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Black box

Ryan N. Shuler

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Black Box

By

Ryan N. Shuler

Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Finally, I’d like to express my gratitude to my family for their love and support during my time at RIT. I especially wish to thank my fiancée, Jocelyn Turner, for her unconditional love and companionship throughout this entire trying process.
Fear and paranoia are steadily on the rise throughout the world as a result, in part, of media’s presentation of violent and traumatic imagery. The dissemination and reception of these types of images are consequential for a viewing public, including an increasing desensitization to violence through over-exposure; the potential for aggressive behavior by people of all ages; and the loss of a viewer’s accountability as-witness-to a disturbing event.

Black Box is an aesthetic investigation of the reception of traumatic images by a viewing public. In order to trace this reception, the image of the American crow (Corvus brachyrhynchos), removed from its natural context, is transformed via moving imagery into literal, violent recreations of events and images present within today’s media-soaked culture. The crow functions as a metaphor of the ways in which images are first read and then subsequently shape contemporary viewership. The use of video identifies the disseminating power of 24-hour media, with its telltale marks of time and sequence, recording and broadcasting. Moving imagery, sound production, and the metaphorical presentation of the crow combine to create a visual metonym for conflict and suggest an ominous threat of trauma.
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Introduction

Fear and paranoia are rising steadily throughout the world, partly as a result of media constantly flooding the public with violent and traumatic imagery. The development and dissemination of these kinds of images create unintended consequences for the viewing public. They include the increasing desensitization to violence through over-exposure; the possible demonstration of aggressive behavior by people of all ages; and the loss of the viewer’s responsibility as witness.

With video as my primary medium, Black Box is an aesthetic investigation of the public’s desensitization, related to violent behavior, and the role of the witness in response to traumatic images. In Black Box, the imagery of the American crow (Corvus brachyrhynchos) is transformed into literal, and violent recreations of events and images present within our current cultural climate. Through this transformation, the crow functions as a metaphor for traumatic images and their potential impact on the viewing public, collectively suggesting an ominous tone of impending threat through a skewed view of nature. In this exhibition, the tension between competing forces present in the

world today—man and culture, technology and the mass circulation of images and how they sometimes conflict with nature, is evidenced.

The title *Black Box* was chosen due to its familiarity and multiple meanings. These include a type of experimental theater, a flight recorder, and the photographic camera. Each of these definitions is particularly appropriate when describing this exhibition.

First, the theatrical nature of the *Black Box* becomes apparent when viewed in the gallery. This exhibit literally forms a black box theater for the viewer to enter. When confined within the immersive experience of this box, the viewer is bombarded with an obsessive looping of media-inspired audiovisual clips.

Second, by alluding to a flight recorder, a device designed to capture various forms of flight data, this exhibition title conjures up cultural memories related to the dissection of traumatic events. Just as the flight recorder is utilized in the analysis of traumatic events, the videos in the *Black Box* exhibition are designed to examine the mediated dissemination of the traumatic image through the media.

Finally, *Black Box* refers literally to camera design. In fact, the camera’s early predecessor, the *camera obscura*, literally means “dark room.” As technology has advanced, the camera has shrunk and the dark room has effectively become a black box.

*Black Box* also references the concept of a black box as a system viewed primarily in terms of its input and output characteristics and not on its internal complexity. In other words, the viewer initially views the displayed crow as bird and then as traumatic image, skewing its transparency via media technologies and methodologies. The French sociologist of science, Bruno Latour, discusses this relationship between technology and
the input and output characteristics of a black box: “Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become.”

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Chapter One

Man’s Relationship with The Crow

To understand the evolution of crows into traumatic imagery requires the viewer to examine different perspectives that humans have had about the crow. It has found its way into American vernacular and popular culture because of its mythological dichotomy as both a giver of life and a harbinger of evil, and its ability to become a symbolic representation of foreboding or mischievous extensions of nature. Historically, perspectives on the crow have been polarized, ranging from interpretations of the crow as an omnipotent god, capable of benevolence, to a symbol of death and evil. For example, in several cultures, crows are seen as companions to, or reincarnations of, mythological gods. Among those are the Buddhist God of Dharma, Mahakala\(^4\) and the Native American Gods—Raven, Crow, and Chulyen.\(^5\) In addition to being worshipped as gods, crows have been recognized as the constant paternal figures to the Dalai Lama.\(^6\)

