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Photographing the Invisible: The Absent Subject and Otherwise Impossible Sites of Experience

"People forget that I want to disappoint…I want to disappoint the expectations of the one who waits to be amazed. When you make a decision someone is going to be disappointed because they think they know you. It is only then that the poetic can happen." [1]
- Gabriel Orozco (October Files, Gabriel Orozco)

In this thesis, I will explicate, connect, and theoretically ground the elements that comprise the arc of my photography and video-based work. The principal components of my work include: leveraging medium-specific myths and histories about photography and video, investigating problematics involved in visually representing what can be felt but not seen, engaging myths about site, constructing an otherwise impossible vantage and experiential site for the viewer vis-à-vis the camera and presentation apparatus, representing the body through its absence, and the performative element of enacting a conceptual framework. I will discuss these elements of my work using my most recent video project, *72 Hours*, as well as my previous photographic work, *Thank G-d for Mississippi*. In positioning my work as inherently pivoting on simultaneous presence and absence, I will interrogate the stakes of attempting to represent the sublime in contemporary photography.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TWO PRIMARY BODIES OF WORK

My most recent project, *72 Hours* depicts the home of a family member using footage that I recorded in the ritual seventy-two hours between her death and burial. The piece is comprised of five video projections, each depicting one room in the house. In each projection, the four walls of the room are sutured panoramically into a single image. Documenting each wall of each room exposes the drive to evidence, record, arrest, and repeat the finite, ad infinitum. The very absence of a body in the image becomes the subject of the work as much as the space itself. These videos feature the barely discernable movement of objects or light in spaces full of belongings. The movement differentiates the projected images from being still photographs. Though not definitively, the projected presentation has a greater association with film than photographs, which are more typically printed on a fixed and permanent substrate. However, the formal tactics used in the images themselves is very photographic, especially the single unmoving vantage point, appearance of stillness until movement is detected, and the deadpan straight-on perspective. Neither completely still nor moving, the projections inhabit a space between photography and video and serve as a metaphor for the interstitial period

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[1] Gabriel Orozco and Yve Alain Bois, *October Files: Gabriel Orozco*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2009), rear cover.

after death but before burial.

In my previous body of work, titled *Thank G-d for Mississippi* I returned to my home state of West Virginia to photograph the area's most common sites of fatal or near fatal jumps. West Virginia is continually ranked one away from the bottom, just after Mississippi, on most socio-economic measures, including high rate of suicide. As a result of this ranking, many West Virginians commonly invoke the phrase "thank g-d for Mississippi."

Using a boom to suspend my camera ten feet over the edges of these sites, I photographed the view seen only by individuals once they have jumped. Through the mechanics of the camera, these photographs reconstruct an otherwise impossible site of experience: the camera is repositioned as the traumatized subject re-enacting the compulsion to escape life. It serves to collapse the subjectivities of the jumper, artist, and viewer through the re-embodiment of the jumper's gaze. This series of photographs incorporate and depict elements of destruction and sublime geographical beauty as bound dichotomy of attraction and repulsion.

In both of my recent works (*72 Hours* and *Thank G-d for Mississippi*) the connotations, histories and expectations imbued in the mediums of photography and video are pivotal in the conception and understanding of the work. I view medium specificity as a layer of information to be leveraged and questioned. In the following section I will give some background on the most relevant facets of photographic and cinematic connotation relating to my work: first, leveraging the assumption that the photographic apparatus documents "truth," in order to represent subject matter beyond human vision; second, the relationship between photography and death, film and liveness and both mediums inherent presentation of both presence and absence; third, the related construction of otherwise impossible site and vantage using the camera and projection apparatus; and finally the relationship between cinematic spectatorship and the absent body.

