



Allie Tsubota

DEAD LETTER ROOM



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Approved by Master's Examination Committee:



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Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa  
Associate Professor, Graduate Program Director  
Department of Photography  
Rhode Island School of Design  
Thesis Chair



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Iyko Day  
Elizabeth C. Small Associate Professor of English  
Chair of Critical Social Thought and Gender Studies  
Mount Holyoke College  
Thesis Advisor



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Paul Pfeiffer  
Artist  
Thesis Advisor





## **Table of Contents**

Abstract	7
Introduction	8
Dead letter room	18
Looking, in three parts	30
A(-)visual warfare	48
Transoceanic desire	64
Not to remember—without forgetting	74
No end to the image	90
Bibliography	92
Acknowledgments	98



## Abstract

*Dead Letter Room* is a photographic and textual dialogue with images that emerge from the end of the Asia-Pacific Wars and World War II in the Pacific. These images are governed by the historical contexts that produce them; they are mediated by the explosive aftershocks of nuclear war, the transoceanic space of imperial desire, and the onset of oblivion in the aftermath of catastrophe. Throughout this essay, I present the historical, image-theoretical and psychoanalytical frameworks that meaningfully guide my address of historical images and my approach to making new ones. With detours through various artists and theorists, I offer the expressive grammars that are critical to my dialogues with images of postwar Japan and the possibilities these conversations engender.

Significant to my practice, and to this essay, are photographic and filmic materials from the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, conducted in 1945 by the US military to study the efficacy of Allied-bombing on Japanese soil. Through sojourns in this archive, I consider the temporal and spatial structures that condition photographic looking, the mediation of the visible and the visual in modern and contemporary warfare, the inter- and intrasubjective flows of desire in the postwar landscape, and the registers of withdrawal in the aftermath of disaster.

At its core, *Dead Letter Room* is a search for (dis)appeared specters in the mid-20th century Pacific. It reflects my curiosities about the potential for intimacy and animacy between human subjects across time, and it represents my desire to short-circuit the directional notion of time that imprisons history as a catastrophe of the past.

## Introduction

*Once dead, there will not lack pious hands to hurl  
me over the banister; my sepulchre shall be the  
unfathomable air: my body will sink lengthily  
and will corrupt and dissolve in the wind  
engendered by the fall, which is infinite.*

Jorge Luis Borges<sup>1</sup>

I.

There is no sound at the center of the blast.

II.

I recall the heat of August in Kyoto. Limbs of trees grow languid, and lovers wait for dusk to come to lounge along the Kamo River. The air is heavy and wet. Most tourists, like myself, search for small and shaded corners that, in August, seem indifferent to the heat and to time's relentless governance.

I arrived in Kyoto by train. Most cities on Honshu are easily accessible via the maddeningly efficient Japanese rail system, and the short passage between Kyoto and Hiroshima is no exception. My visit to Hiroshima had been a gross disappointment; I had planned to visit with my father's cousin, the daughter of an uncle who was abandoned in Japan before the First World War, though after several weeks of polite correspondence she never arrived for our meeting. I nervously fingered the slip of paper on which I had recorded her phone number, and hesitantly dialed from a nearby phone booth. No answer and no machine; just a rhythmic and persistent ringing. I set down the receiver and closed my eyes. Not two weeks prior I had accompanied my precocious young niece to a boardwalk

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<sup>1</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Library of Babel." *Ficciones*. Grove Press, 1962, p. 83.

attraction advertised as a *mirror maze*, a simple array of dimly-lit hallways fit with floor-to-ceiling reflective glass. Corners of the maze hosted sharp 90-degree turns that promptly dead-ended, the effect of which was to lead participants into enchanting mirages that quickly imprisoned them. In the maze, I could hear my niece's playful voice and her rapid footfalls in distant chambers; my chest contracted, briefly, when I saw glimmers of her silver shoes streaming momentarily across the glass. I opened my eyes and stepped out of the booth. I promptly caught a train back to Kyoto, where I continued my trip as if this brief sojourn to a missed encounter was just an inconvenient lapse in memory. This was not how my niece reacted to exiting the maze; she begged for days to be taken back to the halls of shimmering glass.

Several weeks later my father's cousin would write me, apologizing profusely and explaining she'd suffered a medical emergency that left her hospitalized and unable to return my messages. She felt terrible, she wrote, that I'd endured such blind wandering in search of a suddenly absented host. My father's cousin had not *vanished in Hiroshima*, but she had vanished in Hiroshima, and the dark irony of this slippage was not lost on me. I filed the trivial occurrence within the larger stream of strange absences and (dis)appeared specters that, over time, have led me to write this essay and to produce the artwork to which my writing refers. My investigation into the images that emerge from the close of the Asia-Pacific Wars and World War II in the Pacific extends to the realms of image theory, cinema studies, and transnational history, but at its core it's a search for ghosts in a room of broken mirrors.

### III.

This essay outlines the theoretical touchstones and research methodologies that have informed the artworks I have made over the past two years. The majority of the artworks I discuss in this essay are in direct dialogue with historical images from Japan in the immediate postwar period. At this time in the Pacific—the fall of 1945—the atomic bombs have fallen on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Japanese Empire is in the process of being dissolved and requartered among the Allied occupation.

Korea has been split along the 38th parallel and is doubly governed by the Soviet Union and the United States. In Europe, it's been nearly nine months since the liberation of Auschwitz and just over five since Adolf Hitler died by suicide in a camera obscura-like subterranean bunker in Berlin. Alain Resnais has yet to make his award-winning film on the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh. In North America, Japanese/Americans and Japanese/Canadians are ushered eastward, toward Chicago, Toronto, and Philadelphia; Japanese exogamy rates in the United States and Canada would soon be the highest of any racial or ethnic minority.

This is the postwar transnational landscape from which the images my work is concerned with surface. Over the past several months, I have been looking at images of imperial soldiers, Allied-bombed Japanese cities, victims of the atomic bombs, and members of the United States military; I have been watching films of the French and Japanese New Wave and imagining the lifeworlds of Hara Tamiki and Marguerite Duras. The images that emerge from this postwar landscape are governed by the historical contexts that produce them; they are mediated by the explosive aftershocks of nuclear war and the onset of oblivion past a global catastrophe. In my practice, I consider the psychic and social functions of historical and contemporary images to be inseparable from their lives as objects. My interest in probing the space *traversed* or *triangulated* between an image, a spectator, and referent—within this essay and within my artwork—is part of my broader intent to understand the circuitry between the visual, psychic, and social functions of images.

In Chapter 1, I explore the relationship between time, history, and the image through critic and theorist Eduardo Cadava and his invocations of Walter Benjamin. The close of the Asia-Pacific Wars and World War II in the Pacific spans a set of historical episodes characterized by the explosive, amnesiac nature of nuclear warfare, and by the recursivity of imperial structures for doubly-occupied or doubly-colonized people.<sup>2</sup> The wars' endings exist within a disordered temporal landscape that naturally

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<sup>2</sup> Here, I'm referring to sites across the Pacific, including Korea, the Philippines, and Guam, that have been subject to both Japanese and American imperialism over several hundreds of years.

mirrors the suspended, *deranged* temporality of the photographic image.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I follow Cadava's and Benjamin's writing on the temporal structure of the photograph, and contend with the photograph as an entity that fundamentally destabilizes the governance of time and the containment of history.

In Chapter 2, I explore the possibilities offered by the spatial arrangement of photographic looking. Through psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's formulation of the gaze, art historian Kaja Silverman's articulations of spectatorial assimilation and antipathy, and theorist and filmmaker Ariella Azoulay's invention of the civil contract of photography, I consider the psychic, social, and civil possibilities enabled by a spectator's relationship with the camera. Throughout these first two chapters, I discuss how these theoretical frameworks extend to material choices I make within my own creative work.

I linger so long on the temporal and spectatorial structure of the photograph in these first two chapters for two reasons. On one hand, these theories open meaningful strategies by which to reflect on my own encounters with specific historical images. On the other hand, they serve the contemporary spectator in developing a critical attunement to images—an urgent practice given the image's mass proliferation across (social) media and news, and its vulnerability to weaponization by apparatuses of state and non-state power. The overwhelming pervasiveness of photographic and moving images calls us to question the ways that we, as contemporary spectators, perform acts of witnessing. Further, rampant image-trafficking prompts us to contend with how photographic and filmic materials function as "evidence," which can not speak for itself but rather is spoken *for*, or spoken *to*.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, millions of videos and photographs circulate the metaverse that document the violent extrajudicial murder of Black life at the hands of law enforcement, and yet so often these images fail to stand in as the type of

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<sup>3</sup> Eduardo Cadava describes the derangement of the image (in and as ruin) extensively in "'Lapsus Imaginis': The Image in Ruins." *October*, vol. 96, 2001, pp. 35-60.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Keenan discusses this peculiarity of "evidence" in "Getting the dead to tell me what happened." *Kronos*, no. 44, 2018, pp. 102-122.



"evidence" that can successfully indict or convict those responsible. As was the case in the Rodney King trials, images can be manipulated and deployed as ammunition against the realization of justice. My creative practice takes seriously that encounters with images demand attention, even if the images attended to are incapable of resurrecting the innumerable Black lives destroyed by pawns of white supremacy, the millions of colonial subjects murdered by Imperial soldiers,<sup>5</sup> or the hundreds of thousands of *hibakusha* disappeared from the face of the earth.

In Chapter 3, I consider the symbolic and functional intimacies between the making of images and the making of war, and consider broadly the manipulation of visibility and visuality in instances of modern and contemporary warfare. Guided by French theorist Paul Virilio's landmark essay *War and Cinema* and artists Harun Farocki and Rabih Mroué, my considerations in this chapter extend to the aesthetic possibilities of flash illumination and the ethics of the self-effacing catastrophe. In Chapter 4, I explore the flows of corporeal, transnational, and intrasubjective desire prevalent in the postwar landscape, and I identify instances within my artwork where notions of desire are expressed.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I reflect on the psychic, social, and material withdrawals that exist in the aftermath of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. With detours that engage Jalal Toufic's *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, and the work of artist Walid Raad, I consider the expressive possibilities for contending with formations of transnational memory and the persistence of oblivion. In this chapter, I question how distinctions between the real and the unreal are drawn, and I point to my own and others' artworks as sites that productively question how and from where one mediates the formation of meaning and memory.

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<sup>5</sup> Low estimates of people killed by the Imperial Japanese Army from the late 19th century through 1945 are 3 million; high estimates are 10 million with a likely 6 million of those being ethnic Chinese.

In developing my creative practice over the past two years, I have conceded that attending to images cannot resuscitate the dead or the vanished, and I recognize that harm is often recommitted in attempts to remediate the slow withdrawal of that which survived. I have heard Saidiya Hartman's warning that attempts to rescue the lives of trafficked and enslaved peoples reproduce the violences that submit them to the archive as such, and I follow her example in confronting the impossibility of repairing the archive's damages.<sup>6</sup> In my present work, I do not attempt to fill silences in the archive but to disorder the elements that constitute its architecture;<sup>7</sup> I am not interested in revising history but in eroding the protocols of historical disciplines and the state-sanctioned systems that protect them. In the works I address in this essay, my objective is not to resolve the atrocities of the postwar landscape, but to suggest that the thick, knotted, tendinous cord of transnational imperial desire and nuclear catastrophe forged in 1945 remains a critical handhold for the exercise of power today. My use of the photographic apparatus is often self-reflexive, and though my concern over the weaponization of images remains undulled, I am enamored by the image's potential: by its proclivity for flippantly dismissing the legitimacy of hegemonic structures and discourses, for evading governance by a singularized power, and for escaping fixed meaning or description.

In many ways, the practice of writing this essay and of making the artworks it references began in a dark room, and over the past two years I've come to realize that the room is in fact a chamber within an infinite and lightless labyrinth. The architecture of history and memory is vast, and it offers no promise of resolution or elective emergency exit. There are many ways in and there's no way out<sup>8</sup>—the interior banisters and

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<sup>6</sup> Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." This work does not directly engage with the afterlives of transatlantic racial slavery, and does not intend to instrumentalize Hartman's work within a set of histories that does not directly recall ongoing legacies of anti-Black violence, capture, expropriation, and death. However, it is important to note that I am indebted to Hartman's work against the silences and violences of historical disciplines and the archives that emerge from them, and to her commitment to attending to the past as a future-oriented project.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Laura Stoler's attention to archival *disassemblage* in "On Archiving as Dissensus" is important here, as is her consideration of the ways in which relational histories are conceptually and politically torn apart and made into nonrelational ones.

<sup>8</sup> I owe this phrase to conversations with Shiv Kotecha, who recalled that sometimes in a good artwork, there are many ways in, but no clear ways out.

serpentine hallways extend *ad infinitum*. My creative practice is, in a sense, how I have learned to identify the shape of the room I am in; it's how I walk, heel to toe, around the edges of each new chamber and through the archways that lead between them. I am slowly learning the shape of this small corner of the labyrinth, with few ways to validate if I am retraversing familiar ground or approaching a point of no return. This essay strives to describe, as best as it can, the contours of the chambers I have explored, the gatekeepers between the archways, and the many specters met along the way. There are knowingly gaps, contradictions, and redundancies, but this, too, is part of the work of history and memory.

In Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges's short story, "Library of Babel," a fictitious librarian recounts his imminent death in a chamber that escapes both space and time. I think often about the Library of Babel, even stumbling recently upon a website that hosts its digital realization, algorithmically inventing any possible combination of the letters of the Latin alphabet.<sup>9</sup> In conjuring an image of Borges's library, I see myself amid the endless coming together and tearing apart of things, amid irrevocable goneness and tepid-re-emergence, amid knowledge as a specter that infinitely departs, diminishes, and withdraws, only to reappear in the absent space behind me. I know well enough the obscurity of images, and it leads me to wonder: why are the walls of the Infinite Library not lined with photographs?

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://libraryofbabel.info>





## **Table of Contents (Revisited)**

Time  
Looking  
War  
Desire  
Oblivion

## 1. | Dead letter room<sup>10</sup>

*March 22, 2022. Dear H, I write to you about pictures and you write to me about ghosts and sleep. Our departures are different but the shapes of our mouths are the same...Until soon, AT*

I have, lately, been writing to the dead. My rational mind knows that no deceased person can receive and read a letter, let alone respond, and so this writing of letters is an act that threatens to fall into the diaristic, at best. Still, the practice serves my curiosities around animacy and my desire to glimpse what lingers just beyond the gray fringes of my perception, and so I suspend my rationality and I write the letters anyway. Entertaining the possibility that the letter might be delivered engenders the message with a secret spatiotemporality—once sent, its location among the infinite coordinates between Here, There, Then, and Now remains forever undisclosed.

Time; pictures. The radicality of the relationship is not new. Since the invention of the photographic camera, users of photography have endeavored to create memories for the future, immortalize the dead, and search for evidence of distant pasts. Roland Barthes epitomizes his notions on the essence of photography in *Camera Lucida*, famously writing, "I can never deny that the thing has been there."<sup>11</sup> It has-been; it has-been-there. Barthes forges twin identifications between photography and reality and photography and pastness, and manifests both in his search for the long-dead referent, his mother.

But anyone who has seen a photograph of a deceased loved one knows the curiosity that the image delivers: history bursts forth to the present, the gaze of the referent interrupts, and the forward march of time whips around to a screeching halt. The past ceases to be passed; the space of time suffers collapse and sends forth an illegible reality: the impossibility of

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<sup>10</sup> Thank you to Shiv Kotecha for introducing me to the concept of a dead letter office, or dead letter room.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Hill and Wang, 1981.

(knowing) the present itself. The passing of time—and the destruction of the passing of time—is, to me, always the latent protagonist in a photograph. At the outset of this essay, it seems important to disclose my understanding of the photograph's relationship to time—informed through the work of critic and theorist Eduardo Cadava and his invocations of Walter Benjamin—and to describe the way these theoretical frameworks extend to expressive choices I make with and from historical images.

