

THE WHOLE WORLD BLIND

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BY ROXANNE VARZI

To experience the full effect of the installation please use a blindfold, or at the very least close your eyes and do not open them until you are done listening. Listen in a gallery-like space or library (where you will be safe while blindfolded) through an mp3 player or on a computer. And use the best headphones available. Wait to read the essay until after you have heard the piece and formed your own opinions. When you are through, please leave comments.



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The Whole World Blind



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The Whole World Blind is a self-contained ethnographic sound performance/ installation/ soundwalk. ¹ Blindfolded and wearing headphones, the audience listens to a narrative loop of

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Germany, in December 2011 and at SomArts in San Francisco, California, in 2012 in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association.

According to soundwalk artist Andra McCartney, “Soundwalking is a creative and research practice that involves listening and sometimes recording while moving through a place at a walking pace.”² *The Whole World Blind* was recorded binaurally while walking through a major metropolitan museum, and the resulting soundscape was used without any added effects to create an atmosphere akin to a gallery, where the work is meant to be experienced. The audience simultaneously experiences the sound of the recorded museum and that of the “gallery” that they are standing in, which blends the experiences and allows for the recorded narrative to feel like it is occurring in the present, thus creating a sense of immediacy. As artist Janet Cardiff has remarked,

One thing that interests me is the intimacy of sound. We have much more filtration when we look. We turn off. Sound comes immediately and it’s hard to stop it. It enters your consciousness much more easily than the visual. If you create the sound of something before people see it, they’ll see the object more clearly.³

Departing from the idea that seeing is believing and moving toward the notions offered in Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* and Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*—namely that visuals often mislead if not outright lead to complacency, and even engender disaster—*The Whole World Blind* aims to “see” visuals, to understand them and produce them in the mind’s eye through a narrative description from recent and ongoing wars without “looking,” and implicitly asks: Do war photographs do more harm than good? Do we need explicit photographs of suffering and death in order for us to act, to speak out against the violence we see, to donate money or shelter to those we see suffering, in short, to respond actively and positively to the world around us? Or, do these photographs incite more violence than they can ever relieve? What happens when they get moved from newspapers to art galleries?

As part of my research, I went to see a number of war photography shows. At one, where there was no clear indication as to whether the dead were civilians or soldiers, nor from which side they came, I asked the photographer at his public lecture at a major museum why the Geneva Conventions in regard to the ethics of photojournalism during war (in this instance, filming civilian dead) were being so blatantly disregarded. He replied, “I don’t care about morality. People can judge this in a hundred years.” But this wasn’t a Robert Capa show where the audience was looking at visual documents of war years after the war took place; this was a show regarding current events. When war photography enters a museum it elevates journalism’s depictions of suffering into art, and unlike Capa’s photos, now it is happening simultaneously with war rather than years later after the victims’ family and friends are no longer alive to see their dead become museum objects. Or as Sontag says, “Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it ... or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be.”⁴

*I'm not sure if the clicking that bookends the gallery scenes is meant to be the common personal people-counter clicker that stands at the doorway pretending not to implicate you as he does. Anyway I felt counted and thus implicated in another way additional to the second-person narrative.*⁵

This brings us back to the original question, What will we do with this visual information? If we do nothing, are we then simply guilty of voyeurism? Once these images begin to inhabit our minds, especially at the ever-increasing rate afforded by digital media, we move farther and faster away from any intimate connection to the subject depicted, the individual, the human being. Then what do we do with this excess, with these ocular ghosts that float and clot our vision? Are we dealing with these war photographs as art because we can't deal with the real issue, which is that we have death, destruction, and blood on our hands? Can we really alleviate pain by looking at it?⁶ What are the confines of social responsibility, and what are the limits of the visual?

