

BELIEVING IN NOT SEEING: TEACHING ATROCITY WITHOUT IMAGES

In 1982, philosopher Frank Jackson proposed a thought experiment challenging the notion that all knowledge is entirely physical.¹ In his construction, a color scientist named Mary knows everything there is to know about color, but has never herself seen it, existing entirely in a monochromatic environment. What, Jackson asks, would Mary see were she finally exposed to color? Jackson's scenario sparked a vigorous debate in the philosophical world, culminating in a range of responses in the 2004 edited volume *There's Something About Mary: Essays on Phenomenal Consciousness and Frank Jackson's Knowledge Argument*.² While Jackson and his colleagues were interested in forms of knowledge acquisition broadly construed, I ask a more humble—if equally abstract—question: how effective is it to picture an image without seeing it? Or: what happens to verbally painted portraits when assembled only in the mind's eye? I ask the two sides of this one question in order to grope, clumsily, toward a greater understanding of the ethics of teaching atrocity through visual media.

This, I know, is a loaded and highly fraught question that scholars have explored in a range of disciplines with respect to a variety of potentially controversial images.³ The always vexed historical problems of agency, voicelessness, and revictimization circle around the equally vexed issues of our responsibility to the past, our collective project of knowledge acquisition and advancement, and our (sometimes naïve) hope to use historical events to empower and even change the course of the present. Scholars of atrocity, in particular, have offered highly nuanced investigations into these questions with respect to their own research and its implications for students and general audiences.⁴ Those engaged in atrocity research and archiving have carefully and thoughtfully considered the role that documentation may play in establishing—in the language of a recent conference on photography and atrocity—*iconicity*, and the dangers that iconicity may pose in terms of impeding rather than enhancing memory.⁵ Related issues include the aestheticization of atrocity and the ways in which its images can become beautiful as works of art in their own right as well as presentations of past horror. Even the language of presentation is itself fraught—can any image be anything other than a/n (interpretative, and thus subject to fetishization, beautification, and contextual isolation) *representation*?

Rather less attention has been paid to the scholarly audience for atrocity images. The delineation of this portion of the viewing and reading public presupposes—without, at the moment, any evidence—that such an audience is perhaps a special one, with a unique set of concerns and viewing practices that creates a different set of considerations than those so carefully considered with respect to the seeing and viewing public at large. So we must, first, be careful with our

categories, and ask: ought scholarly audiences be analyzed as a special case? And, if so, how?

This is also not original ground. In a seeming never-ending infinite regress, the status of scholarly audiences has been studied by numerous scholars concerned, in particular, with the archive and mimetic images more broadly.⁶ Drawing upon this material, I first assert that yes, scholarly audiences ought to be considered “special” kinds of viewers, in part because they (we) often exempt themselves from concerns that are attached to atrocity image viewing writ broadly, particularly around the aestheticization of images and their iconicity. Scholars peruse these images, ostensibly, for reasons other than the accumulation of general facts of the world and the past. So, the rhetoric goes, in using images for research, scholars are, if not immune, then perhaps protected from the temptation of pleasurable image consumption for its own sake. Perhaps. While I am somewhat skeptical of scholars’ immunity to the power of their images, I do take at face value the importance of the rhetoric of exemption.⁷ It ought be paid attention to as doing its own important and particular kind of work in the presentation and understanding of atrocity images in scholarly works.

So I shall hope to begin to pay that attention. I shall do so in three ways: through a brief discussion of the role of pleasure in viewing practices; through an analysis of secondary scholarly works dealing with atrocity images and the ways in which they do (or do not) use them; and through a closing meditation on alternative looking practices in cases of extremity, drawing in particular on work in disability studies. This is a preliminary and introductory foray into a highly fraught set of emotional questions whose very reflexivity presents one of the greatest challenges of this research. As a person who studies images, a scholar who is engaged with the very practices that purport to critique, I wonder: is the project even possible? Can I really ask (let alone answer) the question: what kind of audience am I?

