

Sensing the Present: Economies of Fear & The Limits of the Visible

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In her well-known book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag notes that torture is “a canonical subject in art...often represented in painting as a spectacle, as something being watched (or ignored) by other people” (42). Critiquing such representations, Sontag argues that the “mingling of inattentive with attentive onlookers” underscores the implication that the violence cannot be stopped. Often this passage has returned to me in the months and years following the performance I did in New York in June of 2008, the video record of which continues to circulate under the title *Stalk*. Begun after the leak of the U.S. Department of Defense document entitled “Secret ORCON: Interrogation Log Detainee 063,” and conceived as a response to and silent protest of the extra-judicial, indefinite, and ongoing torture of some 260 men and boys at the U.S. Government’s Guantanamo Bay Detention Center, the initial two-hour performance consisted of a chained and hooded figure dressed in an iconic bright orange jumper shuffling through some 40-odd Manhattan blocks at midday. A friend intermittently filmed that live performance with a handheld camera, and the footage was later edited into a 22-minute video.¹ One version of this video is accessible online, and it

¹ The cameraperson was the filmmaker Kai Beverly Whittemore; with her permission, I edited her original footage later myself.

includes a vocal overlay of poetry and text appropriated directly from the interrogation logs and other sources, as well as a music score by the electronic musician Rizzia consisting only of sounds taken from an MRI machine. In addition to circulating as an online video, however, the piece is also occasionally performed live. In the live version, the video is projected onto a wall, and I read (and sing) to the video images over the music soundtrack. In this secondary performance, I am thus being watched (by the audience) watching myself (dressed and thus unrecognizable in the orange suit and hood) being watched (by the passersby on the street). Needless to say, the addition of these formal and structural layers remain important for any full analysis or assessment of *Stalk*, especially in terms of the way the different instances of performance complicate and undermine representational agency, and thus render difficult, I think, any easy identification with either the vulnerabilities or violences *Stalk* creates and reveals.²

Partially this concern with agency (or lack of it), witnessing, and violence emerged as an attempt at grappling with feminist performance art practices from the 1970s that I had also then been thinking about. The performances from that earlier era captivated me because they often involved a staging of vulnerability that elicited open displays of misogynist violence that were then documented in some

² I have come to think of this aspect of *Stalk* as a productive disturbance. In the initial performance, the hooded detainee cannot look at the passersby; the passersby do or do not look at the detainee. Likewise, in documenting the event, the camera does or does not look at the passersby looking or not at the detainee. In the secondary performance, the poet does or does not look at the camera looking or not at the passersby looking or not at the detainee. Finally, if this thesis be considered a further instantiation of performance, the critic looks (or not) at the poet looking at the camera looking at the passersby not looking at the detainee, and so on. The looking (or not) in each instance implies complex relations of power and complicity.

fashion and presented back to that same public. For example, in Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964-65), audience members were invited to cut pieces of clothing off of Ono who sat impassively on stage even as the catcalls began to fly and the cutting got more aggressive. In *Rhythm 0* (1974), Marina Abramovic encouraged audience members to act upon her in any way they wished using any of the various objects she had provided on a table in the gallery (which included a range of objects from feathers and roses to gun, bullets and knife). The result was increasingly aggressive, even life-threatening, actions performed on Abramovic by visitors to the gallery. Both of these pieces, to my mind, inadvertently suggest the tricky ways in which complicity entwines with victimhood, and thus they were entirely relevant to the discourse around "terrorism" and responsibility in the post-September 11 climate in New York and the U.S. at large.

Of course, the subject of the public discourse around victimhood in 2008 did not include the men being tortured at Guantanamo, who were for all public purposes made invisible and whom people seemed quietly willing to assume deserved it, even though most of the several hundred men held at Guantanamo by 2008 had been officially cleared of any link to Al-Qaeda.³ No, the subject of victimization was something called "we," the first world victims of terror. That "we" constructed a fantasy unity that, among other things, obscured and erased the

³ The fact that Detainee 063 is likely Mohammed Al-Qahtani, the missing 20th hijacker, continues to obscure public discussion of the quite overt torture that the log records. The vast majority of detainees tortured at Guantanamo are innocent by the Pentagon's own admission, but the U.S. Government will neither try nor release them because, so the reasoning goes, now that they have been tortured they are more likely to be willing to participate in violent acts against the United States. This has led to what some consider to be a dangerous constitutional crisis (Falkoff).

