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Epistemic Violence and the Careful Photograph

I.

In April 2013, the Rana Plaza garment factory collapse in the city of Savar, an industrial suburb of Dhaka, Bangladesh, killed 1,138 workers and injured thousands more. The following year, labor activists projected a film based on photographs of Rana Plaza's victims onto the exterior of Lincoln Center during New York Fashion Week. The installation, somewhat reminiscent of the public installations of Krzysztof Wodiczko, was created by the photojournalist Ismail Ferdous and the filmmaker Nathan Fitch in collaboration with 99 Pickets, an independent workers' organization, and the Illuminator Art Collective (both founded during Occupy Wall Street in 2011). The intervention was one step among many in deploying and distributing photographs of the disaster taken by Ferdous. The images place blame on the Western textile industry for benefitting from the necrocapitalist conditions of work and life in Savar, as well as in the sweatshop districts across the Global South.

Ferdous, interested in further covering the on-site situation in Savar, started an Instagram account in 2015 featuring the voices of survivors of the Rana Plaza disaster. These were short audio recordings usually accompanied by one of Ferdous's photographs. The photographs are shot in a style befitting the standards of international newsmagazine picture spreads and slideshows (both off- and online). Like so many instances of "high quality" photojournalism, they are difficult to handle in their conspicuous commingling of the horrific and the beautiful (particularly when it comes to the aestheticizing photographs Ferdous took of corpses in the rubble of the collapsed building on the day of the disaster). Regardless of potential criticism of such pictorial practice,[1] Ferdous considers himself a "storyteller," whose "stories might not bring immediate change or miraculously solve a social injustice, but photography definitely has the power to raise a question, create a social consciousness for viewers. It's like scratching an unscathed surface."[2]

Such claims about the consciousness-raising function of photography, about its humanitarian ethics, would remain in the fold of mainstream photojournalism, if Ferdous had not sought collaboration with other civil society actors and artists. Through his ongoing actions he continued to document the aftermath of the disaster inflicted upon the workers of Savar, rather than simply leaving after the main event, to push towards a general critique of global inequality, necrocapitalist realities, and "regime-made disasters."[3] With Instagram he attempted to actually give voice to those not usually listened to in a relatively sustained manner. However, updates to Ferdous's "After Rana Plaza"

account have become rare since 2016; as in so many other cases, it has proven difficult to maintain visual activist struggle over a longer period.

Taslima Akhter, another photographer-activist from the region, also covered the Rana Plaza disaster and its aftermath. Akhter's series *Death of a Thousand Dreams* includes images, such as a family searching a morgue for their two daughters and sisters, which stylistically resemble Ferdous's photographs. Akhter's work is typically presented in the context of global, Magnum-style photojournalism, a context in which Akhter has also won awards. One of these awards, the third prize in the "spot news" section of the World Press Award 2014, following her work's considerable distribution in news magazines such as *Time*, was given to Akhter for a particularly disturbing photo that has become known as "The Final Embrace" (though this wording may have not been entirely Akhter's choice). It shows two dead people she found and photographed in the rubble of the collapsed factory building.

"Every time I look back to this photo," Akhter told *Time* a few days after taking the picture,

> I feel uncomfortable – it haunts me. It's as if they are saying to me, *we are not a number – not only cheap labor and cheap lives. We are human beings like you. Our life is precious like yours, and our dreams are precious too.* They are witnesses in this cruel history of workers being killed … If the people responsible don't receive the highest level of punishment, we will see this type of tragedy again. There will be no relief from these horrific feelings … As a witness to this cruelty, I feel the urge to share this pain with everyone. That's why I want this photo to be seen.[4]

The photograph might have been enlisted as potential, if not actual, evidence in the legal trial filed against those responsible for the "massacre." The trial, which began in 2015, has failed to lead to appropriate sentences or any form of adequate compensation.[5] In court, the effects of structural violence and the vulnerability it inflicts were converted into a confrontation between perpetrators and victims of specific violence. Akhter, who self-identifies as a "witness to this cruelty," and therefore partook, at least symbolically, in the indictment, was an activist before becoming a professional photographer and lecturer. She is the chair of Garment Sromik Samhoti (Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity). After the Rana Plaza collapse, Akhter co-organized the production of collectively manufactured quilts that were made of embroidered messages and photographs and that incorporated belongings donated by surviving relatives – offering a counter-narrative to disaster via remembrance and forging public conversation. In 2013, she helped to facilitate building a website to anthologize the event, providing a platform for information, memorialization, and networking.

Both Akhter's and Ferdous's are multilayered visual practices, addressing multiple recipients. The two photographers (and other civil actors on the ground) insert themselves in and address a variety of aesthetic canons and expectations, local and global, professional and grassroots. Moreover, their works circulate in various social and activist networks, occasionally in the company of or in collaboration with other practitioners' work. Therefore they are placed deliberately *between* and *across* constituencies. These practices, as different and even competitive as they may be, share a strategy of diversification and hybridization, of mixing author-based work with collective approaches, combining commercial photojournalism with both humanitarian iconography and the hands-on poetics of a political campaign.