On the other end of the spectrum, the crow has also been viewed as a symbolic messenger of death, thought to be able to traverse from the realm of the living into that of the dead.\(^7\) This can be seen in the Norse myths of Odin and his two crows, Hugin and Munin. In the myths, these birds would travel the world collecting information from the living and the dead on Odin’s behalf. In cultures such as China, the crow is a symbol of

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bad luck, blamed for drought and famine. In the myth of the Ten Suns, ten brothers transform into ten sun crows, which scorch the earth in eternal daylight. Eventually, the crows are shot out of the sky until only one remains.\(^8\) From a perspective based in science, the crow is either seen as a natural pest or an environmental aid. As a pest, the crow is capable of stripping fields of their crops and killing young or weak livestock.\(^9\) They are widely viewed as flying pests, capable of clogging up and polluting urban environments.\(^10\) Interestingly, many scientists now use the crow as an indicator species for determining environmental health. For example, crow populations are observed to establish the location and incidents of avian influenza. Thus studying this bird enables one to assess the health of the local ecosystem.

While historical presentations of the crow are varied, contemporary interpretations are much narrower, with overriding cultural opinion leaning toward the sinister. “Crows seem as though by convergent evolution to have something in their psyches corresponding to something in our own.”\(^11\) Because of their extreme intelligence and unique behavior, humans often anthropomorphize crows. Even with this unique relationship, or perhaps because of it, many cultures go so far as to hunt and kill these birds, especially when they reside in urban environments. However, the drive toward extermination is complex. When fear exists, the dominant attitude is to wage war on crows, to see them as an infestation. Population control tactics range from the

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straightforward to the bizarre, with people shooting these birds and even using several forms of psychological warfare, including the use of bright lights, lasers, and sirens.\textsuperscript{12}

This tense relationship between humans and crows is highlighted in figure one. In this video, the camera observes a roosting crow from beneath its perch. While scrutinizing this bird, aggressive lighting techniques were used to not only mimic a common strategy for relocating a murder of crows, but also to show how desensitized the average urban-dwelling crow is to this form of psychological warfare. In this light, the crow becomes both a victim of human harassment and a cold, calculating character.

The video relies on this brutal human response to crows to transform the birds from a neutral part of nature to an adversary of man. By overtly emphasizing the crow’s cultural stigma as a mysterious, often violent creature, this video is able to critique the presentation of this bird within popular culture.

As an exhibition, \textit{Black Box} presents the dichotomy between the graceful fluidity of the crows and their plague-like cultural stigma, forcing the viewer to question the way

they view the crow—as beautiful abstractions of flight or as signifiers of traumatic events. Additionally, it asks the viewer to inquire how we accept the superstitious presentation of these birds—at the service of man’s imagination or as an extension of nature.

Ultimately, Black Box presents the crow as a synthesis of man and nature, a gothic romance and a spectral force. It deals with cultural fear, control, and concealment. It sheds light on a world “where man is in the habit of disposing of undesirable or harmful elements that threaten his existence.”13 Through this image of the crow, the exhibit creates a dialogue about the present climate of fear in America, as well as the consequences and anxieties that accompany the displacement of nature. Black Box literalizes this cultural anxiety by presenting our psychological need for control, yet it also emphasizes the futility and absurdity of these fears.

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Chapter Two

The Public’s Interest in Trauma and Violence

In order for *Black Box*’s traumatic imagery of the crow to be successful, it relies on the assumption that cultures are not only subjected to traumatic images through media, but that there is an inherent human desire to view these images of trauma and violence.\(^\text{14}\) To fully understand the construction of traumatic images, it is imperative to study the various reasons why the public is both drawn and subjected to depictions of the traumatic and violent.

The first, and potentially the most powerful attraction that people have in viewing this type of imagery is the affirmation of one’s own existence through the viewing of another’s death. This manner of viewing trauma often takes on a fetishistic quality as the viewer gains a sense of acknowledgement that they have escaped death as a response to viewing the trauma or even death of another.\(^\text{15}\)


The video seen in figure two relies heavily on the viewer’s fetishistic behavior as a primary means of display. This clip, which is designed to replicate a man-made explosion through the filming of crows erupting out of a tree, requires the public’s initial desire to repeatedly watch a traumatizing image prior to their realization that the explosion is merely a flock of birds. This tactic principally relies on the viewer to relate to a human element within the image. However, unlike the majority of traumatic images presented by mainstream media, this video lacks this literal human element as dominant subject matter. Instead, this minimalist-inspired video is dominated by nature, or rather a depiction of nature. It reduces the image to an unpopulated landscape, void of anything man-made. The lack of a dominant human subject matter, only subtly present in the form of the predatory eye of the photographer, creates an almost irreconcilable psychological barrier for the viewer. As a result, the viewer is less able to empathize with the crow and is unable to affirm his or her life by “surviving its demise.”

