

# **Stony Brook University**



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A Thesis Presented

By

**Andreas Rentsch**

To

The Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

For the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

in

**Studio Art**

Stony Brook University

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**Abstract of the Thesis**

By

**Andreas Rentsch**

**Master of Fine Arts**

In

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As my work has extended into other mediums such as painting, drawing and performance art, I will explore in the first chapter of my thesis how this art practice fits in the art historical context of expanding the boundaries of the photographic medium. I am also interested in contemporary discourse of medium specificity, as it relates to my art and the work of other artists. I will use Michael Fried's provocative claim of the emergence of Jeff Wall as a painter and Gerhard Richter (1) as a photographer as the basis for a critical argument regarding photography.

As photography has become the most democratic of all mediums through the accessibility of easy to use and low cost digital cameras, the second chapter will discuss the proliferation of imagery, dealing with pictures of horror, and the virtue of empathy. This portion of my paper includes elements drawn from my personal history that have shaped my interest in existential and humanistic issues as well as inform my art practice.

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# Chapter I

## Introduction

Although my work of late possesses a close aesthetic relationship to performance, drawing and painting, it always originates in my mind and in its application within the photographic medium. While my work is anchored in a moral sensibility, process has become more and more important in my art practice. My aim has consistently remained within the parameters of the photographic medium in order to discover new ways to articulate my ideas visually. Experimentation and chance have become important tools in my research. A big part of this process has been abandoning a considerable amount of control and allowing the material to take over in some unexpected and unpredictable ways. This has mostly been accomplished by forgoing one or several steps in the conventional approach to photography. In the case of my *Entangled with Justice* series for example, I circumvent the manufacturer's specification of separating the negative from the positive of the Polaroid Type 55 film right after its exposure and processing, and instead of fixing and washing it immediately, allow it to develop and decay over a period of weeks or months before I tone it for permanence. By allowing the chemical phenomena to randomly and arbitrarily impact the once available information in the image, the resulting shapes and forms became metaphors for our own unpredictable and exciting existence.

In the series *X-Ray*, a body of work that composed my MFA thesis exhibition, I

eliminate the apparatus altogether. Additionally, the light sensitive medium (x-ray film) is continuously exposed to light at all times: weeks at a time, and sometimes months. A unique feature of X-ray film is that it has a double-sided emulsion that allows me to utilize both sides for producing images. The mark-making is created through my application of traditional black and white photographic chemicals by hand onto the film's surfaces. Once again, the methodology is very much part of the meaning, as the ensuing manifestation of the image is concealed until the film is ultimately fixed, washed and dried. Its temporality is an integral part of the process, as the evidence of my



Figure 1: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled* from the series *Entangled with Justice*, 2007, 4.5x3.5", Unique Polaroid negative

actions is often revealed after several days or weeks, or is completely deconstructed by the chemistry. The X-ray film becomes a revelatory tool, exposing hidden appearances, almost like a forensic expert unearthing concealed truths under the layers.



Figure 2: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled #3* from the series *X-Ray*, 2012, hand applied photo chemicals on X-ray film, 80x126"

## Medium Specificity in the Contemporary Discourse

My unconventional approach to photography raises the question of medium specificity. When I first introduced my *Entangled with Justice* series at *FotoFest*, a biennial photo conference in Houston, Texas in 2008, it was the first time that I returned from one of these events without a sale, future exhibition or publication of my work. My initial disappointment shifted to curiosity as to the reason for this rejection. To my astonishment, this work was deemed non photographic, or not photographic enough, or outside the norm that was acceptable to the reviewing attendees. Although I consider my art practice to be an expanded form of photography by including other art forms such as performance and drawing, all the work originates with and is captured by the photographic process.

