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ARTICLE

HORROR VACUI

HIDDEN PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE COUNTER-ARCHIVE

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Abstract

Horror vacui – the fear of the void, is faced in the two instances of counter-archival practice examined here: *Real Pictures*, an installation by the artist Alfredo Jaar, and *Holocaust Museum*, by the poet Robert Fitterman. Both works have at their center, photographs from the realm of atrocity that are, in different ways, rendered invisible to viewers or readers, who are beckoned into the resulting representational void. This article is an exploration of the epistemic implications of this perverse mode of representation, which include the opening up of both invisible image, and decontextualized words to active forms of imagining. Both Jaar and Fitterman confront the archive, as it is conceived by Michel Foucault – an engine of epistemic regulation – by disabling one of its primary mechanisms: the binding of text to image.

Keywords: Atrocity, Counter-archive, Representation, Museum, Memorial

SYMBOLIC BATTLEGROUND

The presentation of photographs of atrocities and their aftermath, obscured and absent from view suggests a perverse act of representation; but it is an act that also illuminates the perversity of certain aspects of representation itself. In two works: “Real Pictures,”¹ an installation by the artist Alfredo Jaar, and *Holocaust Museum*,² a book by the poet Robert Fitterman – visible access is denied to the very images upon which each work is founded. These stagings of photographic absence raises urgent questions about knowledge transmission in the face of catastrophe.

Each of these works – by loosening the bonds that tie photographic images to text – problematize the authorization of knowledge, the hierarchical selection and presentation of facets of reality in ways that correspond to the interests of powerful representational forces. Such institutionalization of knowledge has famously been theorized by Michel Foucault and subsequent thinkers as ‘archival’³ and the works analysed in what follows are, in their confrontation with representational authority, counter-archival. If the archive is the engine of epistemic regulation and control, then the counter-archive represents resistance to this. Counter-archival works differ radically from acts of representation conducted under the auspices of symbolic power which serve to distance collective apprehension of reality from actual social experience. By problematizing the organization, presentation and transmission of knowledge counter-archival strategies illuminate the space between symbolization and experience. Counter-archival practice is not a style or a genre, but a mode of reconfiguring existing information that is manifested in diverse forms of cultural practice. By illuminating the distance between phenomena and their representation, Jaar and Fitterman problematize the truth-claims implicit in representation, but they are also attempting to traverse this distance.

The representational strategies employed by Jaar and Fitterman partake in the symbolic war over actual conditions of existence. However far removed they may be from reality, symbolic operations also structure, sustain and transform the concrete experience of this reality: there is no aspect of social experience that is not symbolically grounded.⁴ We find an example of the conflict between symbolic and experiential realms in the phenomena of the battleground; this territory – on which the destruction of human bodies occurs – is impossible to representationally exhaust as factual, material ground, and it is also the example par excellence of a symbolically saturated phenomenon, a mythic territorial ground over whose contested status human beings die *en masse*. This symbolic battleground of mass death is disturbed in both “Real Pictures” and *Holocaust Museum*; works which are not involved in the production of representations so much as they are contestations of the closures of representation itself. There is a recognition in such work, that the experiential reality of the human victims of atrocity, invisibly populating the works of Jaar and Fitterman, is symbolically unrepresentable; and an awareness of the disastrous paradox that some superimposed, ideologically inflected, symbolic

representation of them has contributed to their harm. Their suffering may not be representable, but *a priori* representation of their identity as ‘other’ was, in each case, the precursor of their suffering. Human beings – constituted in an archivally controlled field of representation; ideologically identified as types of subjects within this construct; and destroyed as a result of this identification – are ravaged in the name of representational force which is itself based on impossible truth-claims. The mythic assertion of the alignment of reality with particular symbolic claims is the herald of a force which shapes the social world into conformity with the precepts of power. The mythic nature of this representational force is the “big secret” of the archive; a secret that lies in the fact that the representations of authority cannot, in truth, represent.⁵ Yet this ‘secret’ provides the symbolic underpinning of violence against the bodies of those designated as others. The ethical implications arising out of the acknowledgement of this representational incapacity become most urgent in instances of atrocity such as those that occurred in Rwanda following the 1994 genocide and during the Holocaust. These events form the basis of Jaar’s “Real Pictures” and Fitterman’s *Holocaust Museum*, respectively.

The political theorist Yannis Stavrakakis, from his own Lacanian perspective elaborates on the implications of this secret for representation: “The field of representation is itself revealed as lacking because it attempts the impossible, that is to say, the representation of something ultimately unrepresentable. Representation is the representation of a real fullness which is always beyond our grasp.”⁶ By implication, behind the “fullness” described by Stavrakakis is a lack – a void in the symbolic order. It is the fear of this void that generates the “horror” of our title, and the following example of memorializing confronts this horror.