### *Reading (a caesura)*

Consider the first atomic bomb: by some accounts, forty-four seconds elapsed between the moment *Little Boy* left *Enola Gay* and the moment it detonated above Hiroshima, a duration thick with registers of perceptive lag: first, for the pilot and the bombardier, who anticipate in that forty-four seconds the spectacular blast they'd already delivered; next, for bystanders and victims, who witness the bomb's flash moments before its sound arrived; and last, for those at the hypocenter, where sonic resolution materially withdrew, almost as if the disaster had never occurred or was never complete. The atomic bomb opened a *caesura* or a fissure in time, much as most forms of war- and image-making do.

The spatiotemporal caesura opened by the atomic bombs, in which an event had both already happened and not yet occurred, represents a point of collapse in which conventional notions of past and present cease to be relevant. The atomic caesura leaves one between times, unsituated in time, *outside of time*, and represents a similar radical (a)temporality to that achieved by the photographic image. Citing Benjamin, Cadava writes, "[The radical temporality of the photographic structure] announces a point when 'the past and the present moment flash into a constellation.' The photographic image—like the image in general—is 'dialectics at a standstill.'"<sup>12</sup> The moment of the bomb's explosion and the moment of photographic capture pull at the edges of the past and the present and draw them tightly together. The dialectical exchange between a phenomenological experience of the Now and the continued arrival of the Then continues back and forth until it reaches, as Benjamin says, a

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<sup>12</sup> Cadava, Eduardo. "Caesura." *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*. Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 61



standstill. The short-circuitry of the photographic structure suspends the directional or teleological continuity between history and contemporaneity, and it divorces the arrival and the understanding of history from the irrecoverable goneness of the "that has been." Cadava writes, "This break from the present enables the rereading and rewriting of history, the performance of another mode of historical understanding, one that would be the suspension of both 'history' and 'understanding.'"<sup>13</sup> The temporal opening that the photographic structure creates dislodges the past and the present from their positions on a teleological timeline, it fundamentally unfixes any notion of singular historical understanding, and it thrusts into the present the active threat of historical catastrophe.

Let me return to the letters. While the sending of a letter to an undeliverable recipient leaves the message in unknown territory, letter-writing is not reciprocal until a message is returned. My letters to the dead were letters to the past—singular, time-bound, and restricted to the familiar linearity of an arrow pointing backwards in time. The opening I hoped for required a correspondence. I needed the dead to write back.

*March 22, 2022. Dear AT, Is this what you hope for? Do you hope to be reborn a bird?...There are oleanders, three floors down, below the windows. I've been listening in my sleep for the sounds of their blooming. I'll write again tomorrow. Sincerely, H*

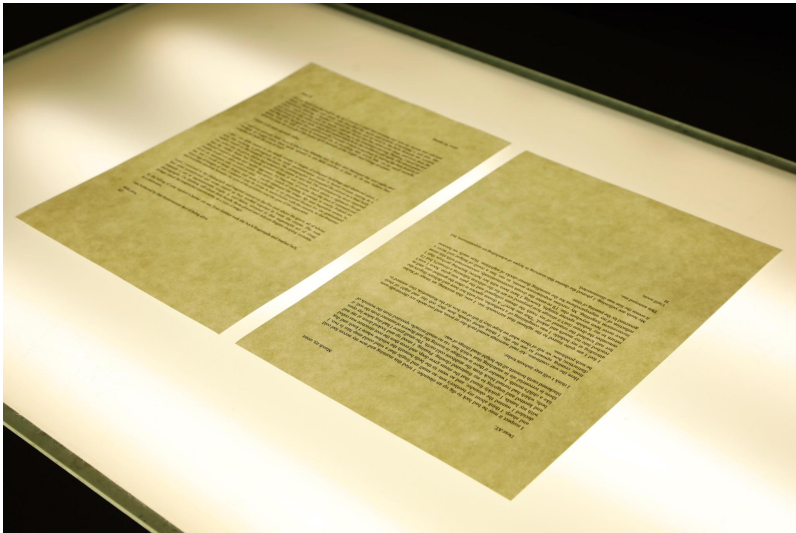
My correspondence with H<sup>14</sup> is a fabulation. H's scantily published writings are one of the primary source materials for our conversations, as are the available archival images from the postwar Pacific that I am concerned with elsewhere. Our correspondence recounts day-to-day experiences, current events, dreams, and encounters with war. Our letters are not written in an alternating sequence, with one prompting the next, but are instead written in pairs on the same day, month, and year, suggesting that our letters exist in parallel and so may, in fact, be missing

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<sup>13</sup> Cadava, Eduardo. "Caesura," p. 59.

<sup>14</sup> "H" is an abbreviated pseudonym for Hara Tamiki, the melancholic Japanese writer and poet and the first person I have taken up a correspondence with. Hara Tamiki survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, and died by suicide in 1951 by laying his body down before an oncoming train.

each other. The nature of our correspondence is dialectical in the same unresolved and uncertain way that a spectator arrives to a photograph. Encountering a photograph, a viewer is never sure that their eyes will meet the referent's gaze—or that, in addressing the depicted gaze they are meeting the photograph's referent—and yet who or what is figured in the image remains inescapably present. The inevitability of the referent's withdrawal is only momentarily reversed, much like my correspondence with H is both beyond reach and deeply intimate.



Allie Tsubota, *Dead Letter Room*, installation view, 2022

These letters to and from H are meant to draw the edges of the past and present closer together, and to short-circuit the directional notion of time that imprisons history as a catastrophe of the past. Our correspondence creates its own opening, *caesura*, or fissure in time, and allows me to consider the potential for intimacy and animacy beyond my immediate spatiotemporal surroundings. It represents a dialogue with history as a present entity and eschews any singular reading or construction of

historical "understanding." These letters, too, are my elegy to H, whose prose and poems continue to haunt me.<sup>15</sup>

### *Reading Historically*

The "radical temporality of the photographic structure" allows the photograph to work subversively against the structures of hegemonic, linear time, and prevents both "history" and "understanding" from occupying any fixed or stable position. But time and the idea of history are not the only entities subject to change—the photograph, too, is regularly marked and transfigured. In "Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruin," Eduardo Cadava describes the image as ceaselessly (re)constituted through the arrival, interruption, and disappearance of other images. Images deposit traces of themselves on the surfaces of other images, just as they bear the ghostly remains of past and future images within their own frames. Photographs are utterly unstable and unclosed. They invoke the various spatial and temporal relationships excluded from their frames but present on their surfaces nonetheless.

Consider the photograph on the following page, which shows a bombed-out Otake in 1946 (Fig. 1). According to Cadava's logic, one cannot read this photograph uncoupled from photographs of the ruins in 1940s Dresden, of mass graves in 1930s Nanjing, or of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear catastrophe that devastated Tōhoku in 2011. Similarly, the spectacular patterns of exploding phosphorous bombs, which left luminescent striations across Osaka's skies in 1945, cannot be read without recalling the streaks of napalm during the American war in Vietnam, or the sharp rays of Imperial Japan's Red Rising Sun. Cadava advocates for an attunement to forms and relations beneath and beyond the image's surface, whether they be formal consonances between images or the circumstances surrounding their capture. He invites a spectator's

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<sup>15</sup> I believe the strangeness of time, and especially the temporal derangement created by the atomic bomb, was not lost on Hara. Hara's *Summer Flowers* is his most famous work, and is comprised of three sections that directly address the bombing of Hiroshima. The first section, completed in 1945, occurs in the immediate aftermath of the bomb on the morning of August 6, 1945. The third and final section, published in 1949, concludes just 40 hours before the bomb falls, and lingers lengthily on the tense and banal days that precede the catastrophe.

attention to the perpetually-shifting, never-arriving, and universally-latent nature of the photograph.



Figure 1: *Bomb Ruins in Otake*. Original taken by US Air Force, Kyoto, Japan, 1946. Reproduced 2021 Courtesy National Archives.

One of the photographic strategies I've developed extends directly from Cadava's reflections on the changing image. Cadava calls for a radically inclusive and relational attention to the processes of exchange and substitution that occur among visual objects, through which a spectator can identify lines of communication between spatially or temporally distant subjects.<sup>16</sup> This is the prompt I have taken up. As an example, I'll discuss two photographs—one that I made in 2022, and one that an American GI made in 1945—whose pairing exemplifies the expressive and discursive possibilities that result from transgressions across images.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Eduardo Cadava's reading of Susan Meiselas's work in "Learning to See; or, Reading Historically in Moments of Danger." 2018, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zz5spujXgs>



Allie Tsubota, *Excision*, 2022

*Excision* (2022) is a color photograph made in Worcester, Massachusetts. Walking along the broad concrete supports of the raised rails near my

apartment, I stopped at the smell of stale ammonia. I didn't immediately register the excised beehive a few feet on, as its streaks of copper honeycomb blended seamlessly with the ashen, rust-colored stone of the weathered concrete wall. I walked closer, and saw that the honeycombs were small and beautiful—delicately mosaiced even as they clung haphazardly to the decrepit concrete. I was saddened to see how dry and shriveled they'd become, thinking that they had, no doubt, at some point been wet and gleaming with honey. Honeybee hives generally smell sweet and pleasant, and a sour odor is a sure sign that the colony is experiencing distress or disease. Built in the center of a city, the hive was likely removed by the department of public works, leaving the tens of thousands of bees drunk on poison gas before they succumbed to asphyxiation. I wonder still if the hive was dying before it was excised, or if the excision was the cause of its death.

The photograph itself is straightforward: a misshapen hole in a concrete wall; streaks of golden honeycomb falling from its mouth. I immediately loved the picture for its tone and clarity, for its ability to recall the smell of the hive, and as a record of this small catastrophe (small to the city, and devastating to the colony of bees). The excision was all at once an open wound and a mass grave.

The photograph bore an immediate resemblance to another image. The second photograph, printed from a 4"x5" black-and-white negative exposed in 1945, was made by an American GI commissioned by the US Air Force to document the effects of Allied bombing in postwar Japan (Fig. 2). I encountered this photograph during a visit to the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and was struck by how the camera's proximity to the scene afforded the resulting image a level of abstraction. This photograph, held within an archive overwhelmingly composed in the visual language of the photographic survey, seemed to be an outlier: pipes are bent and twisted, shadows fall sharply, and the broad metal sheet stretched across the frame bears stains of all shades. At the center of the frame is a large hole; again, an open mouth. This photograph is housed in a file with no corresponding logbook, captions, or textual reference; beyond the year, country, and orders for its capture, the content of the image is unknown.



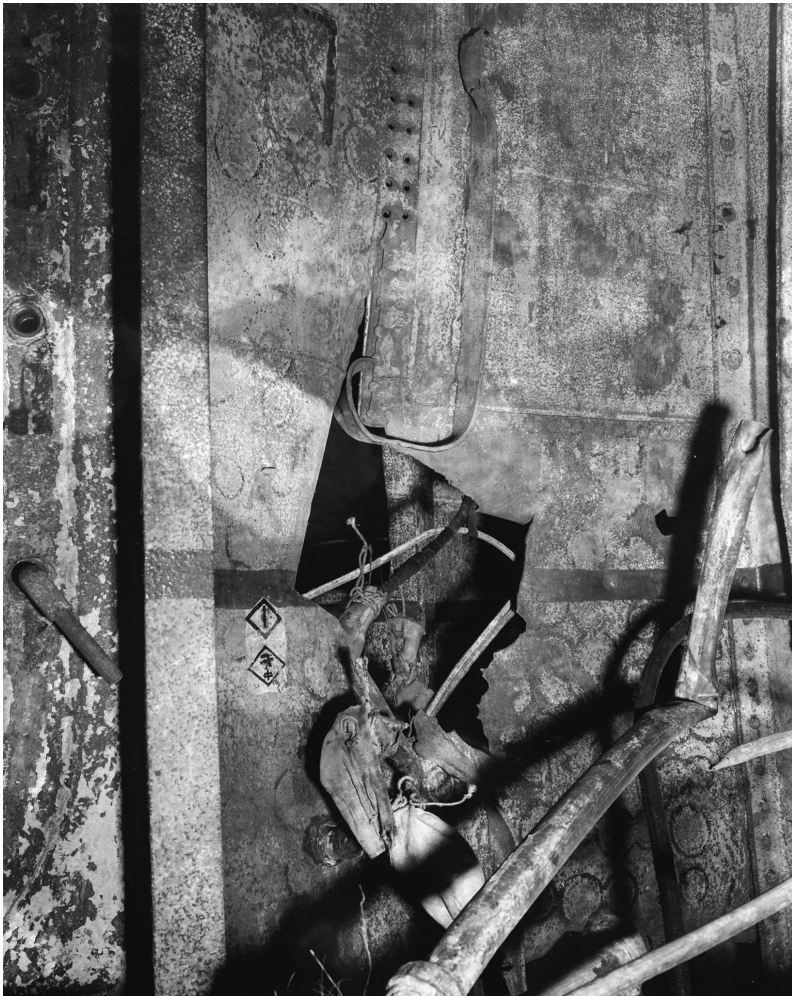


Figure 2: *NARA object no. 243-GNA-15*. Original taken by USSBS Unlogged Division, Japan, 1945. Reproduced 2021 Courtesy National Archives.

What traces do these two photographs, made 80 years apart on separate sides of the earth, deposit on each other? How do these two gaping mouths transform or transfigure one another and the lifeworlds they represent?

*Dear H, I write to you about pictures and you write to me about ghosts and sleep. Our departures are different but the shapes of our mouths are the same.*

The honeycomb falls from the excision's mouth. Like a giant, ribbed tongue, it's ashen and dry. Against the image of disfigured metal, for me the honeycomb recalls the latticed flesh, scars, and lacerations that cross the backs of *hibakusha*—victims of the atomic bombs. A memory of nuclear death takes on the smell of sour honey. The honeycomb clings to the wall, unable to be moved and so abandoned in this slow act of dematerialization. A sweet abandonment. Why, I sometimes think, are there so few pictures of victims of the atomic bombs?<sup>17</sup> The tongue that falls from the hole in the metal, in contrast, is voluminous, more like a set of organs escaping the cupped bowl of a surgeon's hands. There is so little that is legible in this second picture, and yet it, too, is a site of catastrophe. I think of the illegibility of the Asian body, of the perpetual alienness that Asian people continue to experience under white supremacy today. I think of the bomb and I think of insects; of a crude and atrocious act of extermination. I think of the nation-state and I think of bees and I wonder if the bees sensed they were living in an unwell hive, if the colony ceased to be hospitable and was subsequently abandoned. I wonder if any of the bees departed before the excision was made, or if all tens of thousands labored until the very end.

Visual and textual exchange, substitution and transgression make a dialogue between these two photographs possible. Neither of the photographs is closed, and the way they are received will continue to shift with the making or the discovery of each new image. Pairing images does more than recall visual consonances, it heightens a spectator's impulse to

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<sup>17</sup> The USSBS contains over 8,000 photographs, and yet less than 40 depict victims of the atomic bomb. This small number is striking to me, and it provokes questions as to what the US military was keen to create a record of, and how the military may or may not have attempted to prevent certain images from entering the archive as evidence.



make associations, and it reveals the psychological, social, and civil refuse lodged within such a practice. It offers new avenues for making meaning, and in the case of postwar images, it suggests that catastrophe is never an event of the past.

### *Reading Historically in Times of Danger*

In *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, Benjamin writes, "The task of historical materialism is to set in motion an experience with history original to every new present." And later, "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it as it really was. It means to seize a memory *as it flashes up at a moment of danger*"<sup>18</sup> (italics mine).

Articulating the past historically is a distinct project from the search for historicity; it's a practice that locates history as an entity bound with contemporaneity. Reading historical images is not a project in *memory*, or in *re-membering* the spatial and temporal conditions of an historical episode; reading historically is a project in seizing, recognizing, and articulating the legibility of historical representations *as they arrive in the present*.<sup>19</sup> Attempting to recognize the events of the past *as they really happened* is not my primary concern in my explorations of historical images; instead, I investigate how and why these images arrive to me now. What about the present, and the various forms of danger it poses, makes a photographic survey of postwar Japan so suddenly legible? What types of intimacies do I feel across time to similarly racialized people living within (post)imperial regimes? And how am I, an American citizen, more or less vulnerable to disaster than someone who is not?