What defines photography in today's art discourse? Is it still closely identified by the use of the apparatus and its reproducibility? Is it as Annie Leibovitz said, "about moments, a specific split second rather than continuous motion?"(2) Rather than answer these questions and discuss the limitations of the photographic medium as defined in the past, shouldn't we be looking at the new ways and possibilities of the artistic experience that photography offers us in contemporary art? Haven't the barriers and disconnect between dissimilar art practices evaporated, and exposure to other fields of study become necessary to explore new avenues of expression? The dialogue is no longer about each individual medium, but how we can expand them: *expanded cinema*, *expanded photography*. In Andrew Uroskie's essay "Rhetorics of Expansion", he

outlines how artists refused “a rhetoric of medium-specificity that sought to dictate in advance what was essential and inessential, proper or improper, these artists sought instead to reconceptualize both the moving image and contemporary art through a mutual imbrication.”(3) While Uroskie refers to video and film in his essay, this applies to photography as well. With the ascent of the digital age, photography, like no other medium (maybe with the exception of film/video), has been in constant flux and transformation, with diverging groups predicting the demise of the analog photographic medium, while there is a renaissance in some other parts of the photo community to reacquaint themselves with traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century photo processes. More recently, the incorporation and acceptance of other mediums has been a vital aspect of photography, adding an entirely new dimension to the discourse. Is the overlap of media platforms (as in my own work with the camera-less capture of light and the painterly and performative elements in my art practice) an expansion of the photographic medium or is it deconstructing the medium specificity?

In the thought provoking article “After Medium Specificity Chez Fried: Jeff Wall as a Painter; Gerhard Richter as a Photographer”(4), Diarmuid Costello questions Fried’s understanding and definition of medium specificity. Costello mentions that Fried “maintains that we are unable to say *a priori* what may count as an instance of a given medium – other than that it bear a “perspicuous relation” to the past practice of the medium in question – it being a function of the ongoing development of the medium to bring this out... If a photographer can make paintings using the technical means of photography, or a painter can make photographs by painting, is it still possible to

distinguish between artistic media in principle?”(5) According to Fried’s reading, “the photographer Jeff Wall emerges as a ‘painter’ who paints photographically, and the painter Gerhard Richter emerges as a ‘photographer’ who makes photographs with the means of painting.”(6) I share Costello’s skepticism, especially the fact “that approaching photography in this way arguably fails to regard photography as photography, preferring to present photography as a kind of painting by other means.”(7) There is no doubt that Jeff Wall has investigated a great deal visually and intellectually in the history of painting, its pictorial ambition and scale, but an inherent medium specificity can’t be negated with even the loftiest of intellectual arguments. As my work treads similar questions of medium specificity, I would allow my art practice to be called photography by other means. I do agree with the following statement by Jeff Wall about the close connections of mediums:

“Photography, cinema, and painting have been interrelated since the appearance of the newer arts, and the aesthetic criteria of each are informed by the other two media to the extent that it could be claimed that there is almost a single set of criteria for the three art forms. The only additional or new element is movement in the cinema”(8)

Another quote from Richter seems to have bolstered Fried’s argument of considering the German painter as a photographer:

“I’m not trying to imitate a photograph; I’m trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then, I am practicing photography by other means; I’m not producing paintings of a photograph but producing photographs. And, seen in this way, those of my paintings that have no photographic



source (the abstracts, etc.) are also photographs.”(9)



Figure 3: Jeff Wall, *Sudden Gust of Wind*, 1993, transparency on light box, 7'6"x 12'4"

I disagree with Richter's assumption that light is not one of the most crucial components in the medium of photography, when in fact it is the essential element necessary to make a photograph happen in the first place. Susan Sontag said as much in the following statement:

“While a painting, even one that meets photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects) - a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be.”(10)

In my reading of Fried, the main point of his argument is the explanation and conviction of an artist that his/her work should be considered as an exemplar of a certain medium, regardless of some medium specificity. Although I disagree with Fried's theory that "artistic media are not defined physically, causally and ontologically"(11), but basically allows the individual artist to define a specific medium by his/her own standards, I'm nevertheless intrigued by the fact that a discussion by an esteemed art critic and historian such as Fried would attempt to provide such a provocative definition, especially since he was so adamant in trumpeting medium specificity in his *Art and Objecthood* essay (1967). It is a good indication that artists and critics alike have been clamoring for an expansion of the parameters of medium specificity.