GENOCIDE AND THE MEMORIAL VACUUM

In the wave of genocidal killing that began in Rwanda in April 1994, Tutsi civilians frequently left towns and villages and took refuge in local churches.⁷ Rather than providing sanctuary, these churches, provided the Hutu militias and groups of civilians with convenient concentrations of victims. They were trapped and slaughtered, usually with machetes, rifles and hand grenades.⁸ In and around some of these churches, nothing resembling a traditional memorialising process occurred for over a year, and the aftermath of atrocity was left intact. In the catholic mission at Nyarubuye, for instance, and the church at Ntirama, the dead remained unburied, lying where they were killed. Under the auspices of the new government – the Tutsi dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which took power following the civil war in the aftermath of the genocide – these sites were preserved, in lieu of official memorials. The untouched sites – obviously retained something of the horror of the event – served as evidential sites, and as a means of propagating both political and humanitarian messages to Rwandan citizens and foreign journalists. The decision to leave intact sites of carnage, indicates a recognition on the part of the R.P.F. that

to cleanse the area might similarly amount to a cleansing of the event in collective memory.⁹ The cultural and communitarian impulse to provide a symbolic dignity in death for the victims was – and to a certain extent still is – relegated below the need to preserve something of the carnal actuality of the atrocity.¹⁰ This “leaving” of the physical evidence of the atrocity, the delay in the burial of the dead, also suggests a refusal to bury the traumatic charge of the event itself.

Responding to the aftermath of atrocity by failing to “cleanse” the site suggests a singular approach to public memory, one which maintains that if atrocity holds lessons for the future, it involves facing traces of its events in an unmediated form, without the symbolic abstraction a memorial would affect. Implicit in the act of preservation – as opposed to memorialized representation – is a mistrust in the capacity of representation itself to approach traumatic reality.

The question raised by the postponement of memorialising action at Ntirama and Nyarubuye concerns the extent to which the shrine, memorial, or any other official representation or mediation of the event, may itself facilitate forgetting. The refusal concerns the avoidance of the symbolic crystallisation of memory, whereby the memorial becomes the official concretion of a story which closes the case on the event by historicizing it, and consigning it to memory. In this scenario, the risk is that the burying of the atrocity, in conventional memorializing practices becomes, the concealment of both its causes and effects. Behind the consideration of photographic “refusal” in what follows, lies a question about the extent to which the structural roots of atrocity events may be protected by representation.

Esther Leslie, in an analysis of the burial of evidence of traumatic events in German history, speculates that: “The concretion of increasing oblivion might be the very essence of the memorial.”¹¹ The questions I explore here concern the extent to which the photography of atrocity corresponds to this amnesiac characteristic of the memorial. Is it possible for photographs to evade the discursive enclosures that may inhibit their affective potential? A potential that includes the activation of continual collective interrogation of traumatic events and their causes. In countering the assumption that any representation may bring that which is represented into the realm of full knowledge, the treatment of photographs in Jaar’s “Real Pictures” and Fitterman’s *Holocaust Museum* maintains a representational drive against epistemic closure, instead it solicits acts of imagination in the face of the unimaginable.

PHOTOGRAPHIC PETRIFICATION

Photography, as an archival mechanism, represents the technologization of a petrifying gaze; a projection of desire that transforms all it surveys into the requirements of the projecting subject, the culture that infuses them, and the economic base which generates this culture. This projection is just one stage of an inescapable cycle in which acculturation has already become photographic. The photograph saturates perceptual experience to the extent that it is hard to

see, how we might see (or imagine) other than photographically. Perception, (if not the unconscious) is structured like a photograph.¹² Photography is in us before we gaze outward. We make the world in our photographic image because we are already made in its.

We can see this photographication of perception at work in accounts of the aftermath of massacres in Rwanda. For instance, here Philip Gourevitch describes his encounter with the dead in the church at Nyarubuye one year after the genocidal events:

At least fifty mostly decomposed cadavers covered the floor, wadded in clothing, their belongings strewn about and smashed. Macheted skulls had rolled here and there. The dead looked like pictures of the dead. They did not smell. They did not buzz with flies. They had been killed thirteen months earlier, and they hadn't been moved. Skin stuck here and there over the bones, many of which lay scattered away from the bodies, dismembered by the killers, or by scavengers – birds, dogs, bugs.¹³

While this account epitomizes traumatic representation at its most harrowing, a kind of photographication of perception is evident. Gourevitch's text suggests a scene of perceptual alternation between a "picturing" gaze, and embodied aspects of witnessing which are not amenable to visual representation. These include the sensory, nonvisual, effects of decomposition – for instance, smell, and in a later passage sound – as Gourevitch and another visitor accidentally tread upon and break the skull of one of the dead at Nyarubuye. But what we might think of as a kind of pre-photographic abstraction in the gaze – an abstraction that grants the observer perceptual distance from their own sensory immersion – is already at work. An internalized representational apparatus filters experience even in the immediacy of such experience. Journalists who have witnessed such scenes often draw attention to their own representational incapacity and the loss, however momentarily, of preconceived, sheltering worldviews.¹⁴

These accounts reveal how the encounters with the sites generate contradictory responses simultaneously; the ontological wounding caused by witnessing the horror produces the scab of representational closure. These experiences, where cognitive abstraction and traumatic, somatic engagement collide, show how that which needs to become the subject of communicative transaction – that which has to be shown, seemingly cannot become the subject of representation without the loss of its most vital component: its destabilizing somatic/traumatic potential. There is no representational means or strategy which does not cleanse the event and risk anaesthetizing the viewer against its effects. The mistrust of photographic representation that imbues the works considered in the next section, does not imply scepticism about its underlying drive to facilitate a cognitive transaction of that which we have not experienced. It is rather a concern with the extent to which the notion of representation itself may act as a screen or barrier against such transactions, with the result that a cognitive closure is

imposed on a reality which has dangerously evaded cognition. The maintenance of faith, on the part of these artists, in a continual process of representation – in the perpetual representational act – works against cognitive closure and the closed pre-representation of the other, of which atrocity is a symptom.

