codification of the same regulatory logic. It bears an idea that reality in documentary, as John Tagg insists, is “a reality of the intertext beyond which there is no-sense” and “[w]hat lies ‘behind’ the paper or ‘behind’ the image is not reality – the referent – but reference: a subtle web of discourse through which realism is enmeshed in a complex fabric of notions, representations, images, attitudes, gestures and modes of action”35

Accordingly, if we bring this whole discourse of bourgeois realism into our discussion of social documentary as Tagg’s text does, documentary’s objectivity in this

30 Ibid., 64.
31 Ibid., 76.
32 Ibid., 99.
33 Ibid., 99.
34 Ibid., 99.
35 Ibid., 100.
“subtle web of discourse,” appears to be a groundless assumption that veils a system’s historically reified hegemonic interests. To this end, Tagg concludes that, “the documentary mode (‘real reportage’) cannot achieve this [authenticity] because it is already implicated in the historically developed techniques of observation-domination and because it remains imprisoned within an historical form of the regime of truth and sense.”36

Allen Sekula presents another forceful argument relevant to Tagg’s notion of documentary as the historically developed technique of propaganda in his critical essay, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary” (1978). To Sekula, the theory of documentary “emerges historically as both product and handmaiden of positivism.”37 In this positivism conditioned by particular histories, “the camera is a generator of a duplicate world of fetishized appearance, independently of human practice.”38 Thus, for Sekula, documentaries become “repositories of dead facts, reified objects torn from their social origins.”39 This lifeless factuality of documentary, in Sekula’s account, only reassures its limit as a spectacle, nothing but a retinal excitement constantly failing to convey truth of the world it represents.40

It is undeniable that in both Tagg and Sekula, the myth of photographic objectivity only serves to historicize or propagandize particular political ends; the privileged wants to brainwash people, and photography’s “impassive mechanical...

36 Ibid., 102.
38 Ibid., 863.
39 Ibid., 863.
40 Ibid., 864 – “documentary photography has amassed mountains of evidence. And yet, in this pictorial presentation of scientific and legalistic “fact,” the genre has simultaneously contributed much to spectacle, to retinal excitation, to voyeurism, to terror, envy and nostalgia, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world.”
objectivity” (Bazin) seems to be the most effective means of the political persuasion. For Tagg, therefore, photography is “not the evocation of a pristine truth but a politically mobilized rhetoric of Truth.” In a similar sense, Sekula also writes, “the only “objective” truth that photographs offer is the assertion that somebody or something was somewhere and took a picture. Everything else, everything beyond the imprinting of a trace, is up for grabs.”

**Social Documentary as Art**

Although a great deal of critical attention has been paid to exposing documentary’s presumed objectivity, there has been also another line of critical reactions to redefine the thirties’ social documentary as a self-sufficient form of art. This new critical movement began as early as 1937 when Beaumont Newhall, MoMA’s first photography director (appointed in 1940), started including documentarians such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, or Margaret Bourke-White in his influential early exhibition (and catalog), *Photography 1839-1937*. As Christopher Phillips argues, Newhall’s early exhibitions made “a crucial step in the acceptance of photography as a full-fledged museum art.” And this early contribution culminated when John Szarkowski took up the position in 1962 and launched his own version of photographic modernism throughout the 60s and 70s in which social documentary began to be looked at as a significant body of photographic tradition.

---

In this aesthetic perspective, documentary photographers’ new aim is “to persuade and to convince” the viewer, as Newhall writes: “[t]he documentary photographer seeks to do more than convey information through his photography: his aim is to persuade and to convince.”45 Under this new aim, “documentary is an approach which makes use of the artistic faculties to give vivification to fact.”46

This aesthetic perspective has been inherited in most of the current readings of the F.S.A. photographers and therein, the focal point of understanding, for example, Dorothea Lange’s contributions in the F.S.A. project is noticeably changed from her social engagement to her talent of converting the thirties’ particular history into a universal language of art. This new transition emphasizes Lange’s exquisite formality that enhances the emotional communications between the viewer and the subject. This formal consideration is often accentuated by Lange’s characteristic visual compositions that “tease out the bonds of affection and connection between people; especially between mothers and children.”47 [Figure 4-3] In order to maximize this emotional impact, Lange carefully choreographs her subjects’ gesture and pose through which they could play as a vehicle of expression and emotion.48 Moreover, the subject appears incredibly monumental which is in fact a consequence of Lang’s low-angle, close contact shot. [Figure 4-4] Wide-open sky in the background emphasizes the epic nature of this moment, which is also reinforced by tight cropping that cuts off every other distraction except for the subject’s heroic presence. Therefore, as Liz Well points out, “Lang’s photographs are seen as historical, but timeless; densely coded, but

46 Ibid., 144.
48 Ibid., 82. – “[Lange’s] documentary photographs are densely constructed works which use certain techniques and forms to produce a desired response in the spectator.”
transparent; highly specific, but universal."49 In other words, Lange’s works are not only historically codified documentations of specific U.S. history, but also a “timeless” and “universal” art.

**Documentary as an Expressive Genre: William Stott’s Theory of Documentary**

Then, how could this artistic turn of explicit social documentary gain its cultural validity in the 60s and 70s, the years in which documentary’s aesthetic institutionalization was culminated? This question leads us to William Stott’s influential study, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, because this “first comprehensive text” of documentary’s aesthetic nature, published in 1973, “at the beginning of the expansion in photographic studies,” provided not only an articulation of documentary’s expressive aesthetic quality, but also a model in which this aesthetic quality found its ethical justification.50

William Stott in this study underscores the priority of subjectivity, emotional expression, and artistic nature in the thirties’ documentary practices. For Stott, a journalistic document offers not only an intellectual verification of social events, but it also provides readers with compelling emotional experience:

one knows another’s life because one feels it; one is informed – one sees-through one’s feeling. The practitioners of the documentary genre in the thirties realized … the same thing: emotion counted more than fact.51

As he argues in the book, even in the most simple and literal utterance of forensic evidence in a news article containing nothing but facts themselves (‘a story of

49 Ibid., 82.
two young children bitten by maddened dogs to death’ in Stott’s own example) can cause a subconscious emotional upsurge, given that the facts in the public media are the consequence of a carefully designed journalistic selection process to maximize the reader’s emotional response which is a determining factor of the news value.\textsuperscript{52} ‘Let the fact speak for its own!’ - it has long been a catch-praise in journalism. But truth is that even though a camera is an impassive fact-machine, photographers are emotional beings and, whenever they are faced with the issue of human suffering, they feel, think, and react with full of emotions, which is parallel to what artists do with their subjects.\textsuperscript{53} Thus, Stott claims that “[social documentary] increase our knowledge of public facts, but sharpen it with feeling; put us in touch with the perennial human spirit, but show it struggling in a particular social context at a specific historical moment. They sensitize our intellect (or educate our emotions) about actual life.”\textsuperscript{54}

In Stott’s view, expression was inevitable in documentary, and the real problem was how well photographers could manage their expressive desire within the basic protocols of documentary. Noticeably, this problem brings him to a sort of first level ethical discussion of the \textit{good} and \textit{bad}, as the second half of his book is devoted to a

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 12-17. The news title is “Dog kill brothers, 4 and 3, as father’s help is futile” Lynchburg, Va., Dec. 17, 1967, (AP) and this short news article delivers nothing other than sheer facts.

\textsuperscript{53} Tim Gidal, \textit{Modern Photojournalism: Origin and Evolution, 1910-1933} (New York: Macmillan, 1973). Tim Gidal in this sense points out photojournalist should be a creative observer: “The genuine reporter – and by this we mean the rare phenomenon of the passionately committed photojournalist – personally experiences what he captures on film: laughter and tears, joy and sorrow, tragedy, and comedy. It is only through his subjective experience of the objective facts that the photo reporter can become a witness to his time. His alertness and his gift of observation distinguish his work from that of others – not as an artist, but related to the artist by virtue of this talent of creative observation.”

\textsuperscript{54} William Stott, \textit{Documentary Expression and Thirties America}, 18.
didactic comparison between the good Walker Evans and the bad Margaret Bourke-White.

In this quasi-ethical discussion, photographer Margaret Bourke-White, who had “an enviable reputation” in the thirties, is downgraded to an inferior and flawed artist, deliberately and artfully seeking to make a sensational impact, an “emotional punch” that is “more literary than the literature.” In her best-selling documentary book, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), Bourke-White molded the types of people whose poses and gestures were deliberately fabricated to represent the thirties’ calamities [Figure 4-5, 4-6]; they looked incredibly defenseless, vulnerable, and pathetic, and these dramatic characters were resulted from the photographer’s bizarre camera angles, operatic lights, and subtle staging of the subjects. These types of images, in Stott’s view, were intended to agitate the viewer’s sentiment: to maximize emotional reactions not by the facts themselves but by subtle fabrications. Stott, putting Bourke-White’s sentimental style under Evans’s “cool style,” writes, “the purpose of these unusual techniques was just to be unusual: to pep up the content, to wheedle the viewer into emotion by making it seem that what he looked at was fresh, subtle, and passionate, and not what it was: a sentimental cliché.”

---

57 John Stomberg, “A Genealogy of orthodox Documentary,” 44.
58 William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 267. -- “Evan’s version of the Thirties, his cool yet disquieting vision of Americas, has prevailed.”
59 Ibid., 270. -- This sentimental cliché, though, was pervasive in the thirties. In this cliché, photographic objectivity was only instrumental to manipulate reality into utilizable material for a social propaganda. Such manipulations were standard procedure shared by many F.S.A. photographers. For instance, one of the F.S.A. photographer, Arthur Rothstein often used to set his subject up in a specifically planed situation in order to get a “truly candid photograph”; he employed a fake interviewer to lead the interview, asking questions for a while without his interviewees knowing when they would be photographed; “when they answered with anxiety or concern completely unaware of the camera, Rothstein stepped forward and snapped the
Walker Evans, on the contrary, was considered “a classic of the thirties’ documentary genre”\(^{60}\) in Stott’s argument, because Evans had an exceptional talent to “let the reality reveal itself” through the most simple and candid gaze of camera.\(^{61}\) Evans’s talent as such is evident in his works, such as *Bed, Tenant Farmhouse* (Hale County, Alabama, 1936) [Figure 4-7] that depicts a bed covered by stained white sheets in a corner of a wooden cabin. There is nothing special in this room, except for the sheer presence of the bed that evokes a being whose resting site speaks the very nature of his or her world.

*Sharecropper* (Hale County, Alabama, 1936) [Figure 4-8] is another work that demonstrates Evans’s great simplicity. It shows a farm worker precariously staring at the camera with no emotional trace on his face. His face never solicits any pity or empathy. But this complete indifference registers a new classic of the thirties’ documentary in its defying of all the sentimental cliché, deliberate fabrication of facts that was the thirties’ accepted or even promoted protocol for documentary production.\(^{62}\)

In Stott’s view, Evans’s reticent, understated, and impersonal style takes a higher aesthetic position than Bourke-White’s loquacious, dramatic, and solicitous style.

---

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 266.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 268, 269.

\(^{62}\) Roy Stryker, who was the director of the FSA project and made the decision to let Evans go from the project in 1937, was one of the ardent promoters of documentary’s “plastic elements.” (and surely Evans’s elimination from the FSA had to do with Stryker’s belief) Stryker guided his photographers with “all the questions of equipment, technique and style of visualization.” He also remarked, “the documentary attitude is not a denial of the plastic elements …. Thus composition becomes emphasis, and line sharpness, focus, filtering, mood - all those components included in the dreamy vagueness “quality” - are made to serve an end: to speak, as eloquently as possible, of the thing to be said in the language of picture...” See Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography*, 149.
because the former calls “attention to the beauty of the literal, of the world as it is.” In Evans’ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1942), a monumental documentary book co-authored by James Agee, Agee emphasizes on this beauty of literalness, as important as ethical consideration: “it seems to me necessary to insist that [their] beauty … inextricably shaped as it is in an economic and human abomination, is at least as important a part of the fact as the abomination itself.” Without humiliating the poor in a fabricated cliché of misery, Evans accomplishes “the staple of documentary,” which is, according to Stott, “the art of commonplace reality”

**Between Classical Evans and Anonymous Evans**

Given the fact that Stott’s book features distinctive two-part structure, his influential study can be parcelled out in two points: first, contrary to the initial public demands for documentary’s objective task, documentary was, from the outset, an expressive genre that was intended to bring an inspiration for social change. Although intrinsically, this photographic inspiration was prompted by photographers’ individual skills to encode emotion and feeling into their images, so that the viewer could react with something more than just simple knowledge that an image showed; secondly, while this expression was often overdone by many photographers in that time period, breaking the limit of social documentary’s promoted objectivity and authenticity, photographers like Walker Evans made a recognizable compromise between aesthetic expression and political/ethical authenticity.

---


64 Ibid., 276.
This strategic incorporation between reality and artistry has been served as a major framework to define documentary aesthetically. Specifically the critical virtue of Stott’s argument resides in the ways that it neutralizes the anxiety of realism in documentary’s formal articulations. Without tarnishing documentary’s responsibility for the real, Stott’s definition of documentary as an “emotional genre” brings the necessity of formal consideration into the documentary enterprise, and Walker Evans was “a classic of the thirties’ documentary genre,” to Stott.

However, another point should be added to sharpen Stott’s argument. Unlike Stott’s argumentation, it is doubtful that Walker Evans was the true classic of the thirties’ documentary, because, as Stott himself admitted, “Evans’ work was generally thought idiosyncratic, old-fashioned, cold, insufficiently reformist” during the thirties. Evans was discharged from the F.S.A. project in March 1937 for his unproductive

---

65 See Olivier Lugon’s and Jean-François Chevrier’s recent arguments in Documentary Now!: Contemporary Strategies in Photography, Film and the Visual Arts. ed. Frits Gierstberg (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2005)

Lugon argues “...‘to show things the way they are’ ... this very simply-formulated principle actually gave rise to a constant exploration of new procedures and forms.” (67) and therefore, Lugon continues “...documentary is often taken as the antonym to artistic, yet stems primarily from the artistic field - beyond art, yet very much part of it.” (71)

Chevrier reiterates this view. Based on the recognition that documentary is a literal representation of ‘the way things exist,’ Chevrier argues that “any photography could be defined as documentary to the extent that it is a shot.” (47) To document something is above all to shot it and to have the shot developed into a recognizable image. It is basically the same process as artistic reproduction. As long as a documentary camera captures something in reality and reproduces or represents it in particular ways of authorship, it should be discussed in more traditional agenda of photographic art. To Chevrier, therefore, early photographers who paid immense attention to the 19th century world, such as Atget, is a prime example of the documentary tradition, ensuring the inseparability between art and documentary.

66 William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 266.

67 William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, 222.

performance. For years thereafter he remained practically unemployed and relatively anonymous in mainstream documentary fields. His financial status during the mid thirties was also quite unstable, as he often found that his “creative life was suicidal” and there was a “difference between privilege and poverty.” It was at this time that Evans started accepting jobs from what he used to call the “bastard trades in advertising and publicity.”

Evans’ public reputation only began to grow at the end of the thirties when he became the first photographer to be given a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art, “American Photographs” (1938) by his longtime friend and MoMA associate Lincoln Kirstein’s efforts. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, which brought him ultimate public recognition was only published in 1942, not during the thirties. Moreover, at first, this publication did not even make an immediate impact; the recognition as great as it is today was made during the 1960s when Agee died with the Pulitzer Prize and thereby media attention was poured once again to both the book and Evans whose reputation at this point was also remarkably increased in the art world.

It seems Stott did not take into serious account all these historical facts when he wrote Evans was “a classic of the thirties’ documentary genre,” and I believe Stott’s

---

70 Ibid., 75.
71 Ibid., 75.
72 In the Spring of 1930, Kirstein, who was a former member of the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art, was invited to serve as a member of the MoMA’s first advisory council. A few years earlier (1928) Evans met him at a Manhattan bookstore (where Evans was working) and sent photographs to Kirstein who was at this point, the editor of a culture magazine, Hound and Horn, hoping to get them published. Since then, the two had maintained close friendship, sharing many cultural interests. When Kirstein became a MoMA associate, he gave Evans some works at MoMA in several occasions, and continued to promote Evans’ photographic art. See Belinda Rathbone, Walker Evans: A Biography (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 58- 64.
historical inaccuracy signifies more than just a simple mistake, because it is in this historical vacuum between anonymous Evans and classical Evans that documentary’s contradiction between aesthetics and politics was initiated. In other words, when much later institutional critiques, to which Stott’s seminal study was more or less relevant, was rebranding anonymous Evans into classical Evans, this job was done by an intrinsic view that Evans’ misfortune and anonymity during the thirties was a sort of heroic sacrifice in his battle against all those vicious cliché of the thirties’ dramatic documentary. Stott’s study constantly reiterated a moral comparison between authentic Evans and inauthentic other documentary photographers, or politically righteous art of Evans and just aesthetic cliché of Bourke-White. And this didactic comparison had in fact its precursors in photography’s early institutional (or curatorial) history that repeatedly emphasized Evans’s balance between formality and morality, as an effective strategy to lure the public attention. For instance, Thomas Mabry, who was the publicity manager for Evans’s first MoMA show in 1938, wrote in that year that Walker Evans had “a power which reveals [both] a potential order and morality at the very moment that it pictures the ordinary, the vulgar and the casually corrupt.”

The power as such reflected the dogma of modern aesthetics – simple, medium specific, less mimetic and thus purer than others. And at the same time, this power also reassured its moral commitment – morality as a potential order. If a socially concerned art loses this subtle balance between morality and formality, it will be thrown to harsh criticism, as Bourke-White’s reputation had been diminished this way. It is, I argue, from this tactical mix of morality and formality by the early art institutions that contemporary antagonism against

---

74 Thomas Dabney Mabry, “Walker Evans’ Photographs of America.” Harpers Bazaar (November 1, 1938): 85. -- Tom Mabry was the MoMA curator curated and managed the press release for Evans’ first, and the MoMA’s first photography solo show in 1938. (emphasis mine)
documentary’s aesthetic engagement was originated.\(^75\) There is little doubt that social documentary is an aesthetic genre, as convincingly argued in Stott’s study; the problem lies in the subtle logical twist that there is an ethical hierarchy in documentary’s aesthetic expressions – the very tactical mix of morality with formality, nourished in the early art institutions.