Figure 4: Gerhard Richter, *Uncle Rudi*, 1965, oil on canvas, 35x20"

## Expanded Photography

This is an exciting time in photography, in which many contemporary artists have found new ways of creating a visual vocabulary in dealing with the photographic medium, expanding on its discourse and interacting with other types of art. Artists such as Philip Lorca DiCorcia and Gregory Crewdson employ theatrical lighting to give their work a distinct cinematic feel. Crewdson's preparation for a photo shoot is reminiscent of a film set with a crew of dozens, meticulously arranging the location for days or weeks, with the ensuing photograph looking like a movie still. Wolfgang Tillmans' mundane snapshot-like photographs taken of his surroundings, often lacking coherent



Figure 5: Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, from the series *Hollywood 1990/1992/Hustlers*, *Marilyn, 28 years old, Las Vegas, Nevada, \$30, 30x40"*

narratives between them, become something otherworldly once exhibited, an installation of taped and clipped imagery. “They are really color fields—color playing on a purely visual level. That’s why it’s interesting to do these installations where the actual narrative content is taken away and each picture only represents color.”(12) His casual approach in exhibiting on alternative, non-archival surfaces such as laser and photocopy papers, confronts the question of acceptability, challenging the medium of photography, its conventions, materials and processes – and, he has broken with the institutionalized formal display, almost as if to cater to a more social media-oriented audience, rather than the sophisticated viewership that frequents his museum and gallery exhibitions.

Other artists such as Andreas Gursky and Jeff Wall have embraced scale as a definitive nod to painting in their pictorial imagery. Wall wants his massive transparencies to be understood primarily in relation to nineteenth-century painting and its history. Ironically, his method of displaying his giant transparencies in light boxes is heavily borrowed from contemporary advertising.



Figure 6: Gregory Crewdson, from the series *Twilight, Untitled*, 2001, 48x60"



Figure 7: Gregory Crewdson on location, from his series *Twilight*, 2001



Figure 8: Wolfgang Tillmans, installation view, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2012-2013



Figure 9: Andreas Gursky, installation view, Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills, CA, 2010



Figure 10: Jeff Wall, installation view, National Gallery of Victoria Australia, Melbourne, 2012-2013

What all of these artists have in common is their ability to expand the photographic medium beyond the mere causal relationship to its subject that defined traditional photography by reframing the discourse. Process, “formal qualities of style – the central issues in painting”<sup>(13)</sup> become essential queries in their art practice. When Susan Sontag said in her seminal book *On Photography*: “The painter constructs, the photographer discloses. That is, the identification of the subject of a photograph always dominates our perception of it – as it does not, necessarily, in a painting,”<sup>(14)</sup> it epitomized exactly the opposite approach of these artists in dealing with medium specificity and the subsequent re-coding of it. Although their work and the questions they raise have sometimes more in common with other mediums, their aesthetic and the material used is nevertheless photographic in nature, and the use of the

photographic apparatus is an essential component. I found it strange when George Baker in his essay, "Photography's Expanded Field", played down the importance of the medium by declaring: "Even among those artists (\*) then who continue in some form the practice of photography, today the medium seems a lamentable expedient, an insufficient bridge to other, more compelling forms."<sup>(15)</sup> Rather than to denigrate the importance of the medium of photography in their work, I would rather highlight a statement in the same article by Baker, when he refers to Rosalind Krauss' observations in her ground-breaking article *Sculpture in the expanded Field*:

"Thus, to paraphrase Krauss one last time, '[Photography] is no longer the privileged middle term between two things that it isn't. [Photography] is rather only one term on the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities.'<sup>(16)</sup> ... Not that modernist medium-specificity would simply dissipate into the pluralist state of anything goes, but rather that such mediums would quite precisely *expand*, marking out a strategic movement whereby both art and world, or art and the larger cultural field, would stand in new, formerly unimaginable relations to one another."<sup>(17)</sup>

(\*) : In his essay, Baker refers to Jeff Wall, Thomas Demand, Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, Rineke Dijkstra, Andreas Gursky.