ALFREDO JAAR: REAL PICTURES

Alfredo Jaar visited several Rwandan atrocity sites in the immediate aftermath of the genocide in 1994. This resulted in a series of works collectively entitled “The Rwanda Project” made in response to the events and their mediation. In some of these works, and in his commentary about them, Jaar examines the Western representational denial of the unfolding disaster.¹⁵ As the enormity of the Rwanda crisis deepened, and the death count rose exponentially, the global informational lacuna expanded. In response, Jaar’s work becomes increasingly structured around invisibility and absence. When Western states and media did eventually begin to report the crisis, Jaar recognized the voyeuristic, colonial representational tropes that informed such representation. In which the tide of photographs of harmed, starving or destroyed bodies fuels a paternalistic vision of Africa and Africans. Against this, Jaar began to question the efficacy of photographs of violence and suffering.¹⁶ Although he took many photographs of the aftermath of the carnage, none of those that feature the dead have ever been shown. Yet 372 of these images form the basis of the installation “Real Pictures,” first exhibited in 1995.¹⁷ This work stages absence as a means of confronting representational and political blindness. The photographs, some of which Jaar has described as “the most terrible images I had ever taken”¹⁸ are hidden from view in black archival boxes which are symmetrically stacked in groups to form monolithic, sepulchral forms, sparsely illuminated in darkened spaces [Figure 1]. Each box is printed with a white text, like the example cited below, which describes the inaccessible photograph inside.

Ntarama Church, Nyamata, Rwanda
40 kilometres south of Kigali
Monday, August 29, 1994

This photograph shows Benjamin Musisi, 50, crouched low in the doorway of the church amongst scattered bodies spilling out in the daylight. Four hundred Tutsi men, women and children who had come here seeking refuge, were slaughtered during Sunday mass.

Benjamin looks directly into the camera, as if recording what the camera saw. He asked to be photographed amongst the dead. He wanted to prove to his friends in Kampala, Uganda that the atrocities were real and that he had seen the aftermath.