As a way to resolve this discrepancy, the images in this video have been intentionally manipulated, mutating the crows into ambiguous spectral forces. Through abstraction, it becomes possible to connect the natural with the human and man-made form. When the birds take on human form, the viewer forms a stronger social connection to them and, therefore, has a more powerful response to the trauma presented by the crow.

A second reason for the attraction to images of trauma is the important role traumatic imagery plays in the structuring and formation of our cultural experiences.

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16 Ibid., 205.
This desire to share common experiences through the viewing of traumatic imagery creates social bonds that form universal customs and beliefs, ultimately becoming part of the visual culture.

However, the constant viewing of these images has potentially unhealthy psychological effects. While a social bond may be created through traumatic images, the unyielding repetition of these images has the potential to make an event seem less real. Susan Sontag discusses this relationship in her groundbreaking book, entitled *On Photography*:

> To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize.17

Numerous examples documenting the psychological impact of traumatic images on the personal and social can be viewed in the following examples. The images of commuter planes striking the World Trade Center as instruments of terrorism on Sept. 11, 2001, created a collective sense of fear and loss felt by the country as a whole. These images of falling planes and victims, which permeated the country’s conscious and media outlets for several years, allowed the American public to share in the grief of the loss of a few and effectively mourn as a nation. In essence, the public, through watching these images and linking themselves with the victims, gained a sense of American identity. The consequent result of this could be seen in the patriotism decorating the country’s landscape in the months that followed Sept. 11.

In studying these images, it became apparent that the crows must also be transformed into victims. Through the use of similar visual techniques to those utilized

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within the current media, these specific videos, which utilize the crow as victim, have been developed to scrutinize the ways in which the public relates to victims in traumatic images. They also act as a means to catalyze the development of social bonds between the viewing public and nature, specifically the crow, which has historically been subjected to an unwarranted cultural stigma.

This imagery not only evokes the emotions linked to the actual events, but also critiques the construction and dissemination of traumatic images. For example, the video seen in figure three is specifically designed to provoke similar emotive responses to the traumatic images of falling that documented the Sept. 11 attacks. In this video, the flight of a crow passing by a monolithic building is transformed into an image of a commuter
aircraft impacting the World Trade Center. In figure four, a diving crow becomes the arch of a falling man just before death. This video, shot from street level, becomes a record of the bystander’s role in recording traumatic events as a “citizen journalist.” Ultimately, by presenting the crow as human and man-made forms, such as victims, enemies, and weaponry, these videos question the reality of media and remediated images.

Another possible explanation for the public’s desire to view traumatic images is the use of these images as evidence for validating political and cultural responses based on issues of morality, safety, and justice surrounding a photographed event. However, while this application of viewing traumatic images is powerful, it is inherently flawed. This flaw becomes evident when the public is informed of the greater context surrounding a traumatic image. They often choose to disregard it, opting for a simplified version where subjects only play the role of victim or aggressor. One powerful example of this phenomenon is Eddie Adams’ Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan executing the Vietcong Lieutenant Nguyễn Văn Lém on February 1, 1968. The literal context surrounding this image was discarded after its creation due to its dissemination, interpretation, and fame. Adams regretted this loss of context until his death, remarking that:

_The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapons in the world. People believe them, but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths. What the photograph didn't say was what would you do if you were the general at that time and place on that hot day, and you caught the so-called bad guy after he blew away one, two or three American soldiers?_”

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Instead of reading the image within context, the viewing public saw this photograph as an allegory of the forces of war and, ultimately, a tool for questioning the ethical and political consequences of war itself.

