

After and Before

By Christopher Bedford

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“Eroticism is assenting to life even in death.” George Bataille, 1957¹

With a mounting sense of exigency as the elections draw near, critics writing for American art journals and magazines have begun to analyze and codify the extent of political engagement evident in contemporary art practice today. One of the more explicit and persuasive of these engagements was an extended review written by Hal Foster for *Artforum* of an exhibition called “Forms of Resistance: Artists and the Desire for Social Change from 1871 to the Present” at the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands. Foster begins with the unqualified claim that one is unlikely to see an exhibition such as this at a major museum in the United States due to the “politically restrained and financially driven” character of these institutions.² The same could be said of the fiscally-driven gallery circuit, so it should come as no surprise that uncompromising, politically oppositional art practices with no discernable stake, interest, or place in the commercial circus, rarely command prime real estate in commercial publications. In this discouraging context, Silvia Kolbowski’s ambitious video and 16mm production, *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* (2008), developed over the course of three years, represents a welcome deviation from the norm, not least because it merits coverage in these pages, despite existing in a realm parallel to the art market.

The video opens with a series of violently choreographed sequences that refuse simple analysis. Following the production credits, we are shown a landscape of twitching, interpenetrating limbs, covered in what looks like glittering ash, vibrating erratically and colliding in dead, uninterrupted silence. It could be a frenzied erotic encounter, or the uncontrolled spasms of a body - or bodies - in the grip of death; but the action is close-up, disembodied, with insufficient context. The silence is broken abruptly by a night vision scene of American military personnel screaming unintelligibly as they enter a private residence, wielding automatic weapons and ordering a cowering naked man to the ground. A woman screams. A caption appears on the screen in unremarkable white font: “I saw everything. Everything.” Though this footage was harvested from an internet site and represents an authentic account of military action in Iraq, the erratic camera movements and heavy pixilation align rather unnervingly with contemporary cinematographic techniques employed by filmmakers such as Brian De Palma (*Redacted*, 2007) to achieve the look of embedded verisimilitude.

The video then cuts back and forth between details of shimmering, agitated flesh, and the repetition of the green night vision scene with the subtitle response, “You saw nothing. Nothing.” before eventually shifting to Arabic news footage of a narrow street, strewn with unidentified detritus, the implication of bodily violence registered by the saturated red monochrome of the grainy imagery. Again, the passage is accompanied by a subtitle announcing the strategies of displacement and asymmetry that play throughout Kolbowski’s video: “I’ve always wept over the fate of Hiroshima. Always.” Although the shifts from one scene to the next are jarring, even brutal in this opening sequence, and the paratextual contradictions she introduces surreal, Kolbowski maintains the thematic continuity of the video through subtle use of rhyming syntax, the structure of the aforementioned caption (“I’ve always wept over the fate of Hiroshima. Always.”) echoing that of the previous scene: “I saw everything. Everything.” Inscribed in this initial, roughly five-minute passage is the primal, image-based logic that subtends Kolbowski’s video from beginning to end - a visceral, almost precognitive quality that obviates the need for didactic narration. Instead she

¹ George Bataille, *Eroticism* (New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1987), 11

² Hal Foster, “Forms of Resistance,” *Artforum*, January 2008, 272

establishes relations between images, histories and subjectivities that operate on a far more basic and persuasive level.

After Hiroshima Mon Amour is a 22-minute contraction of the French director Alain Resnais' classic account of post-war Hiroshima, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), which tells the story of a fleeting and consuming love affair between a French woman and a Japanese man. Although faithful to its referent on the levels of mis-en-scène, acting, and dialogue, Kolbowski's video departs from Resnais' film at the level of "remake" with found footage that directly engages the aftermath of 9/11, the ideology of American militarism abroad, and governmental neglect at home.³ Yet, like Resnais' original, Kolbowski's video is set in Japan, adding levels of narrative disjunction to this time-based montage. The video incorporates dramatic passages rendered to replicate certain sequences from Resnais' film, as well as a re-mix of the original score, text from Marguerite Duras' original screenplay and synopsis, and found footage of American military intervention in Iraq and governmental in-action in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The consistent asymmetry of text and image, of narration and action, and of character and actor allow the viewer to inhabit a variety of subjectivities consecutively or even simultaneously.

The most obvious result of this structure is a video that feeds on its own indeterminacy to produce meaning by prompting close, thought, demanding - with each successive cut - revisions to tentative conclusions that seemed adequate for the previous scene. Within this shifting structure, the related impulses towards violence and erotic love are paired and played against each other consistently, with both urges presented as fundamental and impervious to rational analysis. Despite this theme of fundamentality, however, the video resists a purely trans-historical stance by remaining anchored in the specificity of character, time, place, and race, all of which are emphasized throughout, not buried or glossed. As the unnamed bodies quiver in unison, oblivious to all else, so the subjectivity of the soldier is concentrated into a historically specific expression of aggressive self-preservation. Feral love and violence are, therefore, proposed as unknowable equivalents.