**Walker Evans at MoMA**

As I mentioned earlier, the aesthetic nature of documentary photography takes a new turn in the great curatorial enthusiasm of the early twentieth century art institutions. By the time, art institutions faced an urgent demand to replace their old inventories - paintings and sculptures - in the rise of new media (film, photography, architecture, design, etc.) of which “painting and sculpture exercised no hegemony at all.”\(^76\) Moreover major American art institutions, the Museum of Modern Art among others, were well aware of the pervasive photographic activities of European avant-garde. Alfred Barr, the first director of MoMA, for instance, traveled Paris, Weimar Germany, and the Soviet Union for a few years prior to the museum’s establishment in 1928 to explore current avant-garde productions across Europe as a “framework for the American neo-avant-garde.”\(^77\) In this survey trip (specifically in his trip to the Soviet Union in 1927), Barr witnessed not only European avant-garde’s new aesthetic trends,\(^78\) but also increasing

\(^{75}\) Similarly, Stomberg writes “the notion of the “modern” in the context of photography clearly owes much to this [ethical]differentiation, and the debates surrounding contemporary photographic representations of human suffering derive, almost unaltered, from these polarities invented in 1938” John Stomberg, “A Genealogy of orthodox Documentary,” 48.


\(^{78}\) See Ibid., 50-53. -- In Buchloh’s essay, the new European trends are factography and fakura. *Factography* is a mode of “literary representation/production” that is “objective,
use of photographic images in the forms of photomontage or photo-collage.\textsuperscript{79} As Benjamin Buchloh points out, Barr’s impression to this eastern European paradigm was not strong enough to affect his future project.\textsuperscript{80} However, it is undeniable that “Barr’s awareness of the photographic activity of the European avant-garde spurred the museum’s nodding recognition of photography as one branch of modernist practice.”\textsuperscript{81} Moreover, presumably, when MoMA’s early staffs such as Lincoln Kirstein (the museum’s Junior Advisory Committee at the moment) and Beaumont Newhall (appointed in 1935 as a librarian) were making “crucial steps in the acceptance of photography as a full-fledged museum art” in their historical exhibitions such as Mural by American Painters and Photographers (Kirstein, 1932) and Photography 1839-1937 (Newhall, 1935), Barr’s dual impressions (first, on photography’s popularity in European stages, and second, its totalitarian use by the US’s ideological rival) would have affected the ways in which those early contributors routed photography’s new direction in the American institution.\textsuperscript{82} To put it differently, the early curators wanted photography’s entry into the museum, but arguably not in the same way as it was in some of the radical European avant-garde arts in which photography served “to construct iconic representations (\textit{faktura}: part of the Russian tradition) for a new mass

descriptive, self-styled journalistic ideal of art,” (50) and \textit{faktura} is “the resonance of the colors, the sound of the materials, the assemblage of textures” (51) that constituted a “new aesthetics correlative to the introduction of industrialization and social engineering of the Soviet Union after the revolution,” (53)
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 57-61.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 50. -- Barr was more interested in the western European models of avant-garde (primarily arts in Paris) and after returning from his trip, he organized the exhibition, Cubeism and Abstract Art.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 17.
audience,” and as “a necessary (political or totalitarian) strategy to implement the transformation of audience.”

Walker Evans’ particular position in this rapid photographic institutionalization deserves closer critical scrutiny, not only because he was the first photographer who held a solo exhibition at MoMA, but more importantly, his disinterested, reductive style appeared as photography’s new standard for the early American curators, in a way that it nevertheless did not completely betray the medium’s fundamental tie to society.

Lincoln Kirstein, MoMA’s advisory committee member and Evan’s longtime friend, organized the first museum debut of the anonymous young photographer, Evans, who was at the moment just laid off from the F.S.A. project. For Kirstein, Evans' photographs seemed superior to salon photography, which was an “heir of European pictorialism,” and also to newly recognized candid photography, which for Kirstein seemed nothing other than “the greatest liar in the photographic family.”

Kirstein in his curatorial statement for Evans’ show wrote: “the real photographer’s services are social, the facts of our homes and times, shown surgically, without intrusion of the poet’s or the painter’s comment.” By describing Evans's simple, artless style as ‘the service of the real photographer in a society,’ Kirstein situated Evans in a new modernist direction of art photography where poetic or pictorial illusions were liquidated.

Thomas Mabry, co-curator and publicity manager for Evans’ first MoMA show, also played a significant role in situating Evans in the art world. At the moment Evans’ first MoMA show was being planned, the museum was under construction and its temporary quarters were located at the Rockefeller Plaza. Mabry was concerned of

---

83 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” 57, 61. (parentheses mine)
84 Belinda Rathbone, Walker Evans: A Biography, 159.
85 Ibid., 159.
attendance to the show due to the museum’s unfamiliar location and Evans’ relatively unknown character. He therefore organized a brilliant publicity campaign, “whispering campaign,” followed by overtures to periodicals, offering them exclusives on certain images in exchange for coverage. Moreover in his press release, Mabry elaborated more clearly Evans’ unique artistic distinction:

[I]t is the power to create an austere drama from America as it is that gives to Evans’ work its unique character. There is no trick about his photographs. He never exaggerates by angle shot or unusual perspective. He never sentimentalizes the ‘beauty’ of the industrial machine, and he respects the industrial worker too much to exploit his pathos. He abhors such easy camera melodrama. [Figure 4-9, 4-10]

In these early curatorial accounts, Evans’s unique aesthetic character is described to come from his formal austerity that keeps Evans’s works from ‘exploiting pathos of the real,’ from ‘turning the social concerns into a melodrama.’ Here, as I mentioned earlier, a tactical mix of morality and formality emerges as an underlying logic of the early institutional critiques for substantiating Evans’ style. By engineering Evans into “the purest eye of any photographer of [his] generation,” the early critics of photographic institutions “shaped a much broader critical orthodoxy for documentary aesthetics and ethics.”

These early curatorial efforts to establish photography’s unique aesthetic quality culminated when John Szarkowski was appointed as a director of MoMA’s new Department of Photography in 1962. Szarkowski’s ambitious curatorial and critical contributions reignited the early curatorial interest in photography, “redefining the

---

87 Thomas Mabry “Walker Evans’ Photographs of America” Typescript, unpaged and undated, Registrar Exhibition Files, Exh. #78, MoMA Archive, NY (Recited from John Stomberg, “A Genealogy of Orthodox Documentary,” 37-56.)
medium’s aesthetic nature in such a way as to set it on an irrevocably autonomous course.\footnote{Christopher Phillips “The Judgment Seat of Photography,” 35.} Szarkowski’s remark in his 1966 catalog, *Photographer’s Eye* (1966), reflects his vision toward photography’s aesthetic autonomy:

> The vision they share belongs to no school or aesthetic theory, but to photography itself. The character of this vision was discovered by … photographers’ progressive awareness of characteristics and problems that have seemed inherent in the medium.\footnote{John Szarkowski, “Introduction” in *The Photographer’s Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), np.}

Such awareness of photographic potential in Szarkowski’s medium-specific perspective comes from two ways: first “from the intimate understanding of the tools and materials” and second “from other photographs, which presented themselves in an unending stream”; “whether his [a photographer] concern is commercial and artistic,” writes Szarkowski, “his tradition is formed by all the photographs that had impressed themselves upon his consciousness.”\footnote{Ibid., np.} In these accounts, photography’s specific quality is determined by “photographers’ understanding of their tool’ and ‘their participation in the medium’s own tradition,” which recall modernism’s reductive and self-critical logic, and therein, bleach out its social concern altogether. Not only did these accounts “route photography’s main tradition away from the (exhausted) Stieglitz/Weston line of high modernism,”\footnote{Christopher Phillips “The Judgment Seat of Photography,” 36. -- As Phillips suggests, Szarkowski remaps photography’s new modernist aesthetic tradition in three lines: “1) the introduction of a formalistic vocabulary theoretically capable of comprehending the visual structure of any existing photographs; 2) the isolation of a modernist visual “poetics” supposedly inherent to the photographic image; and 3) the routing of photography’s “main tradition” away from the (exhausted) Stieglitz/Weston line of high modernism and toward sources formerly seen as peripheral art photography.”} but they also appeared, as Douglas Crimp argued in 1989, to “make photography a modernist medium in Clement Greenberg’s
sense of the term – an art form that can distinguish itself in its essential qualities from all other art forms.”

In *Photographer’s Eye*, Szarkowski further categorized such traditions in five “concepts” that were “unique phenomena of photography” – “the thing itself, the detail, the frame, time, and vantage point.” Specifically, in the first category of ‘the thing itself,’ he underlined photography’s subtle tension with reality in order to make sure of the uniqueness of photographic endeavor that is different from conventional representation.

[photographer] learned that the world itself is an artist of incomparable inventiveness, and that to recognize its best works and moments, to anticipate them, to clarify them and make them permanent, requires intelligence both acute and supple. But he learned also that factuality of his pictures, no matter how convincing and unarguable, was a different thing than the reality itself. Much of reality was filtered out in the static little black and white image, and some of it was exhibited with an unnatural clarity, an exaggerated importance. The subject and the picture were not the same thing, although they would afterwards seem so. It was the photographer’s problem to see not simply the reality before him but the still invisible picture, and to make his choices in terms of the latter.

This account in the first category spells out photographer’s basic protocol that constitutes its new aesthetics: when “what our eyes saw was an illusion, and what the camera saw was the truth,” then, the *photographer’s eye* should attain to the quality of camera that would bring *the thing itself* to us, not exaggerated and overly clarified photographic clichés. In other words, photography’s aesthetic validity results from photographer’s ability to combine disinterestedness of the medium with the world as it is.

---


It is undeniable that Walker Evans would have been one of the photographers that embodied Szarkowski’s aesthetic vision. In the catalog introduction for Evans’ MoMA retrospective in 1971, Szarkowski writes:

Evans at his best convinces us that we are seeing the dry bones of fact, presented without comment, almost without thought. His lesser pictures make it clear that the best ones had deceived us: what we had accepted as simple facts were precise descriptions of very personal perceptions.95 [Figure 4-11, 4-12, 4-13]

To an extent, Szarkowski’s account echoes Clement Greenberg’s reductive logic by implicitly reiterating such reductive languages as ‘dry bones of fact, presented without comment, without thought, lesser pictures,’ etc. This strategic codification of Greenbergian modernism in the early evaluations of documentary’s aesthetic quality bears arguably a hierarchical distinction of the good and bad, as Greenberg’s theory in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), for instance, took the same course. In other words, the good photography in this photographic Greenbergianism is the one that serves only “for its own sake,” “retiring from public altogether,” and “avoiding the plague of subject matter and content,” (as the good avant-garde art does), whereas the bad photography is the one that “welcomes the debased simulacra of genuine culture,” and serves “for those who are insensible for the genuine culture (as the bad Kitsch art does).96 This assumption (a good documentary serves for its own sake, retires from public, and never mixes form and content) eventually brings two different concerns in documentary discourses: 1) the concern about documentary’s isolation from socio-political agenda, and 2) the concern that denounces documentary’s formal indulgence when its subjects suffer.

Two Concerns about Documentary-as-Art

Before concluding this chapter, I will briefly rehearse the two concerns of documentary mentioned above. The first concern - documentary photography’s isolation from socio-politics - has been articulated by Douglas Crimp, when he critiqued that art museum’s new interest in photography brings about a conflict with other institutions (the Library of Congress, in particular, where 77,000 negatives of the F.S.A. photographs are stored) in the medium’s archival nature. Crimp points out that the institution’s great emphasis on photography’s unique aesthetic quality ended up decimating all other relationships that it had served since its invention:

Thus ghettoized, it will no longer primarily be useful within other discursive practices; it will no longer serve the purpose of information, documentation, evidence, illustration, reportage. The formally plural field of photography will henceforth be reduced to the single, all-encompassing aesthetic.98

For Crimp, photography’s “single, all-encompassing aesthetic” is as problematic as Greenbergian modernism which, in its exclusive emphasis on pictorial autonomy, kept art from larger cultural contexts. Considering photography’s indestructible social bonds, Crimp argues, “photography is not autonomous and it is not, in the modernist sense, art.” The loss of plurality of photographic discourse which in Szarkowski’s theory, was a precondition for photography’s autonomous aesthetic, therefore, only signals “the morbid symptoms of modernism’s demise,” as Crims writes:

For photography to be understood and reorganized in such a way is a complete perversion of modernism, and it can happen only because modernism had indeed become dysfunctional. Postmodernism may be said to be founded in part upon this paradox: that it is photography’s revaluation

98 Ibid., 7.
as a modernist medium that signals the end of modernism. Postmodernism begins when photography comes to pervert modernism.\textsuperscript{99}

If Crimp’s critique reiterates the postmodern antithesis that the assertion for autonomy exposes both modernist ideology and its crisis, other critics pay more attention to the second concern - the concern that denounce documentary’s formal indulgence when its subject matters are problematic. Their claims rest primarily on the idea that aesthetic redundancy in documentary would blunt the image’s political sensitivity.

Susan Sontag’s widely cited photographic theory is centered in this particular concern that the beauty of journalistic photography might produce moral depravity, or “prettier lies” in her word.\textsuperscript{100} In On Photography, Sontag writes:

the aestheticizing tendency of photography is such that the medium which conveys distress ends by neutralizing it. Cameras miniaturize experience, transform history into spectacle. As much as they create sympathy, photographs cut sympathy, distance the emotions.\textsuperscript{101}

Sontag’s criticism posits an idea that photographers would never want to involve themselves in a situation they pictures, but just pass through it with a camera as a “passport,” or as a sign for doing nothing but looking, like “a tourist.”\textsuperscript{102} In this idea, photography is “to convert the world into a department store or museum-without-walls in which every subject is depreciated into an article of consumption, promoted into an item for aesthetic appreciation.”\textsuperscript{103} Here the term, “aesthetic appreciation” utterly signifies an eye-shopping in this shopping mall of disasters where the pain of others is embellished by aesthetic sensibility. It is a moral crime for Sontag, as far as it induces an aesthetic

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 109-110.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 41-42.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 110.
pleasure that solidifies the distance between the subject and object. Sontag elsewhere points out that this distancing is nothing other than exoticism (making the pain always the other’s issue), and having pleasure out of it is exploitation of their misery.\textsuperscript{104}

Martha Rosler presents another articulation that pinpoints the problems of aesthetic documentary. Rosler argues documentary’s interest in aesthetic qualities is “ahistorical in its refusal of specific historical meaning.”\textsuperscript{105} For Rosler, documentary photography’s “organismic pleasure afforded by the aesthetic rightness or well-formedness” dishevels image’s timely topicality because of the pleasure’s timeless universality. Documentary should be a testimony of particular event occurred in particular time; in this way, documentary could bring a timely intervention into reality. But, aesthetic beauty or classical formality in documentary constantly reinforces image’s universality and thus, makes it impossible for the viewer to connect an image to a particular time and place in which the image was captured. As Rosler writes, “this covert appreciation of image is dangerous insofar as it accepts not a dialectical relation between political and formal meaning, not their interpretation, but a hazier, more reified relation, one in which topicality drops away as epochs fade, and the aesthetic aspect is, if anything, enhanced by the loss of specific reference.”

This ahistoricity of aesthetic documentary is even more problematic for Rosler because beyond its evaporation of particular history, this aesthetic documentary dismisses the mutability of aesthetic criteria. Universality, then, turns out to be a false supposition based on immutability of aesthetic rightness, masking differences between

each practices. It follows that documentary centered on aesthetic formality eventually makes a double-failure in capturing both particularity of events and specificity of each documentaries. Rosler points this out in the following paragraph:

a problem with trying to make such a notion [aesthetic moment] workable within actual photographic practice is that it seems to ignore the mutability of ideas of aesthetic rightness. That is, it seems to ignore the fact that historical interests, not transcendental verities, govern whether any particular form is seen as adequately revealing its meaning – and that you cannot second-guess history. This mutability accounts for the incorporation into legitimate photo history of the work of Jacob Riis alongside that of the incomparably more classical Lewis Hine, of Weegee (Arthur Fellig) alongside Danny Lyon. It seems clear that those who, like Lange and the labor photographer, identify a powerfully conveyed meaning with a primary sensuousness are pushing against the gigantic ideological weight of classical beauty, which presses on us the understanding that in the search for transcendental form, the world is merely the stepping-off point into aesthetic eternity.\(^{106}\)

Finally, Rosler’s concern moves on to the issue of expolitiveness. When documentary photographers focus on their work itself (image’s formal maturity and such), the identities of their subjects are generally unnoticed, and become instrumentalized to serve larger agendas. In this anonymity, all the benefits from the documentary projects do not go in the subjects’ hands; the subjects in most cases made no fortune out of their modeling, whereas Bourke-White’s or later Walker Evans’s best-selling documentary books brought them great fortune and fame. In these best-sellers, the subjects were utterly exploited given that the photographs did not practically affect the subjects’ lives. According to Rosler, this exploitation continues to this day by countless media reproductions that keep reframing their pathetic past without any permission or reward. Rosler calls it “a new genre of victimhood – the victimization by someone else’s camera of helpless persons, who then hold still long enough for the

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 318.
indignation of the new writer to capture them, in words and images both, in their current state of decrepitude.”\textsuperscript{107}

This particular concern of exploitation in a guise of speaking on behalf of the photographed is also an issue in Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s essay, \textit{Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography}. In this essay, she poses a question of “whether the documentary act does not involve a double act of subjugation: first, in the social world that has produced its victims; and second, in the regime of the image produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions it then re-presents.”\textsuperscript{108}

According to Solomon-Godeau, from Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine to the F.S.A. photographers, all of whom claimed for the social necessity of their photographic operation, there has been an “unchanging tropes” that neutralized “the pictorial spectacle targeted for a different audience and a different class,” and “the immobilizing effect produced by presenting the visual “fact” of individual victimization or subjugation as a metonym for the (individual) conditions that produced it.”\textsuperscript{109} Based on these tropes, she argues, “the photographer’s desire to build pathos or sympathy into the image, to invest the subject with either an emblematic or an archetypal importance, to visually dignify labor or poverty, is a problem to the extent that such strategies eclipse or obscure the political sphere whose determinations, actions, and instrumentalities are not in themselves visual.”\textsuperscript{110} In this account, the visual is denounced as an eclipse of the

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 319.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 179.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 179.
political to an extent that the visual belongs solely to the domain of photographers, while
the political is opposite; what photographers falsely do is to mix them up in “an
inevitable slippage from the political to the anecdotal or the emblematic,” 111 which turns
the images not into a testimony of the subject, but into photographer’s art:

photographs retain their specificity only briefly; much of the graphic legacy
of the F.S.A. is currently embalmed in a collective nostalgia about the
1930s, or enshrined as a humanist monument to the timeless struggle
against adversity, or revered as a record of individual photographic
achievement. Child laborer, tenant farmer, disenfranchised black, the
(once) living subject whose existence testified to the injustice and abuses
bred within a political and social system, now becomes testimony to the
photographer’s eye and the photographer’s art. 112

Noticeably, in these anti-aesthetic accounts, the term aesthetics simply designate
the narrow concept of “beautification” or “formal rightfulness.” This narrow definition
often leads to a misconception that aesthetic is an appreciation of beautiful things, or
disinterested taste toward impractical things. It is this misconception that yields the
ethical concerns about documentaries that draw aesthetic attentions.