Theorists of photography have described and warned us of the problem of the proliferation of violent images, but often without offering a solution. While researching images in Iran, I encountered a possible solution deep within the Sufi mystical traditions that view worldly images as potentially dangerous and misleading and "inner images" as vehicles for liberation from the violence of the material world. Mystics urge us to go within, to cultivate silence, beauty, and compassion. The first step toward liberation from the violence of the image is to become aware of the place these photographs have inhabited in our mind's eye, and then to somehow meditate them away. I wasn't sure if it could help us relieve the ocular overload, but I wanted to give the meditative possibility a try. My method is akin to hypnosis: "lull and shock," in stark contrast to "shock and awe."⁷ It's my contention that the greatest pinnacle of vision emerges from blindness, just as the loudest message is born in silence. To this end, the listener must feel the visual, what Roland Barthes calls the *punctum*, and to my surprise they do.

A listener commented:

It puts your mind to work, being forced to experience actual feelings about the events—to visualize with your mind and go through every detail without seeing but instead feeling.

On some unconscious level I wanted to reclaim or play into this move of journalistic evidence becoming art by using art as a medium for my ethnographic critique. I made a very definite choice to have the work be made as if it were taking place in a museum. The original idea—which came from my reading of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*—was to have the audience in a black box where they hear a description of a series of photographs.⁸ It's to Woolf that I, that Sontag, that we all, owe credit for the first true critique of war's visual representation.⁹ In this critique, Woolf is careful not to show any of the photographs that she writes about for fear of inciting more violence, more anger, and more volunteers for war. (Sontag also avoids photographs in her book on war photography.) Similarly, my aim is not to

to describe but not show war photographs so that one gets the information, without the aesthetic cult object produced by a photographer who is aiming for a museum piece. To this end I do not identify the individual artists or journalists who took/made the pictures or those who were “framed.” In this way I’m removing the photographs from their cult of artist-produced personality and political specificity.¹⁰

A listener commented:

A catalog of images remembered from newspapers or the evening TV news program—we keep them in our memory like a checklist. Hearing rather than glancing at our checklist sharpens us again.

**WHAT CAN WE SENSE ABOUT
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WAR—WHEN WE
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Leaving a notebook for the audience to comment, anonymously or not, on the photographs speaks to how iconic these particular photographs have become in the past few years. Are these photos recognizable, and do they have the same effect on the viewer when we remove the visual, but keep the cultural frame intact? What can we sense about mortality and morality—about war—when we allow ourselves to be blinded? When we are forced to listen and imagine? When we stop privileging visuality and heighten our sense of sound? Can it tame the violent subject matter of the art? Will the blindfolds create a sense of imbalance, of vulnerability that will give the subjects in the photographs equal footing with those who are watching them? In short, can they change the power dynamic between the viewer and the viewed? Can blindness lead us to a new kind of vision that would open a space for peace, love, and beauty? The sound work loops through a history of the present moment to bring us back to our original question: is seeing believing?

A listener commented:

The disjunction between the blindfold as a primary instrument of torture and as an enabling “blind”

narrative (i.e., the responses to photography) resulted in a disabling of the spoken as well as of the seen ... I “wobbled” in my senses.

This work is, foremost, a social act, a form of activism; the hope is that the work will educate through awareness, knowledge, and action. This work had to be action-based, performative, and it had to involve the audience. The piece is about “showing” people what they don’t see, and in order to do this I had to use unconventional methods. Many have already beautifully theorized the relationship between seeing and violence and come to the conclusion that images lie and lull us into complacency; we’ve read this, but have we really felt it, and will doing so make a difference—will engaging the senses and the body in a new way make the point stronger?

A listener commented:

The experience taught me how easy it is to be complacent with violence. Even with all my other senses turned off I had to concentrate to really see what was being described in my head. It was unsettling, even though I didn’t know exactly what images were being described, the images that my own mind produced scared me ... when the cell phones were going off I stopped paying attention to the description. It made me think of how all the distractions of my day-to-day life allow me to escape, be blind to the violence affecting other parts of the world.

