

The University of British Columbia
Department of Art History, Visual Art, and Theory
John O'Brian

ARTH 543
Spring Term 2010-11
Tuesday, 2:00-5:00 pm

Photography, Modernity, Violence

Course Description

Modernity has multiple attributes. The speeding up of time and the compression of space are two of them, and secularization and an orientation towards the future are two more. Close to the heart of modernity, however, are the cult of technology, including technologies of communication, and processes of violence. We inhabit an age of photography as much as we inhabit an age of violence. The two are inseparable. "Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death," writes Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a book deliberating on the hurt and spectacle of war and disaster. For Roland Barthes, cameras are "clocks for seeing" and photographs superimpose present reality on the past. His book *Camera Lucida* is a meditation on the relationship of photographic representation and trauma.

This course will examine photography's engagement with genocide, warfare, nuclear threat, terrorism and other manifestations of violence. It will explore the ways in which violence functions as both image and act. To what degree does the play of representation override historical events – or vice versa? How should the different subject positions of spectators contemplating images of violence be understood and theorized (this was a question that Sontag repeatedly asked herself)? What range of strategies have been deployed by photographers and photo-based artists to intervene in an image-world that is both violent and globalized? A list topics addressed in the course might include the exhibition of atrocity; terror and simulation; monuments and memorialization; the militarization of urban space; economies of spectacle; war and the state. But the list could go on. There will be a field trip in March to Montreal. We will meet with faculty and students at Concordia University and visit art collections and artists. Because ARTH 543 is a graduate seminar in Canadian art and photography, attention will be paid to Canadian images and texts where relevant.