differences between victims of the September 11 attacks, the queer passengers on flight 93, for example, or the Muslim workers at the World Trade Center. I became interested in how this public assertion of collective vulnerability founded both a community of witnesses (to use Sara Ahmed's term) *and* seemed to provide the ballast for so many new acts of organized violence. My expectation that the initial live performance of *Stalk* would be met with displays of barely cloaked violence, similar to that which the earlier feminist performances had elicited, later proved to be unfounded (the reason for this was likely a greater association of danger with the potential target, as well as the fact that the performance did not occur in the sanctioned space of the stage or gallery). Nonetheless, the expectation of violence led me to engage in extensive affective preparation for the performance. It included a lot of journaling and thinking about historical "ghosting", contemplating the gender politics of the performative ingestion of such ghosts and about what it meant to publicly perform a negation of the self, and related to this, an exploration of how affective states arise from bodily postures, as well as elicit them. These potentially fructue avenues of investigation into affect that the efforts at preparation suggest should be looked at more closely elsewhere. Here, it is primarily the *visual record* of that initial performance, replete with the mingling of (in)attentions that worried Sontag, that I am interested in examining here. In doing so, I hope to explore, both as material evidence and social text, what the presence of the orange figure both draws into focus and disturbs.

Vision, Power, Image, Blindness

In her essay “Torture and the Ethics of Photography” (2007), Judith Butler writes that although we might be tempted to “image the state as dramaturge, and so secure our understanding of this operation of state power through an available figure...it is essential to the continuing operation of this power not to be seen” (953). It is therefore “precisely a nonfigurable operation of power that works to delimit the domain of representability itself” (ibid.). This mode of power is exemplified by the Bush administration’s refusal to release photos of soldiers’ coffins in the airplane hull, and in the Obama administration’s refusal to release footage of drone strikes in Afghanistan that slaughter entire small villages (although, technologically speaking, the footage of such strikes is more available than ever before). Likewise, though the photos taken by soldier-participants in the torture sessions at Abu Ghraib were already circulating by 2004, and thus provided a back-drop for the public imagination of conditions at Guantanamo (indeed the same policy was in force in both locations under the command of Major General Geoffrey Miller), in actuality very few images of the camps at Guantanamo Bay existed in the public domain. This is so because “the state operates on the field of perception and, more generally, the field of representability, in order to control affect, and in anticipation of the way that affect informs and galvanizes political opposition to the war” (Butler 953). Several questions arise in this controlled field: How can one respond to what one cannot even see? How can political opposition articulate itself against what may be sensed but for which no image exists? And in the absence of a widespread public groundswell of anger, disgust, or any number of negative emotions that have historically served to motivate people on a mass scale, what exactly does a local

protest communicate and to whom? How can one make the invisibility of these conditions visible? Finally, not unrelated, if the state, with the suspension of habeas corpus, is no longer required to “show us the body” of people being held under its jurisdiction, how indeed can we ever really know whose body is languishing under the orange suit?

With this context in mind, I initially thought of the performance of *Stalk* as a reinsertion of what belonged to but had been ghosted from everyday life. This idea had grown out of Giorgio Agamben’s notion, developed in *Homo Sacer* (1995) and *State of Exception* (2005), that the declaration of a state of emergency has historically been used to justify the suspension of civil liberties, which it then designates as an “exception” to normal rule. A contemporary example is the way the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon led to the passing of the Patriot Act, which, among other things, expelled the detainees held at Guantanamo from rights guaranteed under the Geneva Convention. Agamben argues that this recurring “exception” is at base the hidden “norm” of free democracies (where human rights are accorded to some, not to all). If this was always the case to begin with, it was, in the years following September 11, openly so: the boundary around “our” freedom seemed to require that some may not be free. In a sense, then, the detainee as figured in Manhattan is a placing of the constitutive outside of U.S. “freedoms” back in the heart of the cycles of work, consumption and leisure to

which it is tied.⁴ Indeed, part of the feeling of uncanniness the footage continues to elicit seems to be related to the quite obvious juxtaposition of the “detainee” with the mundane everyday, with the sheer glut of products, sale signs, lunchers, daytime traffic, gorgeous sun, sumptuous wind. Yet what began to press upon me as I watched the video again and again over a period of months was that the reinsertion of this ghost *did not* necessarily make it *visible*. For what is most striking of all about the footage is how few people even so much as glance at the figure in their midst.

