

Permission to Speak: Proximities of trauma at dOCUMENTA (13)

by Beth E. Wilson

Trauma. Collapse. Destruction. These are the overarching themes that run through much of the work on view in dOCUMENTA 13. By pairing Kassel with Kabul, artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev provides an acerbic, contemporary resonance to the history and the experience of this international art extravaganza, framing and reframing the contradictory dynamics of destruction and memory, of liberation and occupation that inspired the very creation of Documenta by Arnold Bode in the 1950s. Leveraging the experience of war and destruction, followed by liberation/occupation that is shared between Kassel and Kabul, Christov-Bakargiev's exhibition oscillates between the historical and the current, commissioning a number of new, challenging works while setting them against a backdrop of historical images and artifacts intended to deepen the emotional and psychological resonances of the show as a whole.

Embodying this complicated dynamic, is Michael Rakowitz's social sculpture/installation *What Dust will Rise?*, which primarily focuses on the Allied bombings and destruction of the library of the Landesgraves of Hesse-Kassel in 1941, when it was then housed in the Fridericianum, which now serves as the central exhibition site for Documenta. One large gallery in the rebuilt museum is dedicated to this work, which consists of long tables (and some surrounding vitrines), displaying simulacra of the burned/damaged/lost books carved in stone, a memorialization of the absent, an impossible, literally unreadable trace of what the catalogue calls a 'libricide'. The irony of the subject—who ever said the Nazis were the only ones who burned books?—is compounded by the fact that these detailed replicas were carved in Afghanistan, out of the travertine that is native to Bamiyan, home of the colossal sixth-century Buddhas so notori-



Michael Rakowitz, *What Dust Will Rise?*, 2012
Installation view, dOCUMENTA 13

ously blasted out of the face of the living rock by the Taliban in 2001. The valences of victor/victim, presence/absence, the past and the present, are turned into a sort of alternating current here, the circuits of mean-

ing flipping back and forth from one pole of identification or attraction to the other; this is a powerful theme that brilliantly threads its way through much of the strongest work in the exhibition as a whole.

Given this curatorial charge, it seems quite natural, necessary even, that the works included in the show exhibit a strong sense of the historical, presenting the viewer with powerful juxtapositions of works from the (sometimes distant) past with those of the historically-conscious present, a tendency most strongly cultivated in the Fridericianum, which serves as a key starting point for the variety of venues and viewpoints that make up the larger portion of the show. In the ground floor rotunda galleries of the Fridericianum, in a section explicitly called the "Brain" in the official Guidebook, we find the oldest work in the exhibition, the Bactrian 'princesses' of central Asia (a region including current-day Afghanistan) of the late 3rd or early 2nd millennium BC; nearby are contemporary works by Lawrence Weiner and Giuseppe Penone, which in turn are only a short distance from a small, boxy plexiglas 'function model' constructed in 1936-37 by computer pioneer Konrad Zuse, an object that simultaneously references contemporary technologies (think: iPad) and abstract modernist sculpture of the 20th century. The juxtaposition of works in this key gallery—intended to set up the overarching themes of the show—is as a whole quite effective, even playing off the rotonda's architecture so that the arc of the semicircular space calls to mind the concentric waves generated by a stone dropped into a still body of water.



Michael Rakowitz, *What Dust will Rise?*, 2012 (detail)



The Brain, installation view of dOCUMENTA(13), Fridericianum Museum, Kassel, 2012.

The productive, imaginative collisions of past and present established here reverberate throughout the rest of the exhibition's venues. There is some significant unevenness, however, in the treatment of some of the key historical works on view. In some cases, these historical elements are thoughtfully and critically engaged, and succeed marvelously to underscore the deep themes that frame this Documenta as a whole, while in others (in particular the inclusion of some photographs by Lee Miller), the curatorial selection evinces a certain lack of respect for the particularities of the source material, uncritically imposing a contemporary reading on the work, an uncharacteristic abandonment of the curatorial rigorousness that characterizes the show otherwise.