In his recent article, “Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique,
(2007)” Mark Reinhardt, a political scientist and art writer, 113 argues that such critical
antagonism, however, has something to do with critical anxiety based on a
misunderstanding of the concept of aesthetics: “a suspicion of a kind of morally obtuse
obscurring or exploitation of pain slides into an anxiety – inchoate or unstated, but

111 Ibid., 179.
112 Ibid., 179.
113 In 2006, Mark Reinhardt programmed an influential exhibition “Beautiful Suffering:
Photography and the Traffic in Pain” at the Williams College Museum of Art, (UK) with art
historian Erina Duganne and Holly Edwards. The catalog included insightful essays, by these
programmers, as well as museum’s senior curator John Stomberg and theorist Mieke Bal, that
address new critical perspectives to foster “a more reflective awareness of how we represent
and address the rampant suffering and the corollary spectatorships that characterize our time.”
For the review, see David Levi Strauss, Nikon and Icons: Is the aestheticization-of-suffering
critique still valid? (online article) accessed October 11, 2011,
http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/014_02/258
perhaps more powerful for that – of the formal choices and rhetorical conventions, and the resulting transformative work, of representation itself.”

Reinhardt points out that Kantian line of aesthetic tendency has formed this distortion of ‘aesthetic attitude’ in which existential situations of the subject is purposefully disregarded in favor of the dogmatic disinterestedness; he further elaborates that this attitudinal turn has driven our aesthetic attention exclusively to the work’s formal or internal properties, which cover only part of the whole aesthetic concepts. This turn causes an anxiety that aesthetic attitude may obscure “the causes of and responsibility for suffering” and the work’s “meaning and implications,” while being used as resources for [aesthetic] gratification.” Consequently, the aesthetic, Reinhardt argues, appears to be “unproductive, pernicious responses to the world’s calamities and injustice.”

**Toward a New Aesthetics of Social Documentary**

If discourses against documentary’s aesthetic engagement are not based on an adequate definition of aesthetics, then what is the essence of the emotional experience, expressions, and inspirations that are the underlying impulse of documentary photography? Michael Renov in his study, *Toward a Poetic of Documentary*, suggests a new way of understanding documentary aesthetically. By surveying both classical (Aristotle) and modern poetic discourses (James Clifford and Susan Rubin Suleiman), Renov argues that “contingencies of a political and historical character (of documentary)

---

115 Ibid., 21.
116 Ibid., 21.
have their place within a poetic framework.”¹¹⁷ Foregrounding Aristotle’s *Poetics* in which he argued for poetic art’s political, educational, historical, and emotional utility, and thereby became the most forceful answer to the Platonic separation between art and politics, Renov here attempts to make a philosophical reconciliation between aesthetic form and political content. Renov writes: “given the fundamental aim of poetics – to submit aesthetic forms to rigorous investigation as to their composition, function, and effect – this field of study has become a kind of proving ground for the relations between science and art.”¹¹⁸ In this chain of thoughts, “poetics must also confront the problematics of power,”¹¹⁹ because the powers – the principle of authority and legitimacy as well as the historical repressions – are what shape and confine aesthetic form.¹²⁰ It is through this “transgressiveness” that poetics of documentary acknowledges its politics.¹²¹

Comparing documentary’s basic tendencies (1. to record, reveal, or preserve 2. to persuade or promote, 3. to analyze or interrogate 4. to express) with classical aesthetic theories (he calls them *modalities of desire*¹²²), Renov elaborates relations between socio-political tendencies and aesthetic qualities: “a record” as a mimetic drive,

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 20.
¹¹⁹ Ibid., 19.
¹²⁰ Ibid., 19. -- “In a very real sense, poetics must also confront the problematics of power. If …the individual is “an effect of power” exercised through subtle mechanisms which “evolve, organize and put into circulation … knowledge, or rather apparatuses of knowledge,” critical inquiries into the species, functions, and effects of discursive forms must attend to the pressures and limits of social determination – the principles of authority and legitimacy as well as the historical repressi ons which shape and confine aesthetic form”
¹²¹ Ibid., 25. -- “any poetic of value, despite the explanatory power it might mobilize through an elaboration of conceptually discrete modalities, must be willing to acknowledge transgressiveness as the very condition of textual potency.”
¹²² Ibid., 22. -- “These four functions operate as modalities of desire, impulsions which fuel documentary discourse.”
“a persuasion” as a rhetorical technique, “an analysis” as a cognitive or psychological impulse, and “an expression” as a communicative aim through aesthetic formality.\textsuperscript{123} In so doing, Renov revitalizes the connection between art and politics that has never been fully severed away in documentary genres, despite forceful critical amputations of the anti-aesthetic criticisms, mentioned earlier.

This connection has been symptomatically reinstated through the new documentary practices (Post-documentary, exemplified by such artists as The Atlas Group (Walid Raas), Luc Delahaye, Aernout Mik, and more,) whose aesthetic engagements in pictorial composition, theatrical staging, and digital manipulation appear to rather reinforce the topicality of socio-political agendas, despite social documentary’s lingering anxiety against those aesthetic elements.

Of course, this new hybrid social documentary-as-art may not always provide us with best possible options for social change. But at least, such documentaries encourage both photographers and viewers to participate in this complex structure of aesthetic proximity. David Levi Strauss once argued, “every photograph is an act amid a complex structure of choices. These choices, which extend beyond the time of the photograph, influence the photograph before, during, and after its instant. Reading photographs in context is a participation in this complex.”\textsuperscript{124} It means by extension that looking images, we are already entering into the complex space of participatory spectatorship. To remain active or passive is up to one’s ability or willingness to read the other’s pain through the visual testimonies of documentary; it is to understand a complex codification of socio-political contexts through the aesthetic eyes. As Levi

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 25-35.  
Strauss articulates, this participation, this willingness of engagement to the visual, even if it is uneasy for us to see the other’s misery, is “a process of negotiation” in which “the relation of photographer to subject – the distance from one to another”- is recognized, questioned, and redefined.¹²⁵ In this negotiation, which brings the unprivileged, invisible others onto the stage of visibility, documentary is an art of emancipation.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 10. -- “Aestheticization is one of the ways that disparate peoples recognize themselves in one another. Photographs by themselves certainly cannot tell “the whole truth” – they are always only instants. What they do most persistently is to register the relation of photographer to subject – the distance from one to another – and this understanding is a profoundly important political process…”
CHAPTER 5
THEATER OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND EMANCIPATION OF THE SPECTATOR:
AERNOUT MIK’S STAGED DOCUMENTARY AND MICHAEL FRIED’S NEW INSIGHT

Aernout Mik at MoMA in 2009

Representation of catastrophes in media (photography, video or film) involves a
great deal of ethical complexity. What makes such media representations ethically
questionable is the conflict between an image’s self-claimed objectivity and its inherent
subjectivity. Oftentimes, our responses to those media images end up with a mix of
aversion and pleasure. Brutal violence easily turns into a spectacle that leads us to an
aesthetic indulgence and political indifference. There, the media’s ethical tasks and
roles are dismantled, and its inherited cultural privilege in this society of spectacles
faces new challenges.

Dutch media artist Aernout Mik challenges this privileged notion of media
objectivity by exploring an ethically fraught terrain of theatrical documentary. Mik has
produced a number of fictional documentaries featuring elaborately staged events that
evoke particular socio-political conflicts. This theatrical documentation, however, has
been observed to involve little risk of re-victimizing the documented figures either by the
brutal immediacy of documentary or by artful circuit of representation. Moreover, the
strategic mix of fact and fiction in Mik’s theater brings up a new terrain of media
representation in which both political objectivity and aesthetic subjectivity can peacefully
coexist.

This chapter examines how Mik’s theatric documentary overcomes and renews
the ethical concerns pervasive in documentary discourses through strategically
reinterpreting the notion of (photographic) theatricality addressed by Roland Barthes
(Camera Lucida), Michael Fried (Theatricality and Absorption and Why Photography
Matters as Art as Never Before), and Jacques Rancière (the Emancipated Spectator).

Based on this redefinition of theatricality, I will argue that Aernout Mik’s theatrical documentary emerges as a new ethical form of media art that leads spectators to a stage of ethical confrontation in which their formerly passive spectatorship turns into more active, more engaging communication with the other.

In 2009, Aernout Mik’s first solo exhibition outside Europe was held at MoMA. His works, which consisted of either large-size single photographic images or multi-channel video installations, clearly revealed a distinctive political tenor in their subject matters ranging from wars and terrorism to the issues of immigration and ethnic conflicts. However, in a curious way, these political subject matters seemed quite effectively adjusted to MoMA’s environment, despite the museum’s iconic status as one of the largest depositories of Western aesthetic tradition. Visitors, including myself, had to run into Mik’s highly political photographic and filmic statements at almost every corner of the museum, and it was a sort of double-edged experience combined with both political awareness and aesthetic appreciation, coming from Mik’s theatricality.

At first glance, Aernout Mik’s video works and film stills, mounted in large format light boxes, seem to be a series of documentaries showing recent socio-political events. However, all the people shown on the screens are actors and actresses,¹ and they are playing their given roles in the staged political dramas. In Mik’s works, such as Scapegoat (2006) [Figure 5-1] and School Yard (2009) [figure 5-2, 5-3], people are elaborately staged in rich typological allusions to some recent political conflicts.² Groups

---

¹ There is one exception – Raw Footage (2006); this is Mik’s only work utilizing real news images he found at the archives of Reuters and Independent Television News (ITN) in London. ² Scapegoat (2006) recalls, to some extent, the unseen inside view of the 2002 Moscow theater hostage situation. School Yard (2009) also represents multi-ethnographic rituals that
of people with unclear identities move around mutely on the stage (which is in fact a real site), suggesting the anxiety of an impending danger (Scapegoat) or chaotic commotion of some sort (School Yard). The deciding factor of this movement is the flow of emotions that constantly re-coordinates the focal point of the situation; as practical causes and effects are not shown in the images, the viewer's attention constantly returns to the emotional gestures of the actors. It is this choreographed emotion exuberated on the stage that makes these works both enigmatic and mesmerizing.

On the one hand, they are enigmatic because anonymity and obscurity penetrate the entire soundless typological sequences, continuously frustrating the viewer’s comprehension. On the other, they are mesmerizing given that the tantalizing situations scrambled with emotional exuberance grab the viewer’s attention in the same way as a successful documentary film does. This ambivalent effect, coming from both anonymity and attraction simultaneously, encourages viewers to begin a sort of emotional free-play without being subjected to ethical anxiety of playing with the other’s misery.

This free-play of emotions insured by anonymity becomes more explicit in another work, Raw Footage (2006). [Figure 5-4, 5-5] In this case, people and events are real, but by using abandoned raw footage of the Yugoslavian civil war, with anomalously edited sequences, Mik keeps viewers from being overly occupied by the disturbing factuality of the images.

include Turkish, Surinamese, and Moroccan. Middle Man (2001) depicts a stock market breakdown; Training Ground (2006) reminds of illegal immigration issues; and Vacuum Room (2005) reminds of a meltdown of political gatherings.

3 Mik unusually uses the real newsreels of the Yugoslavian civil wars for this work; he collected them from the archives of Reuters and Independent Television News (ITN) in London, one of the world’ largest newsreel libraries – Laurence Kardish, Aernout Mik: An Introduction (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 21.
Subtle manipulation of emotions as such begins with double screens. In the gallery, the juxtaposed screens produce strange, unintentional overlaps of sequences with sporadic rhythms and cross-perspectival circuits. [Figure 5-6] Viewers therefore find a strange correspondence between the two screens; for example, at a certain moment, one screen shows an artillery combat unit shooting smoky field guns over the tranquil wheat field. The camera generates drastic contrasts between the busy gunners and the peaceful fields. Meanwhile, the other screen plays a musty, smashed farm house viewed from the gunner's position. As a result of this crisscross editing, an eccentric layout of the site is produced in viewer's mind – the farm house / the gunners / the wheat field. What makes this landscape eccentric is the gunners' uncanny position between the farm house and the wheat field that emphasizes a disturbing void in the pastoral Balkan landscape. This specific psychological layout has something to do with the ironic relation between the Balkan landscape and people who have long been subjected to such a serpentine political history.  

As one way of echoing this serpentine history, Mik never chooses a straightforward mode of representation. He shows neither a dead body nor an actual close-up engagement in this work. All scenes are taken at a certain distance from the killing zone; snipers or soldiers shoot invisible enemies far away from their position. Seriousness barely comes into the situation when a soldier pulls the trigger of his machine gun sitting on an antique love chair or when a boy wearing nothing but a red trunk scavenges around an abandoned tank. Perhaps this is why those films were found

---

4 The pastoral life of the Balkan people started complicated when their early communist slogan of the Brotherhood and Unity among its various ethnic groups (Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian, Slovene, Albanian, and Hungarian) was broken by Slobodan Milošević's (the head of the Serbian Party at the moment) vicious political ambition. Milošević's dictatorship and nationalism resulted in one of the most catastrophic ethnic cleansings since the Holocaust.
unopened in the archive (They were abandoned films Mik found in a corner of The Independent Television News (ITN) in London). They lost their news value due to their distance from the site in which all the provoking spectacles are produced. By using the residues of news, Mik keeps viewers from being overly occupied by the disturbing factuality of the images. The viewers thereby experience a certain emotional circuit: tension, relaxation, and tension again, and then laughter in the end. In other words, all such absurd dramatic mise-en-scènes serve to reduce the tension and pressure of the images, and lead the viewer to a theater of absurdity in which the image’s fact value is neutralized in a sudden emotional overturn.

In *Training Ground* (2006), [figure 5-7, 5-8] the emotional free-play turns into an interchangeable role-play. In this work, two groups are confronted: one in police uniforms and the other with various trip paraphernalia as if they are illegal immigrants. Stereotypical roles determined by their symbolic costumes and belongings are changed by their irrational actions; for example, the police officers’ authority represented by their uniform is overturned by their idiotic tumbling on the ground. However, this role reversal does not seem to diminish the emotional tension of the scene because of the actors’ complete engrossment in their roles. Rather, it emphasizes the intrinsic theatricality of all political actions that would constantly renew and reset the presumed political privilege of the subjects. To this end, *Training Ground* unveils the fact that, in this political theater, an individual is nothing but an anonymous actor whose ontological certainty cannot be insured by any means. In this work, the subject/the other relationship turns into an interchangeable network, renewing the typical formula of modern subjectivism. The last sequence – the lunatics marching around with their fake
rifles – perhaps implies the very insanity of the modern subject, marching along the false track of history.

In Mik’s typical mode of installation (specifically Vacuum Room), beholders are guided to take a particular beholding positions [Figure 5-9]; they stand, sit, or lie down on the floor mats placed in the gallery. Children walk around the freestanding, low-profile six channel screens, making unique interfering shadows on the screens. In this “kinesthetic” environment, screens turn into strange passageways to the mysterious chamber in which politicians and military figures are mutely disputing each other. Therefore, beholders who are watching them with a furtive eye begin to feel a curious urge to walk into this symbolic inter-human and inter-media space.

Photography as Theater: Roland Barthes

In Mik’s works, beholders came across one fundamental question – if Mik’s fake documentary gives the beholder the same socio-political experience in its theatrical resemblance, is there any identifiable epistemological difference between a documentary and this staged pseudo-documentary? All the figures in his works are certainly not real victims, but such knowledge comes not from the viewer’s initial contact with the images, but from the wall text, making this whole experience more striking. Therefore, Mik’s works occupies an ambiguous ontological position which is neither documentary nor representation.

This ontological ambiguity has recently been addressed by critic Walter Benn Michaels as photography’s inherent fossil character. In his essay “Photography and Fossils” (2007) Michaels writes:

---

There is an important sense in which the question about the painting - is it a painting or an object? - has become the question about the photograph, not so much because the photograph can somehow be taken as the object it is a photograph of … but because it cannot simply be taken as a picture of the object it is a photograph of. That is the point … of the fossil. We do not experience the fossil as a trilobite, but we do not experience it as the picture of a trilobite either. And if we understand photographs on the model of fossil, we cannot take for granted their status as works of art. To put it that way, however, is to refuse both the indexophobia and the indexophilic, to refuse the idea that because indexicality is a false issue photographs can of course be works of art and to refuse also the idea that because photographs are essentially indexical they cannot be works of art. 6

What Michaels’s account points out is that like “a fossil of a trilobite, which is neither a trilobite itself nor its representation,” a photograph occupies an ambivalent ontic territory situating itself somewhere between reality and art. Therefore, whether it is a documentation of a fact or not, photographic representation is subjected to its intrinsic ambivalence.