Kaia Sand, in a talk given in San Francisco for the Nonsite Collective in 2009, sees this lack of response as a “performance of urbanity,” and it’s true this is an apt description in some instances (*Poem/NonPoem*). However, most often, it is *not* that people glance at the figure only to look away with boredom, amusement or even irritation, though this does happen. Rather it’s mostly as if people are staring *right through* that garish orange body as if it were diaphanous, not even there. Their faces *literally* don’t register the slightest sign that they have noticed anything at all out of the ordinary. Perhaps this means that people so quickly recognize the figure in their peripheral vision that they discipline their eyes in advance not to look at all. But is it only urbanity that would be at stake if one were to stop and stare? People clearly feel at ease in staring at the Naked Cowboy, posing with him or chatting him up, though admittedly his demeanor makes him more approachable than the hooded

⁴ I first laid out this argument in “Notes Toward a Social Poiesis” (2008), which is included in the Positions Colloquium catalogue published by the Kootenay School of Writing. The conference was organized by KSW and held in Vancouver, B.C. during the summer of that year.

“it.”⁵ Yet still, in the case of the prisoner/detainee, is the foreclosure of recognition enabled by peripheral vision in fact a *kind* of looking in which one sees (but only peripherally) in order that no thing may return one’s look?

Lacan writes of the object that stares back, that returns our gaze, as that which “reflects our nothing-ness [in] the figure of the death’s head” (Feluga). In *The Ambassadors*, a painting by Hans Holbein that Lacan discusses, the barely noticeable blot at the bottom edge of the painting is clearly revealed to be a skull when looked at from the side angle. Slowly it dawns on the viewer that the skull has been staring back, without the viewer’s awareness, and that its blank surveillance might just as easily never have been noticed (ibid.). This is its uncanny power and its horror. Similarly, it is the seeming invisibility of the detainee (frightening figure, dehumanized prisoner, whose face and name have been blotted out) that is simply too horrifying to look at precisely because the look it would return establishes that which one desires most to avoid in the demanding cycles of first-world busy-ness: that one is expendable, vulnerable, and dependant on a system that cares little for individuals and too much for (only some) populations. Further, that the “other populations,” the ones off-shore that are deemed expendable, those whom our schedules demand we not take *too* much time to fret over, might have been able to see us, in this relation, before and thus after this moment, is equally disturbing. To look directly at this unrecognizable other would mean to see oneself through it, as an individual, in relation to it. That the silent, loping figure offers no obvious outlet

⁵ I purposely decided to include footage of the Naked Cowboy in the video *Stalk* in order to preserve this reflexive, if somewhat darkly humorous, comparison. Perhaps my act is little more than the abject underside of the Naked Cowboy’s performance.

for “response,” no plea to action, no pamphlet to read, only heightens the existential crisis of the encounter—you are not even asked to donate money, to sign a petition, to vote, or to join in a display of shouting. Thus the anxiety of the self in relation cannot be assuaged in the comfort of responding through presupplied channels. It requires that one think about what a response might be, requires even that one consider that a response might not be possible within the confines of a lunch break, a shopping trip, or even a week’s vacation. In short, it might threaten to ruin the illusion that “free” time exists at all; it might threaten to ruin the day.

Perhaps the maintenance of discomfort the piece manages to create is valuable precisely for the way it seems to invite meditation on the simultaneous necessity and difficulty of individual response-ability. Lauren Berlant has discussed the “refusal to perform affective security” as a potential goal of political action (Najafi, Serlin and Berlant). Deftly cleaving the notion of refusal from a hyperbolically confrontational demeanor, she points out that an affectively secure situation often simply looks like a safe expression of outrage (behind opposing barricades guarded by police), for example. Conversely, a truly unscripted response would mean that people *don’t know* what to do in a given situation since they have no existing models for it. The act might be affectively *confusing*, not easily locatable in the terms of familiar disobedient scenarios, and thus such situations would require one to continue to think about an event’s meaning long after encountering it. Returning to Butler’s point above, we might say that providing the means for

disobedient vision (which is necessary before disobedient action can take place) requires more than just helping people to see what is already there; it requires that one try to see, and to show others, the very *limits* of what is visible. Perhaps one way of thinking about the filmic document of *Stalk*, then, is that the camera provides a means of seeing the enforced frame, and thus acts as a kind of witness to the invisible. Perhaps some of those passersby will later see themselves, in memory, *not* looking at that figure which nonetheless returns to stare back at them in unexpected moments through the internet news. And then again, how the video itself circulates becomes the new performance, with a new crowd of (virtual) passersby.

