

of gathers and folds

More recently, in contemporary cultural life, art has come to occupy a space long associated with anthropology, becoming one of the main sites for tracking, representing, and performing the effects of difference in contemporary life. From this perspective, the two arenas are in a more complex and overlapping relationship to one another than ever before.

Marcus and Myers 1995¹

The artist Alec Von Bargaen's body of work, comprising installation, photographic and temporal works, undertaken throughout 10 countries comprising 23 projects, titled *So.lil.o.quy*, destabilizes traditional notions of knowledge and representation within visual cultures and methodologies as found in both fields of art and anthropology, attesting to and engaging within a new vision of representational practice, offering a more authentic response to the world. The artist reflects within this work a deep level of humanity more than perhaps politically correct ways of being self-reflexive about the human subject and objects. Von Bargaen's representational practice expands the notion of what it is to be human, to ethically elicit empathy, and to create a discourse of healing and to not reduce it.

As the artist is aware, there are a multitude of issues involved surrounding the visual depiction, conceptual formation and final artistic production/transformation/editing of documentation of cultural and global devastation, human frailty, resilience and supporting collaboration within zones of conflict. Von Bargaen's project, *So.lil.o.quy*, in collaboration with Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) took the artist to 23 missions/projects in 10 different countries in order to create a publication and museum exhibition that tours and walks audiences through the emotions the artist felt within locations. He shares the utter perfection of humanity despite suffering and shares the raw emotions within each work, powerfully. As Von Bargaen states of his potent title and the conceptual foundations for these works... *'So.lil.o.quy, is when a character speaks aloud, to themselves, about their own conflict, often in search of solution. This is what I wanted to achieve. I have been a storyteller all of my life and with this series I want to tell a story—through installations, video, audio pieces and images'*. These narratives of resilience, the strength and determination of the individual and collective in society to overcome these conflicts, is brought to the fore within these works and reveals generously the beauty of humanity. Today, artists and writers are engaging with these turbulent issues within their works globally. To quote Dr Nikos Papastergiadis, Professor in the School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne Australia, in his insightful observations and thoughts on the book review of Dr Veronica Tello's publication, *Counter-Memorial Aesthetics Refugee Histories and the Politics of Contemporary Art*:

*"At a time in which the political discourse on migration moves further and further away from humanitarian perspectives, and entrenches itself in ever narrowing forms of nationalist self-interest, it is refreshing to see how new visions of global interconnectedness are being launched by artists...new paradigms for understanding the relationship between refugee histories and contemporary art. It has an interdisciplinary approach and a global scope that will definitely capture attention."*²

This interconnectedness and awareness is pivotal to the *So.lil.o.quy* project and presented works, and for Von Bargaen, the artist, his passionate connection to humanity and empathetic vision and relationship to the individual, brings with it an ability to perceive and be cognizant of imagery depicting challenging, yet personally shared transformative moments. A lived theatre where the stage and its players share their (at times unspoken) voice, resilience, gratitude and humanity, however fragile. We become them and are enveloped as witnesses within the artists' work, to a healing.

of symbolic truths and allegories

Interdisciplinary undertakings such as Von Bargaen's *So.lil.o.quy* project, enacted within zones of conflict and destabilization, have resounding historical foundations as many may be only too aware of within visual arts, cultural studies, humanities and studio arts practices. These many interpreted histories and perspectives take, it can be said, two distinctive and essential forms, particularly in relation to backgrounding critical views of this work on a massive scale and organizational collaboration—the one that exclaims the truth by showing directly its conflict and disasters and the one that attempts a symbolic truth by recourse to allegory. Symbolic truth and witnessed truth, anticipation and aftermath, ones that have been and continue to be contested. With regard to issues of truth within the image, the

earliest known photographic depictions of human conflict (war) are the surviving 51 Daguerreotypes photographed by an unknown photographer during the Mexican-American War that were made in 1847 and which set the scene for the complicated relationship between photography, conflict and truth.³ In one, a General leads a column of mounted soldiers through a street. The photograph is by necessity set-up (staged), as the technology would have made it impossible for men/women and horses to have been motionless as they appear. Here, the truth is aesthetically represented but reality is absent. These scenes were staged for the camera. Flawed as photography and representation of conflict (war) has been, in both its photojournalistic and more self-consciously constructed forms, we know that these depictions of conflict are preferable than the alternative cleaned versions of the Gulf War, imagery managed as tightly as any corporate entity would. Writer and theorist Jean Baudrillard described this, in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, as a conflict that “along with the fake and presumptive warriors, generals, experts and television presenters we see speculating about it all through the day, watched itself in a mirror”⁴