I opened with a discussion of Mary the Color Scientist, and I now wish to return to her and the lessons she may teach us. Mary, for my purposes, is the scholarly audience—highly educated, possessing sophisticated analytic techniques and multiple modes of understanding the world. Mary (my audience) knows a great deal (if not everything) there is to be known about atrocity history, or the history of a given atrocity. Mary is given access to a rich and deep range of sources dealing with the atrocity in question. Mary, in short, is an expert in the field, with one glaring omission: Mary has never seen pictures of the atrocity she studies. Can she know it? Can she know it better? What happens if and when she does see these images? How then does her story change? This question swings both ways: the images of the mind, some have suggested, may be



even more powerful (or beautiful, or compelling, or scary, or lingering) than those of the eyes. In *The Elephant Man* (1979), playwright Bernard Pomerance is quite explicit that no makeup should be used on the title character to display his deformity, insisting that the visual reality would only fade over the course of the play, whereas the possibilities of the character's actual appearance would never cease to haunt the audience.⁸

In part, these questions are a larger meditation on the nature of history and story-telling.⁹ We, historians and scholars, tell the stories that we create from our research, based on the larger archive of materials to which we have (or have created) access. We all know this. We all, at times, encounter the challenges (posed by ourselves and others) engendered by the necessary selectivity of our craft—we simply cannot process, make sense of, and then recount and represent everything to do with a given topic. We make choices. These choices are not inevitable; we make them based on which materials provide the widest range of options for a given argument. We choose to discard those pieces of evidence that are either redundant, or (in our opinion) irrelevant, or extraneous, or incomplete, or dubious, or unnecessary. These are conscious choices. So, I ask, what would happen if we made the conscious choice *not* to use atrocity images in an examination of atrocity? What, for the scholarly audience (in particular) are the gains and losses?

One of the losses, inevitably, is of a certain kind of pleasure. I refer specifically to the pleasure of knowledge acquisition, an undeniable motivation for, and benefit of, scholarly research.¹⁰ The deliberate exclusion of an entire category of evidence seems, in its way, painful, problematic, anhedonic, and pleasure-denying, not to mention irresponsible and, in many ways, impossible. Though scholars inevitably exclude all kinds of material, these decisions are usually made after an encounter with the texts themselves. In the case of atrocity images, the narrative of iconicity—of the challenges that representation poses to memory and witnessing, the aestheticization of the record—suggests that atrocity images ought to be excluded even

prior to the moment of encounter. If, as some claim, images impede memory work, perhaps even a glimpse of such images is corrupting.¹¹ Perhaps, rather than enhancing the depth of research and the nature of the scholarly record, the use of images in atrocity research only impedes.

But surely there is no alternative. Surely scholars *must* look at images to adequately do their work, especially (but not only) scholars of images themselves. And surely scholars of atrocity images have engaged in the issues around the topic in such depth that the images themselves will not be the fulcrum upon which their relationship to memory rests.

So: scholars are indeed special kinds of audiences who are, in some way, exempt or at least excluded from the general concerns around showing atrocity images in order to educate. Here I play with the definition of audience, thinking of those not just consuming but doing the research as constitutive thereof. But if both the producers and the consumers of scholarly material are audiences, how do we differentiate between the two in terms of their relationship to images?

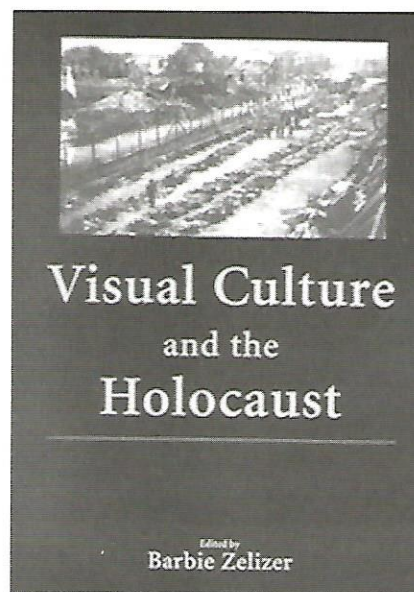
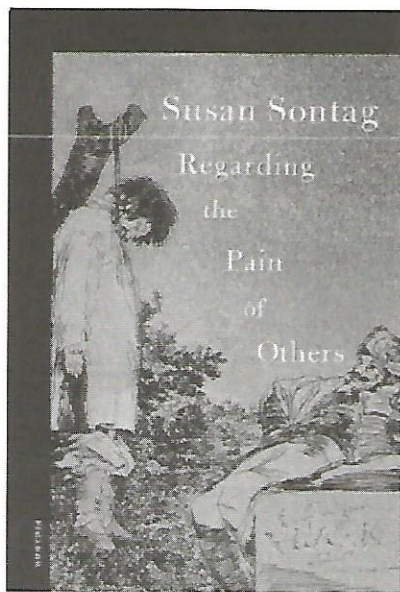
Decisions must be made. Scholars must make decisions about the materials they use. These decisions must be based on as exhaustive an encounter with the material as is possible within the constraints of access, time, and accuracy. Scholars must look at the images before they can exclude them. Something important happens with visual encounter. While scholars may then choose, responsibly, from a variety of sources, texts, and materials in order to frame their arguments and best communicate them, they must encounter as much as possible. Even, and perhaps especially, if it changes their relationship to the material at hand. Relationships to material ought to be changed through encounter. That, if nothing else, is at least part of the point of the scholarly endeavor.

