

Why is it Important – Today –
to Show and Look at Images of
Destroyed Human Bodies?



I will try to clarify, in eight points, why it's important – today – to look at images of mutilated human bodies like those I have used and incorporated in various works such as *Superficial Engagement* (2006), *Concretion* (2006), *The Incommensurable Banner* (2007), *Ur-Collage* (2008), *Das Auge* (2008), *Crystal of Resistance* (2011), *Touching Reality* (2012), *Collage-Truth* (2012), *Easycollage* (2014) and *Pixel-Collage* (2016).

1. Origin

The pictures of destroyed human bodies were taken by non-photographers. Most of them were taken by witnesses, passers-by, soldiers, security or police officers, rescuers or first-aid workers. The origin of the images is unclear and often unverifiable; there is no source, whatever we believe a source to be. This unclear provenance and this unverifiability reflect today's uncertainty. This is what I am interested in. Often the origin is not guaranteed – but what can be

guaranteed in our world today, and how can 'under guarantee' still make sense? These images can be downloaded from the Internet; they have the status of testimony and were placed online by their authors for many different reasons. Furthermore, the origin of these images is not indicated; sometimes it is confused, with an unclear, perhaps even manipulated or stolen address, as is often true of many things on the Internet and in social media these days. This is something that confronts us every day. The uncertain provenance is one of the reasons why – nowadays – it's important to look at and display such images.

2. Redundancy

The images of destroyed human bodies are important in terms of their redundancy. What's redundant is that such a vast amount of images of destroyed human bodies exists today. Redundancy here isn't repetition of the same thing because it's always another human body that has been

destroyed and as such appears to be redundant. But it's not about images – it's about human bodies, about the human, the picture of whom is a witness. The images are redundant because the fact that human beings are being destroyed is redundant. Redundancy is important here. I want to treat it as something important, and I want to see this redundancy as a form. We don't want to accept the redundancy of such images because we don't want to accept the redundancy of cruelty toward humans. This is why it's important to look at and display images of destroyed human bodies in their very redundancy.

3. Invisibility

In today's newspapers, magazines and TV news, we rarely see images of destroyed bodies because they are hardly ever shown. These pictures are non-visible and invisible: the assumption is that they will hurt the viewer's sensitivities or only satisfy voyeurism, and the justification is to protect us from this threat. But this invisibility isn't harmless. The invisibility is the strategy of supporting, or at least not discouraging, the war effort. It's about making war acceptable and its effects commensurable, as was expressed by, for example, Donald Rumsfeld, former US Secretary of Defense (2001–06): 'Death has the tendency to encourage a depressing view of war.' But are there really any views of war which aren't depressing? Looking at and showing images of mutilated human bodies is a way of campaigning against war and its justification and propaganda. Since 9/11, this phenomenon of invisibility has been reinforced in the West. Refusal to accept this invisibility as a given fact or as a 'precautionary measure' is why it's important to look at such images.

Thomas Hirschhorn,
Pixel-Collage n°14,
2016, 33 × 45 cm,
prints, tape,
transparent sheet.



Thomas Hirschhorn,
Pixel-Collage n°7,
2016, 332 × 490 cm,
prints, tape,
transparent sheet.

Thomas Hirschhorn,
Pixel-Collage n°13,
2016, 43 × 44 cm,
prints, tape,
transparent sheet.

4. Tendency to iconism

The tendency to 'iconism' still exists to this day. 'Iconism' is the habit of 'selecting', 'choosing' or 'finding' the image that 'stands out', the image that is 'the big one', the image that 'says more', the image that 'counts more' than the others. In other words, the tendency towards 'iconism' is the tendency to 'highlight' something; it's the old, traditional procedure of favouring and imposing, in an authoritarian way, a hierarchy. This is not a declaration of importance towards something or somebody, but a declaration of importance towards others. The goal is to establish a common importance, a common weight, a common measure. But the 'iconism tendency' and 'highlighting' also have the effect of avoiding the existence of differences, the non-iconic and the non-highlighted.

In the field of war and conflict images, this leads to choosing the 'acceptable' for others. It's the 'acceptable' image that stands for another image, for all other images, for something else, and perhaps even for a non-image.

This image or icon has to be, of course, correct, good, right, permitted, chosen – the consensual image. This is what makes it manipulation. One example is the much discussed image (even by art historians) of the Situation Room in Washington during the killing of Bin Laden by the Navy SEALs in 2011. I refuse to accept this image as an icon; I reject its 'iconism', and I reject the fact that this image (and this goes for all other 'icons') stands for anything other than itself. Struggling against the 'iconism tendency' is the reason why looking at images of destroyed bodies is important.