In her essay “Trauma Time: A Still Life” (2005), Kathleen Stewart examines what she calls “the collective dream world” of everyday life in the United States, a place where “the here and now drifts between the future making of awakened expectations and the dragging dread of lurking threats and half-remembered horrors” (322-23). The present, in “trauma time,” is simultaneously experienced as insistent and inaccessible: we count things, buy things, sell things compulsively as a form of avoidance, then feel panic at the alienation we feel from our lives. Thus trauma is both symptom and motor of manic consumerism, and both feed the continuing aggressive commodification of everything under neoliberal capitalism. Impossible dreams of “personal, exceptional safety” only end up reinforcing the “risk society” that bred them in the very effort to insure against it (323). In this way, we can link the peculiarity of the affective numbness endemic to the state of trauma, neither fully conscious nor fully unconscious, directly to the capacity of the

“everyday” to cover it up, to go on *as if* the trauma isn’t there. But this *as if* is also trauma’s symptom, and a clue that we are in its grips.

This led me to begin thinking about the orange figure as a sort of migrating void, like a wandering pupil, a “nothing” that is simultaneously an aperture of sight. In much the same way that pupils dilate when someone experiences fear, or contract with feelings of intense sadness, perhaps this frightening and deeply saddening blemish on the screen of an otherwise beautiful day could become a musculature of vision. Its absent presence asks how we might begin to sense the historical present, and as answer, the abject, slightly inhuman body (both as bright as a target and acting as a musculature of vision) draws into focus precisely the underside of the otherwise familiar everyday public space.⁶ In his discussion of trauma and bodily affect, Brian Massumi describes the effect of trauma on the body spatially as being like “eyes reabsorbed...through a black hole in the geometry of empirical space and a gash in bodily form” (qtd. in Clough 154). Perhaps this orange figure could be the gash in the collective bodily form that we *look through* to see the contours of past histories of trauma that continue to shape this pseudo-rational national space.⁷ It lopes beneath the aggressive “FOREVER 21” sign, and as it does so

⁶ Berlant discusses the sensing of the historical present in her interview with Najafi and Serlin (2008) and alludes to the use of silent protest to do this in “Affect, Noise, Silence, Protest: Ambient Citizenship” (2009).

⁷ As if to attest to the ideological character of this space, according to my count, during 22 minutes of footage, 17 flags appear. Ten of them are American. Of the remaining seven, two are British, two are Italian, two are Greek, and one is French. I view this as an instance of what Žižek calls “the materialization of ideology” (1997), and indicative of the phenomenon Billig termed “banal nationalism” (1995). What seems to be “flagged” is American dominance with a little bit of Europe thrown in for taste (“other” places are irrelevant).

it slips between three struggling aging bodies that lean painfully on their canes as they limp towards impending social obsolescence. A faceless white dummy lodged awkwardly amidst a thicket of wild bamboo with a plastic monkey is the not-so-cute fetish remnant of a colonial past out of which the loping orange figure begins its contemporary jaunt. On an HSBC Bank window, a camel sticks its head into the back of an innocent-looking little white car (and one finds oneself guffawing, “Can it be? By the gas tank?”), while to the left appear the words “Banking That’s Never Lost in Translation.” All these are the not-so-hidden materializations of the social imaginary made concrete (with its mix of terror and happy-go-lucky innocence).

Watching this orange figure floating abjectly among such signs of everyday “peacefulness” in big-city life, I also can’t help thinking of the way that the photos taken of the torture sessions at Abu Ghraib were essentially part of a private record of everyday life (Butler, “Torture” 960). Confiscated from a camera in which many other types of photos existed, the famed shots of dog-chained men, hooded figures attached to wires, and stacks of bruised and naked men were situated in the midst of casual snap-shots of “everyday life” in Baghdad. There are photos of the local bazaar, friends smiling over plates of food, sunset views of streets in the neighborhood, a consensual love-making session, and these are punctuated with the by-now familiar shots of happy, “thumbs-up” brutality, sexual humiliation, and even murder. Yet it is the *series* of photos, with the mundane photos included, that is the historical evidence we should be discussing as regards torture; they show us among other things how the soldiers wanted to see themselves, and that torture coexists with, arises out of, and perhaps even enables the peace of everyday-ness. This