Cadava explains the Benjaminian notion of "danger" as the threat that at any given moment one might become, without their knowing, a tool of the oppressor.<sup>20</sup> It occurs to me that my investment in contending with historical images of imperial collapse, a nation in ruin, and nuclear

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<sup>18</sup> As quoted by Eduardo Cadava in "Caesura," p. 60. Cadava is citing from Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. New Left Books, 1979.

<sup>19</sup> Cadava, Eduardo. "Lapsus Imaginis": The Image in Ruins." *October*, vol. 96, 2001, pp. 35-60.

<sup>20</sup> Cadava, Eduardo. "Learning to See; or, Reading Historically in Moments of Danger." 2018, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zz5spuiXgs>

catastrophe as (at best) a definitive end to a war and (at worst) a race-driven extermination, is an apt way to maintain antagonism toward a white hegemonic, American regime that is rapidly assimilating minoritarian, marginalized, and vulnerable subjects into the white neoliberal state. The universalization and absorption of difference is a major threat in this present moment of danger, in which citizens regularly surrender their right *not* to be a perpetrator.<sup>21</sup>

The way that photographs fundamentally destabilize the governance of time, the containment of history, and the danger of the present is a gift, and it's one that I have adopted as a key element of my creative practice. The photograph's non-adherence to linear time and singularized meaning enables it to serve as a site for psychic, social, and civil possibility independent of the state. The temporal structure of photography works in concert with the possibilities engendered by the spatial arrangement of photographic looking, possibilities which I reflect on in the next chapter.

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<sup>21</sup> Ariella Azoulay discusses this right in "'We,' Palestinians and Jewish Israelis: The Right Not to Be a Perpetrator." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 114, no. 3, 2015, pp. 687–693.

## 2. | Looking, in three parts

Vision structures the way people with sight perceive the world. Vision is one of the most practiced sensory privileges—children learn to identify colors and various farm animals far before they can name the smell of burning sulfur—and it serves as an immediate resource for formations of knowledge and understanding. A person's reliance on vision is especially active in an image-wired world in which pictures are trafficked across the vast distances that have historically limited the human field of vision. I make this declarative claim—*vision structures the way people with sight perceive the world*—not to denigrate the availability or significance of the other senses, but to point to sight as a sensory regime that importantly governs how we navigate our surroundings and the people that inhabit them. As Martin Jay says of modernity's ocularcentrism, the implication that historical eras are inclined toward different senses should not be taken at face value, but "it is difficult to deny that the visual has been dominant in modern Western culture in a wide variety of ways."<sup>22</sup>

Vision's apparent largess means that it contributes meaningfully to the psychic, social, and civil relationships that govern us, and alongside the seemingly inseverable relationship between the photograph and the referent (the Barthesian "that has been"-ness which vouchsafes photography's relationship with reality), the camera is regularly deployed in attempts to construct impenetrable social architectures predicated on visible difference.<sup>23</sup> In these attempts, the camera is instrumentalized in mediating the visible or the visual in order to enforce hierarchies of difference, and to carve visual pathways that are socially or corporeally damaging to already vulnerable people. Yet images are also uniquely capable of working *against* hegemonic social and political regimes, a capacity that often begins with the silent dialogues between a spectator

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<sup>22</sup> Jay, Martin. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." In *Vision and Visuality*, edited by Hal Foster. Bay Press, 1988, p. 3. The inclusion of "Western" is important. Notably, the historical images I have been concerned with were produced by and for a Western audience.

<sup>23</sup> For an important example, see Brian Wallis's discussion of Louis Aggasiz's daguerreotypes of enslaved Africans in the 19th century. Wallis, Brian. "Black Bodies White Science." *American Art*, vol. 9, no. 2, Summer 1995, pp.38-61.

and an image. The practice of addressing images—of *speaking to them* and *being spoken to by them* upon a spectatorial encounter—has steadily become an important component of my creative work, and it's one that offers rich terrain on which to consider how contemporary spectators relate to the people or events images depict. In this section, I rehearse several addresses to images through three sites: the self, the camera, and the citizenry. These sites are not necessarily discrete, but I separate them here in order to propose different spatial possibilities for one's arrival to the image.

### *The Self*

The oft-cited anecdote goes something like this: Jacques Lacan spends a summer as an apprentice in a small fishing village. One day while out at sea, a fisherman points to a floating sardine can and yells out to young Lacan: "*You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!*" Lacan is irked by the comment, offended by the fisherman's blunt declaration that an object so clearly within his field of vision does not see him back. Without the return of the object's gaze, Lacan cannot confirm that he exists, and so loses his sense of subjectivity.

A psychoanalyst, Lacan is broadly concerned with notions of self as they are both affirmed and troubled through vision and desire. For Lacan, acts of *seeing* and *being seen* are critical in the formation of the Self and the recognition of the Other. To *be seen* is, in many ways, simply to *be*. Cinema studies and feminist theory both use Lacanian formulations as a way to consider how the gaze functions in relation to the *screen*—the plane between the subject and the object onto which an image is projected and from which meaning is read. The screen exists between the subject/self/look and the object/other/gaze, and it acts as the site where their images are exchanged. The Lacanian screen is a symbolic site that mediates the dialogues and relationships between who or what is looking and who or what is looking back.

The screen is neither blank nor faithful to what a subject projects; it is saturated with a host of social biases and cultural contexts that inevitably transform how two agents see and are seen by one another. Art historian

and critical theorist Kaja Silverman writes of the screen, "It seems to me crucial that we insist upon the ideological status of the screen by describing it as that culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which subjects are not only constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age, and nationality."<sup>24</sup> The screen interrupts the look and the gaze's unhindered movements across space; it engenders the look and suffuses the gaze with a repertoire of biases, partialities, and social and cultural differences that in turn create unlimited real and imagined relationships between the subjects doing the looking. I have been struck by Silverman's insistence on the screen as a mediator through which an unlimited number of heterogeneous relationships can emerge, and I see her articulation of the Lacanian screen as a productive framework that enables a multiplicity of dialogues with a single image and with the people, objects, and events that burst forth from it.

Let me offer one example, relevant to the postwar Pacific history I have slowly been describing, of a moving portrait that depicts an Imperial Japanese soldier captured on film in October 1945. The war is over. The soldier has been asked to pause before the camera by an American GI fitted in fatigues, while off-screen thousands more soldiers and civilians are repatriated from the outposts of the Japanese colonial occupation. This transferral marks the collapse of the Japanese Empire and the reformation of the Japanese nation-state, and the event is methodically captured as a visual record. The moving portrait recalls the taxonomical aesthetics endemic to photography—the physiognomic study, the colonial census, the mugshot—and I suspect the camera operator is as curious about the physical expression of the soldier's facial features as I am.<sup>25</sup> Resting below the soldier's neck are the collars of the imperial uniform, but beyond the

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<sup>24</sup> Silverman, Kaja. *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. Routledge, 1992, p. 150.

<sup>25</sup> In December 1941, *Time Magazine* ran a photographic feature called "How to tell your friends from the Japs," which crudely compared the physical and behavioral characteristics of people of Japanese and Chinese descent, and exhibited wanton racism towards both. The article begins, "There is no infallible way of telling [Chinese and Japanese people] apart, because the same racial strains are mixed in both. Even an anthropologist, with calipers and plenty of time to measure heads, noses, shoulders, hips, is sometimes stumped." See "How to Tell your Friends from the Japs." *Time Magazine*, vol. 38, no. 25, 1941, p. 33.

regulation gold buttons, his clothing is unadorned by badges or decorative medals (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Still from *Japanese Repatriates*, *Otake*. USSBS Motion Picture Project, Otake, Japan, 1945. Reproduced 2021 Courtesy National Archives.

The soldier wears spectacles. From behind them, he points his gaze directly into the camera, and it's this directness that is, for me, a mysterious address, and one that immediately recalls the logic of the Lacanian diagram. I look at the soldier by way of his image; by way of the image he reciprocates my gaze. We are each in the other's field of vision, entrapped in a bind that leaves us continuously negotiating our relationship to one another. We are caught in the *screen*—which is in some ways, just the image itself—and are vulnerable, as Silverman implies, to our latent and active social and cultural differences.

I react tepidly to being caught in the screen with the soldier. I notice that his right eye is slightly awry, a common result of untreated amblyopia in childhood. For many children an offset eye is a result of uneven eyesight; one eye sees poorly and so begins to wander and then to weaken; vision fogs and becomes distant until it vanishes completely. Looking at this picture I think of my father, who needed surgery as a child to correct the musculature around his eyes. In our family albums the correction is a conspicuous one. I think, too, of the soldier's uniform. Many Imperial Japanese soldiers were forcibly conscripted into the army; others joined freely. Most would have witnessed—or committed—the most inhumane atrocities in Manchuria, in China, or on the Korean Peninsula. These atrocities, too, are caught in the screen. The soldier's expression is timid, and sad, and his disposition more so recalls the bashful schoolboy chewing on his fingers in the corner than it does the one throwing punches at lunch.<sup>26</sup> Still, I imagine what the soldier may have done, what he may have lost, and what he may or may not think of me, caught in the screen alongside him.

Lingering on the soldier's gaze heightens everything that escapes from the fissures of the image—the ghostly wails of the soldier's intimate dead, the hollowing moans of vacated cities, the joy of a sibling's return, or the potentiated blindness of an unfocused eye. Certainly, in the Lacanian sense, the undead soldier and I affirm each other's subjectivity; more importantly, our exchange exceeds any limitations imposed by the two imperial adversaries that govern him (the Japanese Empire and the United States). The soldier's gaze is delivered through the frame, it arrives at the screen, and it appeals to me, the spectator, who is in turn authorized to gather and return it.

### *The Camera*

The photographic camera functionally and symbolically represents the gaze in several meaningful ways.<sup>27</sup> While in a conventional Lacanian

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<sup>26</sup> Hara Tamiki recalls himself as a bashful child chewing on his fingers in the corner. See Hara, Tamiki and Minear, Richard H. "Hara Tamiki's Land of My Heart's Desire." *Program in Asian Studies Occasional Papers Series No. 14*, 1989.

<sup>27</sup> The camera even appears in vernacular language around self-affirmation, such as being "framed" by the social gaze, or of recognizing that we are "in the picture."

diagram, the camera easily assumes the position from which the gaze is returned, the widespread availability and social pervasiveness of the camera means that many contemporary subjects are just as often *behind* the camera as they are in front of it. Today, the act of gazing photographically has become just as familiar as the experience of being photographed, and so a spectator arrives to the photographic image with several rehearsed corporeal relationships to the camera. A comprehensive account of the philosophical and physiological frameworks that have figured human vision and that inform our relationship to the camera is well beyond the scope of the essay, and so what I hope to do instead is to follow Kaja Silverman's discussion of "The Gaze" in *The Threshold of the Visible World*, which yields a uniquely positioned spectator whose relationship to the image is functionally unstable and unfixed.

Silverman begins "The Gaze" by asserting that film theory has long entertained a discourse around primary identification. She outlines, via film theorists Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, how the *jouissance* of cinema relies on the rules and ideology behind monocular perspective, which enable a seamless meshing between the eye of the spectator and that of the apparatus. The perspectival illusion of cinema all at once assimilates the spectator and the camera, collapses the "I" and the "eye," and bequeaths to the viewer an omniscient and transcendent visual purview. Primary identification in photographic and cinematic viewing gives the spectator privileged access to vision while dissolving the visibility of the camera. It affords the viewer visual immediacy and proximity via a "seemingly *invisible* vision."<sup>28</sup>

Assimilation with the camera has the potential to incite both deep pleasure and profound pain within the photographic spectator, as it provokes an experience of looking in which the spectator is enmeshed in the scene depicted. Consider the following photograph of a young *hibakusha*, captured in Hiroshima in 1945 (Fig. 4). The photograph's caption reads that the child was 0.7 miles from the hypocenter and exhibits acute lacerations and effects of radiation. The child is positioned in profile, but

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<sup>28</sup> Silverman, Kaja. *The Threshold of the Visible World*. Routledge, 1996, pp. 125-126.



because the camera operator is not at the child's eye-level, the picture shows the child's back from an adult's heightened purview. From the bottom-left corner of the frame, a hand—presumably masculine—pulls tightly at the child's vest, so as to hold the child in place for the bright flash of the camera. As a spectator arriving to this picture, primary identification leaves me with profound psychic pain, aching sadness, and guilt; I feel myself towering above the child, and I sense my careless negotiation of the few feet of space between us. I see a collaborator's hand extending to snatch the child's vest in an attempt to hold the child steady for my act of looking. The sharp edges of my empathy cut me, they hurt me, they deform me; I cannot escape my role in the scene.



Figure 4: NARA *object no. 243-GM-1A-1*. Original taken by USSBS Medical Division, Hiroshima, Japan, 1945. Reproduced 2021 Courtesy National Archives.

The seamless meshing between the eye of the spectator and the eye of the camera produces a photographic viewer who cannot easily detach themselves from the scene represented. For the photograph of the young *hibakusha*, a scene of abjection, this is a spectatorial experience that threatens to entrap a viewer in discomfort, forcefully collapsing the distance between their psychic, social, or cultural position as a spectator and the privileged position of the camera (or cameraperson) itself.

Silverman departs from primary identification and pivots to those "theoreticians of suture" who, rather than exploring assimilation between the spectator and the camera, investigate the *disjunction*, or the antipathy, between the two.<sup>29</sup> As a technical apparatus, the camera is capable of seeing and recalling the visible world in ways the human eye cannot. This privileged ability is the reason Eadweard Muybridge's sequential photographs of galloping horses were so effective in dispelling illusions about the way horses run; why military strategists rely on surveillance images and not hastily drawn pictures; and why we photograph precious moments that we might otherwise forget. The camera displaces human vision from its "locus of mastery" through its ability to see and recall the visible world more precisely than can the human eye; as Silverman argues, "the relation between the camera and the human optical organ might now seem less analogous than prosthetic."<sup>30</sup>

Silverman's discussion reveals the camera to be the mediator of the visible, rather than the corporeal eye itself. The camera is not enmeshed with the spectator's body, but assumes its own geo-, socio-, and psycho- spatial position; it becomes a separate agent through which the eye receives the external world. The camera and the spectator occupy discrete locations, and they bear distinct functions and responsibilities. This arrangement expands the possibilities of a viewer's engagement with a photograph, and

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<sup>29</sup> Silverman cites Jean-Louis Comolli (who argues that the photograph represents both the "triumph" and the "grave" of the eye), Jonathan Crary (who deeply problematizes the assumption that the camera obscura and the photographic camera emerged from the same scopic regime), and André Bazin (who cedes that the eye and the camera are discrete, if only to uphold equivalence between the photograph and "reality"). Through the work of these theoreticians, Silverman outlines an ontology of photography that dramatically divorces the camera from the human eye.

<sup>30</sup> Silverman, Kaja. *Threshold of the Visible World*, p. 130.

it jeopardizes the authority of the photographer or the regime that employs them.

Consider, again, the photograph of the young *hibakusha*. As a spectator, what does my refusal to assimilate with the camera offer in my encounter with this picture? To start, I am immediately aware of the presence of the photographic apparatus. Even in the absence of contextual framing, I sense there is an event of power at play. I know there are two adults—the camera operator and the owner of the hand in the bottom-left corner—who conspire to force a child to be photographed. They collaborate in this act of violent, if momentary, captivity. My awareness of the camera extends beyond its physical presence as a mechanical device, and stretches toward the social, political, and discursive components that shape photography. I see a concerted effort, shared between human desire and a technological device, to govern the image of a child, and by extension a part of the visible world; I become aware of the collaboration between the photographer and the camera to conduct this act of research and to produce a shard of evidence. I imagine how such an image might be instrumentalized to serve national interests in postwar political discourse: in the United States, to verify the destructive capacity of the atomic bomb, and in Japan, to promote a framework of postwar victimology. Arriving at this photograph from a position adjacent to, rather than assimilated with, the camera reveals the event of the photograph's production as a complex social and machinic amalgam<sup>31</sup> that is carefully governed by the state. From an independent purview, I am able to exercise one of *my* unalienable rights—the right, as Ariella Azoulay would say, to *not* be a perpetrator.<sup>32</sup> I can renounce my identification with the photographic apparatus that first captured this child's image, and I can thus avoid adopting the viewpoint of power.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Crary lengthily discusses the camera as a social and technological amalgam in *Techniques of the Observer*. MIT Press, 1990.