Mik’s staged documentary plays on this inevitable paradox of photography. In Mik’s works, the indexicality of photography, through which we see what it is, is confirmed and revoked simultaneously, because the figures in the photos can be identified as (n)either the “trilobite,” its reference, (n)or “a representation,” the trope itself. However, it should be emphasized that even if so, this ambivalence of Mik’s pseudo-documentary does not radically diminish sensitivity of its subject matters because of the forceful photographic actuality. As Michaels mentions, although “the fossil is neither a likeness of the trilobite (reality) nor an expression of the trilobite’s

---

belief (art),” it is “good evidence of the existence of trilobites,” and “the photograph of an event is (also) good evidence that the event took place.”

This particular analysis of Mik’s pseudo-documentary leads us to Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* in which photography’s ambiguity between fact and fiction is explained as its phenomenological essence. According to Barthes, photography retains two ambivalent layers of epistemological experiences – *studium* (“cultural, intellectual experience”) and *punctum* (“ineffable, sensational experience”). Since these two irreconcilable experiences leave completely different epistemological marks on a single consciousness, they often result in a cognitive confusion. Faced with this confusion, Barthes first confesses his failure to “reach into a photograph.” It is nearly impossible to speak about a photograph because it always says something more than what it appears to be. In other words, an intellectual/cultural reading of image (*studium*) is often nullified by the interruption of inexplicable sensations (*punctum*), and in this repetitive process, “photography is an uncertain art.”

To Barthes, the uncertainty of photographic experience only takes its validity when it embraces the uncompromising privacy of the experience. It revokes universal

---

7 Ibid., 435. (parenthesis mine)
8 On the first page, Barthes dedicated this book to Sartre: Sartre’s On Imagination in which Sartre explored phenomenological process (intentionality in particular) of human imagination following Husserl.
10 Ibid., 106.
11 Ibid., 6. -- “Photography is unclassifiable because there is no reason to mark this or that of its occurrences … Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.”
12 Ibid., 18.
13 Ibid., 4, 12. -- “In the photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the This (this photograph, and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the Tuche, the Occasion, the
comprehensibility; instead, photographic experience is a completely private activity and thus, it takes neither any preconception of affirmative spectatorship, nor intellectual consensus.\textsuperscript{14} A camera for Barthes is a machine codifying each and every one’s experience in highly individualized signals; in this almost incomprehensible process of photographic internalization (or photographic \textit{intentionality} in phenomenological terminology), which Barthes describes a mystic alchemy of the brilliant \textit{light} in \textit{Camera Lucida}, someone’s fact becomes someone else’s fiction, transforming everything into something more than what it is. Barthes remarks, in this regard:

\textit{the photograph represents a very subtle moment when … I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death: I am truly becoming a specter.}\textsuperscript{15}

It is often inevitable that a fact loses its solid universality when individuality prevails in one’s reception of the fact. In this private arena of sensory experience, the real comes to (re)present itself without having to validate its presence in time and space. It is just like a theater on which a real (an actor as a real person) represents another real (his/her role). In theater, no actors are expected to explain why they are playing their role on a stage. Without any redundant explanations, actors are just what they are on their stage. Certainly, the same goes on in photography; the photographed figures do not explain why and how they are there, but their existence is never denied in their photographic presentness. To Barthes, it is a kind of “magic” that conjures up this

\begin{footnotes}
\item[14] Ibid., 6. -- “Photography is unclassifiable because there is no reason to mark this or that of its occurrences … Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.”
\item[15] Ibid., 14.
\end{footnotes}
absent presence.\textsuperscript{16} It is a stage presence and therein, an analogy between a theater and photography can be made at this moment, a moment in which we acknowledge the presence of a being in a photo as the actual without actuality.\textsuperscript{17}

According to Barthes, it is the “embarrassing certificate of presence” that photography introduces into the realm of representation.\textsuperscript{18} This inexplicably atemporal presence of photography, having no actuality despite its almost perfect reality, is photography’s “resurrectional” power through which the unrepresentable comes to be represented.\textsuperscript{19} And this “embarrassing” or “inexplicable” experience in which one cannot resist to admitting the magical presence of a being in a photograph is in fact the very experience of a \textit{theater}.\textsuperscript{20} Barthes, in this regard, remarks that “photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.”\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Michael Fried: the Dynamics of Theatricality and Anti-Theatricality}

Within a critical convention of modern art history, to define photography as a type of theater is to deny its aesthetic autonomy and authenticity because it would necessarily entail “a plea for another genre” which is “the negation of art.”\textsuperscript{22} Michael

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 88.
\item\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 31.
\item\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 87. – “Every photograph is a certificate of presence. This certificate is the new embarrassment which its invention has introduced into the family of images. The first photographs …must have seemed to him to resemble exactly certain paintings; he knew, however, that he was nose-to-nose with a mutant; his consciousness posited the object encountered outside of any analogy, like the ectoplasm of “what-had-been”: neither image nor reality, a new being, really: a reality one can no longer touch.”
\item\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 82.
\item\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 31. - “We know the original relation of the theater and the cult of Dead: the first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead … Now it is this same relation which I find in the photograph …”
\item\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 32
\item\textsuperscript{22} Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in \textit{Art and Objecthood} (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998), 153. (originally published in \textit{Artforum} 5 (June 1967): 12-23)
\end{footnotes}
Fried, who first sketched this anti-theatrical tradition in his famous essay, *Art and Objecthood* (1967) revisits and reinforces this view in his recent book, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008). In this book, Fried insists that contemporary photographic arts reinstate the anti-theatrical tradition in its absorptive pictorial quality, reinsuring the medium’s art historical contingency and aesthetic autonomy. However, although Fried throughout the book attempts to elaborate historical continuity of the anti-theatrical tradition in art and photography, most of his critical languages rather reassure a more dynamic relation between the theatrical and anti-theatrical, giving us an opportunity to rethink the medium’s new role and task in our times.

Fried’s theory of photography in *Why Photography* begins with a claim that “(contemporary) photography inherited the entire problematic of beholding – in the terms defined in my previous writing, of theatricality and antitheatricality – that had been central, first, to the evolution of painting in France from the middle of the eighteenth century until the advent of Edouard Manet and his generation around 1860, an evolution explored in my book *Absorption and Theatricality, Courbet’s Realism, and Manet’s Modernism*; and second, to the opposition between high modernism and minimalism in the mid- and late 1960s, as expounded in … my “infamous” essay “Art and Objecthood.”

This claim poses an idea that Fried’s new critical endeavor takes his two most famous concepts – *absorption* and *anti-theatricality* – as major frameworks for his readings of recent photographic art. In Fried’s view, “recent large-scale, tableau sized

---


24 Ibid., 2.
photographs that are hung on gallery walls (like easel paintings) and aspire to the rhetorical, or beholder-addressing, significance of painting” are “one of the most important development in visual arts of the past twenty-plus years.”

For Fried, these new photographs are not only “the bearers of no intention other than the artist’s own” that “make sense as part of the history of art photography and of art,” but in so doing, they also “renew the artistic and philosophical stakes of the most ambitious high modernist painting and sculpture of the 1960s and 70s.”

Fried considers Jeff Wall as one of the leading artists in this new photographic current, because his large-scale pictorial documentations of everyday affairs seem to fulfill the very “artistic and philosophical stakes of high modernist painting” of the past. Wall produces pictures in which (photographed) “figures appear not be “acting out” their world, only “being in” it.” So for example, a figure in Wall’s photograph (Adrian Walker who is a painter and in the photograph, sketching a specimen of a human arm in a laboratory) [Figure 5-10] is “concentrating so intensely on his work that he seems to be removed to another sphere of life.” Fried finds it absorptive on the same theoretical ground that his critical precursor Denis Diderot argued in the eighteenth century.

In Absorption and Theatricality, Fried argues that there was a particular aesthetic trend in some of the eighteenth-century French Salon paintings, characterized by its distinctive and strategic representation of “human beings wholly engaged in

---

25 Ibid., 37.
26 Ibid., 336.
27 Ibid., 81-82.
28 Ibid., 38.
29 Ibid., 38.
quintessentially absorptive activities."³⁰ [Figure 5-11, 5-12] Unlike earlier Rococo
conventions that featured erotic and sumptuous subject matters with explicit invitation of
beholder’s attention, the new eighteenth century painters, represented by Jean Baptiste
Greuze and Chardin, often seeks the state of “self-abandonment nearly to the point of
extinction of consciousness.”³¹ In this pictorial manifestation of self-forgetting
absorption, beholder’s intervention in a picture is symbolically dismissed and thereby
painting’s aesthetic autonomy is secured:

for French painters of the early and mid-1750s the persuasive
representation of absorption entailed evoking the perfect obliviousness of a
figure or group of figures to everything but the objects of their absorption.
Those objects did not include the beholder standing before the painting.
Hence the figure or figures had to seem oblivious to the beholder’s
presence if the illusion of absorption was to be sustained.³²

Fried calls this absorptive obliviousness of the beholder “the supreme fiction that
the beholder does not exist, that he was not really there, standing before the canvas;
and that the dramatic representation of action and passion, and the casual and
instantaneous mode of unity that came with it, provided the best available medium for
establishing that fiction in the painting itself.”³³

Fried develops this idea from the eighteenth century critic Denis Diderot, whose
tremendous interest in both theater and painting helped establish the early European
tradition of cultural criticism. As his early aesthetic sketches in “On the Origin and

³⁰ Michael Fried, Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot
³¹ Ibid., 61.
³² Ibid., 66.
³³ Ibid., 103. -- “Diderot’s conception of painting rested ultimately upon the supreme fiction
that the beholder did not exist, that he was not really there, standing before the canvas; and that
the dramatic representation of action and passion, and the casual and instantaneous mode of
unity that came with it, provided the best available medium for establishing that fiction in the
painting itself.”
Nature of the Beautiful” (1752) illustrate, Diderot’s theoretical endeavors in both theater and art criticism often reflected his interest in the flawless order and beauty of nature. This early interest led him to a radical transformation of the old, unnatural theatrical convention (“coup de theatre: surprising turns of plot, reversals, revelations”) into a more natural “tableaux: visually satisfying, essentially silent, seemingly accidental groupings of figures” that Diderot found in some Salon painting’s everydayness, disinterestedness, and absorptiveness. Diderot claimed that “spectator in theater ought to be thought of as before a canvas, on which a series of such tableaux follow one another as if by magic.” It demands, in particular, “the institution of a stage space devoid of spectators which in conjunction with painted scenery would allow separate but related actions to proceed simultaneously, thereby providing a more intense because more pictorial dramatic experience than the French theater had hitherto envisaged.”

In Fried’s view, absorption was “a central tradition in French painting from Jean Baptiste Greuze’s momentous Salon debut in 1755 to the advent of Edouard Manet” that “make paintings appear – by depicting personages wholly absorbed in what they are doing, thinking, and feeling – to deny the presence before them of the beholder, or

---

34 Denis Diderot, “On the Origin and Nature of the Beautiful” (1752) in *Diderot's Selected Writings*, ed. Lester G. Crocker, trans. Derek Coltman (New York, London: Macmillan, 1966), 53-57. -- in this essay, Diderot argues “the notion of the beautiful is composed of order, relation, proportion …” which is a basic character of the nature, and thus artists should imitate the nature in order to the greatest naturalness of their own art.

35 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 78. And see also Diderot’s “Essay on Painting” (1765) in which he argued, “if we possessed a clear knowledge of all these causes and effects, we could do no better than simply to represent natural objects as they are. The more perfect the imitation, the greater its conformity with the underlying physical causes, the more satisfactory we should find it.” Denis Diderot, “Essay on Painting,” in *Diderot’s Selected Writing*, 162.

36 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 78.

37 Ibid., 78.
to establish the ontological fiction that the beholder does not exist.”³⁸ “Only if this was accomplished,” continues Fried, “could the actual beholder be stopped and held before the canvas; conversely, on beholder’s part that the depicted personages were acting, or even worse, posing for the artist (and ultimately for the beholder) was registered as theatrical in the pejorative sense of the term, and painting was judged a failure.”³⁹

In Fried’s new book, photographers in this absorptive category include for instance Jeff Wall, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Rineke Dijikstra, Luc Delahaye, Douglas Gordon, Philippe Parreno and many other contemporary photographic artists whose subjects in photographs are so deeply absorbed in their own world that they appear to exist in a totally different ontological terrain from beholders. But, as many reviewers have complained,⁴⁰ it is a curious argument that the persons depicted in those photographs would have never known the fact that they were being photographed, specifically, for instance, in Wall’s or diCorcia’s staged studio documentaries that show people acting in front of the photographers, Ruff’s portraits of individuals staring deadpan at the camera, or Struth’s family portraits that show whole families looking at the camera. [Figure 5-13, 5-14]

Fried himself is clearly aware of this unlikelihood of his major theoretical frameworks, and it is in this unlikelihood that Fried’s new criticism on photography takes its most distinctive critical sensitivity:

a moment’s reflection (about a model’s complete absorption, his unawareness to the presence of the photographer) is unlikely, both

³⁸ Michael Fried, Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before, 40.
³⁹ Ibid., 40. – Fried also argues “with Manet, (with his “radical facingness”) this antithetical tradition reaches the point of overt crisis.”
because the depicted situation appears patently staged, and because the conspicuousness of the apparatus of display suggests a comparable conspicuousness of the photographic apparatus as such.\(^{41}\)

In Fried’s theory, this “unlikely” supposition of painting and photographing (patently staged but looking unstaged) is explained by certain intimacy between the subject and the photographer (or painter, as a first beholder); that is, the *unlikely fiction* of the painted/photographed figure’s complete absorption becomes *likely* and possible when “the photographer’s relation to the figure (Richter’s *Reading Woman* in Fried book, who is a daughter of the painter [Figure 5-15]) feels too near and in the open for her to have been unaware of his presence.”\(^{42}\)

It is a difficult claim, but according to Fried, it is historical, initiated first by Caravaggio and his followers, creating what Fried calls “the magic of absorption.”\(^{43}\) In the case of Caravaggio’s mirror portrait, it is a sort of double negation of beholder’s privilege, situated by the “primordial” painter/beholder all-in-one entity who had a confrontational pose to beholders, yet never looked at them, but himself in a mirror.\(^{44}\) A boy in Caravaggio’s painting, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, [Figure 5-16] for example, seems to look at beholders but what he really looked at was himself reflected in a mirror, not beholders; so even if he (a model) knew he will be seen by anyone, his gaze never goes to the beholder. This intimacy or inseparable relation between a painter (as well as a photographer) and his/her model (in Caravaggio’s case, himself) produces an

\(^{41}\) Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, 41.  
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 42.  
\(^{43}\) Ibid., 42.  
“immersive spectatorship” that conveys ultimate detachedness (or in Why Photography, “a sense of expert performance”\(^45\)), despite picture’s undeniable “facingness.\(^46\)

A decade later, Fried re-elaborates this complex dynamics of “seeing” and “being seen” in his notion of “to-be-seenness” to make sure of photographed figure’s fidelity in their own world despite their inevitable exposure to photographers or beholders. For Fried, it is a theoretical guarantor of the new absorptive photography’s anti-theatricality.\(^47\)

The new art photography seeks to come to grips with the issue of beholding in ways that do not succumb to theatricality but which at the same time register the epochality of minimalism/literalism’s intervention by an acknowledgement of to-be-seenness, just as ambitious French painting after Manet acknowledged painting’s facingness, while nevertheless reserving an imaginative space for itself that was not wholly given over to soliciting the applause of the Salon-going public.\(^48\)

For example, Jeff Wall’s A View from an Apartment (2004-2005) [Figure 5-17] (this photo is used as a cover image of the book Why Photography), in which two women are doing their daily routines (one reading and the other ironing) in their harbor-view studio apartment, is a picture that embodies the “to-be-seenness” through the two women’s deliberate performance of “being seen,” completely refusing to make any awareness about the presence of the photographer. Wall leased the place and had the two women live there for a while; then he occasionally visited the place, set his camera, and took photos not letting them know when he would put the shutter.\(^49\) In Fried’s argument, the standing women’s ambiguous pose (her subtle avoidance from the

\(^{45}\) Michael Fried, Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before, 43.

\(^{46}\) Michael Fried, “Thoughts on Caravaggio,” 22. -- This facingness is another important theme for Fried in his Manet’s Modernism. See, Michael Fried, Manet’s Modernism (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996)

\(^{47}\) Michael Fried, Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before, 43.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 57.
camera) rather proves her disinterestedness of when to be seen, when to be photographed.\textsuperscript{50} In this deliberate performance of disinterestedness, the picture, argues Fried, “conveys an unmistakable sense of deliberate construction that belongs to what I have called to-be-seenness,”\textsuperscript{51} regardless of the staged situation in which the figures belong.

\textbf{“To-be-seenness” as “Presentness”: Fried’s Ultimatum}

Fried’s theoretical frameworks often involve this dynamics of “to see” and “to be seen.” To see is, by extension, to acknowledge a \textit{specific} physical relation between the beholding subject and the object of beholding. It is moreover an action controlled by a conscious motivation. Thus, a work in this category of “to see” is often rendered theatrical: Minimal art’s “specific” (Judd) and “actual” (Morris) relation to the beholder falls into this theatrical category of “to see,” since they want \textit{to see} the presence of beholder, in a \textit{specific} time and \textit{actual} space.