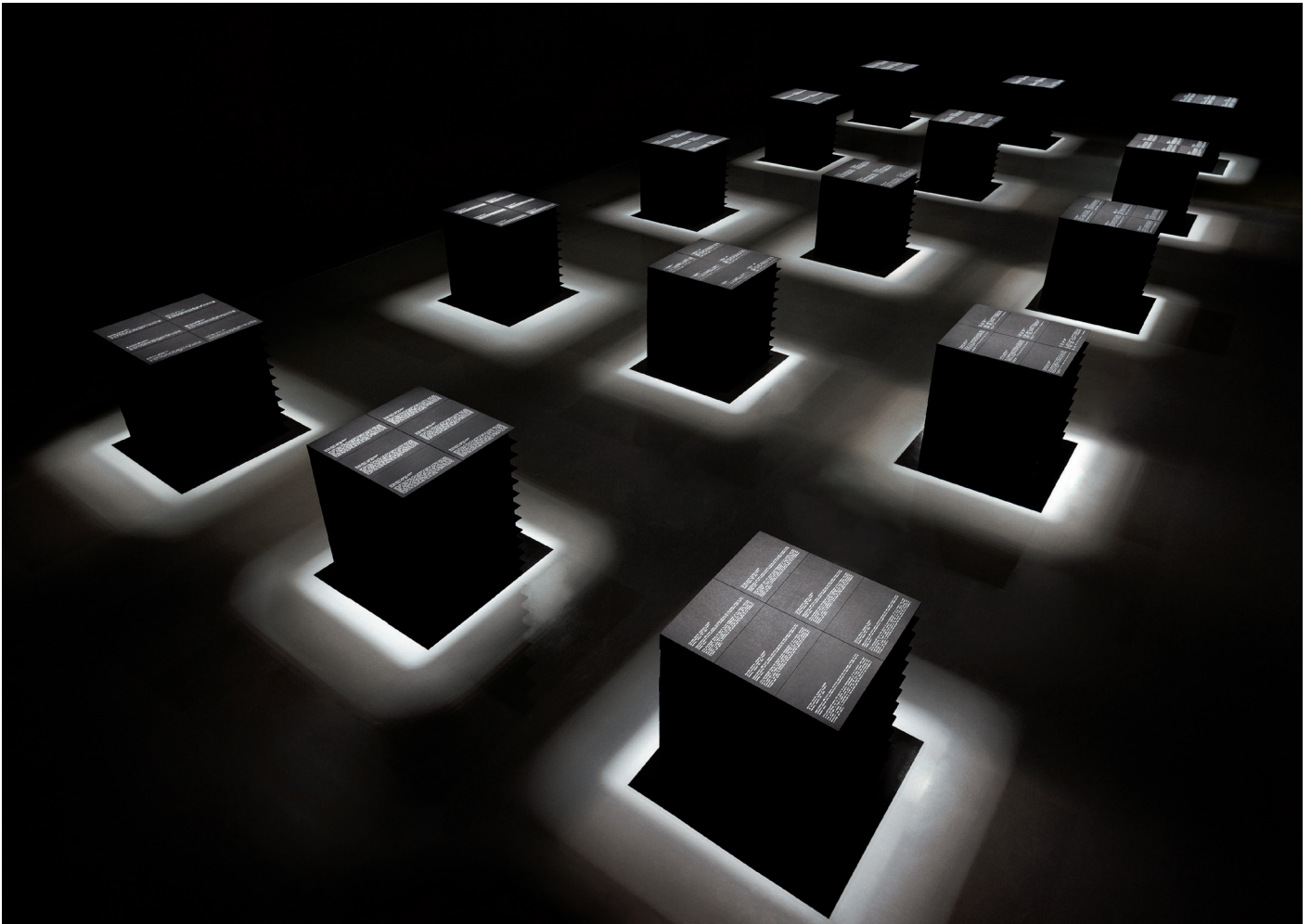


Figure 1
Alfredo Jaar, *Real Pictures*, 1995.
Image courtesy of the artist.

The viewing scene is aestheticized and theatricalized, yet at the same time, any potential aestheticizing or voyeuristic gaze upon those in the photographs is thwarted. What we cannot see, we are incited to imagine. There is no photographic form to guide this imagining, and so the words become catalysts for subjectively generated imagery. By staging a distanciation of the viewer from the apprehension of the photograph, Jaar calls attention to the distanciating effects of representation itself, and in doing so refutes the implicit claim of all photography – indeed of all representation – that we have access to represented phenomena (or any phenomenal aspects of the scene) via such representation. The mediation of reality – the substitution of experience with authorized accounts – is illuminated by Jaar's strategy of thwarting it. Mythic transparency is replaced by a perceptual screen, and in this way an incitement is staged; an incitement to access the events in some other way than through the receipt of imagery (imagery which carries the implicit claim that the events have been representationally 'taken care of').

The implicit claim of representation nurtures an assumption of understanding; in this case it is symptomatic of an epistemic closure in the face of a collapse of human relatedness whose causes and effects demand perpetual attention. The assumption of knowledge of such an event is the ally of atrocity. In a scenario of unimaginable suffering like this, only ethical function of representation is the clarion call for interminable attention.

PHOTOGRAPHIC VOID

The effect of the void created by Jaar's obscuring of photographs of the dead is analogous to effect of the theoretical void in the symbolic field that is central to Lacanian psychoanalytical epistemology. The void cannot exist except in relation to the communicative (symbolic) field it appears in, and Jaar differentiates his own communicative acts by removing photographs from ubiquitous confirmatory binary of image and text, which – fused together – form the basic scaffolding of mass-mediation. For Lacan the void is synonymous with those traumatically generated facets of the psyche that cannot be brought to consciousness, yet which perpetually pull symbolizing activity towards them. The void is the manifestation in the symbolic field, of what he terms "the real", whose fundamental characteristic is resistance to symbolization.¹⁹ From this psychic model, subsequent Lacanian thinkers such as the philosopher Joan Copjec, have extrapolated this idea of the void to propose voiding effects in the entire symbolic field. These are the effects of symbolic negation which generate autonomous acts of representation. Where, for Lacan, symbolic processes occur via a transaction of the dead signs of living signifiers, the production of a void in the symbolic field acquires a perversely animating role. It activates the imaginary activity of the subject, who is left with no other option than to imagine what was once there. It is this imaginary activity, this envisaging of absent information and experience, that is the target of Jaar's work. The epistemic suspension creates a void in the field of discourse, which is the site of a productive "nonknowledge". It is a form of knowledge that may not have ideological utility, but is autonomous. It is not introjected, and if it resembles ignorance then it does so no more than 'knowledge' provided by power; it is the ground zero of autonomous thought. For Copjec, its value lies in its capacity subject to resist totalitarian inscription. Copjec contrasts this nonknowledge to epistemic positivity – the assumption of knowledge which leads to a determinative, self-fulfilling belief in discursive omnipotence. For Copjec "Nonknowledge or invisibility is not registered as the wavering and negotiations between two certainties, two meanings or positions, but as the undermining of every certainty, the incompleteness of every meaning and position."²⁰

A GAZE FROM THE VOID

Jaar's "Real Pictures" complicate the power-saturated conventions of receiving representations; a complication that has political implications for viewing-as-spectatorship. Each text in "Real Pictures" alludes to the gaze of a Rwandan witness, so that attention to the events themselves are supplemented by attention to their effects upon a survivor. If it were possible to transmit the gaze of those who have survived atrocity, so that it entered us as easily as ideology, the ethical problems associated with its representation would vanish. The gaze of the witness/survivor carries an inaccessible, somatic archive of pain. It cannot be transmitted, but when

Jaar stages its non-transmission, we are incited to search for it. The manifold functions of the photograph are opened up to scrutiny in Jaar's texts about witnessing, the complex field of witnessing, and viewing witnesses is activated, and the critical evidentiary role of the photograph for Rwandan witnesses of the genocide is emphasized (itself the main reason why the photograph must exist). In an inversion of the power relations in the panoptic gaze, we are made aware of, but cannot see the gaze of the witnesses in the photographs. And so, the photographic gaze – the vehicle of othering and objectification that so often reinforces the power relationship between African and Western viewers through cultural production and consumption of the traumatic experience of the 'other' – is diverted. "We," consumers viewing others – far removed from the scene yet implicated in the politics that create it – must find other ways of witnessing.