Unashamedly, the artist Alec Von Bargaen’s initial primary source imagery and undertakings of recording and speculating on the So.lil.o.quy project, can be termed documentary, in that they belong to the tradition of photographing that sees the artist recognizing a set of social and cultural conditions and then responding (with both head and heart) by negotiating access to seemingly closed worlds, travelling to those worlds and coming away (enriched and emotionally charged) with images that are in some way evidential. Whilst ideas of truth and the real were and are certainly to the fore within the initial production of Von Bargaen’s works, it is apparent that other, more explicitly non-documentary aesthetic studio practices and heightened personal engagement, play their critical role in taking the concept of the photograph as a personal encounter and visioning of humanity more so than as a record of some external event. Here lies the magic and otherness of the artists’ passionate commitment, belief, collaborative heartfelt engagement and relation to the many faces of humanity.

The works of So.lil.o.quy overall, remind us that portraits are more than just a face and that the fields of view, landscapes, devoid of the human body, contain the trace and presence of society and its dislocation. Von Bargaen’s ability to capture an individual’s spirit, traditions, culture and reality within these works is awe-inspiring and invites each of us to explore humankind through the lens, offering deeper insights into major world events, racial strife and the reality of mass global displacement. A work that poignantly reveals this empathetic translation and representation of harsh realities of individuals within hospital camps, viewed through veiled opaque netting, is ‘*Under the Blue Skies of Agok*’ which places the audience eye-to-eye with individuals in ways that reveal our shared humanity, rather than reinforcing symbols or stereotypes. His empathy and the straightforward elegance of his pictures give the work unique power and grace. Taking us from the ground experience to an aerial view, Von Bargaen again shifts our lens and focus via the gridded format to present and reveal a topological installation comprising 25 images of seemingly monochrome clustered houses in ‘*Colour Me New*’ and the sequenced polyptych ‘*Scar Tissue*’. One could be mistaken for feeling that each is a screen from Google Maps™ or a deconstructed folded ordinance survey map, however, when scrutinized within each grid frame of photographic work, this town/village or reconnaissance view of countryside is beyond our familiar capacity to feel at ease or to comprehend as reverberating with common travel or project destinations. We are held before this gridded work and sequenced imagery by an authentic beauty of the unfamiliar or the unhomey (uncanny), images that speak of the agency of photography’s alienation and follows the theories of aftermath photography, where many critics have argued the experimental genre of aftermath⁵, ‘abstracts’ and renders ‘sublime’ the traumatic historical events that it takes as it’s subject matter.

As such Von Bargaen’s So.lil.o.quy video, installation and photographic stills are not simply contemporary documents, or visual objects of a disinterested aesthetic contemplation. Instead they exist somewhere between these poles. These photographs connect us to historical events and processes. But we encounter these events and processes through their aftermath, a form of mnemonic after-burn or latency, where the experience of re-witnessing the artists critical emotive experience creates a viewing position that is structured by a relationship between connection and distance. In doing so, this type of imagery does not dramatize the events—we are asked to empathetically come to terms with challenging events. If it is a reaction to an event, it isn’t immediate but is deliberately delayed—an after-burn.

of the body and translation

The question we perhaps must ultimately confront in terms of the image, concerns the role of society and cultural institutions in particular, in facilitating a space wherein moral dilemmas healthily correlate to the witnessing of injustice and conflict. It is here, within the modernist 'white cube' spaces that Von Bargaen re-sets and silently dramatizes So.lil.o.quy, rendering us, as viewers, spectators and participants as actively engaged in critical dialogue—questioning the circulation of imagery and artist as witness, artist as socially responsible contemporary anthropologist. What can be said about the responsibilities of visual representation? Whose agency is it that images inform, and what reforms are necessary to make representations of conflict and trauma an ethically effective means to encourage better acknowledgment of individual and collective responsibilities that would engender in the viewer/spectator an emphasis to meet moral and political obligations? These are continual questions related to the creative translation of the body within zones of conflict—paradoxically and, at times, invisible bodies, fraught with global complexities and the challenges of the visual archaeologist and witness, as can be seen in the artists' video, *The Distant Thunder of Honduras*. This work was produced/filmed entirely in Honduras in the Tegucigalpa area when the Zika outbreak occurred, and is accompanied by text and split screen showing mosquito larvae and a male body, at times glitching across the screen, a metaphor for social violence and gun-related deaths. The body is translated.