But what of those who read the secondary works for which these complicated and often torturous decisions have been made? Do these audiences (usually but not always comprised of academics) also count among the special and exempt? Do these audiences (engaged in a particular exercise of knowledge acquisition) stand distinct from, if overlapping with, lay audiences, students, television viewers, and newspaper readers? How ought scholars relate to atrocity images, and how ought authors consider these audiences when weighing the impact of images in their work? And, equally poignant, are the considerations with respect to atrocity really any different from other image-use concerns?

To begin to answer these questions, I turn to the scholars themselves, or their intellectual avatars, their writings. I consider when and how scholars of atrocity have used images, and how reflexive they are about these practices in these self-same writings. As atrocity is an overwhelming and over-determined category, I focus in particular on writings dealing with the Holocaust, especially those materials that engage explicitly with the question of art and images.

Above

Rose (n.d.) by an unknown photographer



who has never experienced anything like what they went through—don't understand. We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine."¹⁶ Still, photography remains, according to Sontag, if not the only thing we have with respect to visualizing horror, one which we cannot avoid.

The scope of Zelizer's volume is broader than photography, but limited to reproducible forms of visibility. The book "considers the visualization of the Holocaust through its various domains of visual representation."¹⁷ This statement returns us again to Mary the Color Scientist: can we conclude from this introduction that all essays in the text

In the introduction to her 2001 collection *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, editor Barbie Zelizer writes that as "generations of individuals were not alive to experience the Holocaust firsthand, its visual representation thereby possesses a critical importance in the shaping of public consciousness."¹² According to this statement, Zelizer falls firmly on one side of the debate around the value of atrocity images in historical memory. For her, images are not only detrimental to the project of witnessing, they are vital. They are, in fact, a proxy (though perhaps a weak one) for personal experience. They may well be, she hints, the best we can do. Not for her, nor (one might falsely extrapolate) for this collection the avoidance of imagery in favor of other forms of historical recording and retelling. Such an avoidance would constitute not a gesture toward ethical (re)presentation of past horror, but indeed a serious breach.

Zelizer's approach shares some considerations with Susan Sontag's stirring conclusion to her 2004 work, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.¹³ This book, Sontag's second on photography, takes up some of the themes she raises in her 1977 essay collection *On Photography*, particularly around the problems associated with the distancing function of the medium of photography, which, in turn, renders images of horror commonplace and, accordingly, less affective and affecting.¹⁴ Unlike Zelizer, Sontag explicitly tackles the relative strengths of various forms of atrocity-representation, arguing that narrative is indeed a more powerful activating force than visual imagery, if only because with visual images, we conventionally glance and quickly look away. Sontag asks: "Could one be mobilized actively to oppose war by an image (or group of images) as one might be enrolled among the opponents of capital punishment by reading, say Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*?" She answers that "a narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image." This is due, in part, to the response the medium evokes rather than that which is represented: "Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel."¹⁵ And yet, Sontag seems to conclude, while the photographic image remains problematic and only underscores the extent to which "We"—this 'we' is everyone