<sup>32</sup> Azoulay, Ariella. "'We,' Palestinians and Jewish Israelis: The Right Not to Be a Perpetrator."

<sup>33</sup> Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*, translated by Relä Mazali and Ruvik Danieli. Zone Books, 2008, p. 192. See also bell hooks's "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End Press, 1992, pp. 115-131; and José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Silverman's exploration of spectatorial relationships with the camera, via assimilation and antipathy, is deeply resonant with the way I encounter photographs, and it reflects the type of experience I hope to invite for viewers of my work. My arrival at a photograph is never stable or static; my body shifts easily from a locus inside of the camera to one adjacent to it. The invisible camera is both my corporeal eye (and "I") as well as a physical and symbolic representation of the photographic apparatus. Slipping in and out of assimilation<sup>34</sup> with the camera allows for the flesh of my body, the flesh of the machine, and the flesh of the image to wear at each other, and it ushers new transgressions between the mind, the camera, and the visible world. When encountering images of war, the ability to negotiate *both* the seamless meshing and the distanced adjacency between oneself and the camera offers an opportunity to feel across the multitude of positions engendered in situations of violent conflict; it invites an internalization of shame and a sense of shared civility, and it allows an image to exceed any singular or authorized translation.

### *The Citizenry*

From the self, to the self's extension as/through the photographic apparatus, the photographic "citizenry"<sup>35</sup> represents the broadest site of visual dialogue that I discuss here. In this final sub-section, I explore the potential of the spectator-as-citizen through an account of my encounter with a single postwar archive, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey. This archive has become a crucial component of my recent artwork, and it continues to offer a material foundation for many of the questions I engage in this essay.

In October 1945, an American outfit commanded by the United States Air Force arrived in Japan. Their orders were simple: produce visual documentation of the magnitude and nature of the damage wrought upon Allied-bombed Japanese cities, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Over several months, the team of camera operators captured over 8,000

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<sup>34</sup> I owe this idea to Paul Pfeiffer, who has spoken in conversations about the spectatorial phenomenon of slipping in and out of immersion with an artwork.

<sup>35</sup> Ariella Azoulay describes a photographic citizenry which includes all members of photography, including the photographer, the spectator, and the photographed subject. See Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*.

photographs and hours of 35mm and 16mm film, recording what was visible of the wrecked Japanese war economy and, to a notably lesser extent, the hundreds of thousands of civilians left dead, disfigured, and disappeared. This visual survey, entitled the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS),<sup>36</sup> was a critical component in the United States' internal postwar reporting, and it is among the only remaining visual records of the ruins of nuclear war.

My arrival at the USSBS was quiet. A young and recently married archivist had pulled ten large boxes and placed them neatly on a gray metal cart, labeled with my name, and left me to work until the building closed at four. She admitted she had never been able to decipher the antiquated codes of the collection, which beyond having no alphanumerical consistency were so hastily written as to be nearly illegible. I heard Fiona Tan give a talk weeks later, during which she mentioned that she's never met an archive that wasn't in disorder. This felt apt.

Visiting the archives feels a bit like patronizing a library at the ends of the earth. Each room is brightly lit and comfortably hygienic, extending a tranquil air that welcomes and purifies. The silence is profound, as is the general lack of interaction between researchers, each so lost in their endeavors in the past that the surrounding room simply vanishes. I sat with gloved hands and opened the boxes.

The prints were interruptive, deafening—flooded bunkers, abandoned munitions factories, mile-wide heaps of concrete, torqued metal, and shattered glass; the young *hibakusha*, and several more, bare-backed adult women and men with strange burns and dark lacerations. Each print presented a lifeworld in ruin, a decisive catastrophe wrought by two warring empires and sustained by the impact of outsized structural damage and prolonged radiation. The scenes figured were noticeably repetitious, with each subject resembling the next, and my procedural approach to viewing the prints only reinforced their tendency to withdraw

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<sup>36</sup> The United States conducted postwar strategic bombing surveys in both the European and Pacific theaters. This essay and the work it describes is concerned only with the United States Strategic Bombing Survey that was conducted in Japan.

into homogeneity. It felt urgent to contend with my address of these photographs, and to understand my role as a distanced spectator to images of catastrophe.

How is it that we, as spectators, are meant to contend with photographs of disaster? And to specify further, how is it that we are meant to contend with photographs of disaster produced by the state, wherein both the disaster and the photographs are regime-made? My use of the word "citizenry" in titling this section may leave no surprise that theorist, writer, and filmmaker Ariella Azoulay's groundbreaking invention of the civil contract of photography offers an important theoretical framework for wrestling with such a question.

In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay divorces photography from the production of photographic objects, and instead characterizes photography as an event or an encounter between several members of photography, notably the photographer, the photographed subject, and the spectator, all of whom engage in an extended relationship mediated by the camera. This simple fact that photography, as a set of relations, requires the participation of multiple parties undermines the formation of any single sovereign authority, and precludes the possibility of photographic mastery by a single entity across space or time. Citizens of photography agree to this tacit agreement, in which no one member has the right to assert sole authorship, or to exercise sole governance, over the relations within a photographic event. Azoulay proposes the civil contract of photography as a site of opportunity to reconstruct the concept of citizenship from a good or a property bestowed by the state, to a set of relations among all of the governed. Citizenship becomes not a status owned, but a bond exercised.<sup>37</sup> Azoulay views photography as a fundamentally social and civil encounter that "provides modern citizens with an instrument enabling them to develop and sustain civilian skills that are not entirely subordinate to governmental power,"<sup>38</sup> and that offers

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<sup>37</sup> Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 105.

a site of possibility to "turn citizenship into the arena of a constant becoming, together with other (non)citizens."<sup>39</sup>

*The Civil Contract of Photography* explicitly addresses two types of "non-citizens," modern Palestinians governed by the Israeli regime, and women. While Azoulay's elaboration of the civil contract of photography is directed expressly to the historical and present exclusion of these two vulnerable groups, the fundamentally open and unfixed framework she proposes for photographic encounters—and the persistent threats to it—offers meaningful instruction for my approach to the USSBS.

The civil contract of photography undermines the formation of any single sovereign authority, and yet these civil bonds are frequently threatened by the ruling power.<sup>40</sup> The USSBS was a strictly controlled survey in which the ruling power—the United States—participated as both the photographer and the primary spectator of the photographic encounter,<sup>41</sup> swinging the locus of authorship dramatically toward the state. Azoulay describes this very condition, writing that "where addresser and addressee have been made to agree in advance on the meaning of the statement...the referent is usually assimilated to the meaning. The meaning of the statement is usually located within predetermined brackets, restricting the referent of the horror to an already constructed container of meaning."<sup>42</sup> The military-as-photographer and government-as-spectator agreed in advance that the USSBS images were data to be submitted to the archive and reported as such. The meaning of the images was restricted to measurements of structural damage wrought by Allied bombing, of the physical state of the Japanese war economy, and of the immediate biomedical effects of acute radiation. Any practice of citizenship within the USSBS photographs was further obstructed through their official censorship in the United States and Japan until the late 1950s.

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<sup>39</sup> Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 118.

<sup>40</sup> Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 192.

<sup>41</sup> The images captured during the USSBS were intended only to be seen by branches of the military and the US federal government. The images were officially censored in the immediate postwar period.

<sup>42</sup> Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p. 202.

There is another problem. Even when photographs of disaster, such as those in the USSBS, become available to the public, the threat of foreclosure on the multiplicity of meanings (and on the continued exercise of citizenship) remains present through the propagation of generalized meanings of images of war. The contemporary spectator has ready access to images of disaster through media and news outlets, and they are relatively prepared to encounter such images and to digest what they depict. As I write this, there is a steady stream of images of atrocity arriving on my screen from continents far away. I see Kyiv and Mariupol in ruins, overcrowded humanitarian corridors, Russian tankers patrolling the cities as Ukrainian corpses rest in mass graves. My immediate reaction is that I am quite inured to such images—I am prepared to position myself, ideologically, against a known and legible aggressor and to lament the loss of another's lifeworld. My easy ingestion of these pictures of war is concerning. My rehearsed response essentializes a series of unfolding events, and obfuscates the driving historical and contemporary forces that have left thousands dead, have forced millions to flee, and have heightened the racial inequities that ensure or restrict one's access to safety. In the case of the USSBS, I wonder, what are the generalized meanings of *these* images of war, and do they threaten to foreclose on the civil possibility that such images present?

My expressive choices in arranging, manipulating, and displaying the photographs I have reproduced from the USSBS are directly informed by these questions on civil possibility. In *The problem with clouds*, I have reproduced 100 black-and-white photographs from the USSBS, all printed at 5"x4" and pinned directly to a wall in a grid format. The photographs are representative of the USSBS collection as a whole, and variously depict the ruins of bombed-out cities, the relics of Japanese munitions factories, and several back-turned portraits of civilians affected by the atomic blast and radiation in Hiroshima. A handful of outliers show bucolic countryside landscapes, and I wonder if the USSBS photographers enjoyed, at times, life as tourists. Roughly half of the pictures are positioned beside a similar image, digitally manipulated to show only an outline, or a trace, of the original photograph to which it refers. The trace images obscure the majority of tonal detail from the original photographs, and the contours of



their referents are difficult to decipher. The grid as a whole is scuttled and inconsistent, frequently interrupted by gaps and missing images. There is no algorithm to the design; it remains as haphazard as the archive itself.



Allie Tsubota, *The problem with clouds*, 2022, digital mockup view



Allie Tsubota, *The problem with clouds*, 2022, digital mockup detail view

My intention in reproducing the USSBS photographs in this manner is two-fold. On one hand, the gesture of exhibition responds to the United States' attempt—as the regime or the ruling power—to foreclose on the practice of citizenship within the USSBS. Again, while the civil contract of photography undermines the formation of any single sovereign authority in the event of photography, this fundamentally collaborative authorship is frequently threatened by the ruling power. By occupying the position of the photographer *and* the primary spectator, the US attempted to establish a more singular locus of authorship, and to swing it sharply towards the regime and away from the third citizen—the photographed subject. My hope in reproducing these photographs is to strengthen the civil possibility within the USSBS through displacing the military-as-photographer with my own creative agency and displacing the government-as-spectator with the gaze of the contemporary viewer. In subtly redistributing authorship, I hope to elevate the authorship of the third citizen, the photographed subject (the nation in ruins and the vulnerable persons that inhabit them) and to keep this archive critically open for the continued exercise of photographic citizenship.

A second and related intention in reproducing photographs from the USSBS is to explore the possibility of bypassing the generalized meanings of images of war, and more concretely, the generalized meanings of *these* images of war. Can the relationships expressed between photographs in the grid, and between photographs and their trace images, invite new ways of understanding the state of postwar Japan as a collapsed empire, a conquered nation, and the site of the first specters of atomic war? Can this scuttled arrangement sidestep narratives of American military supremacy and Japanese victimhood and instead make visible the vulnerability of civilians within their own nations? Can it make apparent the inordinate vulnerability of racialized people under the perpetual anxiety that engenders white hegemony? Or the possibility of living on the verge of catastrophe? Can it reveal the photographic survey as a project fraught from the start, one intimately related to the collection and administration of data that similarly enables the making of war and the making of international hierarchy? What are the multiple counter-hegemonic readings that a rescued and reaggregated archive makes possible? *The*

*problem with clouds* attempts to bypass dominant discourses of the atomic bomb as a weapon to end a war, and instead aims to invite considerations of the vulnerability of the governed and the transnational nature of empire, and to allow the USSBS photographs to overtake the regime's own intention in producing them.

I've lingered on the civil contract of photography, and it leaves me with a final question: What do I owe to fellow citizens of photography—and especially to photographed subjects vulnerable to disaster—across time? 1945 has passed. The 200,000 *hibakusha* and the millions more civilians dead or disappeared across the 20th-century Pacific do not listen for my response in the same way that contemporary Palestinians or Ukrainian refugees urgently call for attention. Photographs of postwar Japan, as photographs of disaster, may not even translate into what Azoulay calls "emergency claims," or to statements that insist upon civil action to arrest a disaster. I find myself, as always, in terrain encircled by ghosts. There is nothing I can do to aid these citizens of the past, who despite occupying disparate subjectivities are similarly governed by imperial desire and military showmanship, and by the experience of being seen as a perpetual threat to the integrity of national identity. I cannot ease the young *hibakusha's* pain, or assure him he is no longer vulnerable to missiles from the sky; I cannot protect him, just as he cannot protect me. And so, what is it that I owe to the subjects of these photographs, and to the countless others that escape the frame?

What is it that I owe to the dead? What is it they owe to me?

These are larger questions than I can begin to ponder, but I do wonder if photographs offer guidance. Historical photographs of disaster offer an assurance—or a contract—of non-closure; they serve as certain non-resolution. There is no foreclosure on the open image; there is no burying the undead. Perhaps the indeterminacy of the photographic image

offers a lesson for how one might strive to refute or to refuse *resolution*, as yet another state apparatus for the governance of grief.<sup>43</sup>

I have lingered so long on photographic structures of time and spectatorial relationships with the camera because they offer theoretical frameworks that meaningfully guide how I make and understand photographs and how I reproduce archival images. The images I discuss in this chapter, including the young *hibakusha* and the imperial soldier, appear throughout the visual and textual products of my work (including in *Dead Letter Room*, *The problem with clouds*, and *Otake*, which I discuss in following chapters). My dialogues with these images are just as crucial to my practice as are how they are sequenced or materially installed, and in many cases they provide the conceptual or textual fodder that informs what new photographs I make and governs how I display them. I highlight these dialogues in this essay—through the broad frameworks of temporality and spatiality—in order to offer examples of how my addresses toward images attempt to offer space for intimacy and shared citizenry across space and across time. In the future, these dialogues may manifest in book or film-essay format, and as an exercise, this type of address toward images will remain an important foundation of my creative practice.

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<sup>43</sup> In using the word "indeterminacy" I'm anticipating David Campany and Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa's forthcoming book, *Indeterminacy: Thoughts on Time, the Image, and Race(ism)*, to be released by Mack Books in June 2022.

### 3. | A(-)visual warfare

The first known Allied images of Auschwitz were taken in April 1944, in a series of aerial photographs meant to capture the I.G. Farben complex between the plane's origin in Foggia, Italy and its target in Silesia. Aerial photographs of the concentration camps would continue to be produced and studied—even through 1945 as the end of the war loomed in the European theater—however, Allied reports failed to include any mention of the death and labor complexes so clearly rendered in the available photographs. The analysts had no formal prompting to look for Auschwitz in the photographs, and so the camps remained imperceptible to human viewers for over thirty years, at which point the privilege of retrospection rendered them legible.<sup>44</sup>

The late filmmaker and writer Harun Farocki recounts this gross failure of vision in his essay "Reality Would Have to Begin."<sup>45</sup> Alongside his address of the prevalence of photography in the modern war machine (in the form of visual surveillance and reconnaissance), Farocki lays bare the vexing partiality of human perception and its role in shaping the spectrum of invisibility.<sup>46</sup> Farocki's considerations of Allied blindness amid the persistence of photographic "evidence" of Nazi genocide is one example among many of how lapses in—or manipulations of—human perception can inordinately effect subjects within the field of the visible. The human inability to recognize what the photographic apparatus unfeeling captures prevents phenomena within the visible (what can be seen) from being transcribed into the coded field of the visual (the meaning one gives to what *is* seen). The making of images and the making of war both rely on mechanisms and practices that work to control the availability of the visible, or to manipulate the flow of the *visible* to the *visual*. This logistical overlap between war and the image is foundational to the contemporary,

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<sup>44</sup> Farocki, Harun. "Reality Would Have to Begin." *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-Lines*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser. Amsterdam University Press, 2004, p. 195.