PHOTOGRAPHIC TRUTH CLAIMS AND PHOTOGRAPHING THE INVISIBLE

The association between photography and objective truth has been developed and fortified since the medium's inception in 1827. The inherent problematic of photographic truth claims has an equally long history. Even before a photographic image could be fixed to any material base, the camera apparatus (the camera lucida) was being used to assist in the drawing process to create renderings that more closely resembled perceptual reality. The inception of the fixed photographic image, though conceived in a whirlwind of multiple inventions, was in large a product of the scientific community, and imbued the medium with a connotation of objectivism and truth. A prime example is the work of William Henry Fox Talbot, who saw the potential of photographic processes to record botanical and other specimens as a revolutionary advancement for scientific documentation. The one-to-one relationship between object and image is inherent in the contact printing process of his early Calotypes. Talbot's early inscription in his published "Pencil of Nature" sheds light on how photographic truth claims were established around the erasure of human representational hand:

"The plates of the present work are impressed by the agency of Light alone, without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil. They are the sun-pictures themselves, and not, as some persons have imagined, engravings in imitation."[2]

Even with the advancement of the negative or digital file as an inter-layer between subject and final image, photographs and film are still thought viewed as direct indexes of the visible.

It is not surprising then, that as they developed, photography, and later, inventions in light sensitive mediums such as video have become synonymous with the archive, the document, and evidence, ultimately fortifying these mediums with a claim on truth. However, photography and film have never been any less a representation that their artistic counterparts in painting and drawing. Claims of photographic truth and objectivism subvert both the inherently representational and subjective elements of photography as well as the notion that the photographic apparatus is inherently politicized and motivated. Photography and film are inherently subtractive and therefore subjective. Photographic truth claims, though they do not go unquestioned, play a large part in our understanding of the images we see.

Leveraging the prevailing association between the photographic image and truth or evidence, photography has frequently been used as a means to record the para-visual— items or actions that the human eye cannot easily discern without the aid of a tool. In a prime application of this, Eadward Muybridge photographed human and animal movement patterns at one-second intervals, dissecting the motion into visual diagrams that revealed information not perceptible to the human eye. This early example of photography's scientific employment revealing the invisible supported a parallel application of the medium in early spirit photography. Early spirit photographs often used technical limitations of the camera, appearing in other applications as undesirable aberrations, to show the existence of walking spirits. This is seen most evidently in the use of motion blur from a long exposure, which results in a translucent and luminous figure. Commonly, the ghostly figures were depicted as moving through a space, represented by light trails and motion-blur crossing the frame. The depiction of motion became central to conveying the existence of the spirits between death and life, already dead but still walking on earth. These early spirit photographs (as well as their later iterations) relied heavily on the historical association of photography as a direct index of visual truth in order to lend credence to existence of paranormal activity.

Similar to early spirit photographs, my video installation, *72 Hours*, leverages photographic truth claims in its proposition of representing what is felt but not seen in the home of the deceased directly after death. Given the absence of a body in the frame, this allows the logically improbable movement of objects to read as evidence or at least reference the presence of a spirit. The use of movement to as the element signifying signs of life echoes the use of traces of movement in early spirit photographs to represent the

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[2] Helmut Gernsheim, *A Concise History of Photography*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), page 40. see also: Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (New York: Da Capo, 1969).

figure as living. Though the presented subject's death is a matter of scientific record, their continued presence is shown through traces of movement. As opposed to photographic representations of movement such as light trails, *72 Hours* depicts the movement of objects moving in real-time. A few examples are the drip of a faucet and a figure's shadow passing across a wall. The experience of viewing literal movement affirms the relationship of what is projected to our own lived experience, lending credence to these elements as signs of life. In the same breath, these gestures also reference the history of falsifying the para-visual through the photographic apparatus and can be seen as a mechanized attempt to represent signs of life outside logical understanding. Given the conceptual framework of the seventy-two hours after death, myths of photographic truth position the videos as evidence for or against the presence of a subject between life and death. This serves as an entry point for questioning the proposition of representing what cannot be seen.

