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Event Review: "The Flood of Rights"

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The Flood of Rights[i]

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The colour photograph of a high-end video camera—a bulky, black contraption
mounted to a tripod and controlled by a human operator standing just outside the frame of
the image—that accompanied the public announcement of 'The Flood of Rights'
(September, 2013) elided some of the most pressing issues—about the unevenness of
accessibility to digital image-making, the affective impact of the online circulation of
these images, and the erasure of certain kinds of human bodies from these
representations—the conference would raise.[ii] Given the event's focus on how people
"make claims for their rights through user-generated communication channels, such as
Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr" (*e-flux* 2013), a smartphone instead of a studio camera
would be better suited to evoke on-the-spot citizen journalism. But as a representation of
image-making, the photograph of the video camera was also misleading, as the majority
of the presentations at this three-day conference were not interested in analyzing visual
culture's sites of the production but rather its modes of circulation and reception.
Convened as a follow-up to 'The Human Snapshot,' the 2011 conference that
investigated the intersections of human rights, photography and universalism, 'The Flood
of Rights' focussed on the platforms for these intersections, asking how user-generated
imaging technologies and their modes of distribution have 'transformed the very terms of
human rights' (*e-flux* 2013). Although the 'flood' of the conference's title called to mind

the massive volume of photographic images being produced daily—underscored by Erik Kessels's artwork, *24HRS of Photos* [2011–], a mountainous installation of printed copies of all the photographs uploaded to Flickr in one day on view concurrently at the Les Rencontres d'Arles Photographies festival—it also suggested the unruliness of their directions. Without the newspaper front page or a photo editor to direct the viewer's attention, how does the spectator make sense of these competing claims for rights from distant digital citizens? And how is the role of the viewer understood and evaluated in these networked forms of dissemination?

Much like these questions, the conference organizers' choice of illustration points to an ongoing challenge facing visual culture theorists in the age of digital networked communication: how to picture a seemingly immaterial medium, or series of media, streaming between portable screens around the globe with no fixed point of production or reception. In many ways, 'The Flood of Rights' was an event in search of a common and consistent object of study, in itself an interesting and demanding project and one that I want to think about not as a shortcoming of the conference, but rather as a productive ambiguity that unsettles assumptions about 'the event' and 'the image,' two foundational terms in recent photography theory.

In the past decade, visual culture scholars have been re-thinking the relationship between photography and human rights claims in the wake of the critique of humanism, which has characterized much art historical and visual culture work since the 1960s. In particular, Ariella Azoulay's *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008) and *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (2012), the edited volume *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain* (2007), Susie Linfield's *The Cruel*

Radiance: Photography and Political Violence (2010) and Sharon Sliwinski's *Human Rights in Camera* (2011) have each managed to move beyond the anxieties about image fatigue that propelled Susan Sontag and Victor Burgin's writing about photojournalism and atrocity imagery. Instead these scholars argue for the radical contingency of photographic meaning and for the spectator's ability to make rights claims by activating these shifting meanings. The notion of the event is central to this work: a natural disaster, atrocity, genocide, act of war or forced displacement must be registered as an image and shown to spectators to demonstrate the violation of subjects' rights and to incite political intervention. However, user-generated digital images put pressure on the definition of 'the event,' making it difficult to discern what constitutes an event worthy of the spectator's notice and intervention within the 'flood' of images of political situations shared, tweeted and streamed around the world.

In this context, it is not the spectator's apathy that causes anxiety for the visual culture critic, but her limited attention span. For instance, Bernard Stiegler argued in the first presentation of the conference that the advent of digital networks has shifted our understanding of the *res publica*, creating a globalized but non-physical public space. For Stiegler, this virtual public space is a 'formation of attention,' where human subjects are never truly alone: they are always living 'with others' through social media even when they are physically isolated. For rights claims to be seen within this constant flow of imagery, spectators must pay attention to them, designating them significant events within the flows of the digital public sphere. Unfortunately, what incentive would motivate the spectator to do this work, to pay attention to the everyday and elevate it to the status of event, remained unclear in Stiegler's talk.

Rony Brauman's presentation extended questions about the spectator's attention span to a consideration of the limits of visual representation, arguing that in most natural disasters, it is not the first highly representable event that causes the greatest human suffering, but rather state officials' management of its after-effects. These smaller events, difficult to picture because of their banality and pervasiveness, are those requiring the intervention of the international community. In these cases, Brauman argued, spectators judge with their ears rather than their eyes, trusting first-hand accounts over visual representations: we begin to 'see' things that have not been visually represented, which proves for Brauman that the provocation of the image is always a provocation of the imaginary. This tension between what photographic images show of an event and what spectators imagine them to mean can be politically generative, as writers like Azoulay have shown, allowing citizens to refuse state imposed narratives of photographs, and to create their own oppositional readings. Seen through this lens, human rights claims are not discrete events waiting to be visualized, but processes enacted by what human agents *do* with images.

