

## Rearranging Corpses, Curatorially

Julian Stallabrass

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In 1942, Vasily Grossman, then a journalist with the Red Army, wrote in his notebook as the Soviet troops advanced south of Kharkov:

Severe frost. The snow is creaking. Icy air makes one catch one's breath. The insides of one's nostrils stick together, teeth ache from the cold. Germans, frozen to death, lie on the roads of our advance. Their bodies are absolutely intact. We didn't kill them, it was the cold. Practical jokers put the frozen Germans on their feet, or on their hands and knees, making intricate, fanciful sculptural groups. Frozen Germans stand with their fists raised, or with their fingers spread wide. Some them look as if they are running, their heads pulled into their shoulders. ... At night the fields of snow seem blue under the bright moon, and the dark bodies of frozen German soldiers stand in the blue snow, placed there by jokers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vasily Grossman, *A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army 1941-1945*, ed./ trans. Antony Beever/ Luba Vinogradova, The Harvill Press, London 2005, p. 86.

As the curator of the 2008 Brighton Photo Biennial, which is devoted to the theme of images of war, I constantly carry with me a dreadful sense that my task is comparable to that of Grossman's 'jokers'. There seems something wrong about, at the most extreme end of what I do, arranging photographs of corpses and the wounded in a way that makes cogent sense, or judging how they may be best arranged to produce a coherent formal ensemble.

Such acts violate the (unstated) edicts against either any curatorial tinkering with images of trauma (aesthetic tinkering is permitted, and indeed encouraged, if you bear the label 'artist'); and also of displaying in galleries images which may be complicit with violence, or were made as a part of dealing out violence.

The point of those objections can be grasped in the many unattractive statements made by journalists, crowing over some scoop that had involved tragedy for its subjects. To take a single example, Evan Wright of *Rolling Stone* magazine, was embedded with US Marines, and had witnessed firing at civilians by a young, trigger-happy troop-member. He later came across the bloodied victims:

Again, being a reporter, I'm thinking in the back of my mind, 'This is gruesome. This is awesome. This is perfect. I've got everything now. This is the honest truth. I was there when the shooting happened, and everyone knew that Trombley was the one who shot them'.<sup>2</sup>

The 'gruesome'/'awesome' combination is telling about the journalist's yearning for blood, but is it right to judge that the 'awesome' is merely the voice of journalistic ambition? After all, Wright's delight at getting the story was a feeling that comes from fitting events together to establish cause and effect, as well as perhaps to seize upon a narrative that has the force of recognisability: the consequences of putting young men, raised on bloodthirsty war movies and brutalised by Marine training and the very ethos of the Corps, into a battleground which is the home of civilians. So while the triumphalism of Wright's statement may be ugly, there is something about his activity which is valuable: making sense of a situation which goes beyond the immediate, one-thing-after-another accounts that characterise much embedded reporting.

So there is, first, the 'rearrangement of corpses' to make sense of their deaths—and to do so politically, militarily, socially and ideologically. This is surely an essential task of any curation that dares to broach such topics.

But what of aesthetic ordering? What does it mean to make such images look good, either individually or when seen alongside others? One model of a response is seen clearly in the work of Thomas Hirschhorn, not least in *The Incommensurable Banner*, which will be exhibited at Fabrica as part of the Biennial. This is a protestor's banner writ large, which (like Brian Haw's display in Parliament Square) contains a collage of corpses torn apart by modern weaponry. Such weaponry has been developed, not merely to kill, but to destroy the body, and the horrific remains are left as a lesson for those tempted to further resist. The subterranean circulation of these images, online and in disreputable magazines, has a similar function to the publication of what took place at Guantanamo Bay, or the placement of torture chambers by the Latin American dictatorships in the

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Katovsky/ Timothy Carlson, eds., *Embedded: The Media War in Iraq*, The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut 2003, p. 336.

centre of cities: that the consequences of opposition should be known by all without being broadcast.

The roughness of Hirschhorn's work—its lack of finish, its overtly cheap materials and spatchcocked construction, which always reveals its own methods—would seem to blunt the aesthetic. This has long been the case—and these elements attempt to set his work and its politics apart from the carefully made and polished art objects that are sold out of galleries flanked by other shops selling jewellery, antique furniture, tailored clothes and other domestic accoutrements of the rich. With Hirschhorn's exploration of the worst images of warfare, this rough and open method of working matches the vulgarity of its photographic sources, and in other pieces, such as *Substitution 2*, the juxtaposition of pornography, advertising and the dead. Whether these pieces are exactly composed is open to question: Hirschhorn has said that he wants to 'give form' but not to 'make forms', a formulation that implies a privileging of meaning over beauty, one that is backed up by the artist's insistent references to protest culture.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, particularly with photography, the aesthetic cannot be banished quite so easily. As the first photographic formalists discovered, there is a large overlap between photographic qualities which may be taken as aesthetic and the functional characteristics of the medium. The strictures of the f64 manifesto, for example, produced a particular aesthetic result, but also one—in the insistence on contact printing, sharp focus, maximum depth of field and full tonal range—that also had a level of descriptive detail never before seen. In attempting to fix on the essential characteristics of photography, these avant-gardists could not but make finer-grained descriptions of the world. Fine printing for the work in the Biennial will aid the clarity and visibility of the subjects depicted, while simultaneously ensnaring an aesthetic outlook with its own history and ideology. There is a danger here that some of the objects that we wish to show may, especially in the gallery setting, be taken as art works which have been recommended by some power of intellectual and aesthetic authority. So the aesthetic is both unavoidable and perilous, and it is best to be conscious of it, to highlight it and declare it openly.