will show the visual representations they consider? Or, can these domains be considered (in a responsible and nuanced way that effectively communicates itself to the reader) without the representations at all? These comments indicate that the presentation of these visualizations is a necessary part of the act of memory, though Zelizer does continue to note that "we have at our disposal more ways of 'seeing.'"¹⁸ She readily concedes the shortfalls of various modes of visualization, but is more interested in moving "beyond that frailty [to] locate the strengths of each code."¹⁹ While the book engages with photography, artwork, monuments, film and television, among others, it is telling that the visualization of the imagination is not among the codes explored. This is a project about external media; while there may be many ways of seeing, only those that can also be seen by others seem to do the work of shaping public consciousness with which Zelizer credits visual representations. Although such a responsibility is not necessarily one that I would place upon images of the past and their use in scholarly explorations, here I engage with Zelizer's own language and approach. Holocaust imagery serves a necessary public duty that is inextricable from the presentation of the images. There is a strong ethic here, and a careful one. It is one that rests on the thoughtful analysis of visual representations, carefully and accessibly displayed.

Not all of the scholars contributing to the volume agree, seemingly. While many of the essays include images prominently presented in service of their analysis, others do not. There are, perhaps surprisingly, a number of pieces that contain no figures at all, and still others whose subjects deal with secondary artistic renderings of the events of the Holocaust rather than images from the Shoah itself. These secondary representations are a manifestation of Zelizer's different ways of seeing, as well as a telling and fascinating commentary on the varieties of archives, sources, and evidence, and their respective contributions to storytelling. But are they also indications of a conscious decision to avoid a less interpretive set of representational images of a historical event?

The first substantive essay, by literary scholar Liliane Weissberg, is entitled “In Plain Sight.”²⁰ Provocatively, beyond printed text, there is nothing to see. Weissberg’s examination calls for a recognition of silence and absence as a way to order our understanding of the aesthetics of the Holocaust. She tracks and analyzes a number of visualization projects but displays none of them, relying on written descriptions to do the necessary work of constructing images for her readers. The absence of pictures mirrors Weissberg’s call for taking seriously the motif of absence, and gestures toward another way of thinking through visualization and memory, one that operates on an individual rather than a collective framework of pictorial understanding. This is not a call for excluding images in memory projects per se; Weissberg’s critique is not of the visualization projects but of the ways in which they are framed and discussed. Her own visual silence is loud, reverberant, and, in its way, thrilling. The lack of images empowers readers to frame their own understandings while taking seriously her call for a new aesthetics of memory that privileges absence in the way that her writing—in both form and content—so compellingly does.

Weissberg’s objects of analysis are themselves both primary and secondary representations of Holocaust atrocity. Other essays in the volume focus exclusively on one or the other, with a variety of visual strategies for representing their images. Jeffrey Shandler’s piece, “The Man in the Glass Box: Watching the Eichmann Trial on American Television,” contains just two accompanying figures, both of which are photographs of the Adolf Eichmann war crimes trial.²¹ His discussion focuses on the video recordings of the trial and the trial’s status as a problematic performance contributing to Holocaust memory culture. Shandler’s figures make no pretension to fine art, and serve to peripherally illustrate his descriptions of layout and staging. The dangers of aestheticization and iconicity around these visualizations seem to be much reduced, because of both the nature of the photographs and their historical location. These are not images of the atrocity itself, but of the ways in which it, and one of its perpetrators, have been collectively and communally confronted. These seem to be different kinds of visualizations of the Holocaust than, say, pictures of bodies (or shoes, or people) in concentration camps. Do pictures of pictures, or pictures of narratives, or pictures of memories, somehow serve to lessen the dangers of fatigue, or casual looking, or aestheticization? What if these pictures make more explicit claims to artistic status? What if the memorialization is on someone’s body? Is someone’s body? (And what if Shandler’s piece had included images of Eichmann’s execution?)