Although the description of the conference foregrounded the role of 'images and their consequences as human rights praxis' (*e-flux* 2013), it was often texts rather than images that carried the greatest affective force in the speakers' presentations. Sharon Sliwinski's paper, 'Sexuality in the Time of War: or How Rape Became a Crime Against Humanity,' relied on oral testimony from both the Rwandan Genocide (1994) and Bosnian Genocide (1995) to argue that the spectacle of sexual violence is not a byproduct of, but rather integral to, establishing sovereign power. Rather than analyzing specific images of rape, Sliwinski examined how sexual violence is made into an optical

experience intended to be witnessed as a strategy for consolidating power and

sovereignty.[iii] Similarly, both Rosalyn Deutsche's reading of Krzysztof Wodiczko's

proposal to wrap the Arc de Triomphe in a museum dedicated to the abolition of war (*The

Arc de Triomphe: World Institute for the Abolition of War* [2011-]) through the

psychoanalysis of war, and Olivia Custer's careful elucidation of 'It is not a Coup', a

message projected onto the façade of a building during the 2011 Tahrir Square

demonstrations, were fascinating studies in the political work done by failed propositions

rather than documents. Although Wodiczko's monument to 'un-war' will never be

realized and the Syrian Civil War has already become a messy, devastating struggle

exceeding its Magritte-like description as a 'coup', it is instead the promissory function

of these gestures, the imagining of what could be, that constitutes a rights claim in these

seemingly impossible scenarios.

If the image took a backseat to text in these presentations, it was often in the

service of thinking more seriously about the psychic and affective implications of human

rights claims on viewers. In this context, David Levine's presentation was unique in its

use of film to consider both the psychic and somatic effects of floods of images on the

viewer. Using scenes from the films *The Parallax View* (1974), *A Clockwork Orange*

(1971) and *The Act of Killing* (2012) as his case studies, Levine critiqued the

spectatorship model that evaluates the viewer's moral fitness based on their physical

reaction to images, most commonly expressed through nausea. In Levine's view, these

filmic representations echo what critics like Sontag expected from viewers when they

encountered images of warfare and atrocity: that spectators 'voted with their stomachs'

through their nauseous symptoms. But the relationship between these experiences of

physical discomfort and moral judgment is not natural or inevitable, as Levine rightly

pointed out; to assume otherwise places unreasonable demands on both the force of

images and on the spectator, without considering images' latent effects.

Levine's insistence on the embodied nature of spectatorship and the long-term

effects of images raised a provocative but unanswered question for 'The Flood of Rights'

conference: how do digital images transform the material conditions of human subjects

whose bodies and environments are exploited for their production? In other words, how

might the supposedly immaterial representation of rights claims create new physical

human rights violations? These kinds of questions about the material conditions of

image-making, such as uneven access to camera equipment, used to be a feature of 1970s

critiques of documentary photography, but now seem to have fallen out of discussions

about digital image-making. This omission signals a dangerous assumption that image-

making technologies are immaterial, universally available and democratically distributed.

For even though the cheapest cell phone now includes a basic digital camera, and

therefore the ability to make images has been extended to places where analogue camera

equipment is difficult to find, access to the Internet is not (yet) universal. (The United

Nations's declaration in a 2011 report that the Internet is a human right underscores the

messianic nature of rights, as something that can be claimed by subjects only when they

are withheld [LaRue 2011]).

Another omission was any discussion of how the proliferation of these immaterial

forms of making and circulating images have real physical effects, whether that be on the

people who make cell phones, smart phones and tablets in dangerous working conditions,

or on the environment through the extraction of mineral resources and the massive stress

put on the power grids that support data centers. While Hito Steyerl famously asked 'Is a

museum a factory?' (2009), it is equally important to question whether a streaming image

is also a manifestation of the factory, in its reliance on the material global networks of

digitized information. Although speakers like David Campbell were interested in

analyzing how 'post-industrial journalism'—journalism that is physically distanciated

from the means of its print production (Anderson 2012)—affects both photographers and

viewers, there is an obfuscation of how digital image-production participates in systems

of globalized industrialization and transnational capitalism in assuming we are 'past'

industrialization. Recent attempts at visualizing the physical impact of networked digital

imaging by artists such as Steyerl, as well as in projects like Harun Farocki and Antje

Ehmann's *Labour in a Single Shot* (2011–), might offer a corrective to how we imagine

the scene of human rights in the era of the digital image. But to do so, we need to be

willing to see them; we need to be reminded that human rights are represented and

claimed at the expense of the rights of unseen others.

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NOTES

[i] 'The Flood of Rights' was a three-day conference held in Actes Sud at the Chapelle du
Méjan, Arles, France from 19-21 September 2013. Co-organized by Thomas Keenan,
Suhail Malik and Tirdad Zolghadr with support from the LUMA Foundation and the
Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (CCS Bard), the participants were: Amanda
Beech, Rony Brauman, David Campbell, Olivia Custer, Rosalyn Deutsche, Eric
Kluitenberg, Jackson Pollock Bar, David Levine, Sohrab Mohebbi, Sharon
Sliwinski, Hito Steyerl, and Bernard Stiegler.
[ii] See Conference: The Flood of Rights (2013). *CCS Bard*, no date. Available at:
http://www.bard.edu/ccs/conference-the-flood-of-rights/ (accessed October 2013); and
The Flood of Rights: LUMA Conference in Arles. *e-flux*, 2 July. Available at:
http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/the-flood-of-rights-luma-conference-in-arles/
(accessed October 2013).
[iii] This reading also brought to mind Azoulay's question in *The Civil Contract of
Photography*, "Has Anyone Ever Seen a Photograph of a Rape?" (2008: 217-288).