Charlotte Salomon,
*Leben? Oder
 Theater? Ein Singespiel
 (Life? Or
 Theater? A Play with
 Music, 1941-43.*
 Installation view,
 dOCUMENTA(13),
 Kassel, 2012



A positive example of curatorial attention to the historical element can be found in a large gallery in the Fridericianum that presents what could only ever be a selection—although a large one—from the colorful, Expressionistically-painted magnum opus by Charlotte Salomon, *Leben? Oder Theater? Ein Singespiel* (*Life? Or Theater? A Play with Music*). This enigmatic Gesamtkunstwerk was started in 1941, less than two years before Salomon's final deportation from occupied France to Auschwitz in 1943 where, as a pregnant Jewish woman, she was immediately killed. The work lay undiscovered until years later, and was not made public until the 1960s.

Exterminated in life, Salomon's vivid vision lives on in her art, raising in the process very difficult questions for the viewer. It seems impossible to comprehend this work now without the final, framing reference of Auschwitz, and yet it was created by someone who did not yet know what fate would ultimately befall her. Most commentaries on the sprawling cycle have read it as a kind of visual autobiography, collapsing Salomon's imagery and themes into a prelude anticipating her Vernichtung, her extermination; by contrast, in an essay written to accompany the exhibition, Griselda Pollock makes a carefully

nanced, critical argument on behalf of the work, which “has been both richly and badly served by the dominant trend toward a purely autobiographical interpretation”. She restores to Salomon her own, historical agency as a woman and as a creative being, locating the many pre-Auschwitz sources of meaning drawn upon by the artist, and attempting to comprehend something of the (admittedly strange) historical moment in which this brief, intense interlude of creative energy manifested itself in the 769 gouaches that comprise the completed cycle. Pollock rightly recognizes the ways in which our narratives of the Holocaust, constructed only in retrospect after the war, can only partly illuminate the complexity and the richness of Salomon’s enigmatic masterpiece.

The historical thread of the exhibition, writ large just upstairs in the gallery featuring Salomon’s *Life? Or Theater?*, finds its most explicit, extended expression in the ‘Brain’ by way of a series of photographs by/of Lee Miller, and a selection of objects she had collected during her stint as the war correspondent photographer for *Vogue* magazine. While I was heartened by the exhibition’s overall thoughtful engagement with the turbulent, vexed history of what the Germans refer to as the ‘NSDAP-Zeit’ (‘National Socialist Period’) and its aftermath in the rest of the exhibition, I was deeply disappointed by the presentation of work by Miller here, which wastes what could have been a splendid opportunity for yet more problematizing, a chance for yet more richness of reflection of the kind exemplified by Pollock’s reading of the Charlotte Salomon work.



David E. Scherman, *Lee Miller in Hitler's Bathtub*, Munich, 1945

The focal point of the expansive display of ‘Miller’s’ photographs (two stacked rows of matted/framed exhibition prints, 20 in all) is the now-notorious image of Miller, who had just arrived in Munich by way of the nearby Dachau concentration camp, taking a bath in Hitler’s bathtub, in his apartment at Prinzregentenplatz 16.

Actually, there are no fewer than four photographs of Miller in the tub in this array, one of each exposure made, with slightly different poses in each. Miller and her colleague (and lover), the *Life* photographer David E. Scherman, some of the first journalists to arrive with the American troops, had made a point of billeting themselves in the dictator’s home, at virtually the same moment that he and Eva Braun were committing suicide in Berlin.

In her essay engaging these images, Christov-Bakargiev makes explicit the claim that the photograph “appears to have been staged by Miller,” and in fact the photo is credited in this text to “Lee Miller and David E. Sherman [sic]”, although the wall text where it is installed in the Fridericianum seems to credit only Miller. After discussing the strategic placement of objects in the photograph (Hitler’s framed photograph on the left, the Fascist/Neo-classical sculpture on the right, etc.—objects that are displayed here in a vitrine directly opposite the photos), which she presumes was organized by Miller, she asks the question “Could this be a feminist accusation against the patriarchal military world that lay behind the image?” Quite rightly, this appears in the form of a question, as it assumes quite a number of things that are far from proven, beginning with the attribution of the image’s staging to Miller, not to mention the assumption that she possessed a clearly ‘feminist’ ideological position from which she would have critiqued the “patriarchal military world” in which she had been deeply embedded for the better part of the previous year. Neither of these claims stands up to even rudimentary scrutiny. In an exhibition dedicated to recognizing the emotional traces of trauma (and often seeking to reverse the historical erasures) arising from damage and destruction, Christov-Bakargiev comes dangerously close to expunging the crucial role played by David Scherman here, not only misspelling his name in the essay text, but by virtually omitting mention of his name in the exhibition context itself.