means more than just a simple repetition of the adage about the banality of evil, however, for the questions such evidence begs are profound: if we accept that the experience of trauma is “lodged” in the body, and “reprocessed” in a bodily fashion, resulting in a compulsion to repeat, may we ever have the courage to ask what traumas were being re-enacted at Abu Ghraib (though of course, and this no small matter, made possible by a structure)? What of the details we hear little about, like the way that Charles Graner drove around in Iraq in a truck with the words “white trash god” painted on its side? (McClintock). Or the history of complaints filed against Graner when he was a prison guard in a Pennsylvania prison in which 70% of the inmates were African American (many of which involved racist language, and sexual or physical violence)? (ibid.). How are these pieces of information related to the argument put forward by the United States Government itself that even though the prisoners at Guantanamo had been resolutely cleared of *any* guilt or wrongdoing (and had thus been mistakenly and unjustly imprisoned), they should nonetheless *not* be released because they had been tortured (by that same government) and were thus more likely to commit violence when released? In short, it seems to be openly and officially acknowledged that violence circulates, that the so-called “monsters” and “bad apples” are created, yet there has been no public discussion of the social conditions that went into forming the affectively politicized climate in which Lynndie England, Charles Graner, Meagan Ambuhl and the others played out their violent fantasies. A further question is why the architect of the policies at both Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, Major General Geoffrey Miller, has not also been psychologized in such ways.

We must find ways of asking these *political* questions, resisting the temptation to reduce and contain their explosive implications to the field of individual ethics (more amenable by far to heroism of all kinds). Ethics always absolves those who believe they are ethical, yet that identity as with any other “requires precisely that which it cannot abide” (Butler, *Bodies* 188). In short, the self-designated ethical person requires the person of evil in order to form the idea of him or herself as ethical in the first place. If *Stalk* enacts its own complicity with what it critiques, choosing the abject over the more comfortable stance of benevolent artist-hero, perhaps this might be looked on as an effort to chart the ways in which oppositional political acts might proceed without recourse to political identities whose present agencies are fully dependant on the structures of violence they supposedly abhor.

The Fear of What Sticks

There remains, however, a question of how fear works in *Stalk*, and I do not wish to turn away from it. Sara Ahmed writes of the way that feelings come to *seem* to reside in certain objects, but only “through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation” (11). She argues further that certain objects become “sticky” with affect (let’s say the racialized figure of the terrorist), acquiring specific affective value through an economy of circulation in which metonymy and displacement end up shaping how bodies form impressions on one another. In describing the peculiarity of fear as an “affective politics” that is used in the conservation or preservation of power, Ahmed explains that although fear does not

reside positively in any object, “this lack of residence allows fear to slide across signs and between bodies” and thus “keep[s] open the very grounds of fear” (64, 67). In other words, if the object contained fear, then the object (and thus fear itself) could be contained. Thus, the “displacement between objects works to link those objects together” and distribute fear across fields of threats, keeping it alive, so to speak, as material for power’s perpetually delayed promise of safety. Further, “the sideways movement between objects, which works to stick objects together as signs of threat, is shaped by multiple histories” (ibid).⁸ So according to Ahmed, fear circulates and sticks to different objects, linking them together, and this is part of the social production of affect.

In thinking about stickiness, the stickiness of the detainee as it wanders through Manhattan, the way it seems to pick up more and more associations as it proceeds, and the way in which it seems to warp the everyday spaces it moves through by virtue of its sheer affective density, I begin to wonder whether “what sticks” is as important to understanding the spookiness of the figure as its more overt signing of the situation in Guantanamo. In other words, what sticks to the figure of the detainee besides Guantanamo? What past “histories of production” have contributed to the reactions (even if the reaction be avoidance) that this void body provokes? What other fears/traumatic pasts *haunt* it, imbuing it with uncanny sense that it is both strange and yet familiar? And, even more troubling, through this

⁸ An example of this sideways movement is the way that “terror” and immigration get sutured in public discourse about “the border,” as both an anxiety about permeability and rallying cry for the enforcement of racial nationalism. There is no single object of fear, but a quickening of the slippage back and forth between anti-Mexican and anti-Muslim pronouncements.

stickiness, does the piece merely traffic in the economy of fear? Does it—and I ask this fearfully—“use” the torture at Guantanamo as material for its art effects? Or, does it trace the outlines of fear’s production, revealing the economy of fear without contributing to the accumulation of fear ‘values’? I don’t think it is possible to simplistically answer these questions.