This disregard for a photograph’s content is only further exacerbated by contemporary media standards. As media sources have replaced literary sources as a primary means for obtaining knowledge, consistently more complex situations are condensed into superficial audiovisual bites and they are thereby overly simplified. This paradigm shift to reliance on a new kind of technology as the primary source for information, coupled with the fact that the majority of global citizens are scientifically illiterate, results in a public fundamentally unable to draw logical conclusions of complicated scenarios. Put bluntly, images contain both fact and fiction. It is these two elements, and the slippage between them, that the viewing public struggles with as they analyze photographs. Regrettably, because of this modern structure of dissemination, they no longer recognize the image as part of a greater context. Instead, their interpretations create stereotypes of good and evil constellated around the formation of simple universal messages. These universal messages are used as a unifying force in times of anxiety. Unfortunately, these universal messages also remove distinctions between the current crisis and all the previous traumatic events brought up as part of the unifying hysteria.

*Black Box* takes into consideration this inherent desire to simplify or stereotype the elements within an image, especially when confronted with an image that initially

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assaults the senses. As a result, the images in *Black Box* are heavily manipulated to both intensify this desire and critique it.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 5*

In the video in figure 5, abstraction pushes the role of the crow, as either a victim or aggressor, to the point in which the crow becomes a symbolic force. Moreover, this abstraction couples with the viewer’s initial desire to discard information as a means to quickly “read” the photograph, allowing for the crow to exist as a predetermined visual element within previous iconic traumatic images. For example, the video in figure five uses these techniques to transform a flock of crows into a world war two fighter squadron traversing the sky.

By utilizing this public desire to draw polarized conclusions from minimal initial information, the videos in *Black Box* transform a subject matter not commonly thought of as a direct threat to mankind – the crow – into images reminiscent of both state and individual acts of terror. These acts range from military excursions to actions suggestive of terrorist cells. Through this transmogrification of the crow, *Black Box* can critique the
conflict between humans and nature through the public’s interpretation of mainstream media’s presentation of traumatic imagery.
Chapter Three

The Media’s Role in Traumatic and Violent Imagery

Another major component of Black Box centers on the mainstream media’s role in the creation and dissemination of traumatic and violent imagery. The construction and presentation of the crow within Black Box ultimately exists to critique this relationship. To fully understand this critique, it is important to understand the current structure and technology utilized by major news outlets and their present methodology for what constitutes headline news.

The exponential growth and evolution of technology such as television, video, personal computers, the Internet, and the World Wide Web, coupled with the introduction and mass dissemination of digital capture devices, has given birth to a new brand of photojournalism. This new brand, a product of the 21st century, is diametrically split between the cell-phone, camera-armed public, aptly named “citizen journalists,” and their professional full-time photojournalist counterparts, dubbed “super-journalists” because of their ability and obligation to produce work in and for more than one media.22

With today’s technology, “super-journalists” and “citizen journalists” alike have the potential for reporting up-to-the-minute news and the ability to globally publicize it within seconds. Unlike earlier forms of photojournalism where film had to be shipped and processed before it could be published, temporal and spatial distance are now abolished within contemporary photojournalism. Today’s photojournalists are able to

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immediately send the images wirelessly from their cameras to their photo editor. This not only allows information to be disseminated faster, but also allows publications to provide news previously impossible to obtain. Photojournalism is becoming a polarized field, as it is both elevated by this new global potential and degraded by the inundation of shallow, unsuccessful images provided by the public.

The ongoing transformation and advancements of technology bring unforeseen potential as well as serious negative effects to the communications field. The impact on photojournalism and photography as a medium are difficult to predict. Moreover, with photographic manipulation now rampant due to computer software such as Adobe Photoshop, the ethical and technical responsibilities of 21st-century photojournalism are both more heavily policed and completely disregarded than ever before. The “super-journalists” are expected to abide by the highest technical and ethical standards while citizen journalism, because of its unique ability to report information that could not otherwise be reported, is allowed to co-exist with very little ethical and technical enforcement.23

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Black Box furthermore explores the tensions between these professional and amateur photojournalists and the subsequent imagery they produce. Using multiple technologies ranging from high-end capturing equipment to the amateur, coupled with a variety of shooting techniques reminiscent of both the professional and novice, Black Box’s videos provide a spectrum of images equivalent to the images collected by major news outlets. For example, the imagery in figures six and seven incorporate the selected, fragmentary, and repeated view, successfully utilized by the media, with the literal or documentary character of subject, place, and time. In this way, these videos bridge the gap between the documentary and the abstract image. These two photographic methods, when utilized together, allow the videos in Black Box to both frame and obscure the crow within a recognizable landscape. The crow is transformed from its literal definition as natural phenomenon to a more symbolic representation of Nature.