5. Reduction to facts

In today's world of facts, information, opinion and comments, much is reduced to being factual. Fact is the new 'golden calf' of journalism, and journalists want to give it the assurance and guarantee of veracity. But I'm not interested in the verification of a fact.

I'm interested in truth, not a verified fact or the 'correct information' of a journalistic story. The truth I'm interested in resists facts, opinions, comments and journalism. Truth is irreducible; therefore the images of destroyed human bodies are irreducible and resist factuality. I don't deny facts and factuality, but I want to oppose the texture of facts today. The habit of reducing things to facts is a comfortable way to avoid touching truth, and resisting this tendency corresponds to the dynamics which lead to touching truth. Unconditional acceptance of facts is intended to impose on us factual information as 'the measure', instead of looking and seeing with our own eyes. I want to see with my own eyes. Resistance to today's world of facts is what makes it important to look at such images.

6. Victim syndrome

Looking at images of mutilated human bodies is important because it can contribute to an understanding that the incommensurable act is not the looking; what is incommensurable is that destruction has happened in the first place – that a human, a human body, has been destroyed, indeed, that an incommensurable number of human beings have been destroyed. It is important – more than anything else – to understand this. It's only by being capable of touching this incommensurable act that I can resist the suggestive question: Is this a victim or not? And whose victim? Or is this perhaps a killer, a torturer? Perhaps it's not a victim at all? Perhaps this mutilated human body shouldn't be regarded or counted as a victim? Classifying destroyed human bodies as victims or non-victims is an attempt to make them commensurable instead of thinking that all these bodies are the incommensurable. The victim syndrome wants me to give a response, an explanation, a reason to the incommensurable and finally to declare who 'the innocent' is. The only surviving terrorist in the Mumbai killings in 2008 declared to

the court that sentenced him to death: 'I don't think I am innocent.' I think the incommensurable in this world has no reason, no explanation, and no response – beforehand or afterwards. In this incommensurable world, I have to reject the commensurability of accepting classification as victim or non-victim. I do not want to be neutralised by anything which wants to make the world commensurable. *I refuse to explain and to excuse everything because of its context. I do not want to be neutralised by 'the context'.* Looking at images of destroyed human bodies is important because I don't want to give up in response to the victim syndrome.

7. Irrelevance of quality

These pictures – because they were taken by witnesses – don't have any photographic quality. I am interested by this. It is the confirmation that, under conditions of urgency, 'quality' is not necessary. I have always believed in 'quality = no, energy = yes'. There is no aesthetic approach here beyond the objective to capture the image. Concerns of quality are irrelevant when facing the incommensurable. This is shown by images of destroyed bodies. No technical skill is needed. No photographer is needed. The argument of 'photographic quality' is the argument of those who stand apart, aren't present, and who, on behalf of the 'quality' argument, express their distance and their attempt to be the supervisor. But there is no supervising anymore; what is 'needed' is to be a witness, to be there, to be here and to be here now, to be present, to be present at the 'right time' at the 'right place'. Most images are taken with small cameras, smartphones or mobile phones. They match our way of witnessing 'today's everything' and 'today's nothing' in daily life and making it 'public'. The irrelevance of quality of these images is an implicit critique of 'embedded' journalism, including photo-journalism. This irrelevance of quality is what makes it important to look at such images.



Thomas Hirschhorn,
Pixel-Collage n°5,
2016, 330 × 507 cm,
prints, tape,
transparent sheet.

Thomas Hirschhorn,
Pixel-Collage n°16,
2016, 45 × 47 cm,
prints, tape,
transparent sheet.

8. Detachment through 'hypersensitivity'

I am sensitive and I want to be sensitive, and at the same time I want to be alert. I don't want to stand aside; I don't want to look away. Sometimes when viewers are looking at images of destroyed human bodies, I hear them saying: 'I can't bear to look at this, I'm too sensitive.' This is a way of keeping a comfortable, narcissistic and exclusive distance from today's reality, from the world. From our world, the unique and only world. The discourse of sensitivity – which is actually 'hypersensitivity' – is about retaining one's comfort, calm and luxury. Distance is only taken by those who – with their own eyes – won't confront the incommensurable of reality. Distance is never a gift; it's something taken by a very few to keep their exclusivity intact. 'Hypersensitivity' is the opposite of the 'non-exclusive public'.

In order to confront the world, to struggle with its chaos, its incommensurability, in order to coexist and to cooperate in this world and with the other, I need to confront reality without distance. Therefore it's necessary to distinguish 'sensitivity', which means to me being 'awake' and 'attentive', from 'hypersensitivity', which means 'self-enclosure' and 'exclusion'. To resist 'hypersensitivity', it is important to look at those images of mutilated human bodies.

Thomas Hirschhorn, 2012



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Pixel-Collage n°15*, 2016, 30 × 55 cm, prints, tape, transparent sheet.