Zelizer’s volume engages with at least some of these approaches. Dora Apel’s essay, “The Tattooed Jew,” is heavily illustrated with Jewish-themed tattooed body parts (often cropped to focus exclusively on the tattoo, thereby, in its way, dehumanizing the individuals who imagined and created these memory forms).²² Apel meditates on the implications of challenging the Jewish strictures against tattooing and the work these markings do to empower a practice used to dehumanize Jews in concentration camps. Apel carefully does not include images of survivor

tattoos, both to focus our attention on the contemporary nature of the memory work she chronicles, and to underscore the empowerment inherent in the bodily decisions she chronicles. However, the message of dehumanization remains powerful through the images she chooses; while the heavily cropped photos could be read as a testament to the artistic nature of the tattoos to which our eyes are directed, the lack of individual framing undercuts her written claims about the thoughtful nature of the decision to, and choice of, tattoo. This piece highlights the ways in which even artistic renderings that comment on historical atrocity are subject to a similar set of problems that challenge the use of the original images.

Challenges are not, of course, insurmountable. Marianne Hirsch’s contribution, “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory” offers a haunting chronicle of the recycling of the same Holocaust photographs in multiple realms, arguing that the landscape of Holocaust memorialization has become visually routinized and standardized.²³ There is a function to this repetition, Hirsch argues, as it forces subsequent generations to connect with those who came before and to encounter and work through past trauma in similar terms. Hirsch, then, supports Zelizer’s approach around the vital transgenerational function of images in creating collective memory. In a surprising move, Hirsch’s first figure, a highly stylized personal portrait, dates from 1910. Equally surprising is her second figure, from the first, very short iteration of the Holocaust graphic novel *Maus* (1986, by Art Spiegelman). Neither of these two images are part of the traditional inventory of the Holocaust visual landscape, unlike the bulk of the subsequent thirteen figures. In opening with these selections, Hirsch signals that part of the work done by images is to provide the conditions of possibility of other forms of visualization, and to enlarge (working both backward and forward in time) our mental landscape of the Holocaust archive. Hirsch places her images in creative conversation, forcing readers to do likewise. These images are not ones at which one can briefly glance, or elevate to iconicity in isolation; they make sense, in her narrative, only in conjunction with the others. Hirsch’s writing provides the framework with which to conduct this conversation, once again empowering individual readers to do actual work with her and with her visual selections. In so doing, she justifies the claim that there are special kinds of audiences for whom images enhance, rather than detract from, the memory project. While these audiences may not necessarily be scholarly, they have to be willing to think along with this scholar and her images.

The conundrums posed by the use of atrocity images rest on certain assumptions about the kinds of responses enrolled by various media representations. Sontag and Zelizer’s concerns about image fatigue stem from one way of thinking about pictured evidence. Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s work on staring posits another potential set of reactions to the grotesque, the jarring, and the unexpected. Garland-Thomson’s heavily illustrated book *Staring: How We Look* (2009) chronicles the various reasons people stare, using

as her objects both other people and the ways in which they have been represented in photographs and paintings. Vital to her analysis is the recognition that people do, indeed, stare. Equally vital is that the staring emerges from curiosity, a sense of the unexpected, a jarring context, or an unusual setting or framework. Hirsch's piece is so effective because it keeps images—images she has selected precisely for their frequency and iconic nature—unexpected. This is the challenge scholars face when drawing on the visual atrocity archive, and this is also the privilege they possess as writers for an audience motivated to think about and challenge the texts they produce: the privilege to have the opportunity to invite their readers to think with the images—and then, ideally, not only to see them in new ways but, indeed, to see them at all.