## Etymology of Photography as Inspiration

Since I first experienced the practice of photography at age twelve, the affection and passion for the medium has not dissipated. The fascination of being able to capture light felt like pure magic to me. As I grew older and started to better understand the process, the desire to explore still uncharted territory became an obsession. The etymology of photography has always been my inspiration for experimentation. The word originates from the Greek language: the definition of photo is light, and graph means write, draw, describe and record. My artwork of the last two decades has taken that word quite literally; from illuminating entire landscapes with a flashlight, from clouds transforming into lines emulating charcoal drawings, from the sun making unpredictable imprints during hour-long exposures, from recording my walks in nature by leaving the shutter open for several minutes, to drawing the outlines of my body with a flashlight. All these series involved recording the light with an apparatus.

My latest body of work, *X-Ray*, raises some additional, interesting questions about medium specificity. The basic ingredients of this series are purely photographic: X-ray film that consists of an emulsion of silver halide particles similar to that of traditional black and white film; conventional photo paper developer and fixer that are used in the analog process, and light. The parallels basically end there. Pinned to the wall, the film is exposed at all times in my studio, without the use of any apparatus or lens to gather the light, creating an instant latent image. In a temporal process that takes hours and weeks, the mark-making happens by using my hands to apply the chemicals directly

onto the surface, creating shapes and forms depending on my gestures. The end results closely resemble expressionistic paintings. Very few people would consider it a photograph without my explaining. Even then, most would regard it closer to painting and drawing. But isn't my studio the container that brings in the light necessary to burnish the silver halides, and my hand the mechanics of the apparatus that guides the light to its ultimate resting place? It still raises some fundamental questions whether or not the act "of painting" the chemicals onto the emulsion and the lack of an apparatus "disqualifies" my work as photographic. But then again, is the medium of photography defined by the apparatus?



Figure 11: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled* from the *Rock Series*, 1995, toned gelatin silver print, 50x35"



Figure 12: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled* from the *Cloud Series*, 1997, toned gelatin silver print, 11x14"



Figure 13: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled* from the *Sun Series*, 2000, toned gelatin silver print, 30x30"



Figure 14: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled #4* from the series *X-Ray*, 2012, hand applied photo chemicals on X-ray film, 80x70"

There have been numerous artists who have pushed the boundaries of photography. Man Ray explored the camera-less approach with his photograms - or as he called them, Rayographs, after his last name - by arranging translucent and opaque objects on photosensitive materials. His technique included immersing the object in the developer during exposure, and using stationary and moving light sources. There is no dispute

that being a painter greatly influenced some of Man Ray's approaches and his interest in the process. During the Dadaist and Surrealist movement (Man Ray was part of both), artists were especially excited to investigate a still young medium that was so conducive to experimentation. More recently, Wolfgang Tillman's other work, his abstract images, are more closely related to the painterly tradition - created in the darkroom with chemicals and no apparatus - and he has re-defined the medium further by adding giant scale that was not common in the nineties. Another artist, Adam Fuss, experiments with some of the earliest photographic techniques such as the photogram, giant daguerreotypes and the pinhole camera, using these ancient processes to construct a contemporary aesthetic.



Figure 15: Man Ray, Rayograph, gelatin silver print, 1922



Figure 16: Wolfgang Tillmans, *It's only love give it away*, medium and exact size not known, 2008



Figure 17: Adam Fuss, *Home and the World*, 2010, daguerreotype, 27<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 42"

## Summary

In 1977, Susan Sontag wrote her seminal book *On Photography*. Her observations are still enlightening, fresh and valid: Prescient as well, maybe not in the way she imagined when she wrote the following quote to counterpoint Edward Weston's insistence of assessing a good photograph by its technical prowess, which she considered a "bankrupt" objective:

"The new position aims to liberate photography, as art, from the oppressive standards of technical perfection; to liberate photography from beauty, too. It opens up the possibility of a global taste, in which no subject (or absence of subject), no technique (or absence of technique) disqualifies a photograph."<sup>(18)</sup>

This quote summarizes and answers some questions I have been raising. I do want to return, one last time, to the etymology of photography: Drawing with light, light recording, documenting and writing with light. In that regard, I consider my more recent work to be the purest form of photography. This fascination in the ability of capturing light and making it visible within the photographic process has been an obsession of mine for the past 30 plus years.