On the contrary, “to be seen” is an unconscious action and the other’s business. \textit{To be seen} is to stand within the unknown relation (unknown time and space), and thus an object in this unknown distance does not care much about what happens to beholders. This indifference and passivity rather secure the object’s ontological independency (or autonomy), regardless of terms and conditions under which it is shown. There might be a beholder, but since an art in this category does not pay any attention to the beholder, it is something more than just simple theatrical (literal) presence; its presence becomes persistent in time and space. Fried has called this persistent feeling of presence in (modern) art \textit{presentness} in \textit{Art and Objecthood}:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 58.
  \item \textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 59.
\end{itemize}
it is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it is, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness, as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.\textsuperscript{52}

Fried, as a modernist, presentness was “a grace,”\textsuperscript{53} and “it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theatre.”\textsuperscript{54} However, there was also a dilemma on Fried’s side, because no matter how elaborately rendered, a painting could never completely overcome the materiality of its own medium. At best, the presentness was an illusion of presence that needs further transcendental compromise for the arbitrariness between a thing and its image. Therefore, as Hal Foster has put it, when Fried’s battle against minimalism called for a “grace” from the presentness, it was theological rather than critical.\textsuperscript{55}

As Douglas Crimp pointed out long ago, Fried’s demand for presentness in art did not work out very well, for the radical intrusion of theatrical presence in postmodern art.\textsuperscript{56} But photography, since it has much more elastic proximity between the presence and the presentness (the very elasticity articulated by Walter Benn Michaels in his “Photography and Fossils”), rekindled Fried’s conviction in a way that the question raised in “Art and Objecthood” finally finds its most plausible answer in photography.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 168.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{56} Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” \textit{October} 8 (Spring 1979): 77. -- “what Fried demanded of art was what he called “presentness,” a transcendent condition (he referred to it as a state of “grace”) in which “at every moment the work itself is wholly manifested”; what he feared would replace that condition as a result of the sensibility he saw at work in minimalism – what has replaced it – is presence, the sine qua non of theater.”
there is an important sense in which the question about painting – is it a painting or an object? – has become the question about the photograph, not so much because the photograph can somehow be taken as the object it is a photograph of … but because it cannot simply be taken as a picture of the object it is a photograph of. That is the point … of the fossil. We do not experience the fossil as a trilobite, but we do not experience it as the picture of a trilobite either. And if we understand photographs on the model of fossils, we cannot take for granted their status as works of art. To put it that way is to refuse both the indexophobic and the indexophilic, to refuse the idea that because indexicality is a false issue photographs can be works of art and to refuse also the idea that because photographs are essentially indexical they cannot be works of art (or “Art”) … the mid-twentieth century obligation of the painter to secure or assert the status of the painting as art and not (only) object has … devolved upon the photographer. Hence, … the importance of photographers like … [the listed above] … can only be understood in terms of their more or less implicit commitment to establishing (since it cannot be taken for granted) the photograph as a representation.57

This post-“Art and Objecthood” agenda rekindled in the photographic discourse is elaborated in chapter 10 of Why Photography (“Good” versus “Bad” Objecthood: James Welling, Bernard and Hilla Becher, Jeff Wall) that Fried considers “the climax of the book.”58 For Fried, James Welling’s photograph of a two-by-four [Figure 5-18], which could presumably be a photographic version of minimal art in its literal objecthood, embodied an instance of photographic presentness, because it preserved the essence of the wood stake without presenting it literally. Thus, this photographic objecthood of a wood stake appeared as a “good” kind of objecthood in comparison to the minimalists’ literal, thus “bad” objecthood.

Another way of characterizing Welling’s focus on the two-by-four might be to speak of an interest in real as opposed to abstract literalness or even in “good” as distinct from “bad” objecthood, understanding by the first term in

57 Michael Fried, Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before, 336.
58 Ibid., 3. -- In the introduction, Fried remarks the chapter 10 in which Welling and the issue of good and bad objecthood is discussed is “the climax of the book.”
both oppositions qualities pertaining to objects that can only be revealed or manifested in and by the art of photography.\textsuperscript{59}

When Fried wrote in “Art and Objecthood” that “it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theater,”\textsuperscript{60} he was, as critic Stephen Melville has put it, attempting to make a “distinction between the frivolous (essence of minimal art) and the serious (essence of modern art)” in order to “perpetuate the standards and values of the high art of the past” by a “pure motivation.”\textsuperscript{61} However, as Melville argues, over the course of the sixties and seventies when modernism was declining, Fried’s pure modernist attempt was seen as “that of separating, impossibly, the “mere” from the “pure,” in “the forgetting of modernism.”\textsuperscript{62} But, this impossible attempt of separating the mere from the pure became all the more possible in photographic art because, as Welling’s two-by-four symbolically manifested, a photograph of a thing was capable of bringing the purer abstraction of the thing without merely and literally presenting it. In this way, Fried came to an answer that he could not answer in “Art and Objecthood,” as he writes, “issues … that might have seemed quite possibly forever invalidated by the eclipse of high modernism and the triumph of postmodernism both artistically and theoretically in the 1970s and ’80s have returned … to the very center of advanced photographic practice.”\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 304.
\textsuperscript{60} Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 167.
\textsuperscript{61} Stephen Melville, “Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric, and the Conditions of publicity in Art and Criticism,” \textit{October} 19 (Winter 1981): 63
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{63} Michael Fried, \textit{Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before}, 2.
In the tenth chapter’s last comparison (Tony Smith’s *Die* (1962) [Figure 5-19], a typical minimalist canon, and Jeff Wall’s *Concrete Ball* (2003) [Figure 5-20], a photographic example of the “good” objecthood) Fried remarks:

Smith’s *Die* is a work of almost pure theatricality, depending as it does on enticing the viewer into a kind of indeterminate, open-ended situation of which the hollow steel cube itself is only one ingredient. In Wall’s transparency (Concrete Ball in a transparency light box), on the other hand, the viewer’s perspective relative to the solid-seeming concrete ball, as well as his or her apparent distance from it, are fixed by the sheer fact of the ball’s having been photographed. … More broadly, Wall’s picture is what it is regardless of the “performance” of the viewer, who finds himself or herself confronted with the challenge of coming to terms with it … simply as it stands.64

What this final comparison reassures is that photographic objecthood is a better kind of objecthood in its photographic instantaneity. While Smith’s object (a steel cubic box) exemplifies minimalism’s *theatrical plea* in its “hollow, anthropomorphic” pretension (Fried’s critical languages in *Art and Objecthood*), Wall’s photographed object (a concrete ball) manifests its presentness, modern art’s ultimate aim of bringing the essence of a thing itself without presenting it literally. Fried in this regard concludes that, “Wall’s *Concrete Ball* … has come to an explicit critique of minimalism/literalism.”65

Again, the questions about art’s transcendental condition in which “*at every moment the work itself is wholly manifested*” were raised in minimalism, but answered in photography. This is why photography matters as art as never before, in Fried’s criticism.

**Michael Fried’s New Insight and Photography as a Theater**

Despite the fact that Fried’s new theory of photography enlarged our understanding of the medium’s artistic possibility, it also has drawn many critical doubts:

64 Ibid., 333.
65 Ibid., 333.
and misunderstandings. Among them, two prevailing concerns about Fried’s new theory need to be mentioned here to get at my earlier point that Fried’s true insight rests on a dynamic relation between theatricality and anti-theatricality.

The first concern begins with Robin Kelsey’s *Artforum* review that Fried’s theory is self-referential that “reverberates with gratuitous cross-references and aggrandizing discussions of his past writing.”\(^6^6\) That is, Fried’s ambitious new theory of contemporary photographic art constantly returns to and co-opts his earlier theoretical formulas – absorption and anti-theatricality which he developed first in his 60s’ essay “Art and Objecthood” -- with some problematic “elasticity,” in terms of applying these non-photographic formulas to photography.\(^6^7\) Thus, Fried’s arguments in the new book in many cases appear logical only in relation to his previous sets of theories that all point to, rely on, and praise photography’s kinship to particular pictorial traditions.

Problem lies in a contradiction that this self-referentiality brings about; that is, Fried’s new theory of photography conflicts with his modern theoretical agenda based on medium-specificity due to this self-referential nature that constantly brings photography into the discourse of painting (and sculpture). James Elkins for instance argues in his critical response to one of Fried’s essays (“Barthes’s *Punctum*” which appeared first in *Critical Inquiry* in 2005 and later included as a chapter in Fried book *Why Photography*) that defining photography through terms and conditions of painting is “a betrayal of modernist faith in media-specificity,” and this “co-opting of properties from


\(^{6^7}\) Ibid., 57.
one another rearranges, blurs, or switches their historical roles." Critic Diarmund Costello has also noted in his recent review on Fried, this view (photography-as-an extension-of-modernist painting) “fails to regard photography as photography, preferring to present photography as a kind of painting by other means,” and it “looks inconsistent to Fried’s earlier defense of medium specificity” by “approaching photograph through the optic of painting.”

These critical responses to an extent suggest that Fried, while absorbed too much in his own notion of absorption which does not originally belong to photography itself, ends up dismissing every other possibility of photography, so that beholders can see nothing other than a pictorial contour of the photographic tableaux. In other words, by emphasizing exclusively photography’s pictorial affinity, and by paying little attention to its specific tie to socio-political grounds, Fried’s new theory loses this medium’s anchorage in socio-political grounds that have been inseparable from the outset. Therefore, Elkins, although agreeing in part on contemporary photographic art’s affinity to painting, conclude that “it is necessary to locate contemporary photography as a whole not only by reference to art but to the many kinds of scientific, technological, and utilitarian images and their digital and philosophical possibilities.”

The second concern comes from the complexity of Fried’s set theory that often leads his readers to a misunderstanding that there seems to be a theoretical discrepancy between anti-theatrical formulas (absorption and to-be-seenness, etc.) and

---

model’s irrefutably staged positions; thus, this creates difficulty in understanding the subtle dynamics of the theatrical and the anti-theatrical inherent in Fried’s theory.

It seems that this complexity results from sort of theoretical leap of the notion, theatricality, made between “Art and Objecthood” (1967) and Absorption and Theatricality (1980). As Robert Smithson wrote in the 70s, it was a prevailing thought in the early time period that Fried in “Art and Objecthood” was at war against theatricality and Fried’s war against theater was often complicated by his transcendental conception that seemed ironically also theatrical:

Michael Fried has declared a “war” on what he quixotically calls “theatricality.” In a manner worthy of the most fanatical puritan, he provides the artworld with a long-overdue spectacle … Fried has set the critical stage for manneristic modernism … What Fried fears most is the consciousness of what he is doing - namely being himself theatrical.

Interestingly, Smithson’s harsh remark picked up a crucial point that Fried in “Art and Objecthood” was incubating - a higher theater that defeats a lower theater, which was, in Fried’s language in the sixties, art’s timeless drama of presentness “at every moment of which the work itself is wholly manifested.” As Fried remarked in his later discussions with Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, and Benjamin Buchloh, this point had already been in Fried’s mind since 1966 when he was teaching Diderot’s theory and criticism. But it was definitely in his subsequent elaborations in Absorption and Theatricality, Courbet’s Realism, and Manet’s modernism that Fried’s early point was

---

73 Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 167. (Italicized in the original text)
74 Michael Fried, “Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop” (Discussion with Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, and Hal Foster) in Discussions in Contemporary Culture; Number One, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1987) 57.
substantiated with more convincing historical details. It was, as Stephen Melville has argued, to distinguish the truly dramatic from the merely theatrical.

Theater is what pure painting would exclude from itself -- what it thus fails to exclude and is, in the end, obliged to acknowledge as its inward capacity to go always astray from itself (we could even say: to be always astray from itself). But, as Fried reads Diderot, this very theater can be divided against itself, sorted out into the merely theatrical and the truly dramatic. The stage -- to name the neutral thing on which the dialectic both breaks and rests -- shows forth not only the threat to or failure of painting, but also that which is most powerful and absorbing in it.75

Doubtlessly, most of Fried’s critical accounts in Why Photography revolve around the updated notion of (supreme) theatricality that sets out an imaginary network between a photograph and beholders. It is a pure communication between art and beholders because it never solicits any physical, literal recognition between them. But this “dialectics of purity” also draws a difficulty precisely because it is “an impossible work of separating the mere from the pure” and it is “where criticism is lost in a jagged hesitation of purity that are reduced to the punctual simplicity of “that which is unique and absolutely fundamental” to every art,” as Melville argued in his review on Absorption and Theatricality.76

However, we should also remember what Melville added in his review essay which he himself called, “an appendix to Fried’s work”: “[Fried’s] deep story (in Absorption and Theatricality and now reiterated in Why Photography) -- as against the apparent tale in Greenberg -- is not that of the truth of painting, but rather that of painting’s continuing effort to recover itself through and across its denials and evasions

76 Ibid., 63.
of its necessary conditions." This effort unfolds the true meaning of absorption and true status of the beholder, as Melville argues in the following paragraph:

As this project unfolds in time, it will necessarily have the character of a series of reinterpretations of the meaning of "absorption" as each given grasp of it falls before the inevitable and ineluctable fact of the beholder. The beholder, always there, gazing, is the silent motor that drives the history of modern painting forward, forcing it to find behind its ever more radical claims to absorption always the same brute fact of theater.

As Melville posited throughout his essay, Fried’s best insights have always come from this rich dialectics that invites readers to a sort of juncture between what he said and what he said not. It is, I believe, in this juncture between the implicit theatricality and the explicit anti-theatricality that Fried’s true contribution in his new book is discovered. It explains, in other words, a complexly interwoven network of photographic experience that cannot be attributed to a single entity, discipline, or discourse. As Fried elaborates, this experience reveals the fidelity of the photographed figures completely absorbed in their own world, of the photographers who come so incredibly closer to the model’s world that they become “immersive spectators” themselves, and finally of beholders whose responsibility pushes them to the very world they are looking at, despite the inviolable phenomenological distance between an image and themselves. It is an experience of theater par excellence that can exist only in this complex interrelation of one another.

77 Ibid., 65.
78 Ibid., 66.
79 Melville in his introductory comments mentions briefly Paul de Man, specifically one of his main theoretical (allegorical in de Man’s theory) maxim in Blindness and Insight (1971) that an "insight is exactly its blindness." (56) It was meant for his own criticism. But if considering the essay’s title, general theme, and its application to the essay, the allegorical reinterpretation of Michael Fried should be understood as one of the main project of this essay.
To this very end, Fried's theory of photography, even though he never mentions a word about photography's socio-political association, brings all of those interrelated fields and entities into a community of complex discourses. As Fried insightfully argues, recent photographic arts is reaching out at a great level of the *supreme fiction* that makes the models and beholders completely engrossed in what they are doing and looking at. In so doing, they go beyond contemporary spectacle society's deep-rooted concerns about the broken relationship between image and the viewer, which has succinctly been summarized by Guy Debord's following maxim: "Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle." The contemporary photographic art in the dynamics of theatricality and anti-theatricality, in other words, redefines "the nature of the relationship between the photograph and the beholder," in the way that the relationship "demands to be understood in terms of issues of self-control and *oubli de soi* that … were fundamental to the absorptive tradition from the outset." Consequently, what recent photographic art manifests is a new spectatorship that calls for a new degree of responsibility coming from spectator's extraordinary absorption in the photographic theater, as Fried has already articulated in *Absorption and Theatricality*, a primary reference for Fried's new theory:

…a painting, it was insisted, had to attract the beholder, to stop him in front of itself, and to hold him there in a perfect trance of involvement. At the same time … it was only by negating the beholder's presence that this could be achieved; only by establishing the fiction of his absence or nonexistence could his actual placement before and enthrallment by the painting be secured. This paradox directs attention to the problematic character not only of the painting-beholder relationship but of something still more fundamental - the *object*-beholder (one is tempered to say object-"subject") relationship which the painting-beholder relationship epitomizes. In Diderot's writings on painting and drama the object-beholder relationship

---

as such, the very condition of spectatordom, stands indicted as theatrical, a medium of dislocation and estrangement rather than of absorption, sympathy, self-transcendence; and the success of both arts, in fact their continued functioning as major expressions of the human spirit, are held to depend upon whether or not painter and dramatist are able to undo that state of affairs, to de-theatricalize beholding and so make it once again a mode of access to truth and conviction. ... What is called for, in other words, is at one and the same time the creation of a new sort of object -- the fully realized tableau -- and the constitution of a new sort of beholder -- a new “subject” -- whose innermost nature would consist precisely in the conviction of his absence from the scene of representation.82

Then, once again, why does photographic theater matter as a cultural agenda as never before? Why do the recent Post-documentary artists such as Aernout Mik explore the fraught terrain of theatricality? It is because, I argue, this photographic theater leads us to a new ethical terrain of representation in which formerly blind and passive spectators, invisible and detached figures in photographs, and indifferent and irresponsible photographers find each other’s undeniable relation. The space of exhibition then becomes a sort of psychological stage in which the subject and the other find each other’s invisible, yet ardent recognition. It is by this very manifestation of intersubjective spectatorship that Fried’s new theory of photography emancipates both the medium and the beholder in this post-medium era.

**Emancipation of Photography in Theater**

This new ethical terrain of theatricality has been sketched by Jacques Rancière in his recent text *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), as a part of the demand he made in his earlier work, *The Ignorant School Master* in which Rancière explored his neo-Marxist theme of intellectual emancipation. This theme finds a new metaphor in the current theatrical society in which the public/spectator exists with a hopeless passivity in

---

82 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 103-104.
a spectacle society. This passivity leads Rancière to a new aspiration by which the passive spectator becomes an active participant in the emancipated theater-community.

Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator* is first of all a philosophical question about who the spectator really is. Rancière’s question thus begins with what Diderot’s actor tried not to see. In other words, contrary to Diderot’s basic doctrine that “there is no spectator in front of a (good) actor, so as in front of a (good) painting,” Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator* revolves around an idea that “there is no theatre without a spectator.”

In classical (Platonic in particular) discourses, being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First, “viewing is the opposite of knowing.” Spectators are always confused by false appearance of what they look at due to their epistemological ignorance. Secondly, “viewing is the opposite of acting.” Spectators always remain inactive in their seat and this passivity leads them to certain inferiority. Unless accompanied with some actions, a mere viewing draws an ethical doubt. In short, to be a spectator is to be separated from both capacity to know and power to act.