Here ethnography is an interactive art, a means to an end, the end being the kind of activism that enlightens and makes one think about the images we consume without “thought.”¹¹

In an interview, Cardiff mentioned that she had read that

...babies don’t have the same sensual differentiation that adults do, in that visual and auditory stimulation create the same response for them, and that they hear, feel and see odors as much as smell and see sounds. Perhaps when the differentiation between senses finally develops in a child there is also a new alienation between their body and the world, this split that you refer to between our inside thoughts and our outside perceptions, between location and events.¹²

According to Cardiff, we live in two parallel realities: the images given to us—by the media or our surrounding environment—and a sense of things that are happening far outside of our bodies. What happens when the visual deluge is over—those descriptions, those things that we have seen continue to echo through our minds? When there is censorship, when the body is paralyzed? When there are no cameras, only sound?

And why use found sound? When anthropologist Jean Rouch showed his film *Hippopotamus Hunt* to the hunters that were its subject (a practice he called “shared anthropology”), they objected to the music he added to hunting scenes on the grounds that it would scare away the hippo.

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Perhaps it's the hippos that led me to stick entirely to found sound in this work. Why not, for example, use the sounds of war: loud bangs and bombs? They're too universal, too obvious; they move us into an all-too-familiar realm where we can easily stop listening and return to a rote understanding of our environment.¹³ Besides, everything seems different when we hear about atrocities from a soft voice, a woman's voice.¹⁴ Cardiff explains, "At the same time the recorded voice is removed and has a sense of past that a real voice doesn't, so it can actually get closer to the audience through that removal. They feel safe being intimate with a removed voice." There is immediacy, an authenticity that is lacking in what is supposed to be the most real medium—the visual medium—that can only be overcome by the voice.

The binaural recording lends a strong sense of the museum curator standing right next to the blindfolded listener. Like a missile that comes without any hint as to where from, except for that deafening whistle, a binaural recording completely disorients a person's usual frame of reference. According to a statement Cardiff made about her piece *The Forty Part Motet*, "With forty speakers the sound waves bombard your body from all round you, creating a complete physical affect. The sound is able to come into your body in such a way that you can't refuse it."¹⁵ Cardiff says the binaural technique allows a closeness of the sound like an audio bridge between the visual, physical world and one's body. For her it's about connection rather than alienation, "because sound does come into your unconscious more directly than visual information."¹⁶

Listeners concurred:

It was a complete mind trip.

I forgot I was wearing headphones and immediately looked in the direction from which I heard the noises and all this despite the fact that I was wearing a blindfold the whole time.

A lack of sight heightens awareness of self.

... disorienting and captivating.

... scared and afraid of not being able to run ... the images in my imagination were becoming more and more real.

The sense of physicality is heightened not only because of a lack of visual and sound referents to war but also due to the tactility of the long black blindfolds reminiscent of those worn by prisoners of war, coupled with the binaural audio that comes at the listener like a missile and in a space that feels like a bomb shelter or a prison. These all contribute to a sense of the psychological and physical space of war without using the usual visual and auditory tactics.

The visual space one enters before putting on the blindfold sets up a sense of emptiness—be it the emptiness a meditator aspires to or that of a prison cell or an abandoned war trench. I didn't have any expectations or demands of the gallery space, save that it be quiet and safe. And yet, by chance, the first space in Long Beach (where the whole idea of Soundwalk was to take over a large urban space for a night) was derelict and looked bombed-out from disuse. The spaces in both California and Berlin had nothing on the walls and were small enough that not much more than a small crowd could fit comfortably. In Long Beach, there was a line out the door all night, heightening the sense of an event, whereas Berlin was quiet and intimate. And yet the comments from both audiences were very similar because it was quite clear that the physical space was completely overtaken by the psychic space.

One thing that photography can't do that sound can is produce a rhythm. Cinema does this through sound and moving images. It wasn't something I thought would effect the gallery-goers when I wrote the piece, and yet it's obvious from the poetic responses that people were responding to the rhythm of the piece.