<sup>45</sup> Farocki, Harun. "Reality Would Have to Begin," pp. 193-202. The narrator also recounts this anecdote in Harun Farocki's 1988 film, *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*.

<sup>46</sup> Invisibility can be rendered through various phenomena in the visible field, including through obstruction, transparency, ignorance, and absence.

global, geopolitical moment. My creative practice is heavily invested in images of/from war, and so it has become crucial within my artwork that I present questions around the technical, psychic, social, and political arbitration of what images of war *can* be seen and *how*.

In his 1989 essay *War and Cinema*, the French theorist Paul Virilio traces the intimacies between photographic, cinematic, and military technologies and their shared reliance on "the logistics of perception."<sup>47</sup> In nearly every department of military operations,<sup>48</sup> Virilio explains, warmakers employ ocular and optical devices to control the nature of seeing, foreseeing, and being seen. They rely on sight-enabling mechanisms to police and control the flows of information that crucially underpin the distribution of force on the battlefield. From the darkened room of the camera obscura to the subterranean bunker, from the telephoto lens to the telescopic viewfinder of a sniper rifle, and from the "camera-pigeon"<sup>49</sup> to the autonomous aerial drone, the making of images and the making of war rely on mechanisms that manage the field of the visible. Furthermore, these mechanisms work to produce grave real and symbolic inequities among people. The trafficking and manipulation of the visible runs so critically behind the exercise of power that, as Virilio writes, "nothing now distinguishes the functions of the weapon and the eye."<sup>50</sup>

I begin to address the mediation of the visible and the visual—and, very directly, the adjacencies between war and cinema—in *Blue Skies* (2021), a four-channel video work interlacing slowed excerpts from the 1946 film of the same name with ultra-enlarged footage of the mushroom cloud over Nagasaki. Three of the four channels alternately project a kaleidoscopic line of dancing Fred Astaires—smiling in tapered, long-tailed tuxedos, top hats, and canes in hands—against a formless array of pixelated purples, blues, and whites. Astaire is a famously skilled and graceful mover, and his well-measured leaps and turns are made even more sensational by the rhythmic synchronization of his multiplied body. His metal-tipped shoes

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<sup>47</sup> Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. Verso, 1989.

<sup>48</sup> Virilio spends most of the essay discussing military technologies in the 20th century, from the Russo-Japanese War (ending in 1904) through to the American campaign in Vietnam.

<sup>49</sup> Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, p 15.

<sup>50</sup> Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, pp. 103-104.

and wooden cane strike the floor with great force and intensity. Astaire both defines and exceeds corporeality, a rare quality not lost on audiences who rushed the cinemas in 1946.



Allie Tsubota, *Blue Skies*, 2021, installation view

The collusion between Hollywood and the US military is no mystery, nor is the use of cinema as an anesthetic for the masses. While Astaire was enchanting audiences in 1946, another type of visible, visual spectacle was vibrating beneath the surface: the censored images of nuclear atrocity in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In *Blue Skies*, the Astaire footage appears adjacent to ultra-enlarged footage of the cloud over Nagasaki, which at times spans all three projected channels. The formless colors of the cloud are meant to be as entrancing as Astaire's kinetic grace, and to induce a discomforted sense of flying or falling that is nonetheless sensational. I have intentionally manipulated the footage of the mushroom cloud so as not to reproduce the profound spectacle of the explosion and the semiotic

baggage it carries, and have opted instead to render the image as both a distortion and a fragment of its better-known original. The viewer is "inside" the cloud, while also standing as witness to the posterization and digital deterioration of an image that inches closer to the dematerializing nature of the blast itself. On the fourth channel, streamed through a 12"x12" Toshiba television seated on the floor and propped up at a 45-degree angle, white text scrolls continuously against a black background. The viewers' experience of reading the text is meant to occur semi-privately, with their back to the remaining three channels, an arrangement that makes it virtually impossible for the viewer to perceive the image and text simultaneously.

*Blue Skies* addresses the arbitration of visible and visual information in times and contexts of war, and includes a nod to those technical, or structural, impediments to perception through the placement of the fourth channel. The piece also infers a type of meshing, or overlap, between Hollywood's investment in the mass cinematic spectacle and Washington's investment in policing the flows of public sentiment. Together, the footage of Fred Astaire and that of the enlarged mushroom cloud recall the twin spectacles of cinematic light and militarized death that, in Virilio's words, shape "a world in the throes of dematerialization and eventual total disintegration,"<sup>51</sup> in which reality is shaped in the space between a disembodied eye (a weapon, a camera, a spectator) and a projected image (a target, a scene, a subject).

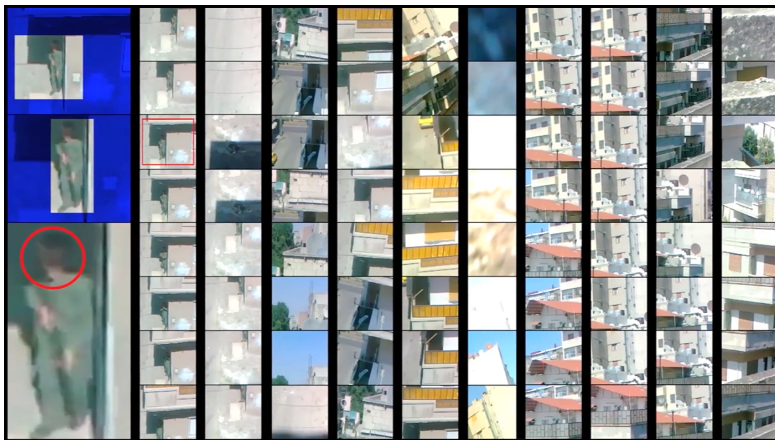
Many artists, Harun Farocki notable among them, have examined the formation of visuality as mediated through the eye of the camera in times or in contexts of war, but I have been most moved by Lebanese artist and performer Rabih Mroué's investigations into the low-resolution images produced and circulated by protestors and "guerilla filmmakers" in Syria. Mroué presents questions about how one records or witnesses their own death, especially within a set of violent episodes from which conventional journalists are notably absent and in which the veracity of evidence is

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<sup>51</sup> Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, p. 91.



always in question.<sup>52</sup> In his "non-academic lecture," *The Pixelated Revolution*, Mroué investigates images captured by civilians resisting the Ba'ath regime, wherein images are made using handheld digital cameras and mobile phones attached, like a prosthetic device, to their bipedal hosts. Many of the images Mroué mines depict the final moments of the meeting between a Ba'athist rifle/gunman and a civilian camera/witness, in which the parties fatally interrogate one another. Between the eye of the camera and the eye of the rifle, and by extension between the eyes of each of their operators, are several prospective outcomes: there is the possibility of mutual recognition, the threat of the creation of photographic evidence, and the risk of corporeal injury or death. Reality begins there, in the *distance* between two sets of eyes and the images they behold, mediated continuously through the camera and the gun.



Rabih Mroué, "The Pixelated Revolution," 2013, still from non-academic lecture video accompaniment

There is an additional horror to these images, in that the collapse between the eye of the camera and the eye of its operator extends to encompass the eye of the delayed and distanced spectator. Because the mobile phone serves as a prosthetic extension of its operator's body, a spectator becomes

<sup>52</sup> Mroué, Rabih. "The Pixelated Revolution." *Image(s), mon amour: Fabrications*. Comunidad de Madrid, 2013, pp. 378-393. The term "guerrilla filmmakers" appears on p. 381.

corporeally invested as the camera is shot, as the cameraperson is shot, and as the spectator, too, is metaphorically and distantly shot and presumably injured, or killed. Mroué enforces a proximity and an immediacy between the distanced spectator and the filmed event, and elevates the subversive potential of civilian footage while dislodging the viewer from a presumably safe or detached position. Thinking again of the various spatial arrangements between a spectator and the camera, Mroué manages to generate a type of viewership that incites both assimilation with and antipathy toward the photographic apparatus and the scene it records.

Both Mroué and Virilio suggest that in a state of perpetual warfare (in which we all live, whether or not active combat physically surrounds us in our distinct geotemporal positions), the eye of the camera unblinkingly interrogates the eye of the weapon, and both eyes fuse intimately and integrally with our own vision. We live in an age of perpetual *eye contact*.<sup>53</sup>

With Mroué and Virilio in mind, I have begun searching for instances in postwar archives in which this heightened grade of eye contact appears. In revisiting the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) footage, I was struck by another instance of intersubjective recognition between two subjects on either side of a lens. In this footage—captured in Otake, Japan in 1945—a crowd of Japanese civilians is herded along in the process of repatriation, returning to the newly formed Japanese nation-state from the outposts of the colonial occupation. The camera operator—an American GI—stands separately from the moving crowd, and points their lens directly toward the line of civilians entering and exiting the frame. Many adults captured in this footage see the camera, recognize its operator, and bow to both before shuffling on. These subjects recognize their own subordination before the gaze of the nation that the camera represents. A Japanese civilian's impulse to perform this gesture upon meeting the eye of the camera is uncomfortable, but not altogether odd. Rather, I am taken by a child in the footage, whose eyes meet the eye of the camera with little practice and without a self-censoring sense of inquiry.

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<sup>53</sup> Mroué, Rabih. "The Pixelated Revolution," p. 384.



Allie Tsubota, *Little girl in the red coat*, 2022, video still

*Little girl in the red coat*<sup>54</sup> (2022) is a 44-second looped video streamed through a 3"x6" flat-screen monitor mounted directly onto a wall. The video depicts a sequence of frames from the aforementioned USSBS footage, dramatically enlarged, slowed, and fixed on a young girl pulled through the moving crowd of repatriates. She wears a bright red overcoat with wide lapels, its hem resting just above her bare knees. The coat waves lightly as she falls, in walking, from one foot to the next. Her right hand holds the hand of an out-of-frame adult, and though she stays tethered it's clear she struggles to keep pace with the longer, more graceful strides of those around her. The camera follows her with precision and intent while

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<sup>54</sup> This title also refers to the character of the same name in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. When I searched the internet for the Spielberg scene, the first result was a news article reporting that the actor who played the girl in the red coat (now an adult) is presently aiding Ukrainian refugees escaping into Poland.  
<https://deadline.com/2022/04/schindlers-list-little-girl-in-red-coat-ukraine-1234996770/>

she, in return, directs her gaze into the camera's lens. *Eye contact*. The girl is the camera's target, though her tepid expression suggests neither surrender nor subordination to the camera's operator. The footage is slowed so significantly that each frame appears distinct from the next, continuously arresting the girl as she falls from foot to foot. Each frame lingers barely long enough for the girl's image to register with a spectator; she is momentarily caught, only to escape specular legibility. Eye contact made, eye contact pulled apart. A suturing and unsuturing of the film, the celluloid, the body, the eye, the gaze of the girl interrogating the camera without capture, over and over again.

*Little girl in the red coat* fragments the moving image, and aims to achieve a sense of arrest apparent in another aesthetic strategy: flash illumination. Artificial flash has been used throughout the history of photography, and it is especially present in the language of the photographic survey. Flash itself is distantly militaristic if traced to its origins as a controlled explosion of magnesium powder, and its development alongside optical and motor technologies has secured for flash the same speed and luminosity that characterizes the "cinematic delirium of lightning war."<sup>55</sup>

Artificial flash has functionally and symbolically "shed light on" or "exposed" presumably dark, unknown, or illegible conditions, from Jacob Riis's photographs of New York City tenements to Weegee's pictures of crime scenes. In the case of wartime surveys, it comes as no surprise that artificial flash is used frequently, including in the USSBS in postwar Japan. The frequent employment of flash within the USSBS is striking, and it is used to capture a number of different scenes—subterranean bunkers, flooded cellars, and abandoned munitions factories, all relics of the Japanese war economy whose invisibility Imperial Japan would have been invested in maintaining, and whose visibility is immediately enabled by the operations of the Allied occupation (Fig. 5).

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<sup>55</sup> Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, p. 95.



Figure 5: NARA object no. 243-GP-3D-03. USSBS Photo Intelligence Division, Japan, 1945. Reproduced 2021 Courtesy National Archives.

The use of flash has become an important aesthetic strategy through which I explore the shattering nature of brilliant light in scenes otherwise secure in darkness. I am intrigued by the sudden and interruptive nature of flash illumination, and by its ability to render a subject visible while momentarily blinding those around it. I am intrigued, too, by how flash so closely resembles the artificial lightning of warfare, from the explosion of gunpowder at the mouth of a rifle to the blitzkriegs of Europe, all violently beautiful and destructive lights that momentarily shatter the dark.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Flint, Kate. "Prologue." *Flash! Photography, Writing, and Surprise Illumination*. Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 1-6.



Allie Tsubota, *Excision (night)*, 2022

My curiosity over the transformative nature of flash illumination compelled me to return to the site of the excised beehive. This time, at

night. The photograph resulting from this nighttime exposure was wholly different from the photograph I had taken in the soft light of an overcast day. The flash-lit photograph is captured by the camera and received by the spectator instantaneously; it offers no gentle graduations to guide the spectator between edges of the frame, and the relative equivalence of its tonal values delivers the image all at once. In the case of the beehive, the honeycomb surrenders its delicate character, and most articulations of difference between depth and texture are lost. The photograph reads as an objective document of clinical scarring more than as an homage to an absent corpse. The evenness of the flash renders nearly everything in the scene visible and leaves only one slice of the excision unavailable to the photographic or human eye. This thin, jagged line is the only piece of the image the excision holds for itself; the rest is nakedly exposed.

And yet, even in a photograph that renders the visible world so plainly available, isn't there something that is still withheld? A viewer cannot *see* the production of absence, the sensation experienced by a drunken bee, or the excision's smell of stale ammonia, and yet this photograph still promises its referent to the spectator. I struggle to see the *throes of dematerialization* that Virilio describes in *War and Cinema*, and that I know are somehow evident in this photograph of the beehive's absence. That the photograph represents a trace of catastrophe and not catastrophe itself leads me to a final question: What about the spectacular phenonema that exceed perception and visibility so completely that they become *avisual*, or as Akira Mizuta Lippit writes, "A-visual," of the spectacular visuality of the atomic or A-bomb?<sup>57</sup>

With ghostly resemblance to Eduardo Cadava's formulation of the image, Lippit writes: "The atomic blast that melted the eyes of angels brought forth a spectacle of invisibility, a scene that *vanishes at the instant of its appearance only to linger forever in the visual world as an irreducible trace of avisuality*"<sup>58</sup> (italics mine). The profound imperceptibility of

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<sup>57</sup> Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*. University of Minnesota Press, 2005, p. 81.

<sup>58</sup> Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*, p. 82. Cadava writes, "Like the world, the image allows itself to be experienced only as what withdraws from experience. Its experience—and if it were different it would not be an experience at all—is an experience of the

bodies turned radiant in the one fifteen-millionth of a second of atomic light exemplifies the utterly *avidual* nature of the instantaneously phantomized and the sensorial vacuousness at the atomic hypocenter, and further gestures toward acts and elements of war that can and will not ever be "seen." Catastrophic light itself cannot be photographed, instead one can only depict the shadowy traces of disappeared objects and the dark stains left in the aftermath. A delayed witness can see the negatives that Hiroshima and Nagasaki—as massive cameras—produced, but they cannot "see" nuclear annihilation itself. It remains, ineluctably *avidual*.

The atomic bomb's act of self-effacement presents ethical quandaries not dissimilar from those presented by the destruction of evidence, such as the requisite burning of all photographic negatives and prints ordered by the American occupation in the immediate aftermath of the bombs.<sup>59</sup> There is, in this second case, an undoing of evidence by fire—a transubstantiation of evidence to ash, an annihilation that erases its own act of erasure.<sup>60</sup> The first photograph of the atomic bomb was made by the atomic flash itself, and though the photograph left in the flash's wake persisted, the bomb promptly effaced any evidence of itself as the photographic apparatus—as camera, as weapon, as event. This certain dematerialization of evidence represents a grave threat, in that it attempts to foreclose on the formation of the archive and to seal the fate of history.