According to Rancière, these two problems of the theatrical spectatorship result in two different conclusions. First is that theater is an absolutely bad thing because of its mimetic delusion that undermines truth of form and action; this is what Plato denounced drama for in his accusation of theatrical mimesis. Second conclusion is that the evil of theater lies on the presence of the spectator. It is a view that spectators’ ignorance and passivity deteriorate theatrical mimesis. In these logical consequences, spectators are not considered as much important as actors on a stage.

---

84 Ibid., 2.
85 Ibid., 2-3.
To Rancière, however, such conclusions are based on a prejudice of spectator’s epistemological capacity. It is a prejudice that the spectator cannot do anything more than the name implies; *specting,* or viewing which has nothing to do with knowing and acting.\(^{86}\) To avoid this prejudice, Rancière suggests “a theater without a spectator.” (And it is the moment Rancière from different motif arrives at the same consequence as that of Fried) The conventional spectator as a passive viewer does no longer exist in Rancière’s theater. Rather, to him, theater is a place in which actors and spectators play their own role both individually and collaboratively. He says: “a theatre without spectators … is not a theatre played out in front of empty seats, but a theatre where the passive optical relationship implied by the very term is transformed into a different relationship.”\(^{87}\) In this account, Rancière returns to the classical (Aristotelian) form of drama, in which actions and interactions (both physically and psychologically) are highly emphasized. Rancière writes that, “theatre is the place where an action is taken to its conclusion by bodies in motion in front of living bodies that are to be mobilized. The latter (the living bodies or spectators) might have relinquished their power. But this power is revived, reactivated in the performance of the former (actors), in the intelligence which constructs that performance, in the energy it generates.”\(^{88}\) Rancière further argues that, “it is on the basis of this active power that a new theatre must be built, or rather a theatre restored to its original virtue, to its true essence, of which the spectacles that takes this name offer nothing but a degraded version. What is required

---

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 3. -- “the illness of the gaze in thrall to shades. It transmits the illness of ignorance that makes the characters suffer through a machinery of ignorance, the optical machinery that prepares the gaze for illusion and passivity. A true community is therefore one that does not tolerate theatrical mediation.”

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 3-4.
is a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs.”

Here, once again, Rancière’s dialectical reversal of a certain prejudicial, hierarchical relations take place; in this case, emancipation of the passive spectator into an active participant. This self-motivated emancipation is in fact, as Rancière remarked in the first page of this book, what has constituted the theme of his early book, *The Ignorant School Master*. This book begins with a story of early nineteenth century French educator, Joseph Jacotot whose pedagogic adventure of teaching French literature to a group of Flemish students who did not speak French proved the possibility of intellectual self-emancipation. 

Without any further *explication* except for the two texts written in different languages, Jacotot’s students succeeded in designing their own pedagogic apparatus and learned the language. For Rancière, It was the moment in which the explication as “the myth of pedagogy” lost its power; and it was also “a sign of equality” that broke the barrier between teaching and learning that was initiated by the master teacher, Socrates. Therefore, Jacotot concludes that the most ignorant teacher is the true master as long as the teacher’s ignorance turns on students’ own intellectual inspiration to emancipate themselves from all prejudices.

“*To emancipate an ignorant person, one must be, and one need only be, emancipated oneself, that is to say, conscious of the true power of the human mind. The ignorant person will learn by himself what the master doesn’t know if the master believes he can and obliges him to realize his*

---

89 Ibid., 4.
91 Ibid., 6.
92 Ibid., 11.
93 Ibid., 29.
capacity: a circle of power homologous to the circle of powerlessness that ties the student to the explicator of the old method (… the Old Master)”

In the same way, Rancière claims that we, spectators, already possess enough intellectual capability to transform ourselves from passive viewers to more active participants. Classical drama had already anticipated this transformative process through the form of chorus. In most Greek tragedy, there was a moment in which spectators become active participants when chorus begins to speak directly to audiences. At this moment, audiences were as important and as active as actors. Rancière says, “every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor, every man of action, is the spectator of the same story.”

According to Rancière, emancipation begins when “we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting.” It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. Such transformation turns this whole process of spectatorship into a process of building a collective community. Rancière says “theatre remains the only place where the audience confronts itself as a collective. … It signifies that ‘theatre’ is an exemplary community form. It involves an idea of community as self-presence, in contrast to the distance of representation.”

What is behind all of this process of transformation and emancipation is what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible, an epistemological engine that pushes us to the limit of our passivity, an engine that makes us move toward the stage of action.

---

94 Ibid., 15.
95 Jacques Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator, 17.
96 Ibid., 13.
97 Ibid., 5.
Theater is a symbolic form of our society in which political conflict and mediation appear to be a structure-giving power in this interactive cultural stage. Rancière says:

Theatre accuses itself of rendering spectators passive and thereby betraying its essence as community action. It consequently assigns itself the mission of reversing its effects and expiating its sins by restoring to spectators ownership of their consciousness and their activity. The theatrical stage and performance thus become a vanishing mediation between the evil of spectacle and the virtue of true theatre. They intend to teach their spectators ways of ceasing to be spectators and becoming agents of a collective practice.\textsuperscript{98}

Here, the distance between actors and audience or distance between a work of art and beholders is restructured because, unlike the conventional Diderotian motif that there should be no recognizable distance between actors and audience, the distance is a necessary condition of communication and community. Rancière writes, “distance is not an evil to be abolished, but the normal condition of any communication.”\textsuperscript{99}

**Photography and Ethics**

Rancière’s insight above all makes sure that there is an inter-subjective relation in spectatorship that calls for an action and communication. This inseparable interaction between a photograph and the spectator establishes what I prefer to call a theatrical community in which the two recognize each other’s ontological validity regardless of all the negativities of the term, theater -- “frivolous, mere, and literal” space. What does it mean that there is no difference between a documentary and art photography mimicking each other, as Mik’s fake documentary is symbolically contesting? Why is it still an issue that we are unable to distinguish between the two, as many contemporary concerns of social documentary revolve around this very indistinguishability between art and reality?

It is after all that we are still living the life of prison in Platonic cave and this is why the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 8.
\item \textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 10.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
call for the emancipation and the new ethics of media art are urgent. In today’s culture where art’s emancipative roles are urgently requested, photography, I argue, should not merely be an extension of painting, but be an extension of our lives, which nonetheless would never exclude any artistic sensibilities that are distributed in every layer of our sensible life.

Photography is a theater in its most intrinsic sense, a stage that calls up the presence of the photographed despite its painful absence. Admitting this photographic theatricality, we should say that the sympathy of photography is not to fill up the space of absence with false morality and skepticism, but to recognize the painful absence and try to commemorate those who are not there. Aernout Mik’s theatrical photography illuminates, in its highly expanded/distributed emotional networking, the presence of the other, who has long occupied the marginal area of subjectivity. There, the distance between the subject’s ontological security and the other’s plight is negotiated through the increased sensorial interactivity. Indeed, it is in the sensorial interactivity of theater that the subject recognizes the other’s disastrous condition despite its voiceless, unrecognizable identity. At this moment, the other’s disastrous political reality produces various sensational echoes, and it is at this point that the singularity of documentary embraces the multiplicity of art. As Aernout Mik’s theatrical documentary manifests, photographic art today emerges as an ethical apparatus that leads spectators to a stage of ontological negotiation in which the fleeting fidelity of socio-political documentary turns into a more enduring ethical drama through the theatrical expansion of the sensations.
CHAPTER 6
REPRESENTING THE UNREPRESENTABLE: LUC DELAHAYE’S HISTORY AND THE ETHICS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

“When to write, or not to write makes no difference, then writing changes – whether it happens or not; it is the writing of the disaster.”

--- *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot

**Writing of Disaster**

Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster* evokes an idea that the ethics of writing begins at the very moment in which writing reveals the disastrous impossibility of representing a disaster.¹ For writers like Blanchot, whose entire life was overshadowed by traumatic encounters with the victims of the Holocaust, writing itself was not an adequate tool to reduce the pain of the disaster. This is not only because no writing could adequately represent such an unimaginably horrifying disaster, but also because this representation would re-terrorize and re-victimize the reader. A disaster like the Holocaust is unimaginable and unrepresentable; thus, at any rate, it should never be represented in the illusions of writing. Recognizing this inevitable dilemma of writing, Blanchot claims that the writer’s ethos resides in the refusal of writing: “To write: to refuse to write – to write by way of this refusal.”²

Blanchot’s ethical refusal of representation has been embodied in French director Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 documentary film *Shoah*. [Figure 6-1] Originally meaning “annihilation” in Hebrew, *Shoah* is a globally acclaimed nine-hour documentary about

---

¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 7. – “The disaster, unexperienced. It is what escapes the very possibility of experience – it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes. Which does not mean that the disaster, as the force of writing, is excluded from it, is beyond the pale of writing or extratextual. It is dark disaster that brings the light.”

² Ibid., 10.
the Holocaust. This global recognition, however, results not from the film’s accomplishment in documentary conventions, but from Lanzmann’s intentional refusal of the very conventions. Throughout the film, he never uses any archive photographs, films, or voiceover narrations that directly depict the devastating human conditions in the camp. Lanzmann, instead, fills his entire film with interviews in which the truth of the camp is revealed in meticulous questions and answers about the day that each interviewee came to be involved in, as a victim, as a bystander, or as a collaborator.

The film, therefore, involves no sensationalism that visual spectacles may produce. As Lanzmann believes, such secondary images are incapable of conveying victims’ terror and despair of facing their imminent death in a gas chamber. How can one capture those moments only briefly hovering in the eyes of victims and then just going away with their last breath? It is impossible, and this impossibility of capturing reality of disaster was indeed Lanzmann’s most acute recognition of the Holocaust that eventually led him to produce Shoah, a film about the impossibility of imagining the unimaginable.

---

3 Raye Farr, “Some Reflection on Claude Lanzmann’s Approach to the Examination of the Holocaust,” in *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television Since 1933*, ed. Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman (London, New York: Wall Flower Press, 2005), 161. -- *Shoah* has been called as ‘the film event of the century’ (Paul Attanasio, Washington Post), and ‘among the greatest films ever made’ (Gene Siskel, Chicago Tribune).

4 For example, the film’s episode about the death camps at Treblinka and Auschwitz consists of a testimony of survivor Abraham Bomba who was a barber, or Henryk Gawkowski (the man in the poster) who drove a train to the dead camps while he was intoxicated with vodka given by Nazi officers. The horror and pain of the deceased were delivered by their unimaginable memories which are more horrifying than any other visual reenactments.

5 Claude Lanzmann, “Interview with Spiegel,” Spiegel online International, trans. Christopher Sultan, accessed November 25, 2011, http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/0,1518,716722,00.html – “… there are no images of people dying in the gas chamber. … (the Nazi)removed all traces. I wanted to resurrect the dead…”

6 Ibid., np – “…The ruthlessness of death in the gas chamber remains incomprehensible. Presenting this bewilderment is the goal of my film.”
Chilean media artist Alfredo Jaar also engages with this impossibility of representation in his six-year political art project, *The Rwanda Project*. In 1994, when the most massive genocide since the Holocaust occurred in Rwanda, Jaar flew there to witness the terrifying failure of humanity in his own time.\(^7\) The atrocity of the tribal war fueled by western colonialism was far beyond his imagination; according to a UN report, more than a million people were killed in the first hundred days of the genocide, and while the western intervention was lingering, about 20% of Rwandan population disappeared in that single year.\(^8\)

In this apocalyptic land, Jaar interviewed and took photos of victims and survivors, in complete shock and trauma. When he returned to his New York studio, however, he couldn’t to do anything with over 3,500 pictures he brought back from the killing field, because the cruelty of the photos was unspeakable and unrepresentable.\(^9\) After spending an uneasy year in traumatic memories, Jaar finally decided to make an exhibition with the images. But in the show, he never allowed visitors to see the photographs; instead, he carefully put them in a number of black boxes bearing silk-screened descriptions of the images contained within. [Figure 6-2] In this specific setting, the viewing of his photographs was precluded and replaced with the experience of reading. Art critic David Levi-Strauss in this regard remarks that Jaar’s installation “is

\(^8\) For Official UN report, visit “The United Nations Rwandan Genocide Report”.
heretical in its refusal of visual representation. It was non-representation. It was meant to bear witness to the impossibility of representing the unrepresentable.”

**Disaster of Writing**

Remaining in silence before great disasters, rather than speaking recklessly, was indeed one of lessons that have long been empathized by many European intellectuals since the Holocaust. This massive failure of the Reason drove them to an idea that the Nazi crime was so unimaginably horrific that nothing could adequately represent it. Jean-François Lyotard has pointed out the unfathomable atrocity of the event by saying that, “the Holocaust was like an epic earthquake whose seismic intensity was so powerful that it destroyed not only lives, buildings and objects, but also the very instruments used to measure it.” This immeasurability encouraged Lyotard to compare the disaster with Kantian notion of *sublime*, the other side of aesthetic experience that designated “the incapacity of imagination before the absolute” and “the agitated emotion that allowed only pathos.” “No one” writes Lyotard, “can – by writing, by painting, by anything – pretend to be witness and truthful reporter, be “equal” to the sublime affection, without being rendered guilty of falsification and imposture through this very pretension,” because sublime is the feeling of the unrecognizable. Thus, as in the Blanchotian axiom, Lyotard also concluded that “art does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it.”

---

13 Ibid., 45.
14 Ibid., 47.
Both Lanzmann’s and Jaar’s arts of non-representation certainly echo this post-Auschwitz aesthetic tenet. By rejecting all the impossible desire of representing the unrepresentable, they come up with an ethically legitimate form of art that would never disturb the dignity of its subjects. Their determination not to show images of victims moreover protects them from the moral stigma of voyeurism, sensationalism, exoticism, or what David Levi Strauss called “an ideological crime.”\textsuperscript{15} And it is this conscious resistance to image’s impure visual sensation that grants them the great ethical recognition.

However, when the ethical concerns prevail in art, and when art submerges in the domain of ethics, a fatal irony of the non-representation emerges – an irony of visual art decimating all visuality for the sake of ethics. If art should take the complete absence of representation, then it will be a negation of art, as Lyotard himself admitted in his remark, “[art’s] incapacity to produce forms inaugurates and marks the end of art.”\textsuperscript{16} If no one is allowed to produce or see a visual testimony of what happened in the concentration camp or in the Rwandan villages due to the ethical concerns, then it is “to confer on the disasters the prestige of the mythical,” as Giorgio Agamben has once argued.\textsuperscript{17} And, if art has to make a compromise with ethics or politics, or \textit{sublimated}

\textsuperscript{16} Jean-François Lyotard, \textit{Heidegger and "the Jews,"} 44.
\textsuperscript{17} Giorgio Agamben, \textit{Remnants of Auschwitz: the witness and the archive} (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 32. -- Giorgio Agamben has once pointed out that the trope of unrepresentability widely accepted by the post-Auschwitz intellectuals, rather “confers on the genocidal crime the prestige of the mythical.” As in the Christian tradition, the unrepresentability hinges on the incomprehensibility of divine mysteries. Thus, the application of this term to such disasters as the Holocaust, according to Agamben, was rather to enhance the mystic power of the disaster. Agamben viewed this mystification process as an unconscious repetition of the Nazi atrocity in their Final Solution because mystifying the mass-murder through the unbelievable, unimaginable and unspeakable violence was at the core of the Solution. See also Ibid., 156-7.
toward those non-art disciplines, then this “sublimation” may signify art’s historical ending in Hegelian sense.\textsuperscript{18}

This set of suppositions reveals Blanchot’s real dilemma, the dilemma that turns ‘the writing of the disaster’ into ‘the disaster of the writing,’ or ‘the writing’s own disaster.’\textsuperscript{19} When representation of a disaster gives up on its own representability due to the ethical concerns and political pressures, then it would inevitably end up in its own disaster of self-destruction. When art negates what it is originally capable of, as an ethical response to the unrepresentable disaster, then it would fall into a fatal irony of self-denial that would eventually bring a decline in art. The self-motivated refusal of the visual in art may reduce ethical tension. But in the meantime, the pain of image, the decline of art’s viability, finds no consolation.

**Luc Delahaye: History**

It seems that Blanchot’s dilemma of unrepresentation – the irony of art having to negate itself for the sake of ethics – has revived in the current age of war and terrorism, once disasters such as 9/11 appeared to break a certain limit of human understanding, and thereby brought a sense of incomprehensibility in a society. A *Chicago Tribune* article published a few days after 9/11, for instance, read “the shock of the attacks was so powerful and so peculiar that it made the low-rent postmodern American attitude of

\textsuperscript{18} This comprises a grand axis of Hegelian aesthetics; art’s self-sublimation within the ever-developing orbit of dialectical history bears its own transformation into religion, into philosophy, which is what is not art any more. For contemporary thoughts on this aspect, see also, Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997)

sarcasm, aloofness, and pluralism no longer viable or even possible.”

In this uneasy moment, even Susan Sontag’s early comment that “the attack was undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliance and actions” was considered a “ridiculous rant,” whereas comedian David Letterman’s “unusually pained sheepishness” in his first TV show after the attack was seen sympathetic and appropriate.

As Judith Butler remarks, this cultural attitude soon grew into a nation-wide “political paranoia” in which intellectual or cultural “explanation” about the disaster was “considered either complicitous with terrorism or as constituting a “weak link” in the fight against it.” Consequently, freedom of speech was suspended, images were censored, and cultural pluralism and political relativism became a target of public hysteria.

For many Americans, restriction of their civil right was considered a necessary procedure to recover national security. But while the U.S. public voluntarily surrendered their constitutional rights to express freely what they think, the vitality of the U.S. culture was rapidly declined.

However, while this public attitude after 9/11 threatened the vitality of U.S. visual culture, it also urged artists to come up with another way to visualize political disasters.