David E. Scherman was a photographer who had been assigned to Life magazine’s London office, following his accidental scoop on the sinking of the *Zamzam* in the South Atlantic in April 1941. (Scherman had been a passenger on the



David E. Scherman, LIFE photographer, c. 1943

torpedoed ship, and surreptitiously snapped photographs of the Nazi raider responsible, images which later led to its sinking by Allied naval forces.) While in London, he made the acquaintance of Lee Miller, who was then living there with Surrealist painter Roland Penrose, and working as a staff photographer for *British Vogue*. They soon began an affair that continued for the duration of the European conflict; in typically unorthodox Surrealist fashion, Scherman even lived for a time in the Penrose/Miller home in Downshire Hill, near Hampstead Heath, in a situation noteworthy for its amicability and utter lack of emotional fireworks, given the intimacy each man shared with Miller at the time. As Miller invented/discovered for herself the role of war correspondent photographer for *Vogue* (of all things), Scherman became an invaluable source of support and collaboration as they frequently worked together in the field, both in

England before D-Day, and through the Allied advance afterward. In an interview I conducted with Scherman in 1995, responding to a question about the Hitler's bathtub photograph, he recalled "Everybody knew that she hadn't taken the picture, I had....Well we were both dirty, taking baths...but when I took it [the photograph], I said 'Let's fix it up a little bit' as long as we were in the bathtub, for christakes, let's get a picture of Hitler in it! Didn't we have a portrait or something of him in there?"

In support of this claim, one need only consult the back issues of LIFE to realize that he had made something of a specialty of what might be called the 'punch-line' photograph, setting up his subjects to underscore a witty play on words or visual pun, as when he got the rector of St. Clement's church in London to pose handing out scarce wartime citrus to the local children, playing on the English nursery rhyme that begins "Oranges and lemons/Say the bells of St. Clement's". In addition, it seems logical to believe that Scherman was the primary photographer in this case, given the fact that the contact sheet for this roll of film includes so many shots of Miller in the bath versus the single shot of Scherman, made when Miller jokingly turned the tables on him at the end of the 'session'. ("That was just Lee being an old model," he told me, referring to her career in the 1920s and 30s as a model for Vogue, and then for Man Ray and others.)

While previous commentators have tended to shape their interpretations under the assumption that Miller had some agency in creating the bathtub photograph (which might seem reasonable enough, to a certain extent), Christov-Bakargiev presses this idea much too far, thereby (given her overall curatorial thrust) ironically erasing the very real contribution of Scherman in the process.

What is perhaps most disappointing in all this is the fact that if only she'd gotten beyond the spectacle of the bathtub photograph, there is plenty of material in Miller's own wartime oeuvre that would have supported her overarching curatorial argument, and then some. Instead, she highlights Miller's role as the object of the gaze, devoting almost half of the images on the wall to photographs made of her, rather than by her. (In addition to the four bathtub photos, there are two others that document her presence in Hitler's apartment that should also be attributed to Scherman.) Ultimately, this serves to re-inscribe Miller as the model, as the object of the (do I even have to say 'masculine'?) gaze, deferring the power of her own vision, her own creative energy yet again—and isn't that something that's happened enough for women, especially in the context of the surrealist movement?

Christov-Bakargiev seems to want to present Miller's photographs as a testament, as a unique mode of witnessing the traumas of war and of the Nazi atrocities. She discusses the bathtub image as a "'traumatized,' silent photograph that suggests the impossibility of speech after what [Miller] had seen at Dachau that morning." The problem here is that she relies on an argument for an emotional response that, in fact, was only invented considerably after the fact. Miller's engagement at Dachau—and we should mention that it came after her encounter with Buchenwald, which was much larger, and one that was a dedicated Vernichtungslager, an explicit extermination camp, unlike Dachau, which had served primarily as a place to hold political prisoners—was that of a reporter who had stumbled into a big story, a 'real scoop', and who was voraciously absorbed in recording it, both with her camera and in her notes. When she did

write of her experiences of the final days of the war, it was almost immediately (these were current news stories, after all), and without taking the time for the hushed reverence we are now accustomed to in the established Holocaust narrative.