In *Thank G-d for Mississippi* the photographs similarly engage the proposition of representing the imagined vantage and experience of a person, this time directly before death. The work draws on an expectation that the camera can act as a divining machine, given the knowledge that the site is the location of past trauma. The camera can detect visual residue, even if the eye is unable. This concept relies heavily on the histories of spirit photography and scientific use of photography for visually depicting subject matter invisible to the human eye. Photographic truth claims lend credence to what is shown in the final images, as evidentiary depictions of the view before death.

CONCEPTIONS OF SITE

Both my photographic work – *Thank G-d for Mississippi* – and my video work – *72 Hours* - engage myths about sites. In referencing a site, I am referring both to the literal geographic location – as in the coordinates at which someone jumped off a cliff, or the specific architectural interior of a family member's house – and to a psychological or perceptual site given a specific traumatic occurrence. In short, I am engaging the mythology surrounding a specific location alongside expectations of how these sites disclose or reveal residue of trauma.

In *Thank G-d for Mississippi*, the photographs question the expectations of sites where someone commit suicide. The sublime natural beauty of the locations depicted stand in contrast to the morbidity of contemplating death. The expectation of sites of trauma containing some visible residue is also questioned. Further, the photographs are positioned as an impossible view of the geographic site seen only right before death. The depiction in the photographs of this last view as a still downward vantage of the landscape converses with mythos around what a person might see right before death – hypothesized in infinite iterations including examples such as seeing ones life passing before them. In the case of these photographs the flash of life described in the myth is echoed in the photographic arrest of a moment now past.

Complicating the expectations projected onto sites of trauma such as the locations for fatal jumps, the sites themselves are de-stabilized in the methodology for locating them. The images were photographed at locations that, according to state records, are the most

common sites for jumpers. Once identified, the sites were located according to local knowledge and hearsay. The confluence of statistical data about the sites and oral hearsay troubles the projection of any traumatic residue given the inherent potential for error in this methodology. One example is the instructions for reaching Green Hole: "Go over the iron bridge outside of Petersburg, after the turn off park on the right and walk through the path cut in the Rhododendron. You should reach a precipice." In photographing the sites I followed the oral directions exactly, with one image notably depicting a site improbable for jumping. My unstable mode of locating sites of trauma was a means for me to problematize photographic truth claims and destabilize mythology about a site of trauma as being fixed. The work situates the traces of trauma in a site as existing ambiguously between actually visible, and projections of the imaginary.

Not unlike *Thank G-d for Mississippi*, *72 Hours* proposes a site comprised of a physical location, but also locates the work in a specific position in time. The written statement dictates that the videos were recorded during the seventy-two hour period of time right after death. The time period immediately after death is generally mythologized by most cultures, but the specific time marker is a reference to Jewish doctrine. In Hebrew, the seventy-two hours after death is called Aninut. Jewish law distinguishes this specific seventy-two hour time period metaphysically as a suspension of time, and dictates a correlating suspension of most everyday activity. According to tradition, Aninut is a period in which the spirit still walks and mourners question the finite vs. infinite, moving vs. still. Regardless of faith, the proposition that the depicted interior is being portrayed during the ritualized period of time directly following death generates expectations on the side of the viewer. These expectations are comprised of projections of the viewer's own belief of what occurs to the deceased body during this time, in addition to how a physical site reveals or discloses visual traces of this body.

72 Hours continues to pose questions about the perception of trauma in a site initiated in my previous work. The conceptual framework is not evidently revealed until the viewer reads the statement located near the gallery exit. The variations of viewing experience range from those who come to the exhibition already aware that the videos depict a house right after someone has died, those who see the interior unaware of this framework, and those who see the work unaware and then revisit the work after reading the statement. The last experience most effectively questions the existence of visible traces of death or trauma in the actual house and further, in the projected representations of the house. Viewing the projected rooms before and after knowledge of their past further allows the viewer to questions how much of the experience of past trauma is due to the visible image in front of them and how much is due to their own projection. Does the depicted interior look different during the period directly following death than any other house on any given day?