Vilém Flusser called for a new philosophy of photography in which "to probe their [photographer's] practice in the pursuit of freedom... Freedom is the strategy of making chance and necessity subordinate to human intention. Freedom is playing against the camera."<sup>(19)</sup> He singles out the experimental photographers that could lead to this new philosophy of photography in order to rid themselves of the shackles that have been

used to contain the medium from expanding.

“They (\*) are conscious that *image, apparatus, program and information* are the basic problems that they have to come to terms with. They are in fact consciously attempting to create unpredictable information, i.e. to release themselves from the camera, and to place within the image something that is not in its program.”(20)

Flusser’s elaborations concisely reflect my interest in the discourse of photography. My *X-Ray* series creates “unpredictable information” outside the traditional means of capturing light. But does it ultimately matter if it is categorized as photography, or painting, or drawing or even performance? Should it be just called *expanded photography* or is it some sort of new medium that hasn’t been named yet? The one thing I can say with conviction is that I am committed to exploring new avenues of expression, with light as my guiding force and constant companion.

(\*) Vilém Flusser refers to the experimental photographers.



## Chapter II

### The Proliferation of Imagery and its Danger

With the proliferation of the internet and digital cameras (often incorporated into cell phones), we are all inundated by a flood of images. News is instantaneous, often unedited and raw. With the rise of social media, the flow is constant, uncontrollable, relentless, uncensored. The deluge of imagery ranges from the mundane covering of social events to the seriousness of life and death situations. Photography has become the most democratic of all media and has provided us with some incredible imagery of news events (still-photo as well as video). The new documentary photographer of wars and other newsworthy events is no longer a James Nachtwey or Tyler Hicks or others like them. Although these professionals still provide us with exceptional pictures, the anonymous person with the camera-phone has become the main source of photographic material from conflict zones. Few of these photographers would be considered professional or even have any ambition beyond capturing a moment in their lives. They have become the new face of the documentarian in a way unimaginable just a little while ago. As the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown us, conflicts become choreographed and sanitized events, where the professional photographer is embedded with the troops, and operatives of the military and politics tightly control the flow of images. However, with the ascent of the digital age, the stream of information is becoming harder and harder to contain, to the exasperation and fear of many leaders.

The civil resistance of the Arab Spring brought down despotic rulers in ways unthinkable just a few years ago. By no small means, the use of social media played a crucial role in organizing, communicating and raising awareness of the conflicts, and disseminating images past the censorship and the attempts by authorities to suppress their message. Ironically, in an age when the legitimacy of any image can and should be questioned due to the digital tools available to manipulate photos, the authenticity of these often grainy and low quality snapshots are rarely questioned. These “photographers” are more concerned with spreading their message than wasting their time enhancing the quality of their images. The pictorial and technical quality is often low and the photos are made available almost immediately or within the next news cycle.



Figure 18: Unknown, an image taken from a mobile phone camera shows the arrest of Colonel Gaddafi in Sirte, Lybia, shortly before he was executed, 2011

That almost obsessive need to share every aspect of our lives can, however, have serious consequences for the participants and endanger the lives of others. There are

countless examples of sheer stupidity and recklessness in posting photographs and videos for mass viewership. Just in March of this year (2013), we were able to follow the trial of two high school football stars from the Midwestern town of Steubenville, Ohio, who incriminated themselves by posting a video and photos online of raping an unconscious girl and bragging about it. Besides being revolted by the cruelty and indifference of these adolescents, we must question whether society has become anesthetized by and apathetic to the horror depicted on a daily basis on TV and in the social media. Are we becoming immune to shock or at least being desensitized over time? Do people want to look at horror or even get pleasure out of it? Most probably do not, but there is no question of a certain fascination with the depiction of crime, pain and horror, bordering on voyeurism. Susan Sontag called for an “ecology of images” in her book *On Photography* (1977). She revisits this thought in *Recording the Pain of Others* (2004) and asks if it is even possible “that images of carnage be cut back to, say, once a week?”(21) Her obvious conclusion is the fact that in this day and age, “there isn’t going to be an ecology of images. No Committee of Guardians is going to ration horror, to keep fresh its ability to shock. And the horrors themselves are not going to abate.”(22) Therefore, how are we supposed to deal with this type of horror on a daily base? Ignore it? Impossible. “No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia.”(23) But what is that age threshold? For her, she divides her “life into two parts, before I saw those photographs [The images of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau - A.R.] and after.”(24) This brought to my mind memories of a similar experience. At the age of 9 or 10, just after my family got its

