

Darren Almond
Night + Fog
27 April – 14 July 2007
Galerie Max Hetzler
Wedding, Berlin

The limits of representation

By Lily Hibberd
published in *eyeline* issue 65, 2007/8

The first time I saw work from Darren Almond's *Terminus* project I was unaware of the specific nature of the objects before me. Standing in front of a pair empty bus shelters, with no obvious reference to place or history, they existed only as a sign of impossible transportation, silent amid the howling intensity of the Royal Academy of London's *Apocalypse* exhibition in 2000. In the scheme of attention-getting contemporary art, Almond's practice, which includes photography, film, installation and site-specific work, sits apart from the rest. His work is situated within the ontology of disappearance or the un-representable; of objects being removed from their place of origin, where customary experiences and the evidence of time and memory are turned inside out.

In June of this year Almond exhibited three bodies of work, collectively titled *Night + Fog* after Alain Renais' 1955 documentary film on Auschwitz. The show was installed in Galerie Max Hetzler's 'temporary' space, an enormous former East Berlin light globe factory in the suburb of Wedding. Although being conceived at separate times, the works formed a powerful visual and conceptual cluster of references to war, environment and memory. In an amplification of the *Apocalypse* show, in this version *Terminus* was comprised of 14 bus stations, recently salvaged from the town of Oświęcim in southern Poland. These shelters situated us at the site of the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz, as Oświęcim was called during the German occupation. In Heltzler's gallery the warehouse walls also displayed 15 landscape photographs of the Siberian nickel mines of Norilsk, a closed city controlled by a mining company that produces "some of the largest amounts of sulphur dioxide on the planet".¹ These images seemed even grittier as they were faced at every turn by the endless *Archive*, a galvanised steel shelving system that stocked four million blank sheets of A4 copy paper.

Bearing witness to such events, whether historical or recent, presents an impasse for fear of diminishing the scale of the loss. *Night + Fog* dealt with this unspeakable past by leaving aside the evidence. Quite the opposite of presenting the trace, Almond's displaced referential objects resonated with horrific and incessant absence. The testimony connected to them present only omitted, un-utterable like a silent letter or a word formed on another's lips from which nothing can be heard. Words come frequently into direct conflict with memory for war survivors too, who are well known for taking one of two positions: extensively recounting and recording their experiences (like the tireless witness of Auschwitz, Primo Levi), or by avoiding any reference to them at all. Almond included a reference to the loss of identity of this very man in the work *Primo*, in which Levi's Auschwitz prisoner number, 451745 was cast as an aluminium train plaque, located next to the central stairwell of the building.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz: the witness and the archive* (2000) the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has argued that speechlessness is inseparable from the historical moment. Agamben stated that up to now the ethical approach used in recounting and understanding

Auschwitz has failed to acknowledge the very witnesses who should be heard – they faced the horror of death, but have been denied because they perished and cannot not speak for themselves. On the other hand, he acknowledges that Auschwitz “survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to...”ⁱⁱ Many victims accordingly shun any mention of the War or their family as if their past lives had never existed at all. This sturdy silence is complicit in overcoming the horror of the events that took away everything they had known of life up to that point. “...commenting on survivors’ testimony necessarily meant interrogating this lacuna [missing object or witness], or more precisely, attempting to listen to it. Listening is something that did not prove fruitless work for this author”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Silence is one way to forget the past but it is not as innocuous as things unsaid. An absence of witnesses is apt to leave historical facts open to be contested, denied or forgotten, and other accounts of the past inscribed. The four million sheets of blank paper that lined the shelves in *Night + Fog* quoted the number inscribed on the original Auschwitz memorial. This plaque was removed after the collapse of the Polish Communist government in 1989, when the death toll was queried and then revised as 1.1 million.^{iv} Holocaust deniers have attempted to use the lack of agreement on the death toll as an implement of propaganda, and argue that this provides a case for the general inconsistency of all witness evidence of the Holocaust. In an effort to deal with the varying accounts, the Nizkor Project (Hebrew for ‘we will remember’) has developed a web-based project that constantly posts new evidence and material combating Holocaust deniers’ statements. This and other projects like Steven Spielberg’s Jewish Film Archive, which holds around 10,000 films documenting Jewish life in communities all over the world, arguably exist to make the facts and the testimony of witnesses more immutable.

This brings us to the limits of representation. In collecting and documenting evidence, let alone storing and presenting it, a hermeneutic or interpretative act is necessarily involved. Moreover, as books are printed, films made and stories told, those suffering are objectified by the author and the audience. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag makes another of her eloquent dissertations on the subject of images and war: “Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticized if it seems ‘aesthetic’; that is, too much like art.”^v These limits are more problematic for representation than ever, yet Almond made an unusual move in *Night + Fog* as he uncannily sidestepped both its documentary and aestheticising compulsions while sitting somewhere between the two. Almond’s photographs of Norilsk for instance, were carefully pared back to show only stark outlines of trees, roads and tracks: black on white and white on black. Presenting hardly any evidence, the images spoke the dialect of the graphic object, so, while politically loaded in reference to Oswiecim’s mining history and the extraction of salt to produce rubber during the German occupation, the shots remained visually distanced.

Where a depiction of human loss would have employed devices of illustration, showing us bodies or faces, Almond drew a neat circle around two modes of description (words and images) and left it void.

A blank archive is probably not the best way to remember four million dead people, and this work could have easily offered another series of empty metaphors. Yet the vacant constructs of *Night + Fog* were equivalent to the relation I have to the missing and transfigured bodies that the bus stops once sheltered. Because there are other ghosts at the station: those that lived in Oświęcim prior to German occupation; the 6,028,000 Polish who perished during the War; those who were incarcerated and died in Auschwitz, of whom the first of many were Polish; and those that have lived and suffered in the aftermath since.^{vi} In

a kind of collective human transport system, the mourning is for a network of lost souls from many times, and if, as Agamben suggests, we can be silent we might be able to hear the remnants of a voice at the station.

Hans Werner Holzwarth will publish a book on Almond's *Terminus* in September this year.

Lily Hibberd is an artist and writer who lives in Melbourne.

ⁱ Quoted from the *Night + Fog* media release.

ⁱⁱ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the witness and the archive*, Zone Books, New York, 1999, p.13.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*

^{iv} On the Nizkor Project website, according to Harmon and Drobnicki, estimates range, between 800,000 and five million people. <http://nizkor.org/features/techniques-of-denial/appendix-2-01.html> – accessed 01/08/07

^v Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin, London, 2003, p.76.

^{vi} "...many Poles died in the extermination camps too. The first non-German prisoners at Auschwitz were Poles, who constituted the largest number of inmates there until 1942, when the Jew became the largest group." Richard C. Lukas, *The Forgotten Holocaust The Poles under German Occupation 1939-1944*, Hippocrene Books, New York, 1986, p.38.