DEATH AND LIVENESS, ABSENCE AND PRESENCE

The association between photography and death is well-trodden theoretical ground. Between Susan Sontag, and the alliterative trifecta of Baudrillard, Benjamin, and Barthes, the effects of photographic process in which a subject is arrested in a moment that is always already gone, has long been connected to the arrest occurring in death. Perhaps

most notable is Barthes' discussion of the relationship of death to photographic process in his canonical Camera Lucida:

"For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolute superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ('this-has-been'), the photograph suggests that it is already dead." [3]
— Roland Barthes (Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography)

In this citation as well as in his other writing, Barthes asserts that in presenting a subject that is alive or has been alive but is no longer present, the photograph frames the subject as dead. Barthes situates the photographic image as both present in our experience of it as an object and absent in the inherent understanding that the subject matter has been but is not longer. In cinematic parallel, the film scholar Christian Metz and others position the filmic image as present (moving in front of us) and absent (displaying something not literally present). Both mediums convey a simultaneous presence and absence of the subject matter as a result of the (medium specific) conditions of capturing a subject for later display. Grammatically speaking, photography and film operate in the past tense, while speaking in the present.

The moving image has often been distinguished from its still counterparts in reference to the term "liveness" This term has been used in film and television studies to refers to the immersive experience of "being there" which occurs when viewing a world moving before one's eyes. This experience is produced in large part through identification with the camera (a key component of Apparatus theory of the 70s). A key element that distinguishes "liveness" in the moving image from the similar operations of identification in still photography is the phenomenological experience of characters, objects and scenes moving in the filmic frame. The depiction of movement in one-to-one "real time" allows the viewer to experience the contents of the filmic frame as real and its characters living. In identifying with the camera, the viewer is implicated as the living gaze present and watching the depicted images as space as if they were there. Though photography and film inherently reference the has-been status of their subject matter, film uniquely invokes life through its ability to show movement and therefore index time passing.

The medium specific evocations of death, liveness, and simultaneous presence and absence, echo the central conceptual concerns of my most recent work, *72 Hours*. The nearly still video references multiple formal aspects of photography including deadpan, panorama, single unmoving perspective and the generally still image. In formally invoking photography, the work levies conceptual associations inherent in the medium, notable its finalizing and fixed position associated with death. The display of the image as a projection and the slight movements locate the work as video. Slight movements, such as the flapping of fabric on a pillow act like a metronome indexing the passage of time. Time passing is one of the most central and unchangeable conditions of life.

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[3] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), page 79.

Through the visible motion, the projections are legible as video and reference filmic "liveness," index time passing and implicate a living subject (either that of the absent body, the camera or the viewer). In inhabiting elements of both photography and video, the projections recall the paradox of representing time passing during a period when time is temporarily on hold. This paradox is highlighted by the looping projections, wherein night never comes and it is always the seventy-two hours after my family member has died. Existing in a formal gap between the two mediums, the piece invokes the conceptual associations of photography and video in order to represent the body of the deceased, which is similarly located in the liminal space between motion and stillness. Photographic and cinematic conditions of constructed absence and presence echoes the subject matter of the work – a body that is at once absent and present.

In *Thank G-d for Mississippi*, the photographs arrest time in the moment before the jumpers' deaths. The photograph perpetually depicts the view only possible after deciding to jump and meeting death. This work relies on the concepts outlined above, specifically the framework proposed by Roland Barthes aligning the photographic image with death. In Barthes' construct, this view is experienced as both continually present each time it is viewed, and already past because we understand the photographic moment as containing subject matter that has-been and is gone. In addition to being positioned as here and already gone via the inherent operations of the photograph, the subject matter (the jumper's gaze directly before death) mirrors the medium's operation. The jumping subject is represented in the decisive moment between life and death. However, in representing the moment after they have already decided to jump, there is no question that they are already dead. Further contorting time, the photographs propose a photographic future tense of "this-will-be" by positioning the viewer in the place of the jump. In *Thank G-d for Mississippi* the photographic tense of both here and already gone is amplified by the subject matter of these images, depicted before death but decidedly deceased.