The relationships between war, the image, and the "logistics of perception" have deeply informed my practice, and have productively destabilized my understanding of the possibilities and the limitations of human vision. The contemporary citizen is a purveyor of images, whose negotiation of the realm of the visible, as well as of how the visible is transcribed into the visual, offers great potential and great risk. What does it mean to "believe

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impossibility of experience." And, "Nevertheless, what makes an image an image is its capacity to bear the traces of what it cannot show..." See Cadava, Eduardo. "'Lapsus Imaginis': The Image in Ruins," p. 36.

<sup>59</sup> Marcón, Barbara. "Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the Eye of the Camera." *Third Text*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2011, pp. 787–797.

<sup>60</sup> I first came across the language of *erasing the erasure* in Ariella Azoulay's "Different Ways Not to Say Deportation," in which she describes state attempts to foreclose on the civil contract of photography via active censorship and captioning as attempts at "cleansing the ethnic cleansing itself." See Azoulay, Ariella. "Different Ways Not to Say Deportation." *Fillip Online*.



our eyes" when reality is shaped in the space between the eye and the image, or between the weapon and its target? How do we contend with the visible world when our eyes-as-cameras actively dematerialize what's before them into distortions of light and digital noise? How do we recognize a visible catastrophe when the mechanisms that engender it are themselves self-destructive?

The sniper lifts his rifle and hits his target. Mroué writes:

The eye falls to the ground, turns toward the ceiling of the room, and we see what it is seeing. The voice of the cameraman who was hit is heard saying, "I am wounded, I am wounded." Then nothing...complete silence...The image stops...<sup>61</sup>

The image stops, and its afterlife begins.

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<sup>61</sup> Mroué, Rabih. "The Pixelated Revolution," p. 384.



## UNITED STATES

1844–1891: Maritime Expansion in the Pacific  
Through a series of treaties and acts of intimidation, the United States gains control of territories in China, Korea, and Japan, and establishes consulates in Fiji, Samoa, and the Marshall Islands.

1854: Convention of Kanagawa  
The United States employs gunboat diplomacy to force Japan open to foreign trade and to grant US citizens rights to extraterritoriality.

1898: Annexation of Hawai'i  
The United States officially annexes Hawai'i, which becomes a US territory in 1900 and a state in 1959.

1898: Capture of Guam and the Philippines  
The United States takes control of Guam and the Philippines following its victory at the end of the Spanish-American war.

1900: Annexation of Samoa  
The United States officially annexes Samoa one year after the island is partitioned between Germany and the United States.

1902: End of Philippine–American War  
Suppressing Filipino struggles for independence, the United States declares the Filipino–American War over and establishes a colonial government.

1906: TDR awarded Nobel Peace Prize  
President Theodore Roosevelt is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in ending the Russo-Japanese War and the Portsmouth between Russia and Japan.

1907: Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907  
This informal agreement between the United States and Japan effectively bars all immigration from Japan to the US. The agreement follows a series of anti-Asian riots on the west coast.

1924: Immigration Act of 1924  
The United States effectively bans all immigration from Asian countries.

## JAPAN

1868–1912: Meiji Restoration  
Japan undergoes rapid industrialization and commercialization.

1876: Japan–Korea Treaty of 1876  
Japan employs gunboat diplomacy to force Korea open to foreign trade and to grant Japanese citizens rights of extraterritoriality.

1894: Capture of Seoul  
Japanese troops capture the Korean king and install a puppet government in Seoul.

1895: Treaty of Shimonoseki  
Japan forces China to cede the Liaodong Peninsula and the island of Taiwan.

1904: Treaty of Portsmouth  
The Treaty of Portsmouth officially ends the Japanese-won Russo-Japanese war, during which Japan encroaches on territories in Manchuria, Korea, and China.

1905: Japan–Korea Treaty of 1905  
Japan occupies Korea and declares it a Japanese protectorate.

1910: Japan–Korea Treaty of 1910  
Japan officially annexes Korea.

1931: Invasion of Manchuria  
Japan invades, captures, and installs a puppet regime in Manchuria. Similar tactics are used in Jehol in 1933, and Inner Mongolia in 1936.

1937, Official Establishment of "Comfort Stations" in Korea  
After several decades of systematized prostitution in areas with high concentrations of Imperial Japanese Soldiers, Japan officially constructs large-scale military brothels in Korea.<sup>2</sup>

December 1937–January 1938, Nanjing Massacre  
Following Japan's 1937 invasion of China, the occupying Japanese Imperial Army commits a series of mass murders, rapes, looting, and arson in Nanjing. Death toll estimates range from 40,000–300,00, and rape case estimates range from 20,000–over 80,000.

December 7, 1941, Attack on Pearl Harbor  
Japan attacks Pearl Harbor. Japan, Germany, and Italy declare war on the United States and bring all parties into World War II.

1941–1945, World War II  
Japan fights World War II on the side of the Axis powers, capturing territory in Malaya, the Philippines, Borneo, Central Java, Malang, Cebu, Sumatra, and Dutch New Guinea.

1942, Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere Memorial Hall Competition  
Architect Kenzo Tange is awarded first place for his proposed design for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere Monument.

September 2, 1945  
Japan surrenders.

1945–1953, Allied Occupation of the Pacific

1947, Constitution of Japan  
Drafted by American officials under the Allied occupation, the 1947 Constitution dissolves the Empire of Japan and cedes its overseas territories, including Korea, to the Allied occupation. The Japanese Imperial Army is replaced by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces.

1951, US–Japan Security Treaty  
This treaty effectively establishes a military alliance between the United States and Japan, and allows for US military bases on Japanese soil.

1954, Construction of Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park  
Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park is built in nearly identical design, though much reduced in scale, to Kenzo Tange's original plans for the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere Monument.

February 19, 1942, Executive Order 9066  
President Franklin Roosevelt orders the evacuation of all people of Japanese ancestry from the west coast of the United States and their relocation to ten inland incarceration camps.

August 6–9, 1945, Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki  
An estimated 200,000+ civilians are killed as a result of direct exposure or long-term radiation to the first atomic bombs used in the history of warfare.

1945–1953, Allied Occupation of the Pacific  
1945, US Takeover of Militarized Prostitution in Korea  
The United States military government systematizes regulated and licensed prostitution and STD testing in military camp towns in South Korea.

1947, Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands  
The United Nations makes Micronesia, including the Northern Mariana Islands, a Trust Territory under the administration of the United States.

1947–1952, Nuclear Testing at Pacific Proving Grounds, Marshall Islands  
The United States conducts over 100 nuclear tests throughout the Marshall Islands. Inhabitants are forcibly removed and relocated.

1951, US–Japan Security Treaty  
This treaty effectively establishes a military alliance between the United States and Japan, and allows for US military bases on Japanese soil.

2021, Continued Military Presence in the Pacific  
As of 2021, the United States operates at least 120 military bases in Japan, 73 in South Korea, 43 in Guam, 15 in Hawaii, 8 in the Philippines, 7 in the Marshall Islands, and dozens more across various Pacific Islands.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Vines, David. "Lists of U.S. Military Bases Abroad, 1776–2021." American University Library, 2021, <https://dra.american.edu/islandora/object/auislandora%3A94927>  
<sup>2</sup> Lee, Na Young. "The Construction of Military Prostitution in South Korea during the U.S. Military Rule, 1945–1948." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 33, issue 3, fall 2007, pp.453–461.

## 4. | Transoceanic desire

There are few places where the transference of imperial structures between Japan and the United States is clearer than in state-sanctioned systems of militarized prostitution and sexual enslavement in the occupied Pacific, which have been alternately administered by the armed forces of both nations. Prior to 1945, Japan introduced and administered a military "comfort station" system through which women and girls—largely from colonized territories including Manchuria, China, Korea, and the Pacific Islands—forcibly performed sex acts with members of the occupying Imperial Japanese Army. Militarized sex trafficking was enforced under a legal structure of "hygiene and welfare management," in which euphemistically-named "comfort women" reinforced imperial standards of "health."<sup>64</sup> Logics of the "comfort station" famously continued after the fall of the Japanese Empire, though in this instance, the industry became privatized, with the growth of militarized prostitution in camptowns surrounding US military bases in South Korea, Okinawa, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Both Japanese "comfort stations" and the militarized camptown prostitution that survived them rely on the exploitation of politically and economically vulnerable people either forthrightly enlisted or strategically coerced into the service of empire.

Accounts of sexual exploitation invite a broader consideration of the registers of desire that exist across and within transnational empire in the postwar Pacific. Japanese "comfort stations" were established as a response to high incidence of rape committed by Japanese soldiers in controlled territories, but they first and foremost attempted to quell the violent local uprisings that such regular occurrences prompted. "Comfort stations" were more concerned with the eruptions of colonial discontent that threatened to jeopardize the occupation than they were with moral questions of rape.<sup>65</sup> Across the Japanese Empire, the militarization of sex was a strategy for mediating desire, and its effects were social and political

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<sup>64</sup> Sakai, Naomi. "On Romantic Love and Military Violence." *Militarized Currents: Toward a Decolonized Future in Asia and the Pacific*, edited by Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho. University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 205.

<sup>65</sup> Sakai, Naomi. "On Romantic Love and Military Violence," p. 213.

as much as they were corporeal. There are similar slippages between corporeal and sociopolitical desire with the onset of the Allied occupation, during which Korean sex workers in military camptowns were "presented as tributes and offered as signs of goodwill to American soldiers" and considered as "patriots volunteering to sacrifice themselves for their nation."<sup>66</sup>

There is an overwhelming presence of rape and systematized prostitution in imperial situations, and yet many cinematic productions exploring empire in the Pacific concern themselves with romance. In "On Romantic Love and Military Violence," Naomi Sakai identifies the largely heterosexist logics of romance narrating colonial situations in films like *China Nights* (1940, Japan; released three years after the Nanjing Massacre) and *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955, US; released shortly after the official end of Allied occupation in the Pacific), both of which propagate romantic narratives as a mechanism for mediating discourses of desire in imperial situations. I am fascinated and troubled by the overwhelming pervasiveness of desire in the postwar Pacific, and by the failure of hegemonic romantic narratives to expose sex, rape, and romance as phenomena that exist concurrently between individual subjects, or to effectively allegorize the complex history of transimperial courtship between Japan and the United States. In my creative practice, I have slowly been developing expressive strategies that gesture toward desire's serpentine movements across an array of interconnected registers—including the corporeal, the transnational, and the intrasubjective.

*Otake* (2022) is a two-channel video installation aggregated of 16mm color footage from the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS), clips from postwar French and Japanese cinema, 35mm color slides from my own family archive captured during the Allied occupation, and original footage. The 14-minute video is projected via two projectors in a 90-degree corner, and runs on loop. Shortly after the video begins, an excerpt from Hiroshi Teshigahara's 1964 film *Woman in the Dunes*—in which the titular

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<sup>66</sup> Sakai, Naomi. "On Romantic Love and Military Violence," p. 215.

character intimately bathes a human subject she is holding captive—is paired with a second, smaller clip of 16mm USSBS aerial footage scrolling slowly above Osaka, Japan. The gaze of Teshigahara's bather is entranced, but determined, and her eyes rest inches from her subject's skin as she kneads his calves, ribs, and waist. To the right, a steady stream of appearing and disappearing coordinates paint a largely homogenous Japanese topography below its aerial surveillers. This section of *Otake* is accompanied by the woman's slow, measured, and anxious breathing and the intermittent sounds of water droplets returning to a pail.<sup>67</sup>

In Teshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes*, the two protagonists are governed by their shared conditions of isolation and carcerality—of psychological manipulation and corporeal control—and their interactions betray deep antagonism and keen tenderness. They slip seamlessly between subject positions (captor to captive, lover to perpetrator, hero to antihero, competitor to collaborator), and so their desire, too, flows unevenly across rapidly changing corporeal and moral boundaries. The desire that Teshigahara's bather expresses is resonant of the transcendent pleasure that precedes the naked use of force: she does not love her captive subject, nor does she violate him, but is instead suspended in the paralyzing act of anticipating and imagining euphoria. The captive protagonist—an entomologist from Tokyo who, while searching for beetles, becomes imprisoned in the young widow's home—does not resist the woman's obvious lust, but the excerpt does not reveal his reaction to it, if any transpires. The shifting subject positions of the two characters, differently ensnared in a Sisyphean bind, describe terrain on which the desire for their own corporeal autonomy is inseparable from the desire to possess another's. In *Otake*, a viewer sees almost all of the several minutes-long sequence in which little occurs except the slide of hands across bare flesh and the unbroken gaze of the bather. My hope is that the attenuated scene keys a viewer in to the subtle frequencies of charged restraint, silent lust, and carnal anticipation that permeate the scene.

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<sup>67</sup> *Woman in the Dunes*. Directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara. Teshigahara Productions, 1964. *The Criterion Collection*, <https://www.criterion.com/films/826-woman-in-the-dunes>.



Allie Tsubota, *Otake*, 2022, left-channel video still

The surveillance footage set beside the film footage also expresses a type of desire, one that extends beyond the individual, to the body-politic that the nation-state represents. Against the foamy streaks that cross the entomologist's back, the scrolling Japanese landscape resembles a type of skin. Harun Farocki, in *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, recounts two translations for the German word *aufklärung*: one being "enlightenment," in the sense of the history of ideas, and the other being "reconnaissance," as in the flight reconnaissance of military operations.<sup>68</sup> The definitions do not share their referent-term coincidentally; both translations are invested in knowledge as a marker of superiority. The slowly advancing topography of the Japanese landscape in *Otake* represents a field of knowledge, a repository of information that the Allied aircraft desires to extract and to master.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Farocki, Harun. *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*. 1988.

<sup>69</sup> The distance *between* the aircraft and the ground also recalls the space between the *look* and the *gaze*, where an active negotiation of subjectivity, desire, and lack takes place. In this sense, the pilot (or photographer, or camera) desires to possess the object from which they are absented (the Japanese landscape) as much as they desire to be recognized by the Japanese citizenry as the victor of the war and liberator of the Pacific.



In *Otake*, the USSBS surveillance footage poses a different set of questions than does its cinematic sibling, but the spatial proximity and temporal simultaneity of the two moving images force them into dialogue. In pairing scenes from *Woman in the Dunes* and the USSBS, I intend to collapse or confuse expressions of corporeal and transnational desire, and to underscore the fact of intersubjective relationships between subjects in imperial (or carceral, in the case of Teshigahara's film) regimes.

Desire is located within subjects as much as it is between them. In contending with the prevalence of desire in the postwar Pacific, I have been eager to locate the echoes of desire in Japanese/America, whose members were subject to another mode of wanting: the desire to transform oneself through the project of assimilation. With the enactment of Executive Order 9066 in 1942, over one hundred thousand people of Japanese descent living in the United States were forcibly removed from their homes and incarcerated in makeshift camps in remote desert landscapes. Upon release, many former detainees were prevented from returning to their homes and from reforming ethnically-concentrated communities; they were instead encouraged to relocate eastward and to disperse themselves among distant towns and cities. Japanese/American and Japanese/Canadian exogamy rates skyrocketed in the postwar period, reflecting the degree of efficacy that a policy of spatial disaggregation can have in dissolving a racial or ethnic community.<sup>70</sup> Spatial disaggregation is not the sole mechanism through which a racialized community becomes absorbed within a white national body, however, and the potential pleasure that accompanies these acts of assimilation poses important questions around the *intrasubjective* desire present in the postwar period.

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<sup>70</sup> The incarceration of people of Japanese ancestry during World War II in the United States, in Canada, and in Australia share many similarities and exhibit important differences. For a striking account of wartime incarceration across "white Pacific nations" following the attack on Pearl Harbor, including the way in which these events emerge from western liberal democracy's settler colonial inheritance, see Iyko Day's "Alien Intimacies: The Coloniality of Japanese Internment in Australia, Canada, and the U.S." in *Amerasia Journal*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2010, pp. 107-124.