Through the fabrication of these photojournalistic images, the work explores the fine line between these professions by pushing the boundaries of artistic license and questioning the possibility of an objective photographer. Black Box questions the artistic
role of photojournalism today, a role that combines a documentary approach with a new consideration for the inherent symbolic possibilities within abstraction.
Chapter Four

The Photographer’s Relationship with The Crow

Another major element within *Black Box* is its use of the photographer’s relationship with the crow as a springboard to question the relationship between hunting and photography. In documenting these birds, this exhibition presents the role of the photographer as both hunter and sniper. Both terms are used because there is an important distinction between their inherent connotations. Both concepts of “hunter” and “sniper” contain critical qualities that intrinsically link them to *Black Box*.

Throughout history, photography has shared much of its terminology and technology with hunting. For example, the term “snapshot,” so ubiquitous in common photographic jargon, meaning to quickly aim and capture an image, was originally coined by Sir John Herschel in 1860 as a comparison to the hunting strategy known for its quick aiming and firing at prey.²⁴

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In relating the photography in *Black Box* to hunting, several different aspects need to be considered. Even though both use similar equipment, it is their similarity in motives that is striking. In both cases, there is a catharsis involved in capturing as a means of control. For photographers, there is something eerily satisfying about the searching for and chasing of subject matter. Sontag in *On Photography* discusses this concept: “There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture… It turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder.”25 In the case of the video seen in figure eight, this predatory role of the photographer is highlighted through the use of a 15-million lumen spotlight and thermal imaging technology, in an attempt to alter the crow into a symbolic object.

In its sniper-like orientation, the work provides the similarities between the professional roles and responsibilities of the photojournalist and sniper. In other words, photojournalism, like sniping, has a sense of duty. Hunting for a subject is not done purely out of desire but because of obligation. *Black Box* also draws parallels between the profession of photographer and sniper through its vantage point. In essence, because the crow is such an intelligent bird with exceptional eyesight, the only way to capture footage of it was through the concealment and distancing of the photographer.

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25 Ibid., 10.
Chapter Five

Contextualizing Black Box in the Art World

Black Box’s exploration of the subjects of surveillance, the crow, traumatic images, and falling through visual imagery, demonstrate how these images fit within mainstream media and popular culture. However, Black Box also fits within the art world and, specifically, within the medium of photography. Many art photographers have discussed these topics sense the invention of the camera. By discussing their work in relation to the images within Black Box, it is possible to contextualize this thesis exhibition in contemporary art.

For example, Black Box can be contextualized with alternative uses or critiques of surveillance within art, including works by Sophie Calle and Jill Magid. Like the works of Calle and Magid, the understanding of a subject matter through surveillance drives Black Box. While Black Box doesn’t literally place the photographer under surveillance, by hunting the crow with the camera, Black Box discusses the role of the photographer and acts as a form of self-critique similar in concept to the works of these two artists.

Black Box runs several important parallels with Calle’s stalker series Suite Venitienne (1980). In this work, Calle, playing the role of an undercover detective, pursued a man from Paris to Venice, “all conducted to yield a portrait of a complete stranger.” However, this work acted as much more than just a portrait of a man. By fabricating an obsession over a complete stranger, Calle’s performance acted as a critique

of popular culture’s use of surveillance as a means for exploring romance and social dynamics. In this case the obsession is not with a stranger but the strangeness – bordering on morbidity – of the non-human aspects of nature.

As in Calle’s work, *Black Box* fabricates an obsession over a subject matter that holds little personal emotional weight. Instead, the crow is utilized as a tool, in much the same way the artist “used” the man, for critiquing the role of surveillance within the current mainstream media.

These parallels are also present when comparing *Black Box* with Magid’s surveillance self-portrait work titled, *Evidence Locker* (2004). In this work, Magid, through collaboration with Citywatch, Liverpool’s video surveillance overseers, was able to construct a photographic record of her month-long excursion through the city. These staged events present both the awesome capabilities of surveillance technology and the “intimate portrait of a relationship between herself, the police, and the city.”27 They also present a further relationship between her and the camera, the cameraman, and the viewer as voyeur.

*Black Box*, through its utilization of technology and the crow as an object of surveillance, also suggests many of these same relationships. However, the relationships this work forms are not framed within the romance of intimate personal relationships, but within today’s climate of fear and paranoia.