Ariella Azoulay notes how "disenfranchized populations are prone to turn into photographs taken by others, more than they tend to become photographers themselves, or self-photographed subjects."²¹ Jaar's denial of photographic access to his predominantly Western viewing audience denies them the easy self-reinforcement that is the product of the unencumbered gaze. Jaar's complication of the photographic transaction is also a reminder of Azoulay's key conceptualization of the photograph itself, not as an object or a mere trace, but as an experiential site of encounter, which has the potential to create a community, or, more specifically a "citizenry" around each photographic event. For Azoulay, however power-saturated and oppressive the photographic scenario may be, the photographed subject can still contribute to this community in a way that refutes their subjugation by the gaze. For Azoulay the photograph of a human being is not a frozen memory or a record of subservience, but a means of preserving and re-activating the presence of the photographed subject in the (always politicized) encounter with the photograph. Each photograph has the potential to be a catalyst for an intermingling of subjectivity predicated on the gaze of both viewer and photographed subject:

To see more than they could alone, individuals had to align themselves with other individuals who would agree to share their visual field with one another. Photography reorganized what was accessible to the gaze, in the course of which everyone had to renounce his or her right to preserve his or her own, autonomous visual field from external forces, but also acquired an obligation to defend the gaze in order to make it available for others to enter and intermingle.²²

The idea of such a photographic encounter is always at war with the political drive to establish the nature of a photograph as commodifiable. A commodification which cannot be separated from photographic experience that culminates in the projection of the gaze itself as the means of imbuing what is seen with commodity-value; a value whose measure is its contribution to an economic function. The aestheticizing gaze which as we noted earlier, is brought to bear upon carnage, is not the result of an alignment of the gaze with norms of beauty or a correspondence

with customs of formal order. It marks, rather the integration of the gaze into a network of signifiers that normalize specific instrumentalized conditions of existence where human dispensability abounds.

In Jaar's "Real Pictures" the images of suffering are protected from this gaze, and from the aesthetic process that is conditioned by it. The images in "Real Pictures" can only be reached by a metaphysical act of imagination which denies both the commodifying gaze and sensory gratification and the objectification of those pictured. The images of the dead must be imagined; they cannot be closed and consumed. The act of sealing the images from view reflects an anxiety over what the "view" has become, and the social relations it is instrumental in perpetuating.

THE CAPTION AND THE VOID – ROBERT FITTERMAN'S '*HOLOCAUST MUSEUM*'

The poet Robert Fitterman's book *Holocaust Museum* directs an iterative poetic practice based on the use of "found" language from various sources towards the representation of atrocity.²³ The work is an archive of an archive, in which Fitterman re-presents a selection of captions from photographs taken from the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.²⁴ It severs these captions from the images they once described, and like Jaar, Fitterman effects a photographic dissociation in which texts that only exist because of the existence of photographs are released from their photographic referents.

Under normal circumstances of representation, bound together with captions, photographs reinforce the rhetorics of representation by forming a bond of mutually confirming truth-claims. Where representation relies on image/caption dyads, these basic units of mediation are usually concerned with the transaction of positivity. The term 'positivity' here, as well as indicating epistemic certainty, is also fundamental to Foucault's notion of the historical *a priori*; the matrix of authorized, validated and sanctioned knowledge that conditions our perception of reality.²⁵ Such all-pervasive representational units authorize the transformation of the erstwhile unknown, into ostensible knowledge; the rhetoric of positive knowledge carried by the caption implicitly assert the positivity of facts; an assertion whose power is intensified by the anonymity of authorship. This removes the taint of subjective partiality and disguises the caption as a disembodied unit of pure knowledge; reinforcing its status as a positive force destined to fill the void in understanding. The caption, in conventional usage, serves to corral the visual image toward linguistic meaning. Where the image threatens to divert and proliferate thought – the caption harnesses the image's unpredictable multiplicity – it yokes the image to the task of representational singularity. The interlocking of image and caption authorises information as an apparent manifestation of the phenomenal world, and together, through this provision of knowledge, they erect an authorizing screen of certainty over the troubling dubiety of reality. But behind the resulting positive constructs, the void

of ignorance, uncertainty, qualm and negativity continues to dilate. By breaking the seal formed around the represented event, (by disabling the function of the caption) *Holocaust Museum* opens a portal to this epistemic void in the representation of atrocity. Where the caption customarily serves to bar access to the vacuum in knowledge that is embodied by the uncertainties of the photograph, then, inversely, the removal of the caption reopens the void into which imaginary activity is drawn.

The subjugating effect of texts upon photographs in this relationship is well known.²⁶ And it is difficult to conceive of a photographic image free of textual determination. In Fitterman's *Holocaust Museum* the result of the photograph's "removal", is also a removal of the capacity of text to foreclose perception of photographs. But the content of the photographs is, nonetheless evoked – haunting the catalogue of captions like an indistinct, collective, visual memory. The separation also results in an unexpected liberation of the captions from their role as 'captors' of the photographs; they are no longer determined by their relation to the photographs, and begin to act with a disturbing autonomy [Figure 2].