first television, the Swiss broadcasting station aired the series *Switzerland and World War II*; I witnessed vintage footage of close-range executions and hangings of people whose only crime was their incompatibility with the Nazi Regime based on race, ethnicity, culture, religion and political viewpoints. These images on TV had a devastating effect on my sense of justice and the human race. It challenged my world view of morality, forgiveness, and kindness that was taught to me by my parents. Up to this point, my life was quite sheltered and was not exposed to any depiction of crime and cruelty. There is a certain irony in that, as I spent the first 18 years of my life on a prison compound where my father was the warden and where daily interactions with convicts were common. However, compassion and morality were on display before I could really comprehend the extent of it. My father was a true believer in rehabilitation and the need to treat each man with respect and dignity, regardless of his crimes. These visual and real life experiences nurtured a sense of empathy in me for the human condition that has been a guiding force in my life as well as my work.



Figure 19: Photographer, date and place unknown, execution by Nazi officers in WW II

## Empathy

Our incapacity to deal with distant events of horror may leave us helpless and indifferent. As "compassion is an unstable emotion, it needs to be translated into action, or it withers."<sup>(25)</sup> To empathize and sustain the horror in our consciousness is a crucial act in insuring that these memories stay alive. How we maintain these public repositories is personal as well as cultural. At the beginning of April 2013, Berlin destroyed another section of the Berlin Wall (\*), a monument to a dark past that tore a wedge between a nation, families and friends. Confronting the past is essential, and how better to remember than by witnessing the ultimate iconic artifact that came to symbolize the political and humanitarian divide of the cold war. Do the changed landscape and the void created by the demolition of this monument affect our memories? Does it become a further eradication of a recollection of a horrible past, a blatant disregard of history and its memory, or is it a way of healing and confronting the future? It is telling how the German nation is still trying to come to terms with the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and often resorts to repressing the past instead of facing it. But as Sontag says, "the memory of war, like all memory, is mostly local."<sup>(26)</sup> As outsiders, how are we supposed to judge and react if we did not experience the pain and suffering firsthand. In our oversaturated world of instant news and imagery, how

(\*): In the winter of 1986/87, three years before it came down, I photographed the Berlin Wall extensively in a photo essay. Growing up in a penitentiary, I was well aware of how walls and incarceration act on our psyche. I was fascinated and repulsed at the same time by what lengths the political machinery went to separate, enclose and protect a misguided, repressive ideology.

can we, even with the best of intentions, have empathy for all the conflicts that deserve our attention? Do we need to censor ourselves to some extent to keep our sanity? Does editing some memories become ultimately a survival instinct? One thing is clear: if we lose our sense of empathy, we lose our humanity.



Figure 20: Andreas Rentsch, Berlin Wall, 1987, gelatin silver print

## Personal History

As we all deal with images of horror in different ways, expression of sympathy is very personal. I want to share some memories from my childhood that are directly tied to the interest in justice and morality that informs my work. Growing up in a penitentiary, I was confronted early on with existential and humanistic issues. It was not uncommon for inmates to be put in positions of trust that were incompatible with their transgressions. I remember P., a sexual predator, who acted as a night guard, or T. who was an alcoholic and worked every day at our home that housed the wine cellar of the penitentiary. By believing in the good of mankind and having faith in the ability of a person to turn his/her life around, my father instilled in many of the incarcerated a belief and confidence in self worth. We were especially fond of T. who cut our hair, played with us and literally became part of the family. After he completed his sentence, he was invited once a year to spend a week of vacation at our house, and every time, we were overjoyed to see him. Often the boundaries of private and public life were blurred. As a fanatic soccer player in my early teens, I often sneaked out of the house to play in the Thursday evening practices and Sunday regular games between teams comprised of inmates. My daily encounters with many prisoners were just an unavoidable fact of life, to a point that their crimes didn't matter in how we interacted with them. We were fully integrated into the routine of the prison life. Our family often ate the same meals as the inmates. It wasn't unusual to have a detainee at our dinner table in order for him to get a short reprieve from incarceration. I can clearly remember one inmate with a large