Like Ferdous, Akhter is convinced of photography's potential to "change things." In a 2012 interview she elaborated on her view of the photographer's authorial position and the possibility to "represent" a mode of thought or an "ideology" in photographs, thereby activating other people's – viewers' – thoughts and actions. "The camera is just an instrument but the photographer behind it is the one with ideas and feelings to create photographs representing her own ideology, through which people can take initiatives to change things."[6]

Akhter goes on to disclose some of her motivations to go into politics and seek an activist's life and occupation. She had a desire for a "different," "dignified life," but also to address patriarchy, feminism, and labor politics. She stresses the importance of founding one's practice in theory: "I think without any ideological and theoretical viewpoint one can't make his/her work strong."[7] Akhter's utterances are revealing, as they bespeak the frameworks and conditions of a feminist, labor activist, and professional photojournalistic visual practice in a specific economic and political context such as Bangladesh's garment industry. With its self-conscious positioning, the interview relates to (and implicitly contradicts) Gayatri Spivak's harsh rejection of "the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject," since it will "cohere with the work of imperialist

Technical information & keywords

Camera	Shutter Speed	F-Stop
Canon EOS 5D Mark II	1/40	2.5
	Focal Length	ISO
	35.0 mm	1600

Keywords

2013 Savar building collapse | Building failures | Clothing factories | Couples

https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2014/spot-news/taslima-akhter

subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever."[8]

In the light of Spivak's invocation of the "epistemic violence" operating in colonialist subject production, the works of Akhter and Ferdous could arguably be read as not only refusing the voicelessness of the subaltern, but also as participating in a decolonial project of *epistemic counterviolence*. Their images certainly present a number of problematic aspects regarding the agency of photographic violence, particularly where they depict, moving between the graphic and the aestheticizing, the victims of the structural violence of global capital and its local realities. However, the images *should* pose a problem, for their "violence" (as visual fact) could as well be read as a symptom of those who consume them from a geopolitical and geo-economic distance. In other words, the "violence" of the visual document registers the violence inflicted on the workers killed and harmed at the Rana Plaza factory and the social worlds that surrounded and sustained them.

In well-known passages from Spivak's 1988 "Can the Subaltern Speak?," the notion of "epistemic violence" is closely linked to the imperialist "asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity." Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of "subjugated knowledge," a set of "naïve" knowledges "located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity," and related to the "international division of labor from socialized capital,"[9] she says Foucault thereby submitted to the "circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education." Spivak ends her argument by emphasizing the "general violence that is the possibility of an episteme."[10]

Photographic images could be considered particular forms of violence spurred by a given power/knowledge that is responsible for "general violence." Conceived in this way, images could be *performative* as they enact ideology, as they exemplify, codify, and translate written and unwritten laws and social hierarchies, as they bestow or remove citizenship, and as they exert epistemic violence. Images do all these things in a particular mode and manner depending on the specificities of their respective medium and form. Visual activism, or the realm where images are put to militant use, like in the cases of Akhter and Ferdous, is one of the customarily invoked strands of practice that supposedly enables the production of visualities that oppose and contradict the "general violence" in which photography arguably takes part. So what exactly is the place of violence in activist image journalism and in modes of visual protest? And what may be the limit of such violence with regard to the violences of the (neo)colonial order?

Depending on where one stands in the global geopolitical and geo-economic hierarchy, the violence of Akhtar's and Ferdous' images and the activist practices they are embedded in may be a two-fold political violence: a violence against the victims of structural, racialized, and gendered violence who sue those responsible for the massacre; and a violence that resides in the resistance against continuing colonial power relations, the unfinished business of decolonization. They may not be images capable of "ejecting" the colonizer "outright from the picture," to use Frantz Fanon's visual metaphor from the chapter "On Violence" in his *The Wretched of the Earth*.[11] However, although the "picture" of the sociopolitical situation may not be liberated from the (neo)colonizing forces of racial capitalism, it is certainly dislodged and unsettled by the multilayered practice of the visual activists in Dhaka, to become less welcoming to the responsible and indicted.

Unlike during the age of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes, in contemporary visual culture photographic images are not considered potential candidates for revolutionary use – for a visual practice that supports and helps to bring about radical change. Yet they continue to do work in the digital factories of consent and dissent, in content farms and online news media, and arguably, they work harder than ever. Notwithstanding its role in the shaping of individual and mass affect, the visual production of the present – hyper-democratized, inflationary, ubiquitous, autonomous, algorithmic – sustains a particular *condition of knowledge*, or rather non-knowledge.