Nevertheless, one thing the presence of the orange hooded figure seems to “stick to” overwhelmingly as it moves among the individual bodies and through the social body they compose is *race*—both as a prime node in the circulation of fear and as its effect. As Ahmed correctly points out, “fear works through and on the bodies of those who are transformed into its subjects, *as well as* its objects” (62; my italics). In thinking of the uneven distribution of fear in the history of racial politics in the United States, it occurs to me that the hood on the figure of the detainee, as with the black hoods of Abu Ghraib, unmistakably resemble reverse mirror images of white Ku Klux Klan hoods and the lynching parties they both provoked and came to symbolize. That one of the prime camps at Guantanamo is called “Delta” is yet another, perhaps inadvertent, echo of this history (though none the less stunning for that fact). That isn’t all—the orange jumpsuit is precisely the same color and type as the uniforms worn by prisoners in the United States, and as is well-known, the number of people incarcerated here is not only the highest in the world, but African Americans account for a disproportionate percentage of that imprisoned population. This points to deeply entrenched forms of structural racism, as certain kinds of crimes are more likely to get sentences than others, access to quality legal

representation is skewed, and appeals are less likely to be granted, as has been well documented.⁹

When the orange figure thus shuffles past a row of African American men in Union Square, dragging its chains behind it on the pavement, it raises the spectre of both the historical legacy of slavery and contemporary mass imprisonment, making it difficult to maintain the distinctness of Guantanamo from this past and present. A young man, one of the few passersby who openly looks at the figure for an extended period of time, bends down to stare at the chains around the figure's ankles, as if trying to see what keeps them locked in place. They symbolize, through a process akin to metonymic displacement, the racialized global inequity of access to resources of all kinds, not least of all including access to space itself. In other words, only some fears get sanctioned as fears worth protecting, and this "restricts some bodies through the movement or expansion of others" (69). Indeed, whose fear is fear's object and whose fear is fear's subject here? The figure seems to ask this of me as I watch the film; it requires that I consider the uneven production and distribution of fear and the ways in which some people's fears are treated as legitimate, requiring protection, while others are not. The figure is a sign of what is typically called "our" fear of terrorism, but it is also a sign of an "other" fear, namely that of the racist sanctioned state violence that acts on behalf of those whose fears it considers legitimate.

⁹ See the Justice Policy Institute's report "The Punishing Decade: Jail and Prison Estimates for the Millennium" (2000).

In addition to this racial subtext that the footage of *Stalk* documents, there is also the sticky orientalist colonial history of Europe's interaction with the Middle East whose "matter" is everywhere encoded in this "New World" city of the present, haunting it like a memory everyone wishes to be forgotten, but that the constant (real or imagined) threat of terrorism seems to continually re-mark. The figure passes under an umbrella on which a desert with an oasis of palms appears; below it is a hand-written sign, "100% SILK," propped up on a piece of cardboard advertising the *pashmina* shawls that are ubiquitous in busy parts of the city. In the video, this clip is spliced and repeated several times so as not to be missed, but surely the history it evokes is not so easily forgotten by the various peoples of the Middle East, with their complicated, particular, and often long involvements with the West. In this regard, it is worth remembering that the first recorded instance of an air assault on a civilian population was performed by the British RAF in its recently acquired colony in Iraq as much as *13 years* before the infamous destruction of Guernica in the Spanish Civil War. This fact attests to both the nature and the long *durée* of these histories of interaction. In what could, with some enlargement of scope, be George Bush or Dick Cheney talking about the "shock and awe" treatment during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, or even of the bombing campaigns unleashed ten years earlier in the 1991 Gulf War, Chief of RAF Bombing Command Arthur Harris wrote *in 1924* that "The Arab and the Kurd now know what real bombing means in casualties and damage; they now know that within 45 minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed by four or five machines that offer them no real target, no opportunity for glory as warriors, no effective means of escape" (qtd. in

Sontag 67). These ghosted histories are public facts that nonetheless remain, like the orange figure, implanted in our midst and yet somehow invisible to a peripheral mode of looking that fears and hence works to deny the return of a gaze. This “local” footage is thus a material-concrete record of the present and historical stalking of the globe for resources – the information it contains can be *sensed*, not just repeated as a series of statistics – through proximity to the glowing body that this logic has tried to keep out of sight and offshore.