When discussing *Black Box* in context of other artistic representations of the crow, specifically within the photographic and cinematographic mediums, it is crucial for the viewer to explore the clash between the disquieting awe of these birds and the

transformation of these crows into weapons of terror. Richard Barnes, Masahisa Fukase, Michel Rovner, and Alfred Hitchcock all discuss this relationship in their work.

For example, this can be seen in Richard Barnes’ photographic series: *Murmur, Crowded Skies over Rome* (2005), in which he creates inkblot-like images from the swarming patterns of starlings in flight. This work runs many parallels with the videos in *Black Box*. His use of the bird as a way to explore abstraction and the power of nature is shared in *Black Box*. Additionally, both bodies of work explore and mesh multiple technologies in an attempt to capture these birds, including multimedia presentations utilizing still, video, and audio elements.

However, while *Black Box* shares a similar subject matter and means of recording as Barnes’ work, the portrayals of the bird differ greatly. While Barnes records abstract forms created within the patterns of flight to present a Rorschach test of the beauty and wonder of nature as a means for introspection, *Black Box* presents nature as both a beautiful and terrible force in constant opposition to human beings.

Masahisa Fukase presents the foreboding quality of the raven in his book, *The Solitude of Ravens* (1986). However, he uses the raven as a symbol for his internal struggle and pain related to losing his wife. In *Black Box*, the crow embodies a cultural anxiety related to both the displacement of nature and the growing fear of global terrorism. While these two works have adopted a similar subject matter and similar style of shooting, the motives behind these decisions were very different.

*Black Box’s* use of the crow as a means for studying traumatic images can also be compared to Michal Rovner’s work, *Mutual Interest* (1997), in order to gain a greater

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contextualization of its role in contemporary art. Both works utilize sound and video to transform birds into ambiguous and unsettling figures. However, while there are many similarities between the two works, there are also several dramatic differences. In *Mutual Interest*, Rovner films swarming characteristics:

> Of birds in flight but more the overwhelming sense of violence and foreboding that they impart. For beyond the seemingly aimless confusion of behavior there is, in each scenario, a group dynamic in which chaos is overlaid by a kind of intangible logic, a hidden code of conduct; possibly, a reason.\(^{29}\)

*Black Box* also portrays aspects of nature that can be misunderstood as threatening events; however, it additionally documents the ways in which the crow can provoke fear through its transmogrification into human victims. This major difference is *Black Box* evokes emotions of fear and empathy in the viewer, and allows the viewer to further explore the relationship between actual and invented threat.

Finally, the videos in *Black Box* are also reminiscent of the pop culture hit, *The Birds* (1963) directed by Alfred Hitchcock. This apocalyptic themed film, which uses the crow among other birds as a terrorizing force, must be recognized as one of the catalysts for why contemporary culture views the crow in such a negative light. As in Hitchcock’s film, *Black Box* uses the crow as a weapon against humans. However, while *The Birds* presents the crow attacks as a form of nature’s revenge, *Black Box*’s presentation of the crow attacks transcends the bird as nature. Instead, the force of the crow represents the force of man. It should also be said that while *The Birds* only presents the crow as aggressor, *Black Box* surveys the crow as both aggressor and victim.

*Black Box*’s utilization of traumatic images must also be placed within the context of artists, such as Andy Warhol, Martha Rosler, and Thomas Ruff. When comparing

Black Box to Andy Warhol’s Death and Disaster series (1962-63), it is important to recognize that both works not only modify similar photographic subject matter, such as suicide jumpers, but also share a strong connection in their means of disseminating such images, although Warhol distills the moments following a catastrophic event. Each presents numerous variants of a piece and relies heavily on repetition as a means of critiquing the media’s commoditization of such images.

Both Black Box and Martha Rosler’s Bringing the War Home series (1967-1972, 2004) recontextualize traumatic imagery found in mainstream media within the common vernaculars of “home.” However, while Rosler used photomontage to take images of war and place them within the cultural images of home, Black Box uses state-of-the-art technology to take a cultural image of home and transform it into images of war.

When discussing Black Box’s use of the traumatic image, it is also crucial to place it in perspective of other contemporary artists working with similar subject matter. This link to other contemporary art is even more important when taking into consideration that the presentation and dissemination of traumatic images changes in the media every few months due to evolving technology. For this reason, it is invaluable to compare Black Box to the works of Ruff.