APARATUS RECONSTRUCTS AN IMPOSSIBLE SITE

In my practice, I understand the camera, processing software, and projection apparatus as all highly motivated technologies imbued with ideology. Countering the normative functioning of these apparatuses to hide this ideology, I highlight the apparatus in an attempt to unsuppress the mediating qualities of these technologies. Further, I use the specific qualities of the apparatus to reconstruct an impossible site for the viewer, one that can only be experienced through the mechanics of camera and projection.

In *72 Hours*, video footage of each of the four walls of a room are stitched panoramically together using video editing software to reconstruct the room in two-dimensions. The seams between the walls vary in their execution from invisible to identifiable. Therefore the projected rooms fluctuate between seamless and noticeably stitched, positioning the images tenuously between immersive and reflective, allowing and denying entry into the projected spaces. This tenuous oscillation heightens the effect of a simultaneous there/here - presence and absence, identification and distancation – all through the construction of a projected site only possible via the apparatus.

The panoramic reconstruction of the space distorts the viewer's ability to understand and visually consume the rooms, as each projection connects walls of differing scales and perspectives. The seams between walls visually demarcate the problematic of rendering the three dimensional visible world in two dimensions. In addition to the distorted wide angle, the seams in the panoramic projections serve as visible residue of the camera apparatus and the mechanical process of representing. The imperfection of the panorama is an intentional highlighting of the constructed relationship between representation and apparatus. The visual reference to camera apparatus is not apolitical or unmotivated. In reference to photography, Vilhelm Flusser writes about the camera as an ideologically imbued apparatus (particularly in his book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*).[4] Jean-Louis Baudry takes up a similar position in his article "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus." Baudry asserts that the greater the erasure of the apparatus in the final product, the more this product is mediated by the apparatus and the ideology, which determines its functions. Baudry also links the invisibility of apparatus to a presumed neutrality vis-à-vis an association with science (and therefore truth). Baudry continues to unpack visibility of apparatus by asserting that the invisible seaming of the eye of the camera with the subject of the representation is what allows the viewer to identify with the subject.[5] By making the camera apparatus visible through the faulty suturing and wide-angle perspective, the videos in this piece prohibit easy identification, trouble the notion of scientific or photographic myths of truth, and generally present themselves as constructions outside the plausible realm of human vision.

The visual tactics used to re-construct each room are compounded by the installation comprised of 5 rooms of the house, wherein not only can the viewer see all four walls of a room at once, but can simultaneously see all five rooms at once, an intervention impossible without the intervention of the apparatus. As the walls are flattened in each room, the house itself is flattened unfolding on the gallery walls (in a means that rejects a one to one relationship between gallery wall and house wall)

In *Thank G-d for Mississippi*, the camera apparatus stands in as a re-embodiment of the suicidal subjects, depicting their gaze right before jumping. The boom apparatus that I used allows the camera to depict a vantage that is only attainable after a person has jumped. As with *72 Hours*, the apparatus is highlighted as depicting a view impossible for human vision, unless in this case, you have already decided to jump to your death. The finite, momentary time period that is captured with the photographic apparatus further constructs an impossible experience of rupturing time where the view printed in the final photograph arrests time in the moment before death. Through the mechanics of the camera, the viewer is presented with the view right before death frozen in repeat due to the photographic apparatus.

In this work the compulsion to escape life is mirrored in the compulsion to escape representation. Visual cues that might typically orient the viewer, such as distance and

[4] Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, (London: Reaktion, 2005).
[5] Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: a Film Theory Reader*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), pages 286-298.

perspective, foreground and background, are not given up readily. The thick gloss of the 3/4" plexi-glass face mounting flattens distinction between two and one hundred feet downward. The atypical downward vantage of the photographs confuses the typical vantage, which establishes the viewer in some variant of viewing what is in front of him as he faces forward. Though the images do contain legible elements of representation and are not complete abstractions, the disorienting formal gestures can be seen as jabs at the potency of photographic representation.