There is, however, a deeper objection to any rearrangement, and again it is particularly pertinent to photography: these images are not merely generic products of the war machine (though, as we shall see, they are also that)—they are also particular depictions of particular people suffering some particular act of violence or humiliation. A photograph of a boot stamping on a head is not just an invocation of Orwell, but shows a perpetrator with a name, a victim with a name, and a specific time, place and circumstance, from which a portion of light has reflected into a lens. Is it right to handle these representations for instrumental purposes, rather than present them as what they are in themselves, and with as full an elaboration of their particularities as possible?

In a less bloody and dramatic key, this problem infects the whole of curation, for are not art works themselves (on one view) delicate and particular emanations of a unique sensibility, best set down tenderly and at a distance from contamination by other works or interference by extraneous thoughts?

The model on which this Biennial is based is in explicit opposition to that view: as against art events which dare not throw the confining cage of cogency about their contents, this Biennial sets out to be about something, and to have something definite to

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<sup>3</sup> From an interview with Hirschhorn by Craig Garrett, 'Thomas Hirschhorn: Philosophical Battery', *Flash Art*, no. 238, October 2004.

say. Its title ('Memory of Fire: Images of War and the War of Images') is plainly descriptive, as against those many curatorial 'concepts' that have only the virtue that they do not exclude anything (a couple of recent examples: 'Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind' and 'Tales of Time and Space'). The corollary of this position, to take a standpoint, is that viewers have the opportunity to respond to what they see publicly on the Biennial website.

I am also not convinced of the need to treat all objects with equal consideration and gentleness. Alongside museum photography, we will be showing photojournalism of the past that has achieved some status in the art world (by figures such as Don McCullin), along with current photojournalism that has not, and some that perhaps never will; and photographs taken by members of the armed forces, both those serving as professional photographers and the many amateurs, including the Abu Ghraib pictures; and photographs built into many contexts in magazines, newspapers and on the Web. Obviously, not all of this material is recommended aesthetically or otherwise, except to say that it is worthy of critical attention. Much of the material is overtly generic—this becomes apparent, for example, in a trawl through the thousands of images of the Iraq War on the US Army site, in which a definite series of genres emerges, from ball games played with Iraqi children to the heroic soldier shot from below, to displays of military competence, to technophilic lingering over hi-tech equipment, to soldiers silhouetted against the setting sun. We are planning to print a large number of these images in a grid to highlight their generic character, so that they are seen as particular examples of a type, and not (as the art work is habitually, if wrongly, seen) as the unclassifiably unique.

In displaying such a variety of images, I want there to emerge an interplay of particularity and generality. Some of the difficulties of doing this were raised in discussions about the inclusion in an exhibition, 'The Sublime Image of Destruction', of an image of a wounded child by Simon Norfolk. Both Norfolk and I wanted to show the image because it frankly described the consequences of the war in a way that put viewers (particularly those whose governments are involved in military action) in a deeply disturbing place. Norfolk had been encouraged to take the picture by Iraqis at the scene, doubtless for similar reasons. Nevertheless, the proposed enlargement of the image to museum photography scale, and that it should be displayed under the concept of the sublime troubled the artist and the curators at the De La Warr Pavilion. How did the image, with its focus on the face of an individual, fit with the more general scenes of ruination in the exhibition? What did the inflation of size do to its meaning as the depiction of an individual? Had the child survived (viewers were bound to want to know)? We eventually decided not to include the print. But our uncertainty about this image raised the difficulty of keeping both particularity and generality in the mind: that the cruelties depicted are typical, and that they happen to individuals—to this child, who should not be reduced to an icon of the general.

So the question is how to achieve this curatorially, and whether doing so necessarily involves aesthetics. Clarity of depiction, after all, is an aid to grasping particularity, and also unavoidably an aesthetic quality. Photojournalism, which is at the heart of the Biennial, has its own strongly generic characteristics, for example in its fixation on the event, the gesture, and especially the expressive face. Again, this is a descriptive and aesthetic matter. Through juxtaposition—not just in but across exhibitions and the website—the Biennial attempts to bring into view a larger functional picture, one which allows comparison and contrast, and encourages critical examination of different generic forms of production. Photojournalism can be matched against museum photography,

amateur photography against professional, and artists' use of photography in installation against the place of news photographs in blogs.

In making that play of contrasts, there has been no conscious compositional effort on my part, but rather an attempt to reach for maximum clarity. This is not to say that one will not emerge or become apparent. Of the (inevitable) question: does your curating have an aesthetic, or, is there a beautiful way to rearrange corpses? On that, I must hold my silence.