bandage around his wrist way before I understood what the word suicide attempt meant. Although I felt at the time that my childhood was unremarkable and normal, I've come to realize that my conservative and strict father was quite progressive, in many respects almost naïve and reckless in the ways we were exposed to this environment. I often wandered around and played by myself within the parameters of the prison that looked more like a village with a church, many buildings and without security fences. Being a father now myself of two pre-adolescent boys, I've come to recognize that the trust he put in us five children, as well as the faith he afforded the prisoners to interact with us, was nothing short of astonishing. Only years later, after my father retired, did I learn that the prisoner who tended our garden had killed his son.



Figure 21: Photo taken by my father, Max Rentsch, of me (in the carriage on the right) and my three brothers with the inmate T. at our house, 1963



## Abu Ghraib

Although many of these memories were embedded in my consciousness, they clearly resurfaced in vivid details after seeing the brutal pictures of the abuse and humiliation of the Iraqi inmates at the hands of American soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison. As the Americans were supposed to be the good guys who liberated Iraq from the tyrant Saddam Hussein, these servicemen became indistinguishable from any other tormenters that are often present in these obscure and secret prison environments. While it may be unfair to compare these two dissimilar situations and settings, the horrifying images nonetheless triggered my memories of growing up in a prison and relating with people that society viewed solely as criminals. As everybody else, I was shocked by the inhumane, bestial treatment at Abu Ghraib that defied any notion of basic human values. What was even more disturbing was the fact that there was real enjoyment in the faces of the mistreating soldiers, similar to the pictures of the lynching of black people in the American South, where white people posed with a smile on their face underneath their trophy (\*). These images were shared and traded as souvenirs, not unlike the Abu Ghraib images that soldiers posted and shared with their comrades. Through this public display, it became clear that the racist white people as well as the American soldiers of Abu Ghraib felt perfectly justified in their actions, or as Rush Limbaugh said on his radio show referring to these same soldiers, trivializing the

(\*) Many of these photographs from the collection of James Allen and John Littlefield were published in the book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*.

occurrence: “You know, these people are being fired at every day. I’m talking about people having a good time. You ever heard of emotional release?”(27)



Figure 22: Unknown, Abu Ghraib, 2004



Figure 23: Unknown, North Carolina, 1916

Feeling empowered by the control they exercised, the guards dishonored and degraded the defenseless prisoners, robbing them of any remaining dignity and human pride. Susan Sontag acutely observed in her book *On Photography*, the power the camera can exercise. Although this quote was written 27 years prior to Abu Ghraib, the writing concisely reflects on the imagery from the Iraqi prison environment.

“The camera is a kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility toward the people photographed.”(28)

Perturbed, and on a certain level personally affected by these images, I felt compelled

to start my series *Entangled with Justice*, which began a long exploration of the connection of fate, geography and politics in the direction of justice. Since my arrival in the USA in 1989, I have been particularly interested in how justice is administered here in the “land of freedom”. I have been especially troubled by cases of individuals who were wrongly accused and convicted, their freedom denied for years, trapped in a system without the possibility of a meaningful defense. And it confirmed my suspicion that many outside factors such as race, political environment and the need to convict in order to appease the public often trump the truth and how justice is applied.