In her lucid analysis of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, Anne Anlin Cheng offers a key to contending with intrasubjective desire, and with the role of pleasure in the project of assimilation. Against more common discourses of East–West Orientalism and veiled homoerotic discovery in Hwang's adaption of Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, Cheng forgoes the discussion on whether Butterfly's professional and sexual identity is a "revelation" to Gallimard, and focuses instead on the role of fantasy and assimilation in the formation of Gallimard's sexuality. Addressing Gallimard's passivity in front of the pornographic tableau—of his impotence "*within his own fantasy*"—Cheng writes that "Gallimard is reminding himself, if not the audience, that fantasy in the sense of a wish-fulfillment dream cannot produce desire...Race and sex are not the content *but the conditions* for mobilizing the work of fantasy in this play." Gallimard is seduced not by the possibility of wrapping Butterfly in his "big western arms," but by the opportunity to also *become the "woman,"* and to enjoy "the unspeakable pleasures of 'oriental indistinction' for himself."<sup>71</sup> Supreme psychic pleasure comes not from possessing the Other, but by becoming the Other and in so doing, transforming the Self. In the closing scene of the play, and in his agony over the loss of Butterfly, Gallimard becomes so consumed by his fantasy of absorption that he effaces his own psychic and material existence through a final act of suicide.

Cheng describes Gallimard's desire for absorption by his lover as an instance in which a subject derives pleasure from assimilation. She suggests that the intrasubjective mechanisms that propel a subject to mimic or to disappear are themselves bent toward fantasy, or ecstasy. It strikes me that Japanese/American postwar assimilation into the white national body was/is a complex and multifaceted project that reflects white hegemonic desire as much as it does the intrasubjective desire of a racialized subject. It was/is propelled by the psychic pleasure of identification with a majoritarian subjectivity, the impulse to obscure oneself as a mode of survival, and the physical dispersion of community (Fig. 6).

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<sup>71</sup> Cheng, Anne Anlin. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief*. Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 116-117.



Figure 6: Family photograph, taken by Shigeru Tsubota circa 1960.

I arrived to Manzanar in August. Manzanar War Relocation Center (now known as Manzanar National Historic Site) is one of ten sites where Japanese-Americans were incarcerated between 1942–1946, and is famously where Ansel Adams captured the photographs he would later

publish alongside a series of troubling essays in *Born Free & Equal*.<sup>72</sup> Roughly four hours from Los Angeles by car, Manzanar sits in an arid desert valley between the Inyo and Sierra mountains. I photographed in Manzanar for several days, and I was drawn to standing bodies of water that reflected, symbolically if not materially, the pleasure-laden potential of dissolving oneself in water in the face of unrelenting heat. Between Manzanar National Historic Site and Tulelake Segregation Center, two differently preserved camps in the state of California, I photographed various puddles, rivers, latent irrigation canals, and swamps, curious to see if I could image a sense of dissolution or dispersion, or reflect on the desire to disappear oneself in a small, wet cavern to escape the beating sun.



Allie Tsubota, *Bridge, Tulelake Segregation Center*, 2021

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<sup>72</sup> See Creff, Elena Tajima. *Imaging Japanese America: the visual construction of citizenship, nation, and the body*. New York University Press, 2004; and Adams, Ansel. *Born Free & Equal*. US Camera, 1944.

No substance ever fully dissolves in water; instead, it only changes, if imperceptibly, the composition and the character of the larger liquid body. The photographs of water I captured among Japanese/American carceral ruins reflect on Japanese/American incarceration during World War II as a site of strategic dissolution of the racialized body—whether provoked through legal apparatuses or through an intrasubjective desire to assimilate. Through these photographs, I find the opportunity to speak about the insurgent potential of the racialized body, which can never be fully disappeared, and whose material persistence only serves to damage the white nationalist fantasy of the purity and impenetrability of whiteness.



## 5. | Not to remember—without forgetting<sup>73</sup>

*To my knowledge, the Lebanese have not made time travel films and videos—nor have they made films and videos exploring post-war Lebanon's labyrinthine ruins, "in" which notwithstanding coming across some photographs or a video showing one in the ruin, one may not remember ever being there—not because one has forgotten visiting the ruin, but because while prior to entering the labyrinth you have not been there previously, "the moment you enter the labyrinth, you've been there before."*

Jalal Toufic<sup>74</sup>

*And a time will come when we can no longer name what binds us. Its name will be erased from our memory until it vanishes completely.*

Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais,  
*Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 1959<sup>75</sup>

Another moving portrait. A figure with long black hair is centered in the frame, their movements nearly imperceptible amid intermittent clouds of smoke. The figure is back-turned, and their key identifying features remain unavailable to the spectator. An overhead light weakly illuminates the frame, falling off toward the bottom of the scene and singularizing the figure within a field of predominant darkness. The frame and the figure are small. The large channel to their left is also a moving portrait, though

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<sup>73</sup> Toufic, Jalal. "To Remember or Not to Remember—That is Not a Question." *Undeserving Lebanon*. Forthcoming Books, 2007, pp. 9-10.

<sup>74</sup> Toufic, Jalal. "To Remember or Not to Remember—That is Not a Question," pp. 9-10.

<sup>75</sup> *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Directed by Alain Resnais, screenplay by Marguerite Duras, Argos Film, 1959.

here, the subject is the open sea.



Allie Tsubota, *April*, 2021, two-channel video still

*April* (2021) is a two-channel video work whose duration stretches on lengthily and loops back around without a clear beginning or ending. Below the back-turned figure and the open sea, text appears episodically: "I dreamt last night I was pregnant / When the labor pains came I spilled blood and a sallow white face / Did this not make sense, given the strangeness of my small belly?" And, "There is a young girl. Her parents named her April / She remembers her house in Carmel by the Sea, and little before / She left her home despite her name and her residence, and now they tenderly call her 'April Fools.'" The statements are not obviously connected, nor do they flow seamlessly from one into the next, yet they share tonal features and are linked through the persistent presence of the moving portraits above them.

The fragmentary text in *April* is an amalgam of abbreviated dialogues between myself and imagined Japanese/Americans incarcerated during World War II. The fictive incarcerates recount their dreams and their memories of encampment, their desires for beauty and the ghosts that haunt them. The imagined testimonies vanish as soon as they arrive on the



screen, swept up and lost in the tides of the sea or dispersed like smoke in air. In making *April*, I was led by my curiosity about the noticeable absence of discussion or reflection within Japanese/American families, such as my own, on wartime incarceration, and by my desire to retrieve or resurrect the fragmentary relics of a history subsumed in oblivion.

The aftermath of the Asia-Pacific Wars and World War II in the Pacific is a site of profound amnesia. Beyond the material loss of public and personal places and objects, their meanings, too, submit to slow withdrawal. Lebanese theorist, writer, and filmmaker Jalal Toufic contends with the nature of withdrawal in the aftermath of catastrophe in the essay *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, in which he decouples the loss of tradition from measures like number of casualties, magnitude of structural damage, or extent of psychic trauma, and divorces the legibility of objects from their physical availability. Toufic describes the surpassing disaster as a durational phenomenon that destroys a lifeworld and delivers oblivion in ways that are often immaterial and difficult to recognize. Toufic is most concerned with registers of withdrawal past the two decades-long Lebanese civil wars between 1975–1990, but his theoretical frameworks generously and productively lend themselves to considering the onset and persistence of oblivion in the wake of World War II.

Toufic's work is often cited by collaborator and artist Walid Raad, who also considers the nature and extent of immaterial withdrawal in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil wars. In an interview with Achim Borchardt-Hume, Raad writes:

Imagine the following scenario: an artist, renowned for her use of dazzling colours, decides for reasons that she cannot understand to narrow her palette to a single colour. Asked to explain why she uses only a single colour, blue, for example, the artist answers: 'blue is the only colour available to me today.' When presented with other pigments, other colours, the artist clarifies that she is quite aware of the physical availability of other

colours. 'The other colours are not depleted materially, but immaterially withdrawn', she explains.<sup>76</sup>

In this anecdote, Raad references *Secrets in the open sea*, a set of multimedia works that lament the disappearance of material historicity for a postwar Lebanese citizenry subjected to capital projects in development and reconstruction.<sup>77</sup> Within the work, Raad produces (or recovers, the veracity of the story he tells is, as always, unclear) twenty-nine black-and-white latent images from a series of photographic prints found during the demolition of Beirut's commercial districts in 1993. The prints are each of different shades of blue, a color that is in danger of becoming permanently withdrawn, especially amid the demolition of war-ravaged architectural relics and the subsequent redevelopment of such buildings and places and the transfiguration of their meanings. Further, the latent images all figure individuals who drowned or disappeared in the Mediterranean Sea between 1975-1992, a discovery that suggests that state-led demolition in Beirut threatens to erase social or civic memory of violence committed against civilians and refugees in the Mediterranean.

Raad searches for immaterially withdrawn colors, lines, and shapes in various historical documents, as in his work *Appendix XVIII: Plates 24-151, 2010*,<sup>78</sup> in which these basic forms, sensing danger, "deploy defensive measures: they hide, take refuge, hibernate, camouflage and/or dissimulate."<sup>79</sup> The notion that inanimate forms "take refuge" in places invulnerable to disappearance—like advertisements, magazines, and other state and commercial volumes—suggests that the aftermath of catastrophe extends beyond an individual lifespan, and so tradition seeks refuge in places that will be available to subsequent generations. Raad is keenly attuned to the potential for inter- and intra-temporal transmission, and describes his acts of "borrowing" from historical documents as a practice

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<sup>76</sup> Raad, Walid. "In Search of the Miraculous." *Miraculous Beginnings*, edited by Achim Borchardt-Hume. Whitechapel Gallery, 2010, p. 12.

<sup>77</sup> Raad, Walid. *Secrets in the open sea*. 1994-2002. In *Miraculous Beginnings*, edited by Achim Borchardt-Hume. Whitechapel Gallery, 2010, pp. 60-63.

<sup>78</sup> Raad, Walid. *Appendix XVIII: Plates 24-151*. 2010. In *Miraculous Beginnings*, edited by Achim Borchardt-Hume. Whitechapel Gallery, 2010, pp. 98-107.

<sup>79</sup> Raad, Walid. *Miraculous Beginnings*, edited by Achim Borchardt-Hume. Whitechapel Gallery, 2010, p. 94.

that receives, documents, and safeguards forms and their meanings for future availability.



Walid Raad, "Plate 17. AG\_FD\_Secrets." From *Secrets in the open sea*, 1994–2002

My investigation into images captured in postwar Japan—such as those in the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS)—is largely driven by an interest in locating the extent to which the histories they represent have or have not withdrawn, or whether, like the negatives produced from Raad's blue prints, they are latent but available. To return to Jalal Toufic, it first feels important to recognize the differential vulnerability of those *in-* or *excluded* from the community of the surpassing disaster, and to identify these two subject positions as those afforded different privileges of unfettered sight and that experience different withdrawals.

Consider the case of Japanese photographer Yoshito Mitsushige. A resident of Hiroshima in 1945 and a survivor of the atomic bomb, Mitsushige wandered the streets of the city on the morning of August 6, 1945 with two rolls of black-and-white film and a 35mm camera. Mitsushige describes raising the viewfinder to his eye and finding its glass

blurred with tears, which left him unable to capture the scenes he had tepidly framed moments before. Mitsushige exposed only seven frames on the morning the bomb fell, five of which were successfully developed and all of which resulted in rather abstract-looking compositions that obfuscate the ruin of Hiroshima.<sup>80</sup> To recall the Japanese protagonist's accusation in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Toufic might argue that Mitsushige, in his emotional and corporeal vulnerability to disaster, *saw nothing in Hiroshima*. Japanese civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as members of the community of the surpassing disaster, suffered a disorienting and involuntary blindness in the immediate aftermath of the bombs, a handicap that obstructs the formation of memory and deepens the absence of the lifeworld withdrawn.<sup>81</sup>

Consider another: a member of the United States Air Force commissioned to document the efficacy of military violence on Allied-bombed Japanese cities. With the privilege of time and distance, this photographer is less susceptible to disorienting blindness than are victims of the blast, and he can capture rather detached and functional photographs of the city's wartime damages. The Air Force photographer does not *see nothing in Hiroshima*, but is rather defined by his ability to see—to record and analyze the magnitude of the event, and to classify and regulate its meaning. The sheer volume of images produced via the USSBS in the immediate postwar period evidences the fervor with which the United States documented nuclear catastrophe and its architectural, ecological, and biological aftermath, and suggests that the United States was invulnerable to the same disorienting blindness that traumatized victims of the atomic blast.

The United States was/is not included in the community of the surpassing disaster, and images in the USSBS plainly register the United States' privileged ability to look clinically at a catastrophe that civilian victims experienced phenomenologically. The USSBS is a postwar archive produced and maintained by the perpetrator, and yet I am still convinced

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<sup>80</sup> Marcón, Barbara. "Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the Eye of the Camera."

<sup>81</sup> Toufic, Jalal. *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*. Forthcoming Books, 2009, pp. 67-68.

that something within it withdraws. One possibility is quite direct: images produced through the USSBS profoundly threaten the United States' investment in the delusion of its own benevolence, and in 1945, they threatened the plausibility of propagandist narratives that the US military was the liberator and benefactor of Japan.<sup>82</sup> The persistence of evidence of a wartime atrocity wrought against civilians prompted the United States to officially censor the USSBS and related images across the United States and the occupied Pacific, delivering a new and very different type of programmatic sightlessness.

Another possible withdrawal is more subtle and perhaps more dangerous, and it's one that emerges not *in spite* but *because* of the presence of the camera in postwar Japan. The submission of visual evidence to the archive forces the notion that disaster itself is visible, that atomic light and nuclear death can be seen or shown in material form. I recall again Akira Mizuta Lippit's reflections on atomic *avisuality*, on acts and specters of war that can and will never be seen. Perhaps what withdraws from the USSBS images, then, is the crucial *avisuality* of atomic light, and with that, the avisuality of the hypocenter of power and desire as the driving forces of war. The USSBS promises a visible record, but it swallows something in return; it swallows the unseeable, unknowable, avisual nature of loss and grief and offers instead their palimpsests.

This deceptive exchange of the visible for the avisual is perhaps one reason why users of photography continually attempt and fail to capture the ineffable, and it leads me to consider the camera itself as a site of oblivion. In the same way that poet Don Mee Choi writes that her "memory lives inside her father's camera,"<sup>83</sup> I wonder if the small, lightless box of the camera—or the dark room, in the case of the camera obscura—serves as a capsule for memory, a sealed and isolated place where memory rests lengthily until finally, it withdraws. I think of the cellar in Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, where the French protagonist is enclosed for an indeterminate amount of time. The cellar—a damp, dark room hidden beneath the surface of the street, and lit only by a

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<sup>82</sup> Marcón, Barbara. "Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the Eye of the Camera," p. 788.

<sup>83</sup> Choi, Don Mee. *DMZ Colony*. Wave Books, 2020, p.15.

small, gated window—feels, too, like a camera obscura. In it, the French woman withdraws from the world and is left only with her own projections. The cellar is meant to absorb—or at least to assuage—the most stubborn expressions of her madness: the memory of her undead Nazi lover and the unseemly deformity of her grief. She spends an eternity in the cellar; it devours her completely until she seems to be unmoved by the traces of her memory. The losses she experiences in the cellar haunt her, frighten her, traumatize her: *Look how I'm forgetting you, look how I've forgotten you. Look at me!*<sup>84</sup> As with her phantom German lover, she fears the total abstraction of memory that will ensue when she leaves her lover in Hiroshima. In the film's present, she fears the lightless room of the cellar and the transaction it was meant to exact—she was meant to surrender her memory in exchange for her ability to live.<sup>85</sup>

In *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, I read the cellar as a camera not only because of the physical commonalities between the two, but because they both exact an exchange between incommensurate realms—between the psychic and the material, and between the avisual and the visible. In the case of the cellar, the French protagonist is meant to deposit the memory of her lover and the unseemly deformity of her grief, and in return, she is afforded a material life. In the case of the camera present in the aftermath of catastrophe, the avisuality of disaster is exchanged for a visible trace—for a photographic substitute. This second exchange, the case of the camera, leaves the users of photography subject to a *double forgetting*—a forgetting of the avisual experience, and a forgetting of the falseness of the photographic visibility that substitutes for it. Toufic, too, recalls this second forgetting in the context of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*: "Memory of what has thus been withdrawn is a betrayal of it, a false memory."<sup>86</sup>

There is a lingering question around doubly-forgotten memories, and it leads me back to the histories that surround postwar Japan: in the durational aftermath of catastrophe, is there a moment when obstructions

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<sup>84</sup> *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Directed by Alain Resnais, screenplay by Marguerite Duras, Argos Film, 1959.