In The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Thomas Ruff is described as “interested in how technology colors our perceptions. Following the first Gulf War, he used a night-vision camera to bathe banal views of Düsseldorf in the unearthly green glow of CNN's real-time footage of the conflict.”30 Just as Ruff transformed Düsseldorf into alienating, even violent landscapes through the use

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of modern technology, *Black Box* transforms the familiar image of the crow into traumatic images reminiscent of present day acts of conflict and terror. Both Ruff’s images and *Black Box’s* videos utilize this method of transforming the banal into the traumatic as a way to critique the manner in which technology is used by the media and its potential results on the viewing public.

When discussing the depiction of traumatic imagery in the fine art photograph, it is important to understand that there are an infinite number of ways to present trauma. In *Black Box*, much of the trauma results from the erratic flying and apparent falling of the crow. In order to understand the motives behind using the concept of falling within this project, it is imperative to contextualize this presentation of falling as traumatic image within other traumatic photographic presentations of falling. Both Yves Klein and Bas Jan Ader used the element of falling in their photographic work. However, neither artist used this act as a means to evoke fear or terror in the viewer. Instead, falling was used as a way to force a tension on the viewer as they anticipate the climax of the image.

In Klein’s *Leap Into The Void* (1960), the act of falling even takes on a spiritual aspect, where Klein appears to be at the moment of taking flight.

Yves Klein
at Rue Gentil-Bernard,
Fontenay-aux-Roses,
October 1960.
Photographed by Harry Shunk.
Le Saut dans le Vide
(Leap into the Void)

Broken fall (organic)
Bas Jan Ader, 16mm
Duration: 1 min 44 sec© 1971,
Mary Sue Ader-Andersen
Figures 9 and 10

Ader’s presentation of falling, coupled with his use of video, heightened this tension in the viewer. These videos, such as Broken Fall (organic) (1971) provide a visual basis for the impact of falling and its resulting trauma. While these images don’t present any death or danger, they evoke emotions and desires that are linked with viewing actual traumatic images. In other words, a viewer responds to an image of Ader falling from a tree in much the same way he, or she, would respond to an image of a suicide jumper leaping from a building.

Aaron Siskind’s photographic series Terrors and Pleasures of Levitation (1954) presents falling in much the same way. Siskind’s images of men diving act as a study of human form through the excitement and fears of falling. What is critical to understand about Siskind’s work is the fact that he has documented a rather mundane subject matter and transformed it into the traumatic.

While these three artists’ use of falling is significant, when discussing the elements of falling in Black Box as a link to traumatic images it is necessary to discuss other artists who tie these two elements more closely together. These artists include Nicolai Howalt, Josh Azzarella, and Richard Drew.

Howalt’s photographic series Dying Birds (2005) explore the parallels between photography and hunting. Howalt’s beautiful presentation of falling birds as they are shot out of the sky creates a form of traumatic image, which frames the concepts of falling and death within abstraction and the inherent flattening nature of the camera.

While Black Box also forms traumatic images with the birds, it differs from Howalt’s work in its presentation of the bird as human and man-made forms. It is this
specific presentation of the bird as human that allows *Black Box* to be placed within the greater context of the media’s creation and dissemination of traumatic images. Howalt’s presentation of the falling bird never transcends the bird. In other words, the bird never takes on a human element. Because of this, Howalt’s images act as a critique of human’s control over nature without bringing up the traumatic concepts of suicide or human-on-human violence.

In contrast to Howalt, Azzarella is known for taking iconic traumatic images and altering them such that the viewer doesn’t necessarily recognize the historical or traumatic impact of the image. By removing said elements from the image, Azzarella creates a cognitive dissonance between the aesthetic qualities of the image and the recognition of it as a specific traumatic event. As opposed to Azzarella’s work, *Black Box* uses abstraction as a means of transference. Instead of using abstraction to distance the traumatic image from the viewer, *Black Box* abstracts the crow as a way to reform traumatic images.