THE ABSENT BODY

Expectations associated with film spectatorship heavily affect the understanding of my work, particularly the expectation of having a visible human subject with whom to identify. In *72 Hours*, the very absence of a body becomes the subject of the work as much as the space itself. The relationship between the projected video format, the absence of human body, and the viewer's desire to have a body to identify with, is connected in part to the writings of Laura Mulvey[6] and Christian Metz.[7] (Laura Mulvey's canonical essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and Christian Metz's "The Imaginary Signifier.") According to both, the viewer desires identification with the camera apparatus and the protagonist of the film. According to Mulvey, the viewers' gaze and that of the apparatus are subverted to privilege the onscreen gaze of the protagonist. Using methods supported in Mulvey's article, these videos disrupt the viewer's desire to identify with a body on screen, and therefore deny the onscreen gaze (male or otherwise). This disrupts the cinematic expectation and allows for the visually absent subject to be re-constituted through the projection of the imagined body.

Similarly, in *Thank G-d for Mississippi*, the conceptual framework of the project implies a human subject that is not visible in the frame, that of the person or people who have jumped. Instead of depicting the individual person(s), the photographs depict the gaze of this absent subject. The photographs loosely adhere to the bounds of portrait photography in that their subject is still the jumper. There is precedence for this type of portraiture where the body is absent, such as Tammy Rae Carland's *Lesbian Beds*.[8] These images depict the beds of lesbians and construct the subject of the bed's owner/inhabitants using the visual cues present. My photographs similarly construct reference to the subject through their marked physical absence, but prevent any construction of a specific subject via visual cues to that person. In this way, the images engage and defy photographic expectations established in the tradition of portrait photographs for a specific and visible subject. Instead, the photographs elect to establish the human subject through their absence.

VIEWING AND PERFORMING REPITITION

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[6] Mulvey, Laura, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film and Theory: an Anthology*, (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2009), 483-94.

[7] Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," *Film and Theory: an Anthology*, (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2009), 408-436.

[8] View Tammy Rae Carland's Lesbian Bed project on her photography website: http://www.tammyraecarland.com/lesbianbeds.htm

In understanding how traumatic subject matter operates in filmic projection or photography, it is useful to look at early spectacular cinema alongside writing about photographs of violence or trauma. In regards to viewing photographs, Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography* that "Images transfix. Images anesthetize…. After repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real." [9] I do not agree that the traumatic subject matter becomes less real. However, I do agree that the process of repeating the encounter with trauma could be seen as an anesthetic as it is a rehearsal of the almost-missed encounter with the traumatic event itself (given that neither the artist nor the viewer is subjected to the direct experience of trauma.)

This anesthetic rehearsal is exemplified in the viewing experience of early spectacular cinema. These films enabled viewers to re-situate finite moments of death and violence as everlasting, vis-à-vis the ability to re-experience the moment repeatedly. An example of this can be seen in the early Edison film "Electrocution of an Elephant" (1903), where the viewer (either historical or contemporary) can repeatedly experience the death of the elephant ad infinitum, markedly repositioning the singular action of the animal's execution as outliving both the subject of the film and the creators of the piece itself.

In describing both of my recent works – their relationship to myths about medium, site and subject – the conceptual framework is the central defining element in the work. My decision to enact this conceptual framework and how I choose to do so is a formative element in the work. My performance echoes the repetition viewers experience with both the photographic images as objects and the endlessly looping video.

In *72 Hours*, the video installation permits the viewer to repeat the exposure to the traumatic experience of loss. The video clips all loop seamlessly, containing the depicted video inside the hours between life and death. The repeated moment is both the referent moment of death implied in the work and the moment when the body is buried, signifying another end. Additionally, given the "that-has-been" structure of the video image, as viewers we understand the liminal space/time being depicted as only existing in the ephemeral projections. In allowing viewers access to these images, they are permitted to repeat the post-traumatic experience of mourning. The work contains the viewer infinitely in the finite moment of passing, allowing them to repeatedly experience and rehearse loss.