---

21 Ibid., np.
22 Public furor against the New York times photograph of dead American military contractors who were killed, mutilated, and hung on a bridge by local insurgents at Falluja, Iraq in 2004, controversies surrounding president Obama’s remark of lifting a media ban of showing images of military coffins at Dover in 2009, a media policy that prohibited further release of Abu Ghraib images in 2009, or the unconditional deferment of dead Osama bin Laden’s photograph in media in 2011 explains the fear and distrust of photographic truth after 9/11. See chapter 1.
23 See critical magazine October’s winter 2008 special issue, published “to evaluate and explain the seeming absence of visible opposition to the Iraq War during the past years within the milieu of cultural producers working in the sphere of contemporary visual culture.” Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Rachel Churner, October 123 (Winter 2008).
documentary photographers who have found sort of mediation between art and politics in their politically engaging and visually provocative photographs of recent catastrophes. These Post-documentary artists show how effectively and intuitively a documentary can address sensitive socio-political agenda without diminishing its aesthetic potentials.

Luc Delahaye, a renowned French photojournalist, is one of the leading artists in the Post-documentary practice, as his works continue to appear in various internationally recognized art institutions, including Tate Modern (2012), Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2012) J. Paul Getty Museum (2007), and Cleveland Museum (2005). Delahaye began his career as a photojournalist in his early twenties. His first professional work, commissioned by the SIPA agency in 1985-86, was done in the first Lebanon war. Since then, he has always taken himself to the world’s most dangerous edges to produce the most vivid documentations of wars and catastrophes. By the 1990s, Delahaye earned international reputation for covering wars in Afghanistan, Rwanda, Chechnya, or Bosnia. He has also worked for the major photography and news institutions such as the Magnum agency (1993-2004) and Newsweek (1994), and received many recognizable awards including the Robert Capa Gold Medal (1993 and 2002), World Press Photo first prize (1993, 1994 and 2003), the ICP Infinite Award (2001), the Niepce Prize (2002), and the Deutsche Borse Photography Prize (2005).²⁴

In addition to the war reportages, Delahaye has also produced a number of portrait series throughout his career, such as Portrait/1 (1996), Memo (1997), L’Autre (The Other) (1999), and Winterreise (Winter Journey) (1998-1999). These portrait series featured various types of catastrophic humanity saturated by poverty, homelessness,

drug/alcohol addiction, and civil wars in his hometown Paris or other area like Bosnia and Russia. Interestingly, these portrait works had an analogy in the early American social documentarians such as Walker Evans or Arthur Rothstein. Delahaye’s *Portrait/1* (1996) *and L’Autre* (1999), for instance, reiterated the hidden camera tactic Evans experimented in his *Subway* series, and thereby produced the most emblematic iconography of marginalized human-beings in their most defenseless moment. [Figure 6-3, 6-4] Moreover, Delahaye’s strategy in *Winterreise* (1998-99) had many things in common with Rothstein; just like this F.S.A. precursor, Delahaye employed a translator and made him talk to the person whom he wanted to photograph; then when the person became completely unconscious about Delahaye due to the talk with the translator, he jumped in and took photos.

These early practices reveal two things about Delahaye as a photographer: the social concern and formal/aesthetic interest. As his early photojournalist career shows, Delahaye was a very determined war-reportage photographer, always drawn to the most dangerous political conflicts around the world. But at the same time, he never stopped sharpening his photographic skills and formal language, as his later efforts in the portrait series demonstrate. Therefore, although adventurous and somewhat abrupt,

---

26 In *Portrait/1*(1996), Delahaye photographs French homeless people by asking them to have their photo in a photo booth while Delahaye looked away. In *The Other* (1999) Delahaye set up a hidden camera in the Metro to photograph commuters.
27 “While the translator made conversation, Mr. Delahaye sat in a corner and waited. The hours passed. After a while, life resumed its course. “I hadn’t moved,” he recalled. “The people didn’t pay any attention to me; they thought I was secondary. I took photos.”” 
Delahaye’s radical career-turn in 2001 was not entirely unexpected in regard to this early career.

Delahaye repositioned himself from a successful journalist to an artist in 2001, launching his famous *History* series on European stages.\(^{28}\) Although still dealing with the most news-worthy events around the globe, this prototype *History* series took a different direction from conventional modes of photojournalism; they were large-scale photographs hung on the gallery walls, with distinctive emphasis on color and pictorial composition. Furthermore, Delahaye began to incorporate digital technology in his works; after making several shots in the same position, he digitally reassembled them to produce a final image that was more dramatic and appealing.\(^{29}\)

It was certainly a break of journalistic conventions based on image’s authenticity and objectivity. But this break resulted from Delahaye’s particular recognition of photography’s possibilities and limits that conventional photojournalism had been failing to address:

> Photojournalism is neither photography nor journalism. It has its function but it’s not where I see myself: the press is for me just a means of photographing, for material, not for telling the truth. In magazines, the images are vulgar, reality is reduced to a symbolic or simplistic function ...

---


[O]ne of the reasons for the photographs’ large size is to make them incompatible with the economy of the press.\textsuperscript{30}

In 2003, Delahaye made his successful debut in the United States at the Rico/Maresca Gallery in New York. In this show, he presented eight pieces of four-by-eight foot color prints documentary series, “History,” that dealt with the most problematic histories of the contemporary world, including the U.S. Bombing of Taliban Positions, Genoa G8 Summit, Taliban soldiers, the Milosevic Trial, the aftermath of September 11, etc. The presented images contained sufficient journalistic values. But when presented as large-size picture formats at the gallery, these news images also invited the viewer to a unique pictorial experience.

*Taliban Soldier* (2001), perhaps the show’s most striking work, summarizes the exquisite pictorial quality of Delahaye’s documentary. [Figure 6-5] This provocative photograph features a dead Taliban soldier lying in a ditch of a mountain valley near Kabul. His body is bent along the line of the ditch; his khaki-colored Taliban uniform, without boots, a piece of straw crossing his face, and dirt over his body, all indicate his miserable and unprepared death. But as Bill Sullivan has noted in his exhibition review, viewers find in this image a certain “grace” that is quite unusual in our viewing of war casualties in photographs.\textsuperscript{31} This unusual grace, according to Sullivan, derives from the image’s unique bird’s eye view,\textsuperscript{32} which is one of the most popular compositional conventions in painting, generating a sense of entirety in canvas’s given limit. This pictorial sensibility therefore brings Delahaye into the same rubric of contemporary


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., np.
pictorial documentary art that has been explored by such artists as Jeff Wall or Andreas Gursky.\textsuperscript{33} As in these pictorial conventions, Delahaye places the subject matter (the dead fighter) right in the center of his picture, turning it into an object of beholding.

Some viewers understandably have found it as a “disturbing ethnocentric rendering of human suffering and pain.”\textsuperscript{34} But there is also a powerful beholding experience in this image that somehow neutralizes the ethical concerns. It is, as art historian Michael Fried has recently argued in his study on contemporary photographic art, viewers’ strange experience of the soldier who appears in the picture so deeply absorbed in his own world as to stop the viewers and attract them in his world.\textsuperscript{35} This absorption, in turn, reinforces the very confrontational structure between the soldier and the viewer, keeping the question of ethics wholly within the two entities, not between the photographer and the viewer.

In order to maximize this absorptive beholding experience, Delahaye employed a few tactics that are normally considered a break of journalistic protocol. For instance, the straw placed between soldier’s half closed eyes is in fact not part of reality but something Delahaye later digitally added. This digital manipulation however creates a sharp focal point that attracts the viewer’s attention, to an extent that the viewer’s experience, although pictorial at an art gallery, could not completely ignore the face of the victim. Moreover unlike other photojournalists, Delahaye often uses a large-format, Linhof panoramic camera to capture images that are “incompatible with the economy of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{33} Michael Fried, “World Merger: Michael Fried on Luc Delahaye,” \textit{Artforum International} vol.44 no. 7, (March 2006): 64.  
\textsuperscript{35} Michael Fried, \textit{Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before}, 40.
\end{flushright}
the press.”  

Not only does this incompatibility of the large scale panorama help Delahaye make a successful departure from journalism, but it also gives him a different sort of ethical excuse for photographing the other’s pain. It is the slow and detached process of the large, heavy panoramic camera that “allows him to maintain an absence or distance to the event.” In other words, rather than capturing a snapshot of disasters that leads its viewer to a quick glance of the other’s pain, Delahaye’s panoramic camera and digital after-work slowly and meticulously collect “what comes after” a disaster, with enough duration and distance to create both vivid and thoughtful images. This slow and detached strategy defines Delahaye’s position between the aesthetic domain and political domain.

In my head I am thinking only of the process. Do I have enough light? Is the distance good? Speed too? This is what allows me to maintain an absence or distance to the event. If I impose myself too much, look for a certain effect, I’d miss the photo. This happened very fast; I need to make it slow. I see the two crossing in my mind.

Image that Thinks

*Kabul Road* (2001) is one of the works that shows Delahaye’s tactical promotion of slowness and detachedness. [Figure 6-6] This work depicts a group of Afghan local people gathered on a roadside in Kabul that is frequently ambushed and air-bombed. In the center of the group, two bodies – one old and the other young (seemingly his son) – are laid down one by one with no sign of life; blood oozes through their clothes, indicating the terrifying violence that caused this tragic death. People, presumably local

---

travelers, however seem uninterested in this death; a couple of children playfully hang around the bodies, and others look vacantly at the camera or somewhere else. There is no trace of panic in the picture. Instead, the group of people makes a peaceful horizontal line, unintentionally arranged by the directions from or to which they come and go. This line of the people also makes a compositional harmony with the lines of barren mountain range in the background. It seems to have been in the late afternoon, and the army has left the scene already, leaving this innocent dead untouched.

It is quite a simple visual composition and indeed, there is not much to see beyond what appears in the photograph. But this simplicity creates an ironical duality, when it is compared with the heavily layered historical connotations of the simple, semiarid Afghan landscape and its obvious analogy to the people’s rugged lives. Michael Fried once called this ironic duality “a balance of opposing forces” that leads the viewer both to detachment and to immersion in the scene:

The photographs ... involve a balance of opposing forces. So, for example there is in most a strong sense of distance, even withdrawal, on the part of the photographer: the viewer quickly becomes aware that a basic protocol of these images rules out precisely the sort of feats of capture – of fast-moving events, extreme gestures and emotions, vivid momentary juxtapositions of persons and things, etc. – that one associates with photojournalism at its bravura best. At the same time, the photographs in their sheer breadth and detail extend an invitation to the viewer to approach closely, to peer intently at one or another portion of the pictorial field, in short to become engrossed or indeed immersed in intimate contemplation of all that the image offers to be seen.39

The ironical duality as such is more evident in Delahaye’s another work, the U.S. Bombing Of Taliban Positions (2001). [Figure 6-7] Delahaye took this image in his risky trip to the North Alliance territory where the confrontation between the Northern Alliance

---

and The US troop often brought an attack to the western media reporters.\(^\text{40}\) It was a place where no camera man could be “a passing tourist” with a camera as a “passport” to the area, as Susan Sontag once accused photographers of it.\(^\text{41}\)

Delahaye photographed the image of bombing with his highly visible panoramic camera. But the image’s incredible simplicity makes the viewer doubt the necessity of this dangerous gamble. The image shows just smoke floating over the ground. (The US troops often make random air-bombing over the area to keep the invisible Taliban guerrillas away from their camps.\(^\text{42}\)) In this image of ephemeral smoke, the spectral aspect of the bombing, intended to ward off invisible threats, is well indicated; bombing, one may think, would be a pandemonium. But the bombing Delahaye witnessed in closer distance was just as calm and slow as a specter, and the vast and monumental landscape with parched weeds everywhere also brings the very serenity (or the sublime) of the war to the viewer.

Certainly, as curator Carol Squiers has put it, the images’ “slowness” and “detachment” overturns the journalistic tropes of “immediacy” and “instantaneity.” “By implementing this reversal,” continues Squiers, “Delahaye alters his relationship to the human subjects caught in newsworthy events, often refusing to spectacularize the pain written on the faces and bodies of the strangers he photographs.”\(^\text{43}\) In this altered relationship, viewers feel a complex dynamics of attached and detachedness that somehow make them even more curious about the truth of the image.

Fried in his recent study about photography (*Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008)) has explained this curious attraction coming from image’s dynamics of attached/detachedness as a *supreme fiction* that constantly calls the viewer’s attention despite image’s ostensible silence and indifference.⁴⁴ In his reading on Delahaye, Fried poses the same idea:

> there is … an emphasis on the sheer openness of the image, its total accessibility to vision, as if the photographer has somehow managed to withdraw so as to make way for reality itself. But precisely because this is so, the viewer is given only the most minimal indications of where to look; unlike a photojournalistic image, which is effective only insofar as it makes a single vivid point, Delahaye’s panoramic images in their richness and complexity (and also, in a manner of speaking, their simplicity) leave the viewer to shift for himself or herself to recognize [the main event] and then by looking closely to “activate” the discreet but palpable drama at the photo’s heart.⁴⁵

In this account, the photographic experience, which formerly has always been complicated by ethical concerns of showing (viewing) the other’s affairs, is reconstructed by the image’s *supreme fiction* that figures in the image does not realize the presence of the beholder in front of them. This fiction, in Fried’s theory, attracts the viewers even closer to the very world that the figures in the picture are absorbed in: sort of psychological aspiration resulting from a curious engrossment of painted /photographed models into a thing in their own world.⁴⁶ In this theatrical or deliberate

---

⁴⁶ Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, 40. -- These pretenses “make paintings appear – by depicting personages wholly absorbed in what they are doing, thinking, and feeling – to deny the presence before them of the beholder, or to establish the ontological fiction that the beholder does not exist. Only if this was accomplished could the actual beholder be stopped and held before the canvas”
performance of figures in the photographs, “the significant details are discovered by [beholders] rather than delivered personally by the photographer,” argues Fried.\(^47\)

For Fried, this absorptive motif signals the work’s artistic nature: “because the viewer knows or at least believes that this is not the case (details not delivered by photographer), the ultimate effect of those details is to underscore the effect of art.”\(^48\) That is, since the experience of beholding in Delahaye’s works is accomplished by a sort of transcendental fiction that figures in a picture would never know that there will be beholders outside, it inherits the pictorial tradition first developed by some of the eighteenth century French painters.\(^49\)

However, as I have argued in Chapter 5, what appears non-theatrical for Fried is in fact very theatrical in regard to the dynamics of de/attachment; it is a sort of hyper fiction that one does not know or does not care about the beholder’s presence, which is undeniably there. As Fried himself often recounts, this staged detachedness “conveys an unmistakable sense of deliberate construction that belongs to what [Fried] has called to-be-seenness.”\(^50\) In this complex dynamics between to-see and to-be-seen, Fried’s “supreme fiction” reassures an inseparable tie, or “the nature of the relationship” between an image and a beholder despite the apparent detachedness of the image from the beholder.\(^51\)

In Fried’s new insight, Delahaye’s detached image is a (photographic) theater par excellence that powerfully attracts the audience onto the stage where the political tragedies are being played with great actuality. Moreover, it does achieve all of this

\(^48\) Ibid., 66.  
\(^49\) Michael Fried, \textit{Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before}, 40.  
\(^50\) Michael Fried, \textit{Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before}, 59.  
\(^51\) Michael Fried, \textit{Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before}, 339.
without any unnatural beautification, or sentimental soliciting that may construct another world far away from the beholder’s. If the beauty and sentiments cause the visual exoticism or tourism in their otherworldliness, as Susan Sontag argued, Delahaye’s detached images keep the viewer reattached to the world he/she is looking at. Fried in this regard argues that Delahaye’s promotion of imaginative encounter between the photographed and beholders bring a “merger” between the two worlds:

Delahaye’s panoramic pictures aspire to yield an imaginative experience of something like merger with the world- an aspiration that may well strike a wholly original note in contemporary photography. 

**Ethics of Photography**

The merger Fried claims to happen in this subtle dialectics of detachment and attachment in Delahaye’s documentary is in fact a sort of psychological encounter between the acting object and the viewing subject or the photographed others and the beholding self. Fried’s theoretical sensitivity details up this very possibility of an active spectatorship, and therefore, his theory touches on the limit of modern subjectivism in regard to the visual experience. Indeed, the transcendental (Cartesian) subject who had been believed to have a privileged power to control the entire field of authorship and spectatorship arises and falls simultaneously in Fried’s theory; it is the moment that Fried calls for beholder-subject’s voluntary and active engagement (“self-control and 

---

54 Before Fried, Delahaye also had addressed the same thought in an interview: “the quest for the perfect action, pure in its efficacy, getting over anything that constituted an obstacle; attaining - by a form of absence, by a kind of unawareness, maybe - to unity with the real. A silent unity. There is something rather beautiful about the practice of photography: it allows the self to be reunited with the world.” Philippe Dagen, “Luc Delahaye: Snap Decision,” 31.
55 As argued in *Absorption and Theatricality*, Fried’s supreme fiction is above all a request for a new spectatorship: “What is called for, [in this Supreme Fiction] is at one and the same time the creation of a new sort of object -- the fully realized tableau -- and the constitution of a new sort of beholder -- a new “subject” -- whose innermost nature would consist precisely in the conviction of his absence from the scene of representation” (104)
oubli de soi" when a figure in a picture turns around from, or unable to look at, the beholder, (for instance, the figures in Jeff Wall’s *Overpass* (2001), Paul Stand’s *Blind* (1916) or Walker Evans’s *Blind subway musician* (1938), who all either turn around or cannot see the beholder, somehow encourage the beholder to come closer to them [Figure 6-8, 6-9, 6-10]) or when Fried says that Delahaye let the beholder “discover significant details” of an image, instead of showing them by himself (by his privilege as a photographer). In this repositioning, Fried’s beholders appear not as the privileged subject, but one with full of aspiration and willingness to encounter with the other in pictures. This aspiration and willingness of the beholder uncovered by the dialectical shift of Fried’s insight lead us to the ethical terrain of Delahaye and other Post-documentary artists.