Figure 24: Unknown, Abu Ghraib, 2004



Figure 25: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled* from the series *Entangled with Justice*, 2008, unique Polaroid negative, 4 ½ x 3 ½ “

Earlier, I mentioned witnessing the executions of innocent people in a documentary on World War II. These images of killings found an all too stark reminder in a 2010 article in *The New York Times* describing the public stoning to death of an Afghani couple by

their own community, including relatives. Their crime was that they were in love without the blessing of their parents. Subsequently an online video surfaced depicting this unspeakable cruelty in the name of a higher divine power. It reaffirmed mankind's impotence in the face of evil forces and how destiny is often predetermined by powers outside of society's and the individual's control. This led me to create my latest series, *X-Ray*, which was part of the 2013 MFA Thesis Show. In this series, process becomes a crucial element, involving chance as an integral part of my art practice. As in life, where fate is unpredictable, these images reveal their final appearances long after my mark-making is complete and only after the film is finally treated for permanence and has dried.



Figure 26: Unknown, public stoning in Afghanistan, 2010



Figure 27: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled #2* from the series *X-Ray*, 2012, hand applied photo chemicals on X-ray film, 80x56"



Figure 28: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled #5* from the series *X-Ray*, 2012, hand applied photo chemicals on X-ray film, 80x98"



Figure 29: Installation view, Thesis exhibition at Stony Brook University, 2013



Figure 30: Andreas Rentsch, *Untitled #1* from the series *X-Ray*, 2012, hand applied photo chemicals on X-ray film, 80x56"

## Summary

The democratic proliferation of photography, and its simultaneous expansion through the incorporation of other mediums, has added a rich vocabulary to the visual arts that transcends categorical borders. Photographs have become a wide-ranging language of communication, of representation, of art.

As Susan Sontag mentioned that “all memory is mostly local”(29), my work is deeply driven by personal memories of growing up on a prison compound and coming to terms with images of horror in the news. The unpredictability of life is reflected in my approach to photography.

Imagery depicts a wide range of human emotions and speaks in a visual language to all generations. Photographs create meaning and can have a transformative aspect in their historical, political and social context. They can alter the discourse of major events.(\*). As the flow of imagery in our world has grown exponentially in recent years, the danger of exhaustion and a subsequent defense mechanism that shields us from participating in the suffering of others becomes real. As an “ecology of images” is unrealistic, we must insure that there will never be an ecology of empathy. It is what makes us human. Photography, or for that matter all art, is a way to express and keep the memories alive.

(\*): For example the image by Eddie Adam that captured the point blank execution of a suspected Vietcong prisoner on the street, and Nick Ut’s photo of a naked Vietnamese girl attempting to escape an American napalm strike in her village.

## ENDNOTES

1. Diarmuid Costello, "After Medium Specificity chez Fried: Jeff Wall as a Painter; Gerhard Richter as a Photographer", *James Elkins, Photography Theory*, Routledge, 2007, p. 75-89.
2. Carrie Lambert, "Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer's 'Trio A'", *October*, Vol. 89 (Summer 1999), p.94.
3. Andrew V. Uroskie, "Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Situating Expanded Cinema in Postwar Art, Rhetorics of Expansion", p. 26.
4. Costello, *op. cit.*, p. 75-89.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
8. Jeff Wall, "Frames of Reference", *Artforum*, September 2003, p. 190.
9. Gerhard Richter, Interview with Rolf Shön, "The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993, London: Thames & Hudson", 1994, p.73.
10. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Doubleday, 1977, p. 154.
11. Costello, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
12. Wolfgang Tillmans, Interview with Bob Nickas for online *Interview Magazine*, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/wolfgang-tillmans>, September 12, 2011
13. Susan Sontag, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 92.



15. George Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field", *October 114*, Fall 2005, p.123.
16. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the expanded Field", 1979, in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985, p. 284.
17. Baker, *op.cit.*, p.136.
18. Sontag, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
19. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Reaktion Books, 1983, p.80.
20. *Ibid.*, p.81.
21. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador, 2003, p. 108.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
24. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Doubleday, 1977, p. 20.
25. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador, 2003, p. 101.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
27. Rush Limbaugh on *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, transcript on <http://www.rushlimbaugh.com>, May 4, 2004.
28. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Doubleday, 1977, p. 41.
29. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador, 2003, p. 35.

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