<sup>85</sup> By this, I'm referring to how the French woman's parents only let her out of the cellar once the memories of her dead lover no longer outwardly express themselves through her madness.

<sup>86</sup> Toufic, Jalal. *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, p. 62.

of memory become so complete that they become divorced from any exercise in active forgetting? Is it possible that within the Japanese and American national bodies, memories of imperial intimacy and nuclear death are absent not by way of occlusion or effacement, but through never having been formed?<sup>87</sup> Is it possible, as Toufic suggests, that the withdrawal of memory and the onset of oblivion can be engendered through a strategic and continued foreclosure on one's entry into the labyrinth entirely? The minimal circulation of USSBS photographs, together with the Japanese state's attempts to sanitize transnational discourse around the shape of empire in the contemporary Pacific, suggest attempts to fundamentally transform what constitutes trans-Pacific memory. These are attempts to enforce the most profound type of oblivion; they are attempts *not to remember—without forgetting*.

Toufic's consideration of withdrawal has led me to search for sites and symbols that signify the completeness of oblivion—the profound and utter absence of, or foreclosure on memory. As I write this, the days are growing warmer. The perennial freeze of winter has softened and shadows linger longer in the corners of windows and the elbows of trees. It's spring. It strikes me that spring, too, is a season of oblivion, in which the material refuse of winter transubstantiates into blooming flowers, whose sudden aliveness does not recall the bright dead things that shaped them. I am always relieved at the return of spring, but this year I feel an antipathy

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<sup>87</sup> Beyond the immediate withdrawal endured in the aftermath of the bombs, and beyond the intermediary withdrawal enforced through censorship during the Allied occupation, the postwar Japanese government is responsible for fostering one additional register of withdrawal. Historian and cultural theorist Lisa Yoneyama aptly identifies this postwar withdrawal in Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park, whose origins she re-traces to a nearly identical design produced several years earlier as a grandiose monument to the euphemistically-named "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity." The original design, a tribute to Imperial Japan's fanatical fascism and colonial expansion across East Asia, re-emerged within a span of years to instead propagate universalizing concepts of amity and nuclear non-proliferation. Despite the material re-purposing of the design, discourse surrounding Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park continues to circulate sentiments of peace and progress, and occludes public reflection on Japanese atrocities not-distantly committed, or on imperial systems adopted and maintained by the United States. Official endeavors to build a bright, clean Hiroshima reflect the Japanese government's investment in scrubbing its history of empire from the walls of transnational memory, as much as it serves efforts to obscure the transfiguration of prewar Japanese military-led genocide, colonial subjugation, and sexual slavery into postwar, Cold War, and present Western occupation of the Pacific. See Yoneyama, Lisa. *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory*. University of California Press, 1999, pp. 1-40.

toward flowers—how cruel that they bloom amid a crumbling world, in shifting sands and ruinous soil.<sup>88</sup> I dug with my hands to retrieve the first tulips that sprouted this year, three floors down, beneath my kitchen window. The wet earth was cold and unyielding to my frustrated clawing, and my nail beds were left black from the endeavor. I placed the tulips on a table near the window, crossed their stems, and photographed them.

I pulled the first flowers of spring from the soil. I did not replant them. I later watched them die.



Allie Tsubota, *Crossed Tulips*, 2022

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<sup>88</sup> This poem, written by Hara Tamiki, appears as an epitaph near the Atomic Bomb Dome:  
*Engraved in stone long ago, / Lost in the shifting sand, / In the midst of a crumbling world, /  
The vision of one flower.*



I wrote to H about these spring flowers, knowing he would have witnessed the sudden blooming of the carpet of oleanders in the aftermath of the bomb. Carol Mavor refers to the River Motoyasu, which runs throughout Hiroshima, as the mythical river of forgetfulness: the River Lethe.<sup>89</sup> I imagine the August oleanders of Hiroshima falling into the river in the same way that victims of the bomb, in agony and desperation, sought refuge in its waters. I imagine the oleanders' oblivion was so complete that they ceased to know the charred and toxic soil from which they sprouted. To pull a tulip whole from the soil—to extract the entirety of its globular bulb—is to dispossess the tulip of its perennial potential, through which the flower returns year after year. Like the French woman in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, who swallows whole the round glass of the marble, I took the tulip in its entirety. The resulting photograph shows two tulips, crossed at the stems and strewn across a table, robbed of their ability to bloom again, year after year. The picture offers an inadequate record for all the years the tulips would never know, for all the years the tulips would never *be* known.

In their writings and films, Jalal Toufic, Marguerite Duras, and Alain Resnais all make apparent memory's porosity and its vulnerability to various mechanisms and registers of transformation or withdrawal. Memory's permeability to known and unknown forces leads me to one final but important note on Walid Raad's practice, and his disinterest in conventional notions of historicity. In "The True and the Blurry," Blake Stimson writes:

"The part [of Raad's work] that exceeds the material world might be called 'fiction', of course, or 'fantasy', or 'form', or 'self', or 'nation', or even 'God', but none of these fabulations by itself will help us much with the art in question, or, for that matter, with any other. Rather, we would be better served by using one of Raad's own more measured characterizations—'hysterical symptoms'

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<sup>89</sup> Mavor, Carol. "Summer Was inside the Marble": Alain Resnais's and Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour*. *Black and Blue*. Duke University Press, 2012, pp. 114-159.

is probably best—to make sense of that part which exceeds the documentary."<sup>90</sup>

For Raad, this set of symptoms, immaterial lamentations, or even desires is manifest across his work, from the fictional character of Dr. Fakhouri, to the bets wagered in *Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese wars*, to *The Atlas Group*, an imaginary foundation and archive to which Raad attributes various contributors but whose work is in fact always produced by Raad himself. Like the immaterial ruin in the wake of disaster, Raad makes evident that often the "traumatic symptom [begins] to feel more real than the event itself."<sup>91</sup>

Raad's transgressions of norms of veracity cannot be reduced to, or rejected as exercises in "fact" or fiction," but instead propose new coordinates where the social, the psychological, the historical and the imagined lay in a state of shattered or suspended disarray. To return to Anne Anlin Cheng's work on fantasy and desire: "The question of truth versus falsehood has become far less interesting than the more vexing question of how do the categories of real and the fictive get processed—or rather, how those categories come to accrue or forfeit their respective status and currency."<sup>92</sup> To rephrase, how do we come to form distinctions between the real and the unreal, and through what practices do we qualify and account for their meanings? From what coordinates do we mediate formations of meaning and memory that emerge from fact and fiction?

The negotiation between the factual and the fictive has steadily become central to my practice, especially so in the spatial installation of *Otake*. In this two-channel video work, both channels often play their images in perfect synchrony, each image a double of the other, and the images together inviting stereoscopic viewership.<sup>93</sup> In this arrangement, my aim is

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<sup>90</sup> Stimson, Blake. "The True and the Blurry." *Miraculous Beginnings*, edited by Achim Borchardt-Hume. Whitechapel Gallery, 2010, p. 123.

<sup>91</sup> Gilbert, Alan. "A Cosmology of Fragments." *Miraculous Beginnings*, edited by Achim Borchardt-Hume. Whitechapel Gallery, 2010, p. 126.

<sup>92</sup> Cheng, Anne Anlin. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief*, p. 116.

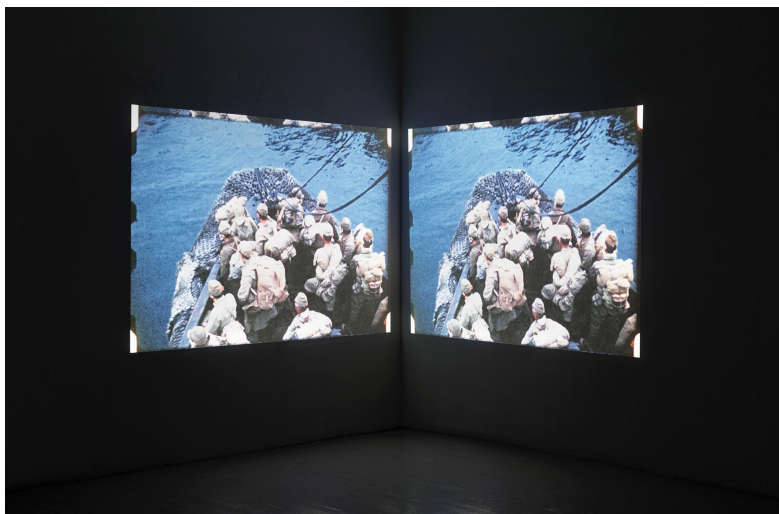
<sup>93</sup> Stereoscopic vision seamlessly composites two images into one, through which the spectator sees neither the left image nor the right, but instead the amalgamated result. The magic of this

to create a triangulated relationship between the two screens and the viewer, wherein the viewer is positioned as an interpolator between dichotomies of "past/present," or "veracity/falsehood." This arrangement is especially relevant to the USSBS footage, which moves gratuitously and without explanation between documentary and theatrical registers. The USSBS Motion Picture Project had public entertainment/educational objectives as well as private military ones.<sup>94</sup> These two separate objectives required different types of scenes, social interactions, and records of physical ruin, which might explain why many scenes in the footage appear to be scripted or recreated. This is all uncertain, of course, as the project was canceled before its completion, classified soon after, and transferred to the National Archives in 1962 where it now lives as a single collection of reels that confuses, transgresses, and slips freely across a spectrum of veridical forms.

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illusion reveals all stereoscopic—and all binocular—vision to be a type of fiction. See Silverman, Kaja. *The Threshold of the Visible World*, p. 128.

<sup>94</sup> Daniel A. McGovern, the project's director, explained that the USSBS Motion Picture Project had two distinct phases, one to "bring to the public an objective picture of life in Japan as it exists today," and one "designed to record the physical damage inflicted upon Japan and also to document certain important technological aspects of the Japanese war economy." See Shigesawa, Atsuko. "From the STINKO to the USSBS motion picture project: Daniel A. McGovern and the Army Air Forces' first atomic bomb films." *The Kobe Gaidai Ronso: The Kobe City University Journal*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2017, pp. 117-118.



Allie Tsubota, *Otake*, 2022, installation view

Fiona Tan's 80-minute photo-film, *Ascent* (2016), is an excellent example of a work interested less in the dichotomy between "truth" and "falsehood," and more in the opportunities of a disparately aggregated archive undergoing a dynamic transformation through its incorporation into narrative. *Ascent* compiles found still images of Mt. Fuji from private and public archives and engages in a practice of archival assemblage that collapses geopolitical and temporal space even as it focuses on a discrete physical site. Tan expertly traverses time on a grand scale (across several centuries of history, including pre-modern, imperial, and postwar Japan) and on a separate, more minute scale (the frozen photographic moment becoming reanimated cinematically). Tan weaves a delicate, semi-fictive narrative that negotiates the registers of longing between the living and the dead.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Tan, Fiona. *Ascent*. 2016. *Vimeo*, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/ascent>



Fiona Tan, *Ascent*, 2016, photo-film still

*Ascent* centers a mountain and the ritual processes of imaging it, climbing it, and imbuing it with meaning; it entertains the material erosion and semiotic transformation of an entity that stands as a symbol of permanence. Tan's work has been instructive for me in considering how meaning and knowledge derive from historical "fact" as much as they do from our narrative interventions, and that the relationship between the two is not combative but collaborative. Withdrawal and new infusions of meaning construct the same infinite and self-propelling loop, just as the excavation of sand in the dunes initiates and enables the spillage of its replacement. In a desert, there is no distinguishing between sand shoveled away and sand arriving in its place; all sand is made of mountains. Veracity, falsehood, withdrawal, and re-emergence are similarly indistinguishable in the formation of historical memory and in our notions of historicity, which themselves shift according to as-yet-unknown, ever-changing factors like the crawling of geological plates or changes in the weather.



## No End to the Image

A newborn opens and closes their eyes. Stretches of darkness are interrupted, briefly, by flashes of light and trace deposits on their retinas, images visible shortly thereafter on the wet interior of their eyelids. These early efforts in seeing are not unlike the opening and closing of vision that Walter Benjamin describes as a type of *lightning*, or Eduardo Cadava's formulations of the image as "flash," as fissure, as opening, as invitation.<sup>96</sup> Throughout this essay and in the artwork to which it refers, I have attempted to contend with the brief openings that images deliver, and to the textured quality of the darkness that their arrival interrupts. I have considered the temporal and spatial structures that condition photographic looking, the mediation of the visible and the visual in modern and contemporary warfare, the inter- and intrasubjective flows of desire in the postwar landscape, and the registers of withdrawal past the catastrophe of the Asia-Pacific Wars and World War II in the Pacific.

Still, there is an ambivalence to my wandering the halls of the image labyrinth; there is an irresoluteness in harboring both suspicion and affection<sup>97</sup> toward the historical images I encounter and toward my uncertain ability to resurrect or resuscitate the lives they represent. My pathological desire to enter the dark chambers of history and to recover something (or someone) from them might be a symptom of my own propensity for forgetting, as Paul Pfeiffer has calmly and insightfully reflected, that we are born within the labyrinth and that we never truly leave.

*There is no sound at the center of the blast.*

For those at the atomic hypocenter, the bomb cleaved an opening between sight and sound; it severed the blast's radiant flash from the shock of its sonic reverberation. The world's first nuclear specters departed in a sonic vacuum, in which the audial resolution of nuclear catastrophe never arrived, or never occurred. Maurice Blanchot writes, "Flash, the shattering

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<sup>96</sup> Again, throughout Eduardo Cadava's "'Lapsus Imaginis': The Image in Ruins."

<sup>97</sup> See David Company's "Affection and Suspicion" in *C Photo*, vol. 2, no. 10, 2015.

reverberation of language without hearing."<sup>98</sup> I suppose part of me is looking for this opening, this soundless flash, through which disaster and the phantom hands that guide it cease to exist.

The dreamer, as Thomas Keenan says, exhumes and reanimates a skeleton "just long enough to imagine a more intimate relation to it,"<sup>99</sup> knowing all the while that there is no reviving the dead or possessing the past, and that attempts to do so begin and end in vain. There is no *caesura* available to the living in which history—as the catastrophe of the present—does not exist. There is no atomic opening that offers the contemporary subject peace in the soundlessness of what never occurred. The search for release is impossible if it isn't deadly, and so we can choose instead the search for intimacy. Historical traces provoke us to confront the afterlives of the (un)gone, whose losses indict and indebt us, and whose polyphonic voices haunt even those with the privilege of living as though history is silent.<sup>100</sup> Awaiting our elegy in the darkest, most labyrinthine chambers of the Infinite Library are those who *see nothing in Hiroshima*, who hear nothing in the circular, cyclical ruins except the sounds of flowers blooming.

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<sup>98</sup> Thomas Keenan cites this translation from Maurice Blanchot's *L'Écriture du désastre* in "Light Weapons." *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-Lines*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser. Amsterdam University Press, 2004, pp. 203-2110; however the translation I've found reads "The breaking forth of light, the shattering reverberation of a language to which no hearing can be given." See Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writer of the Disaster*, translated by Ann Smock. University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p. 39`

<sup>99</sup> Keenan, Thomas. "Getting the dead to tell me what happened," p. 44.

<sup>100</sup> I owe this notion—the privilege of living as though history is silent—to conversations with Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa.



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