The ostensibly simple act of separation illuminates, disrupts and problematizes the entire archival mechanism that underpins photographic display. The epistemic function of any archive or museum, including that of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, is entangled with the political aims of the state, and the captioning of any photograph forms the uppermost layer of an invisible palimpsest of superposed meaning that has deep roots in the political-industrial complex. If we follow the Foucauldian model and conceive of the archive, not as a repository, but a discourse-machine which pre-interprets the significance of the documents, then Fitterman's de-captioning confronts such a priori interpretation. It disturbs the components of official language in their position within the matrix of signifiers that constitute the field of representation. If the text-image relationship really is the scaffolding upon which the archival episteme is built, then their separation serves to undermine confidence in its construction of discourse. Once we lose confidence in the discursive underpinnings of reality, we may find ourselves drifting toward a cognitive void, where time-honoured prescriptions and received information no longer orientate us in our apprehension of reality.

Fitterman's texts are isolated from the representational field in which they are embedded, the field that establishes the norms of description – a "reinforcement field" that imbues descriptive language with the appearance of transparency, as if it were a natural emanation from events and things. This decontextualization also draws attention to the process of captioning itself, if the caption does not arise from the photograph where does it come from? What is the process that grants any authorial rights over represented phenomena?²⁷ Because the language of the caption is intended to be used as an instrument for interpretation of the photograph, its dissociation from the photograph means that this instrumentalizing function is blocked; the language ceases to refer only to its lost referent, even when that referent is its explicit target. For example, in the following text: "A survivor stokes smouldering human remains in a crematorium oven that is still lit [Photograph #00315]."²⁸

View of one of the ovens in the crematorium at the Ebensee concentration camp. [Photograph #48973]

An American soldier inspects the crematorium in Buchenwald. [Photograph #82224]

A survivor stokes smoldering human remains in a crematorium oven that is still lit. [Photograph #00315]

American soldiers view a pile of human remains outside the crematorium in Buchenwald. [Photograph #20308]

Ruins of crematorium II. [Photograph #08857]

An American soldier tests the crematorium elevator while on an inspection of the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp. [Photograph #02005]

The new crematorium in Dachau, which was completed in May 1944. [Photograph #05810]

Two ovens inside the crematorium at the Dachau concentration camp. [Photograph #80722]

Crematoria ovens in Buchenwald concentration camp. [Photograph #80255]

The charred remains of former prisoners in two crematoria ovens in the newly liberated Buchenwald concentration camp. [Photograph #80253]

View of crematorium ovens at the Majdanek concentration camp after the liberation. [Photograph #05548]

A crematoria oven in Ebensee, a sub-camp of Mauthausen. [Photograph #04880]

In which there are no specific identifiers of place, time or identity, the referring function of language has its grip – on the historical, temporal specificity of the Holocaust – weakened. The language strays into a generalized realm of bodily conflagration; it touches other atrocities and connects with them through its evocation of more universal, deathly scenarios. The unframing of the language creates a kind of terrible poetic dispersal of what is described, into other times, places and situations.

By contrast in a section entitled “GAS CHAMBERS” the majority of the 51 texts locate what is described in a specific, named site of a concentration camp. But even here, the reiteration of the names of these real, specific sites in the accumulated captions – because they are separated from the attendant photograph – take on a repetitive, insistent quality, a fragmented, chaotic refrain that evokes a terrible accumulation of violence. The names of atrocity sites that populate the decontextualised captions form a terrible litany of accumulating disaster, repetitively mentioning:

Dachau, Mauthausen, Dachau, Dachau, Dachau, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Birkenau, Dachau, Dachau, Stutthof, Auschwitz, Gusen, Majdanek, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, Dachau, Dachau, Dachau, Ebensee, Buchenwald, Buchenwald, Natzweiler, Struthof, Dachau, Dachau, Buchenwald, Buchenwald, Majdanek, Ebensee, Mauthausen, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Bergen, Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau, Dachau, Dachau, Dachau, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dachau, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Auschwitz-Birkenau...

In Fitterman’s iteration, the names of atrocity-sites escape their geographical and historical locations, and assume the status of carnage-saturated language, delivered into our world now – with the disruptive quality of a dark mantra or a curse. The closures of instrumental language are unbound in such a process. Once the caption loses its utility it takes on a kind of linguistic surplus-value that it cannot be measured by descriptive efficacy. In this respect, Fitterman’s work amounts to the theft of language from the production-line of confirmatory discourse in order for it to be re-assembled elsewhere in contexts where it can be read (or heard) set apart from historicizing narratives.

