

Why Is It Important—Today—To Show And Look At Images Of Destroyed Human Bodies?

I will try to clarify, in eight points, why it is important—today—to look at images of destroyed human bodies like those I have used and integrated in different works such as "Superficial Engagement" (2006), "Concretion" (2006), "The Incommensurable Banner" (2008), "Ur-Collage" (2008), "Das Auge" (2008), "Crystal of Resistance" (2011), "Touching Reality" (2012) and "Collage-Truth" (2012).

1. Provenance

The images of destroyed human bodies are made by non-photographers. Most of them were taken by witnesses, passersby, soldiers, security or police officers, or rescuers and first-aid helpers. The provenance of the images is unclear and often unverifiable; there is a lack of source in our understanding of what "source" is here. This unclear provenance and this unverifiability reflect today's unclearness. This is what I am interested in. Often the provenance is not guaranteed—but what, in our world today can claim a guarantee and how can "under guarantee" still make sense? These images are available on the Internet mostly to be downloaded; they have the status of witnessing and were put online by their authors for multiple and various reasons. Furthermore, the origin of these images is not signaled; sometimes it is confused, with an unclear, perhaps even manipulated or stolen address, as is true of many things on the Internet and social communication networks often are today. We confront this everyday. The undefined provenance is one of the reasons why it is important to look at such images.

2. Redundancy

The images of destroyed human bodies are important in their redundancy. What is redundant is precisely that such an incommensurable amount of images of destroyed human bodies exists today. Redundancy is not repetition, the repetition of the same, because it is always another human body that is destroyed and appears as such redundantly. But it's not about images—it's about human bodies, about the human, of which the image is only a testimony. The images are redundant pictures because it is redundant, as such, that human beings are destroyed. Redundancy is important here. I want to take it as something important, and I want to see this redundancy as a form. We do not want to accept the redundancy of such images because we don't want to accept the redundancy of cruelty toward the human being. This is why it is important to look at images of destroyed human bodies in their very redundancy.

3. Invisibility

Today, in the newspapers, magazines, and TV news, we very seldom see images of destroyed bodies because they are very rarely shown. These pictures are nonvisible and invisible: the presupposition is that they will hurt the viewer's sensitivity or only satisfy voyeurism, and the pretext is to protect us from this threat. But the invisibility is not innocent. The invisibility is the strategy of supporting, or at least not discouraging, the war effort. It's about making war acceptable and its effects commensurable, as was formulated, for example, by Donald Rumsfeld, former U.S. Secretary of Defense (2001-06): "Death has the tendency to encourage a depressing view of war." But is there really another view to have on war than a depressing one? To look at images of destroyed human bodies is a way to engage against war and against its justification and propaganda. Since 9/11 this phenomena of invisibility has been reinforced in the West. Not to accept this invisibility as a given fact or as a "protection" is why it is important to look at such images.

4. Iconism-Tendency

The tendency to “iconism” still exists, even today. “Iconism” is the habit of “selecting”, “choosing”, or “finding” the image that “stands out,” the image that is “the important one,” the image that “says more,” the image that “counts more” than the others. In other words, the tendency to “iconism” is the tendency to “highlight”; it’s the old, classical procedure of favoring and imposing, in an authoritarian way, a hierarchy. This is not a declaration of importance toward something or somebody, but a declaration of importance toward others. The goal is to establish a common importance, a common weight, a common measure. But “Iconism-Tendency” and “highlighting” also have the effect of avoiding the existence of differences, of the non-iconic and of the non-highlighted. In the field of war and conflict images, this leads to choosing the “acceptable” for others. It’s the “acceptable” image that stands for another image, for all other images, for something else, and perhaps even for a nonimage. This image or icon has to be, of course, the correct, the good, the right, the allowed, the chosen—the consensual image. This is the manipulation. One example is the image, much discussed (even by art historians), of the “Situation-Room” in Washington during the killing of Bin Laden by the “Navy Seals” in 2011. I refuse to accept this image as an icon; I refuse its “iconism”, and I refuse the fact that this image—and all other “icons”—stand for something other than itself. To fight “Iconism-tendency” is the reason why looking at images of destroyed bodies is important.



Picture:
The "Situation-Room" in Washington during the killing of Bin Laden by the "Navy Seals" in 2011.