Miller's remarkable writing has, to date, not gotten nearly the attention that it deserves, and her photographs have been too often held hostage to others' words. Her report of what she found at Dachau lays out the facts of the scene, in a richly descriptive text that captures what by that point had become her deeply banked, smoldering anger at the Germans for the inhumanity she witnessed. "In this case the camp is so close to the town that there is no question about the inhabitants knowing what when on," she wrote, underscoring the responsibility of the local populace for the horrors that took place under their noses. "The small canal bounding the camp was a floating mess of SS, in their spotted camouflage suits and nail-studded boots. They slithered along in the current, along with a dead dog or two and smashed rifles," a description that fittingly accompanies her image of the submerged, dead SS man. She then contrasts the attention paid to the Angora rabbits raised in an enclosure within the camp ("better cared for than the humans"), and the stable of work horses, "fat-bottomed beasts which shocked the eye after so many emaciated humans." Contrary to Christov-Bakargiev's wishful fantasy, this was not a woman bereft of words to describe her experience.

The witness to trauma enacted by Miller in her words and in her images is, in fact, much more deeply lacerating than allowed for in the presentation of her work at Documenta, as she does not



Lee Miller, Dead SS Guard, Dachau, 1945

shield herself from the immediacy of the evil she encountered. On arriving in Hitler's apartment, Miller's personal proximity here to the previously distant dictator is what struck her; rather than simply rejecting it, however, she embraced this experience in what might seem to us a surprising, even shocking way. As she wrote to her editor at London Vogue, she learned of Hitler's suicide in Berlin while in his apartment.

Well, alright, he was dead. He'd never really been alive for me until today. He'd been an evil machine-monster all these years, until I visited the places he made famous, talked to people who knew him...and ate and slept in his house. He became less fabulous and therefore more terrible....like an ape who embarrasses and humbles you with his gestures, mirroring yourself in caricature. 'There, but for the grace of God walk I'.

This process of object identification continued during her stay in Munich, when the next day she ventured into the nearby

house formerly occupied by Hitler's mistress, Eva Braun. After cataloguing in tender detail the contents of the house for the benefit of her Vogue readers ("The long-mirrored dressing table had odds and ends, tweezers, Elizabeth Arden lipstick refills (marked Milan), a half bottle of Arden skin tonic, little funnels and spatulas for transferring beauty products"), Miller writes of taking a nap in Eva's bed, noting that "It was comfortable, but it was macabre...to doze on the pillow of a girl and a man who were now dead, and to be glad they were dead, if it was true." So not only had she frankly exposed herself to the precincts of evil by bathing in Hitler's tub, she also



David E. Scherman, *Lee Miller in Eva Braun's Bed, Munich, 1945*

slipped herself into an intimate relationship with his mistress. Her elegiac account rings an even more intensely personal note when accompanied by a revelation provided me by David Scherman—the fact that she was not the only occupant of that bed. Thus mingling love and death, the private and the public, intimacy and revulsion, Miller experiences/creates a strange (and perhaps truly surrealist) swirl of deep-seated psychological response in a fantastic miasma in this strange scene, generating a mode of witnessing that is infinitely more interesting—and more troubled—than the much easier fantasy of post-traumatic silence that seems too often to fit our contemporary narratives of what seems like an 'appropriate' response to pain, suffering, and destruction.

Yes, after the war Miller put away her loot, the perfume bottle she had 'liberated' from Eva Braun's house, the towel from the bath monogrammed 'AH', even the neo-classical sculpture whose pose she had emulated in the photograph. She stuffed boxes full of her negatives and prints and manuscripts and stored them in the attic, where they were not discovered until after her death in 1977 (and which, thanks to the tireless efforts of her son Antony Penrose, have been brought back to light since.) There is a silence, a self-silencing embedded in these acts, certainly related to the traumas experienced during the war.

But to read these psychical disruptions only from the postwar perspective, from a moment in which our collective, humanist/humanizing narratives have already been organized, rather than to take advantage of the strange and wonderful and terrifying realities of the moment in which the photographs were snapped and when the war and its atrocities were confronted most immediately—the very permission to speak of these things that Miller indubitably granted herself. In the context of this clear evidence, it seems to me to be an opportunity that is monumentally lost, especially in the service of a Documenta that is otherwise so devoted to opening up the complexities of the experience of these traumas and these histories.