THE AUTHORIZING CAPTION

The implication of the self-proclaimed *raison d’être* of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, is that an epistemic disaster would be taking place if visitors to it were to become acclimatized to atrocity through its representations of it.²⁹ But the museum’s reliance on representational orthodoxies exacerbates exactly this risk – of perpetuating the forms of an archival mechanism acclimatizing visitors to existing global conditions in which atrocity plays an important part in the maintenance of international political order. One aspect of the maintenance of this order is the enclosing

of subjectively experienced reality within an overarching narrative superimposed from above. The photographic caption plays its part in this by directing apprehension of the atrocity photograph to pre-determined ends (establishing the referent as belonging to history, the event as occurrence elsewhere, disaster as the concern of others, etc.). Narrative is the sugar-coating of discourse; it encloses both the subject and the referent in an authorized story, and from its inception the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum authorities set out to encapsulate atrocity in narrative:

Comprehension of the narrative and its meaning, is not only an intellectual but also an emotional experience. The emotional effect of the narrative in the museum exhibition is comparable to that of the narrative in novels, plays, or motion pictures. All of them are based on plot. The plot triggers identification which envelops us mentally and forces us to relate to the meaning of the story line. Being gripped by the plot, projecting ourselves into it, identifying with its heroes, and developing resentment towards its villains, we get emotionally involved. This emotional involvement opens us up to educational influence.³⁰

This description of narrative reveals an uncomfortable similarity between its own function as an educational tool, and the indoctrinating potential of myth; where the efficacy of each requires the veiling of authorial intention.³¹ The “educational influence” to which we are “emotionally” opened up, is limited in this way to the reception of an a priori narration; a narrative enclosure in which experience of the face of atrocity has already been taken care of. The relationship between the visitors to the museum in this “circulation path,”³² this “funnel” of narrative, through which they move, mirrors the relationship of the seeing, experiencing subject to the wider symbolic order. The seeing subject poses a threat to this order to the extent that their account of their experience of it, is unpredictable; and any unpredictability that threatens to become communicative currency, presents a challenge to established accounts of the world and its structural power-relationships. The suppression of such accounts is an inevitable aspect of the archival (self-preserving, symbolic) mechanisms of this order. The archive must absorb accounts which are potentially destabilising to it. The symbolic apparatus of power also “envelops us mentally and forces us to relate to the meaning of its story line.”³³ The effect is that atrocity is held in place by narrative, thus ensuring that no connection is made, for instance between the represented atrocity and a state’s own genocidal origin-story; or its contemporary sponsorship of regimes whose activities may mirror those represented in the museum.

But in Fitterman’s “dissociated” texts the flow of narrative is broken. A space is opened up between language and the absent image in which it is impossible to receive fixed meaning. As such it evades the closures of utility and prolongs the possibility of dwelling in the effect of the descriptive words. In doing so it prolongs attention to their horrific implications; it unties the violence of the Holocaust from its embedded position in a historicizing narrative discourse. The pile of destructive referents lose the sense that was hitherto made of them through the ostensibly, mutually-explaining associations offered by photographs with captions. If there is an aesthetic in this work then it is an

aesthetic of shattered sense – a “palilaliac” litany of gas chambers, crematoria, ovens, human remains, bones, ashes, prisoners, victims and ruins. The accumulation of such words – in a language snatched from functionality – stains the language itself with the pathology of atrocity. It becomes an inventory that reverberates with pain.

CONCLUSION: IN VACUO

In the representation of atrocity, the existence of the gap between the positive claims of representation, and the phenomenal reality of the event, presents the most urgent of epistemic and ethical problems. A problem that might be characterized as the aggregation of ignorance generated by the receipt (rather than the acquisition) of knowledge. The idea that we have, at the experiential level, understood an event because of the representational efficacy of the image/caption binary, leads to the establishment of a host of representational fallacies, for instance: that the suffering of others has somehow been comprehended; that the horror of the disastrous event has been transmitted; and that its causes have been made apparent. In this way the atrocity is historicized, and the case for further imaginary inquiry into it, is closed. Receipt of ostensibly objective knowledge displaces subjective attention to the causes of atrocity. By suffusing the atrocity event in this way, with a representational past tense, attention is diverted from the persistence of these causes in subsequent political configurations.

By contrast, the caption deprived of the image, as it is in the work of Fitterman and Jaar, loses its instrumentalising *raison d'être* – the provision of a linguistic conclusion to imaginary activity around the image. By the same token, when the image is, under “normal” conditions, welded to the caption, the image is reduced to the supplementary role of provider of visual proof for the claims of the caption. When this text-image binary is broken, as it is in *Holocaust Museum* and “Real Pictures” a series of effects is produced, which release the stranglehold of the knowledge-authorising caption from perception.

Firstly, by removing it from its connection to the image, the instrumentalizing function of the caption is exposed, and because it is exposed in this way, it ceases to authorize knowledge of the event. It is revealed to be what Lacan describes as an “anchoring point” (*point de capiton*), a signifier which “stops the otherwise endless movement of the signification.”³⁴ This loss of the captioning function grants a perilous, imaginary entry into the realm of atrocity, without the guiding authorizations of meaning hitherto provided. The horror is signalled by the words, but where it was once granted a final meaning through the combination of words and text, this semblance of received, conclusive meaning is now denied. What remains is a void in the field of constructed meaning, a vacuum that draws subjective projections of meaning into it. In “Real Pictures” and *Holocaust Museum*, the liberated captions become prompts for imaginary enquiry into the realm of atrocity, a realm that is signposted but not foreclosed. Consequently, we find ourselves simultaneously in

a realm of horror, and a space empty of given meaning.