5. Reduction to Facts

In today's world of facts, of information, of opinion, and of comments, a lot is reduced to being factual. Fact is the new “golden calf” of journalism, and the journalist wants to give it the assurance and guarantee of veracity. But I am not interested in the verification of a fact. I am interested in Truth, Truth as such, which is not a verified fact or the “right information” of a journalistic story. The truth I am interested in resists facts, opinions, comments, and journalism. Truth is irreducible; therefore the images of destroyed human bodies are irreducible and resist factuality. I don’t deny facts and actuality, but I want to oppose the texture of facts today. The habit of reducing things to facts is a comfortable way to avoid

touching Truth, and to resist this is a way to touch Truth. Such an acceptance wants to impose on us factual information as the measure, instead of looking and seeing with our own eyes. I want to see with my own eyes. Resistance to today's world of facts is what makes it important to look at such images.



Picture:
Caravaggio, Michelangelo Merisi da "The Incredulity of Saint Thomas" (1601-1602)
Bildergalerie Sanssouci, Potsdam

6. Victim-Syndrome

To look at images of destroyed human bodies is important because it can contribute to an understanding that the incommensurable act is not the looking; what is incommensurable is that destruction has happened in the first place—that a human, a human body, was destroyed, indeed, that an incommensurable amount of human beings were destroyed. It is important— before and beyond anything else—to understand this. It's only by being capable of touching this incommensurable act that I can resist the suggestive question: Is this a victim or not? And whose victim? Or is this perhaps a killer, a torturer? Is it perhaps not about the victim? Perhaps this destroyed human body shouldn't be considered and counted as a victim? To classify destroyed human bodies as victim or not-victim is an attempt to make them commensurable instead of thinking that all these bodies are the incommensurable. The Victim-Syndrome is the syndrome that wants me to give a response, an explanation, a reason to the incommensurable and finally to declare who is "the innocent." The only surviving terrorist in the Mumbai killings in 2008 declared to the court where he was sentenced to death: "I don't think I am innocent." I think the incommensurable in this world has no reason, no explanation, and no response—before and beyond. In this incommensurable world, I have to refuse the commensurability of accepting classification as victim or not-victim. I do not want to be neutralized by what wants to make the world commensurable. To look at images of destroyed human bodies is important because I don't want to be resigned in facing the Victim Syndrome.

7. Irrelevance of Quality

These images—because they were taken by witnesses—don't have any photographic quality. I am interested by this. It is the confirmation that, in conditions of urgency, “quality” is not necessary. I always believed in “Quality = No, Energy = Yes.” There is no aesthetic approach here beyond the objective to take the image. Concerns of quality are irrelevant facing the incommensurable. The images of destroyed bodies express this. No technical know-how is needed. No photographer is needed. The argument of “photographic quality” is the argument of the one who stands apart, is not present, and who, on behalf of the “quality” argument, expresses his distance and his attempt to be the supervisor. But there is no supervising anymore; what is “needed” is to be a witness, to be there, to be here and to be here now, to be present, to be present at the “right time” at the “right place”. Most images are taken with small cameras, smart phones or mobile phones. They match our way of witnessing “today's everything” and “today's nothing” in daily life and making it “public”. The irrelevance of quality of these images is an implicit critique of “embedded” photo-journalism and journalism. This irrelevance of quality is what makes it important to look at such images.

8. Detachment through “Hyper-Sensitivity”

I am sensitive and I want to be sensitive, and at the same time I want to be awake, to pay attention. I don't want to take distance; I don't want to look away and I don't want to turn my eyes. Sometimes I hear viewers saying, while looking at images of destroyed human bodies, “I can't look at this, I must not see this, I'm too sensitive.” This is a way of keeping a comfortable, narcissistic, and exclusive distance from today's reality, from the world. From our world, the unique and only world. The discourse of sensitivity—which is actually “Hyper-Sensitivity”—is about keeping one's comfort, calm, and luxury. Distance is only taken by those who—with their own eyes—won't confront the incommensurable of reality. Distance is never a gift; it's something taken by very few to keep intact their exclusivity. “Hyper-Sensitivity” is the opposite of the “non-exclusive public”. In order to confront the world, to struggle with its chaos, its incommensurability, in order to coexist and to cooperate in this world and with the other, I need to confront reality without distance. Therefore it is necessary to distinguish “sensitivity”, which means to me being “awake” and “attentive”, from “Hyper-Sensitivity”, which means “self-enclosure” and “exclusion”. To resist “Hyper-Sensitivity”, it is important to look at those images of destroyed human bodies.

Thomas Hirschhorn, Aubervilliers, 2012

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