

## "ABSENCE"

This work was initially an attempt to make an image of something that wasn't there, to evoke a feeling of absence. Appropriately, the series also came to revolve around death, or deaths more precisely. Though one can certainly find more, three distinct kinds of death occur in and around each of these images. There is the initial death of the moment of the photograph, the literal arrestment and isolation of life from its normal fluidity in time. There is the death recorded in the original image (in all but the Arbus and the WWII Capa which is an image of mourning, the photo's depicted dead or dying bodies). And there is the death/ absence/alteration of that image and the possible effects of this on memory and (therefore?) history. There is also, of course, the death of the author, originality, and uniqueness, much discussed around the work of Sherry Levine, further complicated by the use of digital technology here, though rendered somewhat pointless by the commercial tug of the "limited edition". And there is the possibility of the death of documentary "truth," also a recent popular target for postmodern visual/textual artists.

To alter a historical photograph is not entirely and simply to suggest that "this history is untrue," though in some of these images that may be the case, but it is also to ponder that very question; "does altering this photograph alter history, is this possible, and how might this occur?" On what can/do we depend for our "proof" of history. Since documentary photography has shown itself to be utterly dependant on the caption for its meaning, many viewers may now be more careful about scrutinizing the text. But despite claims that "no one actually believes a photograph anymore," most viewers do not approach images with a basic skepticism in mind as to the veracity of the existence of what they are seeing. In our new digital world an equally powerful scrutiny must be brought to bear on the image itself, as well as the text that accompanies it.

The choice of war photography for this project was equally crucial for several reasons beyond death. No where else in the history of photography can one literally expect to be misled. These photo's were almost always used in some sort of propagandistic way that was less concerned with the "truth" than with the effects of the image on the troops and the public. For these reasons, captions, as well as censorship had a great impact on what we actually ended up seeing and believing. War is also the quintessential experience of large numbers of people seeing the same exact events and issues in utterly oppositional terms, and not just for the afore-mentioned reasons. Civil wars are an excellent example of this occurring even among people who are supposedly "the same." And war and war photography is also a perfect example of (mostly) men glamorizing and heroicizing an exclusively male activity that we'd all probably be a lot better off without. The inclusion of women war correspondents was made partly for this reason, and to recognize their contributions. It's also interesting to note that they are the ones who made the most compelling images of the concentration camps, perhaps having something to do with (anti-?)heroicism, or compassion, though that can devolve into an essentialist argument that's not being made here.

The great popularity of war photography (and war) in our culture (and our economy) is a strange and fascinating phenomenon and one in need of further examination. By altering, isolating, and de-heroicizing these images, their dependency upon the tension of the conflict is broken and they become dull, boring, indeed--lifeless. They display this void as banality, which is appropriate in two ways; death is in fact, utterly banal--it happens to thousands of people everywhere in the world all the time with hardly a notice--it is a fact of life, perhaps its defining quality; and from a photographic point of view, even the most horrific deaths cannot really be felt--the photographs turn us into zombie spectators, ever in wait for a more gruesome photograph, fueling an insatiable scopic desire for images of death, yet leaving us unfulfilled by this continual stream. These images also work against the tendency of the singular image to become an icon representing "all" of a particular war, period, or movement. They throw that moment and that mode of historicizing into turmoil and doubt, problematizing the easy memory. These images prey on the memory, demanding of it a vigilance that inevitably produces confusion; is the punctum in the photograph, or in your mind?

IMAGES (16 x 20 inches, silver gelatin prints from digitally generated negatives, 1993-94)

1. "Buchenwald; 1945" 1994

(original by Margaret Bourke-White)

After the Allies liberated the concentration camp, General Patton Forced the people of Weimar, Germany to walk through and look at the piles of dead bodies in front of the international press corps.

2. "Wounded Dying Infant Found by American Soldier in Saipan Mountains; 1944" 1994

(original by W. Eugene Smith)

The composition and the original caption in Life Magazine suggest a life being saved, "only living person among hundreds of corpses in one cave was this fly covered baby who almost smothered before soldiers found him, rushed him to hospital," Life, 8/28/44. Smith's notes state, "A baby was found with it's head under a rock. It's head was lopsided and it's eyes were masses of puss. Unfortunately, it was alive. We hoped it would die."

3. "Here lie three Americans... Buna Beach, New Guinea; 1943" 1994

(original by George Strock)

This was the first WWII photo showing dead Americans allowed to be published by military censors, 7 months after the initial story appeared in Life. Even after this strict limitations on images were still in force. Photographs were not allowed to show bodies identifiable by face or even by unit; they had to remain completely anonymous.

4. "General Loan Executes Unidentified Viet Cong Suspect, Saigon; 1968" 1993

(original by Eddie Adams)

Adams later wished he could retract this image because it "unjustly" ruined Loan's reputation in the United States, where he now runs a Vietnamese restaurant in Virginia. The never identified victim was suspected of killing the family of another soldier close to Loan.

5. "Child with toy hand-grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C.; 1962" 1994

(original by Diane Arbus)

It is rumored that Arbus followed the boy around Central Park all day, harassing him until she took this photo.

6. "Naples; 1943" 1994

(original by Robert Capa)

The woman in the center holds a photograph next to her cheek of a boy in a uniform.

7. "Sharpshooter's Last Sleep, Gettysburg; 1863" 1993

(original by Alexander Gardner)

The photographers moved the body to this spot for the purpose of the photograph.

8. "Dead German Guard in Canal; 1945" 1994

(original by Lee Miller)

I was told that when Miller came upon this badly beaten concentration camp guard he was still alive. She then kicked him in the water and took the photograph.

9. "Death of Loyalist Soldier, Spain; 1936" 1993

(original by Robert Capa)

A story surrounding this image is that Capa asked the soldier to pose for a photograph, and was shot by a sniper while posing.