If any trace of disaster is retained by any representation, then in order to approach it – if any such approach is possible – we must overcome our horror at the absence of predetermined meaning, and dwell in this absence; in this dearth of explanatory logic. The void itself thus becomes the generator of collective imaginary activity that allows us to transcend the authorization of prefabricated meanings and explanations. Jaar and Fitterman, in different ways, beckon toward the void, asking us to enter without the crutches of deflecting reason and historicizing knowledge, and examine the event for traces of the causes of horror that still thrive among us in the present.

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- 1 Alfredo Jaar's "Real Pictures" installation (1995) comprises 372 linen photographic boxes with text stacked in eight differing geometric shapes and 372 cibachrome prints. The size of the stacks and installation vary.
 - 2 Robert Fitterman, *Holocaust Museum* (London: Veer Books, 2012).
 - 3 See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1991).
 - 4 The conception of the symbolic followed here is Lacanian, and for Lacan's account of the nature and operation of the symbolic, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-55* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
 - 5 This terminology of 'secrecy' comes from Lacan, for whom the "big secret of psychoanalysis" is the fact that the "big Other" – *l'Autre* – can guarantee neither meaning, nor the veracity of its representations. For an elaboration of these representational claims see: Younis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), 39-42.
 - 6 Younis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, 40.
 - 7 For a concise account of the origins of the Rwandan genocide, see: Alex de Waal, "Genocide Took Four Years to Plan," *The Times*, London, 18 June 1994. <https://francegenocidetutsi.org/DeWaalGenocide4YearsToPlanTheTimes18June1994.pdf>
 - 8 Estimates of the numbers of dead vary to the extent that massive number of victims may be regarded as literally incalculable. It became a commonplace shorthand in the months after the genocide to speak of "up to a million" (Keane 1995), 29. Examples of later calculations place the figure between 500,000 and one million (Wrong 2001, 243), at 800,000 (Gourevitch 1998, 3) and at 850,000 (Jennings 2000, 8).
 - 9 For a detailed report on subsequent memorialising controversies in Rwanda, see Rémi Korman, "Sacred Spaces and Massacre Sites after the Tutsi Genocide: Questions about the Patrimonialization of Churches in Rwanda," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 137, no.1 (2018): 155 – 167. https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_VING_137_0155-sacred-spaces-and-massacres-sites.htm#no18

- 10 For the preservation and display of human remains in subsequent memorial development projects in Rwanda, see the official Genocide Archive of Rwanda. https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php/Ntarama_Memorial
- 11 Esther Leslie, "Wrapping the Reichstag: Re-visioning German History," *Radical Philosophy* (May-June 1996): 6-17.
- 12 I am taking liberties with the Lacanian maxim "the unconscious is structured like a language". See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin, 1994), 203.
- 13 Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families* (London: Picador, 199), 15.
- 14 See, for instance David Beresford, "Dogged by Haunting Images," *Media Guardian*, London, 22 August 1994. And Christian Jennings, "The Good, the Mad and The Ugly," *Daily Telegraph*, London, 12 March 1995.
- 15 See Jaar's work "Untitled (Newsweek)" from 1994 which documents the absence of reference to the Rwanda genocide: <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/1994/the-rwanda-project/untitlednewsweek/>
- 16 Debra Bricker Balken and Alfredo Jaar, *The Lament of the Images. Exhibition Catalogue* (Massachusetts: MIT, 1999), 19.
- 17 See Artist website: <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/1995/the-rwanda-project/real-pictures/>
- 18 Alfredo Jaar in Bricker Balken and Jaar, *The Lament of the Images*, 23.
- 19 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 49.
- 20 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire. Lacan Against the Historicists* (Massachusetts: MIT, 1994), 18.
- 21 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 176.
- 22 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 113.
- 23 For a detailed, analytical survey of other examples of works utilizing found language, see Kaja Marczevska, *This is Not a Copy. Writing at the Iterative Turn* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
- 24 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Website: <https://www.ushmm.org>
- 25 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 127.
- 26 See for instance Alan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," *Artforum* 13, no.5 (January 1975). <https://www.artforum.com/features/on-the-invention-of-photographic-meaning-212642/>
- 27 "When asked at a public reading about the ethical justification of his appropriation Fitterman answered, 'Who has ownership of the articulation of collective memory?'" See Maggie Rosenau, "Robert Fitterman. Holocaust Museum Review," *The Volta*, 1 April 2015. <https://thevolta.org/inreview-holocaustmuseum.html>
- 28 Fitterman, *Holocaust Museum*, 92.
- 29 One of the aims of the museum is "demonstrating the applicability of the moral lessons learned from the Holocaust to current and future events." See Jeshujahu Weinberg, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington* (New York: Rizzoli, 1995), 19.
- 30 Weinberg, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington*, 49.
- 31 Walter Benjamin has proposed that the entanglement of violence and myth is intrinsic to the establishment of law. See Walter Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence, A Critical Edition*. Ed. Peter Frenes and Julia NG (California: Stanford University Press, 2021), 57.
- 32 Weinberg, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington*, 51.
- 33 Ibid, 49.
- 34 Jacques Lacan. *Écrits*, Trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1992), 303.