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NOTES 1. Frank Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," *Philosophical Quarterly* 32, no. 127 (1982): 2. 2. Peter Ludlow, Yujin Nagasawa, and Daniel Stoljar, *There's Something About Mary: Essays on Phenomenal Consciousness and Frank Jackson's Knowledge Argument* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004). 3. Particular attention has been paid to atrocity images, pornography, disability studies, and ethnographic film and photography. The use of all these categories of images raises serious issues concerning the value of showing potentially exploitative images for uncertain communicative and scholarly gain. Pornography and atrocity scholars have been highly prolific on these issues; rather less has been written by anthropologists and other ethnographic scholars. For a few representative works see Scott MacDonald, "Confessions of a Feminist Porn Watcher," *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983); Brian McNair, *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Steven C. Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). 4. Key figures in these debates include Geoffrey Batchen, David Campbell, Mick Gidley, Marianne Hirsch, Griselda Pollock, and Barbie Zelizer. 5. For a webcast of the conference see www.photographyandatrocity.leeds.ac.uk/. 6. See for example the work of Kaja Silverman, Wendy Steiner, and Jacques Rancière. 7. My recent research on this topic is forthcoming. 8. Bernard Pomerance, *The Elephant Man: A Play*, 1st ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1979). Pomerance's approach stands in sharp contrast to that of director David Lynch, whose film of the same name initiated the Oscar for best makeup following the painstaking reconstructive, historical, and creative work done to accurately portray the title character. 9. For more on historiography, see Norman J. Wilson, *History in Crisis? Recent Directions in Historiography* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1998). 10. There are of course numerous other forms of pleasure, many of which have been studied across a variety of fields and through a wide range of methodologies, including philosophy, psychology, biology, art history, visual studies, communications, and literary theory. Pleasure remains an elusive concept for its combination of specificity and generality combined with concrete embodiedness and abstraction. While other forms of pleasure may well be at play in the engagement with atrocity images, as Susan Sontag has chronicled, I focus here on that of knowledge acquisition. See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004). 11. See for example David Campbell and Michael J. Shapiro, *Moral Spaces: Rethinking Ethics and World Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). 12. Barbie Zelizer, *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, (Rutgers Depth of Field Series) (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 1. 13. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. 14. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador USA and Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001). 15. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 122. 16. *Ibid.*, 125–26. 17. Barbie Zelizer, "Introduction: On Visualizing the Holocaust," in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. Barbie Zelizer, 1. 18. *Ibid.*, 2. 19. *Ibid.*, 3. 20. Liliane Weissberg, "In Plain Sight," in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*. 21. Jeffrey Shandler, "The Man in the Glass Box: Watching the Eichmann Trial on American Television," in *ibid.* 22. Dora Apel, "The Tattooed Jew," in *ibid.* 23. Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," in *ibid.*

MEDIATED ALGORITHMS

Clive Holden: Media, Mediated

Stephen Bulger Gallery

Toronto

March 2–30, 2013

An approach to artmaking that is driven by the prospect of chance, by the accidental, is reliant upon the inherent rationale of the natural world. There, chaos constitutes change (or vice versa) and reveals new forms that displace and/or update the old. Toronto-based multidisciplinary artist Clive Holden's recent practice has manipulated the properties of the natural world into an aesthetic strategy. Utilizing the randomization and dynamism found in nature serves to unsettle and reconfigure his installations, transforming them into ever-evolving media.

Holden's installations at his recent exhibition, *Media, Mediated*, at Stephen Bulger Gallery in Toronto, engaged ephemerality through carefully composed algorithms and computer programming languages such as HTML5, JavaScript, and GIFs, reshuffling his selected images ad infinitum. For instance, *Wind at Lake Manitoba* (2013) featured a monitor cross-sectioned into sixty-four small frames of stripped tree branches in a state of flux. Each frame captured the tree in close-up, its few shrivelled leaves at times barely visible, and at other times so near that

they remain out of focus. The rampant energy, flickering, and spatial orientation of the images may have impelled some viewers toward discomfort because they were at once here, there, and everywhere—multidimensionality as material. Interjected into these frames at random points in time against a stark black background were the words "WIND AT LAKE MANITOBA." The incorporation of descriptive text with montaged Super 8 film images made reference to a semblance of narrative, and correspondingly, to the qualities of traditional cinema. For Jacques Rancière, "The image is never a simple reality. Cinematic images are primarily operations, relations between the sayable and the visible, ways of playing with the before and the after, cause and effect."¹ Although he engages traditional cinematic media, Holden's work is stimulating precisely because the before and after, the cause and effect, have been made wholly unpredictable.

In a compelling formal juxtaposition, *Wind at Lake Manitoba* was (re)created by Holden as a large-scale 4 x 6-foot chromogenic print. Here, the movement and instability that characterized the media wall installation of the same name has been rendered static, captured and immobilized in both space and time. Though it features a slightly different spatial orientation—seven horizontal frames and eight vertical frames—the print stands and declares itself as an autonomous object. What this does is open up a space in which the viewer can dictate their responses rather than have their responses, rather schizophrenically, mediated to them.