It is here that Von Bargaen, through his meticulously edited and conceptually rigorous attention to creating single and multiple narratives, installations within and between still and moving imagery, that he highlights and considers that in order for politically implicated images, whether veiled or materially obscured, to have an immediate critical effect on individuals and their agency, there needs to be cultivated alternative modes of perception and reception. As Barbie Zelizer has aptly observed, "*the compelling weight of the photograph, then, is determined by a linkage between its material and discursive dimensions, and the power created by that linkage draws us to a photo's many meanings*"⁶ What we need here, then, is to take this moral residue that remains after we confront images of human resilience and give the encounter a contemporary creative form. The contemporary cultural form of artworks that Von Bargaen shares and exhibits to create discourse and healing. '*Let then believe I'm sleeping*', a digital print that recalls both black and white and traditional cyanotype photographic processes, is perhaps the penultimate work that speaks to the artists' conceptual drive and sustained intent, that of stages of healing and apprehending humanities resilience. The inverted mirrored hands appear as levitating transparent x-rays, scarred, mended and healing—outstretched in an act of gesturing and silent pleading of gratitude.

of material witness and its narrative

So.lil.o.quy appears in each iteration and formation within museum and gallery sites as paradoxically durable atmospheres and vestiges of memory; fragmentary traces of traces, they perform the simultaneous possibility of the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen, the presence and the absence, and contain within their narratives the threads and knowledges that reality is no longer there, but has transformed into potent visual dialogues and visible voices. As Laurent Olivier observes, '*like archaeology, photography inscribes events in matter,*'⁷ making the '*past present and tangible*'.⁸ Like shards of tarnished mirror that has been shattered, these works reflect not the past nor the present but fragmentary partial views that appear to carefully reassemble and carry the potential to restore an overall view. Like soft woven memories under our feet, so does the work, '*Mind Your Step*', an installation of 25 carpets of a female's portrait, a disrupted narrative enacting a silent activity, looking up, sideways and returning a gaze back to us. Like woven shards, metaphorical soft woven glass shards of a lens, they can however wound, piercing the viewer with a significant detail, thought or bruising them with brutal testimony of witnessing—a repository for memories, feelings and emotions, playing on the imagination of the viewer, projecting backwards and forwards through temporal space. As Moeller explains: '*the recognition that the image is a record of what has happened up to that instant inspires questions about what might come to pass. Photographs freeze time, then dole it out infinitely, as long as one chooses to look and wonder. They are the residue of continuous experience.*'⁹

of events that unfold

Events unfold. *So.lil.o.quy* performs and acts as embodied sites and voices that can transfer a sense of experience and significant carriers of emotional and psychological depth and meaning. Both a spectator and artist are in the privileged position with regard to the events that unfold in these images. Becoming aware of this relationship between representation, individual experience and social conditions will keep the embodied character of human deprivation from being ignored and/or made more palatable for collective reception. We are aware that this call to resist is neither new, nor without its challenges, but also believe that it has the potential to call attention to both the subjects' positions in a web of historical and social conditions, to call attention to the artist Alec Von Bargen and the many that have and those that are yet to contribute to their understanding of how interconnected and morally sensitive our world actually is.

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¹ Marcus, G.E., Myers, F. (eds.). 1995. *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, Berkeley: University of California Press

² Tello, V. 2016. *Counter-Memorial Aesthetics: Refugee Histories and the Politics of Contemporary Art*, Bloomsbury Academic, Cover Review by Dr Nikos Papastergiadis.

³ Marien, MW. 2002. *Photography: A Cultural History*, London: Laurence King Publishing, pp 47-49

⁴ Baudrillard, J. 1995. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Paul Patton trans, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, p31

⁵ Company D. 2003 'Safety in Numbness, Some Remarks on Late Photography' David Green Ed. *Where is The Photography/Photoworks*

⁶ Zelizer, B. 2000. *Remembering to forget*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁷ Olivier, L. 2011. *The Dark Abyss of Time*, Lanham, MD, p. 63

⁸ Olsen, B. 2010. In *Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects*, Lanham, MD, p.109

⁹ Moeller, S. 1999. *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*, London, p.44