Following Kathleen Stewart’s claim that “in the public-private culture and politics of the contemporary United States, trauma has become the dominant idiom of subjectivity, citizenship, politics, and publics,” and that at the same time that trauma’s material traces “mark the wound or gap where a public politics might be,” we can begin to see the figure as a material trace of trauma that marks this wounded gap, where what is considered “the public” is often simply one sector’s politics of fear (336). Implicitly then, the figure also marks the absence of the sustained oppositional mass political discourse that would be needed in order to put these fears in historical perspective. Its affective stickiness not only pulls the signs of past histories of trauma to it, but also distributes that sticky quality around; it lets us see fear in relation. Thus, as the video progresses, we begin to feel the slippage of the oft-repeated term “detainee” as it slides about the objects in the frame. Who or what is the detainee? Is it the construction workers (all men, it should be noted) silently eating their lunches on the church steps at alienated distances from one another, whose dejected bodies seem to be haunted by the now all-but-forgotten working class radicalism of the past? Is it the young blond woman in the Marilyn Monroe

replica dress, donning the inherited ideas of femininity from a bygone era in the marginalization of women? Are the millions of office workers “just doing their jobs” detained in the disciplinary cycles of production, consumption and leisure not unlike those who were burned alive the two World Trade Center Towers? Or perhaps the detainee is the artist herself (though ungended in this performance), donning the costume in a performance of traumatic repetition that might also read like an admission of complicity. “I am detained,” it seems to say. For in the business of everyday life in the neoliberal capitalist epoch, everyone seems caught between the fetishes of an imaginary personal agency and the material evidence of our continued constitution through biopolitical forms of social control. Accordingly, we are detained by our belief in “the self-making of the sovereign subject in a society that at the same time constrains [the ability to make the self freely] and does so in part by intensifying the desire of and for an autologic subjectivity” (Clough 157). Each of these subjects (including myself in the guise of artist) is thus caught up in the constraints that give rise to its “freedom.” Hence the peculiarly claustrophobic sadness washing out over the beautiful day from the heart of this glowing, hurt body at its center. How can we get out of this suit?

To return to the idea that passersby perform their urbanity for the imagined cameras of a spectacular society, it is worth noting again Butler’s notion of performativity. In her definition, “the ‘performative’ dimension of [social] construction is... the *forced* reiteration of norms” (*Bodies* 94; my italics). The repetition “is not performed *by* a subject; [rather, it] is what enables a subject” in the first place (ibid.). This “forcing” power of the normative arises from its ability to

establish what qualifies as being; what is excluded from that being haunts signification as that which is the unlivable, the nonnarrativizable, or the traumatic. Looked at in this way, the weird sense in the video that most of the people stare past and through the detainee, despite the near-fluorescence of its orange garb, suggests that it forms the abject border of what can count as being. The slippage of the term detainee arises because every one's being establishes and renders the non-being of this other. Our so-called "urbane" identifications are what enable us to *survive* the strictures of the structure, yes, but they are also implicated in what they exclude. It is the job of anyone who wishes to contest this situation, not simply to sympathize with this other, nor to imagine one's "good intentions" as raising one outside and above this constitutive problem, but to trace the ways in which one's ability to act remain within the vortex of identity and its unlivable outsides, and so, to begin there.

Perhaps what *Stalk* does is bring this dilemma to the forefront, both as a political realization *and* a desire to move beyond it. Ultimately, it is the literally endless displacement of fear that *Stalk* tries to make perceptible in a material, affective way.¹⁰ It does not try to impart information to a "populace," nor does it try to teach people, through the sharing of rationalized bits of information, why they

¹⁰ In her article "Teaching/Depression" (2006), Eve Sedgwick eloquently discusses a similar desire to move beyond political activism that is based on purism and schism and towards a politics that can emerge out of what Melanie Klein called the "depressive position" wherein good and bad are acknowledged as being inseparable at every level and form the basis for a political commitment capable of moving beyond the dynamics of mutually projected defenses and splitting. In "Affect, Noise, Silence, Protest" (2010), Lauren Berlant also links the depressive position to the ability to resist reenacting affectively secure modes of protest wherein everyone falls into their positions behind their slogans.