Listeners commented:

... Soon the Malaise dissipated and I can appreciate the aural artistry, visions coming and going from my mind like a butterfly lazily fluttering about a meadow, quite beautiful.

Voices describing

the Middle East

phone ringing

colors

a woman asking me to

touch a wall just

interesting

Inspiration, my little world; deceive me, calm, thoughts, sadness, insightful ... This is your very own creation ...

Waiting, waiting for the bell. The signal to breathe, to open, to focus on the words, to enjoy the pure sound of the bell.

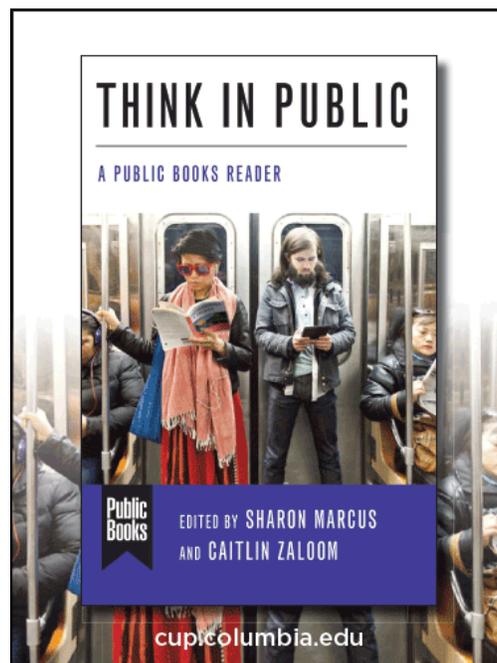
One person simply commented: *image of dark*. Which may just say it all. 

1. Excerpts of this essay have been published previously as an artist statement. [←](#)

2. Andra McCartney, "Soundwalking: Creating Moving Environmental Sound Narratives," in *The Oxford Handbook*

6. In the documentary *War Photographer*, about James Natchwey, we do see how his photo-essay on an impoverished family in the global south elicits an intense monetary response from readers. This is a photo-essay with an ethnographic element of a life story, with names and places and details of daily life that make the people “real.” ↵
7. Cardiff uses this technique in her walking pieces. I’ve always loved her work, but wasn’t necessarily thinking about it consciously while developing my piece. It wasn’t until I read her interview in *Bomb Magazine* (2002) while writing this critical response well after my work was made that I saw so many similarities, which mainly have to do with the binaural technique. ↵
8. It was recorded in one day by my colleague Vincent Olivieri and his students without fanfare at one of my favorite urban museums. ↵
9. Sontag opens up *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) with a quote from Woolf’s *Three Guineas*. ↵
10. As an anthropologist I found it important to work with ethnographic specificity; to this end I used only photographs I observed on display in situ. This way I could watch the photographs being consumed as works of art, as news, as evidence. My field research was at photography exhibits of war (and suffering) in Berlin in 2005, 2007, and 2008 at the Martin-Gropius-Bau and Helmut Newton Museum; The Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2008; and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, 2010. ↵
11. Atom Egoyan, “[Interview with Janet Cardiff](#),” *BOMB Magazine*, Spring 2002. ↵
12. There’s no pun here. We are literally dealing with light and dark—photography depends on it, as do we. ↵
13. From my book *Warring Souls: Youth, Media and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (2006): “The danger of images is their apparent ability to take over thought, and as Plato said, to deceive. This is a theme that resonates both in the Quran and in philosophies of modernity. The prophet Mohammed says, ‘Remove it from my sight, for its pictures are still coming to me in my prayers.’ Centuries later, Benjamin, quoting Duhamel, says, ‘My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.’” ↵
14. Or from an unexpected guilty voice like the ones heard at the trial of the Winter Soldiers. ↵
15. Karen Messer, “[Creating worlds, installation artist Janet Cardiff destabilizes vision, sculpts sound & redefines reality](#),” *Assent Magazine*, accessed March 20, 2013. ↵
16. See note 11 above. ↵

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