If Kolbowski's video has a central thematic concern, it is the primitive logic that governs the interrelated fields of violence, war, prejudice, and eroticism. Literary theorist Jacqueline Rose has written about the mysterious psychopolitics of war, asserting that its persistence through time "signals the breakdown of the nineteenth-century faith in evolution, progress, and science."⁴ Quoting Gertrude Stein, Rose continues, "If everything was understood, so it was then believed, 'there would be progress and if there was progress there would not be any wars, and if there were not any wars then everything could and would be understood.'"⁵ Our inability to understand and prevent war is, therefore, incontrovertible evidence of our fundamental lack of self-knowledge. Kolbowski does not presume to understand the origins or persistence of war – to answer the simple but elusive question Rose poses, 'why war?' – but *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* goes beyond didactic or diagnostic strategies to give visual form to the unknowable, and in doing so draws a psychic thread through the interrelated subjects of love, violence, prejudice, war, and militarism. This thread is not easily translated into language, but it is palpable and persuasive on the less bounded level of visual argumentation.

Though her video is essentially bifocal in its attention to the aftermath of the atomic attack on Hiroshima as seen through the lens of a love affair, and to the sinister character of American domestic and foreign policies in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks, Kolbowski uses a variety of strategies to expand the field of subjectivities

³ Though it is not essential to interpret Kolbowski's video, it should be noted that the beginning of Resnais' film relies on a similar narrative structure, with passages of love making and dialogue between the Japanese man and French woman interrupted by post-nuclear footage.

⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *Why War? – Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1993), 17

⁵ Rose, 17

included in her narrative. In effect, the video addresses not two discrete wars, but also war as a cipher. The unnamed French woman in Resnais' film is introduced in Kolbowski's remake not as a European woman with light brown hair, but rather as a black woman with close-cropped hair, an Asian woman with dark hair, a Caucasian woman with dark hair, etc., and the man identified by a caption as a Japanese man who is "an engineer or an architect" is represented in Kolbowski's video by a man of indeterminate raciality with a block of text tattooed on his chest, and in another scene by a man who looks to be of middle-eastern origin. The cognitive dissonance fostered by the asymmetry of actor and character here provokes a mode of viewing wherein no subjectivity is simply "given" but must instead be understood, processed, and conceptualized by the viewer. As we watch an intimate scene unfold, and a character's lips move silently, a caption informs us that it is "impossible to talk about Hiroshima," by which we also understand that war as a concept is beyond the bounds of conventional analysis.

Such bold claims are bolstered not by systematic argumentation, but through demonstration. One particularly shocking sequence harvested from the internet is comprised of video shot from a Humvee barreling down a street in Bagdad, indiscriminately ramming civilian vehicles and forcing them off the Humvee's path. Here, as in other instances, Kolbowski uses color - in this case violet - to inflect the spectator's engagement with the action. To suggest that the scene is formally beautiful is to flirt with obscenity since the subject matter represents such an unflinching indictment of the prejudice and entitlement that so often attends the theatre of war. Yet Kolbowski permits - even encourages - that possibility within this sequence, so that when the Humvee revs its engine and bores remorselessly on as a man runs out of the way, the beauty of the scene is rendered abject and the act of looking dirty and incriminating. Color, then, becomes a character and silent narrator; a mute call to our collective conscience.

Kolbowski subjects her narration of the affair between the French nurse and Japanese man to regular shifts in scene, language and actor, and to a variety of combative, elegantly rendered contemporary interpolations, each of which uproot the ostensibly historical narrative, and force those dramatic sequences to resonate in the present. But eventually we are returned to the primordial imagery that is the video's nebulous undercurrent. This time, the twitching masses of flesh are rendered in shades of red and black, grainy and indistinct like the surface of a silkscreen print made animate. Here, these feverish movements are overlaid with captions such as "The food of an entire city is thrown away," quotes drawn from Duras' screenplay that situate the imagery in the aftermath of nuclear holocaust. As the scene evolves, passages of light, shadow, and color appear increasingly molecular in character, as if limbs have been reduced to essential structures, cells mutating, combining, dissociating and recombining into new forms. The more elemental the imagery, the more the possibility of comprehension recedes. What was either a scene of love or agony is stripped of its index and reduced to abstraction. Simultaneously, the text becomes more pointed and polemical, reversing the terms of the video's structure and suggesting that while we may be incapable of comprehending the fundamental impulse towards violence, we are, on an intellectual level, able to disavow the principles upon which it rests: "The anger of entire cities, whether they like it or not, against the inequality set forth as a principle by certain people against other people."

It is instructive in closing to return to an important concern raised by Foster in his observation that politically-directed art broadly conceived "is often either too direct or too obscure in its articulations."⁶ Mindful of this dilemma, *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, like all of Kolbowski's most successful projects, operates bilingually, speaking in urbane, nuanced language to the field of initiates, while steering a broader audience through the radical ideas that structure her work, without shading into condescension or didacticism. Given its referent, it is inevitable that *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* prompts the spectator to remember a specific moment at the end of World War II. But Kolbowski's interpolations and displacements claim this war as both a specific instance of historical aggression and as a cipher for all wars. The impulse remains consistent, she argues, but the specific articulation varies. *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, in its splintered, multi-focal character bears down on the transgressions of the present through the mournful lens of the past with one anxious eye trained on the future.

⁶ Foster, 273