Figure 11
Photo by Richard Drew
*Digital Color Photograph from September 11, 2001 (Photograph © Richard Drew/AP/Wide World Photos)*
Of all the presentations of falling and suicide in fine art, there are none so strong as the “straight” or unmanipulated image. While it is quite easy to alter an image with today’s technology, there still exists a sense of “truth” in an image presented by the news media. When these images are presented within the fine art world, they are not only seen for their aesthetics, but also for their direct connection to the traumatic event presented. This unique quality of this type of photograph can be seen in figure 11, Richard Drew’s image of a man jumping from the World Trade Center on Sept.11, 2001. This image shares both the formal elements and the ability to present the viewer with an “honest” glimpse of death, or rather the moment just before death. This pairing of elements allows for the photograph and its subject to be discussed and even judged in a unique fashion. This can be seen in Andrea Fitzpatrick’s the description of this photograph in her article “The Movement of Vulnerability.” “In the picture, he departs from this earth like an arrow. Although he has not chosen his fate, he appears to have, in his last instants of life, embraced it. If he were not falling, he might very well be flying.”31 While the videos in Black Box predominantly rely on manipulation to obtain their success as metaphors, there are still others in the exhibition that utilize the power of the unaltered photograph or video in their quest to present the crow as conflict. These images play an important role in the exhibition. They act as foils to the heavily manipulated videos and ground the viewer back in photojournalistic media and the crow.

Chapter Six

The Black Box Exhibition

As an exhibition, Black Box retools the visual language and techniques utilized by mainstream media outlets. This includes multiple screens, projectors, and speakers designed to play off each other as each presents an individual visual or sound bite, reminiscent of the short, superficial broadcasting clips commonly presented by news media. When presented together within the confines of the “Big Brother” structure of the Black Box, these clips create a barrage of images and sounds, immersing the observer in an environment of paranoia and obsession, which often accompanies the viewing of traumatic imagery.

Because Black Box so closely mimics mainstream media’s broadcasting techniques, each video in Black Box struggles to stand on its own. As in media coverage, Black Box relies on the fluid interaction and constant repetition of numerous individual pieces. With each video variant displayed in the greater context of the other videos, Black Box becomes exponentially stronger.

The audio clips in Black Box act in much the same way as the videos. Appropriated sounds of war, the “caws” of the crows, and the beating of wings as they explode out of a tree are used. The audio acts as an additional referent for the viewer to draw parallels between the Black Box installation and sounds bites drawn from current media.

When presented together within the framework of Black Box, the media platforms of the visual and the aural merge to present a kinetic narrative of trauma. A kinetic
narrative in the sense that these audiovisual clips reference the traumatic image through a meditative, poetic view of nature based on the elemental form of animal motion. This relationship allows the viewer to explore the media’s role in the creation and dissemination of trauma while simultaneously linking the spectral bodies of the crows back with nature and contextualizing the crow as manipulated subject matter. As marks across the frame, the natural beauty of the crow explores abstraction while retaining a subtle literalness, which speaks to a documentary approach. It is in this constant duality that the Black Box finds it meaning, portraying a poetic, even romantic view of nature through representations of trauma, conflict, and fear.
Chapter Seven

Closing Remarks

The Black Box’s presentation of both the crow and the traumatic image is designed to guide the viewer to several specific conclusions. To contextualize these conclusions, the following quote by Wendy McElroy acts as a springboard:

A new fortress mentality is being stoked by a media that dwells incessantly on every terrorist possibility, on every awful news story from anthrax to Catholic sex scandals. And so, we begin to view each stranger as a threat and each neighbor with suspicion.

If in fact, “a new fortress mentality is being stoked by a media… And so, we begin to view each stranger as a threat and each neighbor with suspicion,” then this thesis exhibition ultimately exists to promote awareness among the viewing public of the possibility that this new media structure will continue to feed off of, and in turn, build upon this current climate of fear. Furthermore, the public, as consumers of images, must ask themselves what constitutes headline news and what effect traumatic images play in the structuring and formation of cultural experiences. Black Box provokes these questions by acting as a warning of the public’s increasing desensitization to violence due to the exposure of visual and aural media and presenting the media’s potential for inciting further violence.

Finally, Black Box provides a platform to advance both the photographer’s and viewers’ responsibility as witness. By constantly observing violence and trauma, the

33 Ibid.
public gradually comes to view it as normal and acceptable. In my view, it is no longer reasonable or responsible for the public to respond to these images in this fashion, especially within a society so structured around trauma. If this reading of trauma continues, then the viewing public will view these mediated images as entertainment, void of a greater context in regard to others.

With this relationship between the public and the media already taking shape, it is more crucial than ever that professional and citizen photojournalists must not only take responsibility for their actions during the taking of a photograph, but also be responsible for how those images are disseminated within the media. In today’s image-saturated culture, where anybody and everybody is a potential media contributor, it is not enough to just exist as bystanders.
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