should morally “care.” It doesn’t lecture on how the histories of racism and colonialism are connected to the terrors of fear. Rather, through what amounts to a ritualized performative repetition of the trauma of terror and the terror of daily trauma, *Stalk enacts* the complicity of abjection. In short, if it is “effective,” it is “affective” – it haunts the coherent posturing of everyone long enough to send jolts into the half-remembered frames which keep us locked in trauma time, so that the jolts along those frames, at the very least, might be *felt*, if not yet narrated. This kind of action will never be a matter of what one can rationally know or control, but will instead arise from a zone of *inaffordability*, and a place of tenuous ambiguity and contradiction. What we can ill afford is a recycling of the notion that “entrance” into the biopolitical regime can be “granted” to other others by poet-heroes with kind hearts on the right side of history. Rather, one must enter into the heart of the matter of exclusion, and learn to sense how unmourned traumas get reinscribed and recast into new (old) scripts. It is here that I would like to quote Butler at length:

One does not stand at an instrumental distance from the terms by which one experiences violation. Occupied by such terms and yet occupying them oneself risks a complicity, a repetition, a relapse into injury, but it is also the occasion to work the mobilizing power of injury, of an interpellation one never chose. Where one might understand violation as a trauma which can only induce a destructive repetition compulsion... it seems equally possible to acknowledge the force of repetition as the very condition of an affirmative response to violation. The compulsion to repeat an injury is not necessarily the compulsion to repeat the injury in the same way or to stay fully within the traumatic orbit of that injury (*Bodies* 132).

It is thus the “mobilizing power of injury” *Stalk* wishes to enact, in the hopes that by not staying away from the traumatic orbit, we might be able to chart a course out, beginning with an acknowledgement of the ways in which our own fears undergird

so much of what keeps the edifice of power pulling the strings of the public's stunned flesh. The exaggeratedly rational *denial* of the ways in which our bodies lodge the effects of history as *affects* that hinder our capacity to act can be challenged through art practices that engage in the performative détournement of traumatic repetition.

Returning to Sontag's concern raised at the beginning of this essay about whether art (specifically painting, in her example) that depicts torment as a spectacle either watched or ignored by onlookers implies that the violence is unstoppable, I must admit that I remain, when being completely honest, disturbed about *Stalk* and what it seems to record. However, I also believe that it is important *not* to reject, but to *embrace* this disturbance, for through that embrace one can begin to grapple with just how difficult it will indeed be to stop it. The Pentagon is prepared to fight what its architects call "The Long War" that will last between 50 and 100 years, and even if we view this projection as the grandiose exaggeration of power, already, the United States has been engaged in Afghanistan for 9 years, the longest war in its history. Yet to walk through Union Square on a Tuesday afternoon, one would never know it. No photos on the front page at the newsstand, for example, ever show what the aftermath of a drone attack on a village looks like. The nonfigurable operations of power on the field of perception remain as stringent now as ever. In such a case, I continue to believe that, although not a replacement of other forms of political engagement, art that helps us "sense" what is absent (both temporally and spatially) is valuable both for the disturbances it produces that result in a labor of questioning and reckoning (in economies of affective circulation

that are unusually good at cloaking the production of subjects in relation) and for the way it contributes to the mapping of the emotional terrain through which any oppositional politics must swim. For as Ahmed writes, “The emotional struggles against injustice are not about finding good or bad feelings and then expressing them. Rather, they are about how we are moved by feelings into a different relation to the norms that we wish to contest, or the wounds we wish to heal” (201). In this sense, bad feelings, and the traumas they are so often displaced remnants of (and the difficulties any politics must face when they become exposed) must not be avoided simply because it is easier to embrace an ethics that says one should strive to “feel better” about the injustices that have shaped our lives and worlds. For whatever one thinks of the actual performance of the orange figure, loping through the by-now obviously both victimized and complicit populace, the question of what it means to look (or not) at what the camera records of those encounters remains a question of how willing one is to include one’s own agencies (artistic, political, “consumerist”) in the picture it presents. *Stalk* is not just about the supposed choices of a busy public; it is equally about the supposed choices of those who would contest the norms on which these choices are founded, and a call to remain active in questioning how the presumed agency of oppositional affect all too often slips into an economy of exclusion where what is at stake is not just access to culture or art, but the very viability of so *many* “affected” bodies...including, as I’m sure by now is obvious, our own.