My actions mirror the viewing process. In my conceptual framework for the project I propose an obsessive goal for completeness when I establish that I will record video of every wall in the house. The obsessive drive to document and encapsulate the walls references not only psychoanalytic repetition but also theory surrounding photographic practice. In this instance, Susan Sontag's writings in *On Photography* become essential. She writes that "photographs… help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure…The camera… makes real what one is experiencing….A way of certifying experience…converting experience into an image, a souvenir…The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation." [10] In these

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[9] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Dell, 1978), page 21.
[10] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Dell, 1978), pages 9-10.

selections Sontag grapples with what it means to photograph a subject as well as the relationship between the photographer and the subject matter. In *72 Hours*, my action of photographing each wall can be read as an attempt to participate in this moment of passing and arrest and encapsulate time before the finality of burial. The completeness of recording every wall asserts a certain relationship to creating a document of record, revealing my own desire to preserve the interior (and visible traces of the transient body) and arrest the forward motion of time. However, I am manning the recording devise, and as Sontag later notes, "the person who is recording cannot intervene." [11] My actions performatively reference the history and mythology surrounding film and video by exposing my own desire to record, arrest, and repeat the finite, ad infinitum.

As described in the initial description of the project, I see my participation in creating the photographs for *Thank G-d for Mississippi* as re-enacting the jumpers' trajectories. I follow them to the point of the precipice with my own body and then, through mechanical extension, follow them over the edge. There is a compulsion associated with the repeated re-visitations of these sites that is akin to the compulsion to escape life. However, it is the near miss that separates me from the jumpers' literal experience. This near miss/almost death I am performing by re-embodying the jumpers gaze is paralleled in the theoretical framing of the final prints, which exists forever as a near-miss, in its arrested position directly prior to death.

CLOSING

In closing, I wish to address the questions I am left with which will shape the direction of my future work. In both *Thank G-d for Mississippi* and *72 Hours*, I am continuing an ongoing interrogation of the myths and problematics involved in visually representing what can be felt but not seen, thus invoking the sublime. Notions of the sublime are tied up in the mythologies we weave about the sites in my work. There is a desire to believe that there is something that cannot be understood or conquered by the scientific apparatus of photographic representation, experiences that cannot be relayed on a grey scale. We want to believe that there is a residue of trauma that, if it cannot be seen, can be sensed. This is a drive to uphold the sublime – why? What is at stake?

Though the incarnations of the sublime are as numerous and expansive as a sublime landscape, the ideas I reference are contingent throughout the theoretical travails of the term. The sublime suggests that there are concepts outside of mastery – outside of the violently colonizing image repertoire in which all can be represented. What is at stake in proposing that there are still experiences outside of representation? What is the anxiety in proposing that everything can be represented? Are these anxieties the cause for the ever-evolving understanding of the terms sublime, uncanny and other such words, which used liberally in art discourse, come to signify the anxious attempt to allow representation to turn in on itself, showing its limitations to fully master the human experience?

My video and photography based practice interrogates the drive and potency of the sublime, wherein ultimately the representational limits of photography and video are

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[11] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Dell, 1978), page 12.

made visible and questioned. The images levy the historical connotation of photography as an index of the real in the service of photographing (representing) what cannot be seen. Through the mechanics of the camera, I reconstruct the perspectival space of the location such that foreground, depth, scale and other establishing cues are altered or absent, destabilizing logical comprehension of the visual space. In the image, the camera is positioned as the gaze of an otherwise absent or vacated subject. Place, in these images, operates not as mere backdrop but as shifting receptor for projections of loss and desire.

"Ultimately — or at the limit — in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes. 'The necessary condition for an image is sight, 'Janouch told Kafka; and Kafka smiled and replied: 'We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes." [12]

— Roland Barthes (Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography)

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[12] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), page 53.

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