To this end, it will be useful to recall Emmanuel Levinas’s *ethics of the other* because Levinas’s ethics revolves around the very idea of *ethical encounter* between the subject and the other. Levinas who had considered that the crisis of modern subject resulted from the Cartesian subject’s oblivion of the ontological validity of the other (most painfully recognized in the Nazi crime during the World War II) attempted to recuperate the other’s existential right, as a new and *first* philosophical task. This attempt above all begins with the repositioning of the other’s ontic validity from an insubstantial concept to a substantial being.

I comprehend being in the other, beyond its particularity as a being. The person with whom I am in relation, I call being, but in so calling him, I call to

---

56 Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, 339. (see footnote 58)
57 Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, 44-47 and 63-93
58 Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, 339. -- “The ultimate artistic significance of that state of affairs [dynamics of theatricality and anti-theatricality] - at any rate, this is my claim - demands to be understood in terms of issues of self control and oubli de soi that … were fundamental to the absorptive or antitheatrical tradition from the outset.”
[upon] him. I do not only think that he is, I speak to him. He is my partner in the heat of a relation which ought only have made him present to me.⁵⁹

And this repositioning of the other from a concept to an actual being whom one can call on, think of, and speak to brings about an ethical responsibility, “a summons to respond”:

The absolutely Other is the human Other. And the putting into question of the Same by the Other is a summons to respond. The I is not simply conscious of this necessity to respond, as if it were a matter of an obligation or a duty about which a decision could be made; rather the I is, by its very position, responsibility through and through.⁶⁰ ⁶¹

As Levinas’ famous ethical imperatives often pose it, this “summons to respond” or the capital I’s “ethical responsibility” comes into play when the I recognizes the face of the other (“A being is a human being and it is as a neighbor that a human being is accessible – as a face.”⁶² And “to be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill.”⁶³). Here, the face is equal to the other’s ontological testimony that “defies all the murderous will” to eliminate it:

That the relation with a being is the invocation of a face … can indeed appear somewhat surprising when one is accustomed to the conception of a being that is by itself insignificant, a profile against a luminous horizon and only acquiring signification in virtue of its presence within this horizon. The face signifies otherwise. In it, the infinite resistance of a being to our power affirms itself precisely against the murderous will that it defies; because, completely naked, the face signifies itself.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height” in Emmanuel Levinas; Basic Philosophical Writings, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (Bloominton: Indiana University Press, 1996), 17.
⁶¹ Although in different motif, it somehow reiterates Fried’s “supreme fiction” in which the beholder (the subject) discovers the figures’ world in painting (the other’s situations) despite the latter’s complete otherness. This cognitive encounter with the other, just like in Fried’s to-be-seen-ss, brings a “summon to respond” to the very existence of the other.
⁶³ Ibid., 9.
⁶⁴ Ibid., 10.
As many post-Auschwitz writers point out, the Auschwitz broke out in the failure of ethical recognition, and its most monstrous killing machines (the gas chamber and the crematoria) were developed in the malicious wish to remove all possibilities of imagining the human form of the other.\textsuperscript{65} By annihilating everything and everyone that might bear witness to the monstrosity of their crime, the Nazi wanted to make sure that “even if some proofs remain and some survive, people will say that the events [the Holocaust] are too monstrous to be believed …”\textsuperscript{66} Giorgio Agamben, in this regard, argues that the moral rhetoric of unrepresentation (an idea that the Auschwitz is unrepresentable) is “an unconscious repetition” of the Nazi’s Final Solution because mystifying the mass-murder by destroying all human forms (the possibility of representation, as a witness, as a testimony) was at the core of the Solution.\textsuperscript{67}


\textsuperscript{66} Primo Levi, \textit{The Drowned and the Saved}, 11-12. Here Levi transcribes the Nazi SS member’s scornful warning -- “However the war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed …”

\textsuperscript{67} Giorgio Agamben, \textit{Remnants of Auschwitz: the witness and the archive} (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 156-157 -- “If ….whoever participated in the “Final Solution” was called a Geheimnistrager, a keeper of secret, the Muselmann is the absolutely unwitnessable, invisible ark of biopower. Invisible because empty, because the Muselmann is nothing other than the volkloser Raum, the space empty of people at the center of the camp that, in separating all life from itself, marks the point in which the citizen passes into the staatsangehorige of non-Aryan descent, the non-Aryan into the Jew, the Jew into the deportee and, finally, the deported Jew beyond himself into the Muselmann, that is, into a bare, unassignable and unwitnessable life.

This is why those who assert the unsayability of Auschwitz today should be more cautious in their statements. If they mean to say that Auschwitz was a unique event in the face of which the witness must in some way submit his every word to the test of an impossibility of speaking, they are right. But if, joining uniqueness to unsayability, they transform Auschwitz into a reality absolutely separable from language, if they break the tie between an impossibility and a possibility of speaking that, in the Muselmann, constitutes testimony, then they unconsciously repeat the Nazis’ gesture; they are in secret solidarity with the Arcanum imperii.”
This particular historical reflection has requested a new task of images in spite of all the negativities and vulnerability, as Georges Didi-Huberman has recently articulated in his book, *Images in spite of all: four photographs from Auschwitz* (2008). If Didi Huberman’s request for photographic images as “eyes of history” is valid, then our next logical question should be whether recent photographic arts, including Delahaye’s works, are capable enough to set out the medium’s new ethical task despite the concerns about its aesthetic involvement. Levinas as a philosopher was skeptical about art’s capability to bring realities of the other, as he argued, in “Reality and its Shadow,” that art is “the substitution of the image for the object,” “the image neutralizes the real relationship, the original conception of the act,” and “the image is a shadow of being.”

But Michael Fried, who felt the same anxiety in an exactly opposite direction in the 60s, finds reconciliation from photography which, to him, appears as neither reality nor shadow. This photographic ambivalence in Fried’s theory is a motor for the “supreme fiction” in which the beholder (the subject and the other simultaneously)

---

70 In this doubt about image, Levinas’s aesthetics returns to the Platonism, (see Edith Wyschogrod, “Art in Ethics: Aesthetics, Objectivity, and Alterity in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Ethics as first philosophy: the significance of Emmanuel Levinas for philosophy, literature, and religion*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, (New York : Routledge, 1995), 139) as his ethics of the other returns to theological spheres in doubt about the vicious power of the Cartesian subject. This particular circularity in Levinas’s ethics is discussed by Alain Badiou in his Ethics in which he argues Levinas’s theological turn (God as a mediator of the ontological negotiation between the subject and the other) should not be the answer after all the philosophical repositioning of the other and instead, ethical thoughts should pay more attention to the notion of the Same which was rejected by Levinas, yet bears a significant potential to redefine the subject’s responsibility to the other. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London, New York: Verso 2001), 18-29.
71 Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, 336.
discovers the figures’ unseen world in photography (the other’s situations) despite the latter’s complete otherness. And this fiction is always completed by an inaudible yet undeniable “summons to respond” from the others in images that Fried calls “the magic of absorption.” In Fried’s theater, the beholding subjects are the ones who first humbly keep themselves in a complete darkness in which their privileged spectatorship is put off. They are however the ones who keenly respond to the invisible, inaudible summons of the image, despite this denial of their presence, their subjectivity, in the theater. It is this dynamics of rejection and invitation to the unseen face of the other that creates both ontological and ethical merger between the subject and the other in Fried’s theory.

The Poetics of History

Delahaye’s History brings the most vivid representations of the suffering world. In so doing, Delahaye challenges the ethical concerns about representation, the impossibility of representing the unrepresentable. In the power of image, in its poetic detour, Delahaye’s pictorial drama helps us see what has been unseeable, unspeakable and unrepresentable. This pictorial drama, as Aristotle’s famous lesson goes, shows something more historical than history itself. If Delahaye’s documentaries are art, it is not simply because they have a kinship with certain pictorial traditions, but more precisely because they seek to achieve art’s most fundamental drama that brings the absent to the tangible and eternal forms – one that Fried calls “presentness” – a “grace”

---

72 Ibid., 42.
73 Aristotle, Poetics, trans. Richard Janco, (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), 12. - “poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history; poetry tends to speak of universals, history of particulars.”
Delahaye in an interview has articulated this poetic vision that constantly repositions him in a neutral area between art and politics:

Being an artist is nothing, or at least, not enough; what you want is to be a poet. You are articulating sounds that are still formless, inventing what looks like a possible route. And yet that is the essence of the thing. All you're ever doing is translating an attitude and rationalizing an intuition, using first of all what is specific to photography. There is the refusal of style and the refusal of sentimentalism, there is this desire for clarity, and there is the measuring of the distance that separates me from what I see. There is also the will to be like a servant of the image, of its rigorous demands: to take the camera where it needs to be and to make an image that is subservient neither to the real nor to an intention – for the intention of the moment will always fall short of what you're really looking for. You have to record as many details as possible and achieve an order, without taking away the complexity of the real. To voice the real, and create an image that is a world in itself, with its own coherence, its autonomy and sovereignty: an image that thinks.

The ethical discourses of photography in the past several decades have gradually annihilated photography’s (or photographer's) fundamental desire to show images of the suffering others. One of the appalling reminders of this anti-photographic discourse is that it might bring not only a decline in photographic genre, but also a repetition of the same disturbing logic from the dead camps, from Rwandan villages, or from Ground Zero, that had all signaled a hopeless idea that annihilation is the only way to achieve their political goals. But the ethics of photography turn differently in Delahaye who says, “if an artist wants to champion a political or moral cause, he can only do it well by first serving the cause of his art.” As Delahaye’s remark reassures, the most ethical dream of photography will come true when photographers discover and utilize

---

74 Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 167. – “it is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it is, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness, as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.”
76 Ibid., 32.
their medium’s own potential – bringing reality into a persistent and perpetual image. In this fidelity to its own art, photography reveals its most innocent face.
APPENDIX
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

2-1 Luc Delahaye, Jenin Refugee Camp, 2002, Chromogenic process print, 111x239cm
2-2 Richard Mosse, Colonel Soleil’s Boys, North Kivu, Eastern Congo, 2010, Color
2-3 Nick Ut, Phan Thi Kim Phuk (9-year old in the center), 1972, B/W, the Associate Press
2-5 Luc Delahaye, Taliban, 2001, Digital chromogenic process print, Color, 111X237cm
2-6 Richard Mosse, Grand Voyager Sunni Triangle, 2009, Color
2-7 Jim Goldberg, untitled image from Open See, B/W with marker pen text
2-8 Jim Goldberg, untitled image from Open See, B/W with marker pen text
2-9 Juul Hondius. Man #2, 1999, Chromogenic print, Color, 165x124cm
2-10 Juul Hondius, Bus, 2001, Chromogenic print, Color, 162x123 cm
2-11 Juul Hondius, Plastic, 2001, Chromogenic print, Color, 160x125 cm
2-12 Rirkrit Tiravanija, Untitled (Free), 1992, installation views, Mixed media, The 303 Gallery
2-13 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Untitled, 1990, Candies, individually wrapped in red, silver, and blue cellophane (endless supply), Dimensions vary with installation Ideal weight: 300 lbs (136 kg), The Museum of Modern Art
2-14 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Untitled, 1992, Exhibited at Bleecker and Carmine Streets, New York, Color, Dimension variable
2-15 Marcel Broothes, details of Museum of Modern Art, Eagle Department, Section des Figures, 1972, mixed media
2-16 Aernout Mik, Training Ground, 2006, Two-channel video installation (color, silent)
2-17 Walid Raad, Let’s be Honest, the Weather Helped, 1998/2004, Digital print, 46.8x72.4cm
3-1 Laurel Nakadate, *Exorcism in January*, 2009, Still from video

3-2 Mikhailov, Untitled from *Case History*, Kharkov, Ukraine, 1997-98, Chromogenic print, Color, 148.5x99.5cm

3-3 Boris Mikhailov, Untitled from *Case History*, Kharkov, Ukraine, 1997-98, Chromogenic print, Color, 236.2x126.8cm


3-6 Anonymous, *Gas chamber of crematorium V of Auschwitz*, August 1944, Oswiecim Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (negative no. 277-278)


3-9 Walid Raad, *We decided to let them say, “we are convinced,” twice*, 2002/2006, Digital print, Color, 111.1x171.3cm

3-10 Walid Raad, *We decided to let them say, “we are convinced,” twice*, 2002/2006, Digital print, Color, 111.1x171.3cm

3-11 Walid Raad, *My neck is thinner than a hair: Engines*, 2001/2003, Digital Print, Color, 25x35cm

3-12 Walid Raad, *My neck is thinner than a hair: Engines*, 2001/2003, Digital Print, Color, 25x35cm

3-13 Walid Raad, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)*, 1996/1997, Digital print, Color, 7.8x5.5cm


3-15 Walid Raad, *Let’s be honest, the weather helped*, 1998/2006, Digital print, Color, 46.8x72.4cm

4-1 Dorothea Lange, *Negro Family*, Mississippi, June 1938, B/W

4-2 Dorothea Lange, *Dust Bowl* farm, Texas, June 1938, B/W

4-3 Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, *Nipomo, California*, 1936, B/W

4-4 Dorothea Lange, *Woman of the High Plains, Texas Panhandle*, 1938, B/W
4-5 Margaret Bourke-White, *Clinton Louisiana*, 1936, B/W (image from Documentary Book, *You Have Seen Their Faces*)

4-6 Margaret Bourke-White, *Okefenokee Swamp, Georgia*, 1936, B/W, (image from *You Have Seen Their Faces*)

4-7 Walker Evans, *Bed*, Tenant *Farmhouse, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936, B/W, 17.8x22.2cm

4-9 Walker Evans, *Sharecropper’s Family, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936, B/W, 20x24.7cm

4-10 Walker Evans, *Sharecropper’s Family, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936, B/W, 19x24.1cm

4-11 Walker Evans, Burroughs’ *Kitchen, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936, B/W, 23.5x16.7cm

4-12 Walker Evans, *Sharecropper’s Wife, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936, B/W, 19.6x7.3cm

4-13 Walker Evans, *Kitchen Wall, Alabama Farmstead, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936, B/W, 16.5x17.9cm

5-1 Aernout Mik, *Scapegoats*, 2006, Single-channel video installation (color, silent)

5-2 Aernout Mik, *Schoolyard*, 2009, Two-channel video installation (color, silent)

5-3 Aernout Mik, *Schoolyard*, 2009, Two-channel video installation (color, silent)

5-4 Aernout Mik, *Raw Footage*, 2006, Two-channel video installation (color, silent)

5-5 Aernout Mik, Raw Footage, 2006, Two-channel video installation (color, silent)

5-6 Aernout Mik, *Raw Footage*, 2006, installation view

5-7 Aernout Mik, *Training Ground*, 2006, Two-channel video installation (color, silent)

5-8 Aernout Mik, *Training Ground*, 2006, Two-channel video installation (color, silent)

5-9 Aernout Mik, *Vacuum Room*, 2005, Six-channel video installation, looped, Six rear-projection screens embedded in temporary architecture (color, silent) Installation view at MoMA
5-10  Jeff Wall, *Adrian Walker*, 1992, Transparency in light box, Color, 119x164cm

5-11  Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, *Young Student Drawing*, 1733-8, Oil on Panel, 21x17cm

5-12  Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, *The Young Draftsman 1737*, 81x67cm (left) and *The House of Cards 1737*, 83x66cm (right), Oil on canvas


5-14  Thomas Struth, *The Smith Family, Fife*, 1989, Chromogenic process print, Color, 100.8x126.3cm

5-15  Gerhard Richter, *Reading*, 1994, Oil on linen, 72.4x102.2cm


5-17  Jeff Wall, *A View from an Apartment*, 2004-5, Transparency in light box, Color, 167x224cm

5-18  James Welling, *Lock*, 1976, Chromogenic print from original Polaroid, B/W, 9.52x7.3cm

5-19  Tony Smith, *Die*, 1962, Steel with oiled finish, 183x183cm

5-20  Jeff Wall, *Concrete Ball*, 2003, Transparency in light box, Color, 204x260cm

6-1  Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah* (film Poster), 1985

6-2  Alfredo Jaar, *Real Picture*, 1995, Mixed media with silk screened texts and photographs inside the box (Installation view at The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago)

6-3  Luc Delahaye, *L’Autre*, 1999, B/W,

6-4  Walker Evans, *Subway Passengers*, New York, 1938. Film negative 35mm, B/W

6-5  Luc Delahaye, *Taliban*, 2001, Digital chromogenic print, Color, 111x237cm

6-6  Luc Delahaye, *Kabul Road*, 2001, Digital Chromogenic print, Color, 111x241cm

6-7  Luc Delahaye, The *US Bombing of Taliban Positions*, 2001, Chromogenic print, Color, 112x238cm

6-8  Jeff Wall, *Untitled (Overpass)*, 2001, Transparency in Light box, Color, 214x273.5cm
6-9  Paul Strand, *Blind*, 1916. Platinum print, B/W, 34x25.7cm

6-10 Walker Evans, *Untitled (Subway Passenger, New York)*, 1938, Film negative 35mm, B/W

6-11 Luc Delahaye, *A Rally of the Opposition Candidate Alexander Milinkevich*, 2009, Digital Chromogenic print, Color, 181.9x247.3cm

6-12 Luc Delahaye, *The Registration of Internally Displaced People in Eastern Chad*, 2006, Chromogenic print, Color, 281.9x137cm
LIST OF REFERENCES


Baker, George. “Photography’s Expanded Field." October 114 (Fall 2005)


Buchloh, Benjamin H. D. and Churner, Rachel. “In what ways have artists, academics, and cultural institutions responded to the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq?" Special Issue, October 123 (Winter 2008)


Crimp, Douglas. “Pictures.” *October* 8 (Spring 1979)


Gilbert, Alan. “Walid Raad (Re)invents The Archive,” Aperture no. 198 (Spring 2010).


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jong Chul Choi is an art history Ph.D. candidate at the University of Florida. His specialty is contemporary art and criticism, focusing on the socio-political aspects of media art. His recent studies on the ethics of photography have been presented at Cornell, Beijing, Harvard University, and other institutions.