Picturing Atrocity
Photography in Crisis

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Many photographs haunt me. Often they are graphic representations of atrocities. Others are informed by my knowledge of what has or what is about to happen. The images merge together in my mind: covered bodies laid out in makeshift morgues; anguished mothers holding photos of their sons and daughters; debris-strewn streets after suicide bombings, human bones in a pile that fill up the frame. Others are specific: dead Vietnamese near the village of My Lai, a cowering Palestinian boy caught in cross-fire being sheltered by his screaming father; a burned corpse clutching a steering wheel during Operation Desert Storm, the First Gulf War.

I am interested in the afterlife of images. I save newspaper and magazine photos. I scan them to use in constructed photographs and installations. I grab other photos from the internet. Folders in file cabinets and folders in my computer contain hundreds of images. I return to and add to my archive regularly. I know the images well, and they play like filmstrips in my mind.

Fathers hold larger than life-size photographs of their bloody children. The photographer and the fathers are demanding that we look. I superimpose the image over an image of my eyes. I am looking at the fathers holding the photographs as well as at the viewer of my photograph. My eyes look at you – you look at me and through me. I am both image-maker and consumer of images.

I came to use photographs of atrocity in my work through my exploration of the family photograph. In the early 1980s I began an artistic practice where I project slides, often my family snapshots, into empty rooms to create installations specifically for the vantage point of the camera or large-scale, projected installations with sound and floor-to-ceiling changing images. In the early 1990s I began collecting family photographs from women and girls for what was to become the first part of my Collected Visions project. I wanted to see my family’s
Lorie Novak, Look/Not
2011, inkjet print,
40 x 28.75 inches.
photographs against the cultural backdrop of other people’s family snapshots. In the process, I realized that I could use images from the media in much the same way. When I look at the photograph of Robert Kennedy on the ground with the waiter kneeling over him right after he was shot, I see my bedroom in 1968. No family photograph from that time elicits the same clear memory. I see myself running down the hall to tell my parents what I heard on the radio. I see photos of Vietnam, and see myself watching the war on TV and participating in anti-war marches. For many images of atrocity, I remember my first encounter with them. They live in my memory in many of the same ways that my family photographs do.

*Past Lives (for the Children of Izieu)*, 1987, was the first photograph that I created mixing my family photographs and historical imagery. I had been asked to create photographs for an exhibition and book commemorating the 40th anniversary of the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. It was at the time of the trial of Nazi war criminal, Klaus Barbie. A photograph of smiling children hidden in a boarding school in Izieu, France, then deported and murdered, was widely publicized as evidence of Barbie’s crimes against humanity. As a Jewish child coming of age in the 1960s, my historical memory starts with images related to the Holocaust. They are, as Marianne Hirsch writes, my postmemories. In my projected collage of Ethel Rosenberg, the children from Izieu, and me clutching my mother, I see my generation as the recipient of the weight of this cultural past.

In the latter part of the 1990s, I was struck by the fact that photos of displaced families forced from their homes were regularly printed in newspapers to show the horror of the situation in the former Yugoslavia. I was saving more photographs than usual. As it became clear in March 1999 that NATO was going to bomb Serbia in response to the attacks against Albanians in Kosovo, I decided to start saving the entire front section of *The New York Times* once the bombing started. My original idea was to have a stack of newspapers that signified a war that I would then photograph. When the cease-fire was signed, it did not seem like a true resolution had been reached, so I kept collecting. The World Trade Center was attacked and I kept collecting, and I have not stopped. The *New York Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger has said that the *Times* may stop publishing its paper edition in the near future, so now I cannot stop.

I have drawn from my collection of over 4,000 newspaper sections to scan images for my installation and photographic projects. The newspapers themselves appear in *Reverb*, an ongoing installation I began in 2004. Interweaving photographs of significant moments from the last...
Lorie Novak, Past Lives (for the Children of Izieu), 1987, colour photograph, 36 x 28.9 inches.
Lorie Novak, Tower, 2006, inkjet print, 40 x 27 inches.
Lorie Novak, Reverb, 
mid-dissolve excerpt. 
Computer-based 
projection, 2004 (ongoing). 
22 minutes with internet 
audio fragments. 
Software by Jon Meyer.
50 years with personal images, *Reverb* places the individual within a political and historical context. Viewers are enveloped by larger than life projected images and sound. Approximately 200 images dissolve and reappear in an almost perpetual cycle akin to history itself. The chronological sequence contains both important and little-known documentary images of historic events from the Holocaust to the present. Personal imagery including my family snapshots, self-portraits, and travel photographs from the same periods are interwoven with the media imagery. Selected audio fragments, taken from online audio archives, play randomly alongside the projected images — and are complemented each day by a live newsfeed taken directly from the internet. Viewers, finding themselves situated in the midst of visceral imagery and constantly stimulated by the random audio streams are challenged to consider their own individual perspectives. The changing relationship between image and sound simulates our contemporary situation where our knowledge is constantly shifting as new information is presented to us 24/7 on the internet. Nothing is static.

In re-presenting photographs of atrocity, I seek to make an intervention. Like the fathers holding the photographs of their bloody children at a demonstration in Iraq, I want my audience to look, think, and feel. I want to draw attention to the fact that while photographs can help us to know more about the world and ourselves, they often obscure, glorify, and horrify a situation so that we actually know less. And greater truths often lie in what we don’t see or that which cannot be photographed. When I project an image of a pile of human bones from Rwanda, do I keep the photograph up for a split second because it is so horrific or do I keep up it longer so the viewer must confront it? There are no easy answers.
Postscript

This essay is dedicated to my former teacher, the late Robert Heinecken, who showed me at age 19 what it meant to be an artist. I have come to realize how profoundly his groundbreaking work with altered and assembled magazines from the 1970s have profoundly influenced my work. In *Periodical #5*, 1971, he appropriated the photograph of a South Vietnamese soldier holding two severed Vietcong heads and printed it over pages of mainstream magazines, then secretly returned the magazines to the newsstands.
Lorie Novak, Photographic Interference

1 See www.collectedvisions.net, accessed June 2011.


4 Sulzberger spoke at the 9th International Newsroom Summit in London, September 8–9, 2010. “Asked about his response to the suggestion that the NYT might print its last edition in 2015, Sulzberger said he saw no point in making such predictions and said all he could say was that ‘we will stop printing the New York Times sometime in the future, date TBD.’” at www.editorstblog.org/newspaper/2013/09/arthur_sulzberger_on_changing_online_to.php, accessed June 2011.