Within contemporary visual regimes, photography as a historically determined system continues to be regarded as providing a modicum of evidentiary truth. Photographic images have always been carriers and mediators of claims of knowledge, evidence, and truth, and thereby participate in and are complicit with the constitution of epistemic regimes and their constitutive epistemic violences. Manipulation of the photographic image by means of algorithmic compression and calibration, as routinely carried out by digital image-making devices today, is significantly altering the relations between image and imagination, visuality and truth. However, the present epistemological crisis, manifest in the increasing distrust in the purveyors of truth and fact, in the pervasive doubt cast by the populist right on journalism and science, renders the visual evidence attributed to photographic images more

ambiguous and debatable than ever. As photographs are either enlisted as the last stand of objective truth or dismissed as fundamentally corruptible and false, to attend to their part in the performances of epistemic violence and counterviolence may prove crucial to understanding the current function of images as such.

There's yet another facet of epistemic violence in contemporary photojournalism and visual activism that usually remains unnoticed. Much of this intentional diffusion and complexification of practices remains invisible in the entry for Akhter's *The Final Embrace* photograph on the World Press Photo website (though the biographical note on the same page at least mentions Akhter's work with the Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity). Instead, the photograph, like all other photographs in the competition, is equipped with a cool, descriptive caption of the photograph's "content" and a list of the technical metadata of the image file, informing us about the technology and camera settings. The professionalism indexed here works like a member's card and might quite literally give a photographer from Dhaka access to a travel visa – as long as this photographer subscribes to the protocols of award-winning photojournalism, the center of which remains in the West (in the case of the World Press Photo, it's the Netherlands). A subtle, hidden, and thus truly epistemic violence is in operation here. It contributes, if innocently and unintentionally, to the more obvious violences (economic and political) that bring about the kind of photographs that made it into the world media after April 24, 2013.

II.

Visual production in the face of the structural and racialized violence inflicted on Bangladeshi workers and the population as a whole – violence that is caused to a large extent by a global economy whose rules are made in the affluent sectors of the world – implicates the photographs of Akhter and Ferdous in a political struggle and thus demonstrates their performative nature. Arguably, this performativity may participate, in the short or long run, in the pursuit of decolonial aims. It might correct the exploitative, condescending, pitiful, or even embarrassed Western gaze that rests on intolerable conditions of labor, conditions that call for the very "representational intolerance" that photography historian John Roberts sees as a precondition for "keeping alive the politics of violence," for the "need to keep the dialectic between 'looking at' and 'looking away' in tension."[12]

To "drive the representation of violence (and the violated body) solely through the demands of representational intolerance," claims Roberts in his powerful 2014 book *Photography and Its Violations*, "is to *hystericize* the politics of representation: in short, the whole world is turned into a vast hospital and mortuary."[13] Here he refers to well-known arguments by Susan Sontag and others on the topic of war and atrocity photographs, to get at his main point: photographing and thus attempting to show what is incommensurable and cannot be contained in the symbolic and social orders of the West makes "looking away" a necessary and critical impulse. For, as Roberts writes,

> to try to empathize by staring long and hard at the most terrible suffering is the hardest thing to do, because in doing so there is the fear that getting to know something so horrific so well is to aestheticize it and assimilate it as an image that has fallen under the sway of my power to look without consequence. By turning away, therefore, we refuse our own complicity with the depicted suffering … So, representational intolerance is not something photographers want to give up, for photography's inhuman violation of the integrity of its subjects is central to its ethical charge and power. Without this, photography loses all sense of its interruptive and countersymbolic function in the world.[14]

In this sense, and particularly given its feminist and labor politics, Akhter's *The Final Embrace* and the other more gruesome photographs from the series seem to serve the interruptive and countersymbolic function of photography's "representational intolerance" that Roberts demands. Yet it needs to be stressed that the criticality of the "dialectic between 'looking at' and 'looking away'" may work in a Western context, but cannot be applied universally (something Roberts is quite aware of). Such criticality may even prove "violent" in ways different from and undesirable within the late-modernist framework in which the notion of "violation" as the very interruption engendered and performed by photography could be developed.

For instance, it is by now a much-researched and well-argued fact that, from the inception of the medium, photography has served and continues to serve the interests of the state and of capital, of state-bounded knowledge systems, of disciplinary, racialized regimes embodied in the apparatuses of science, education, and police, of the social control of minorities and the racializing orders of colonialism outside and inside the West. This

disciplinary aspect of photography, influentially put forward by John Tagg, Martha Rosler, Abigail Solomon-Godeau and others in the 1980s and '90s, has become a matter of contestation in the more recent wave of photography criticism and history led by Ariella Azoulay, Susie Linfield, and John Roberts, among many others.

Rather than continuing the critical damnation of photography as a mere tool of power and discipline, these latter writers advocate a closer attention to the actual uses and practices of photography, to the materiality of the individual photograph and the materiality of the activities and exchanges it is entwined with, to a politics of photography and photographic archives, and more broadly to the social and political ontologies of photography. Such ontological recalibration of photography theory is not without problems, and it very much depends on the concrete uses made of this ontological turn.

Ariella Azoulay famously coined the term "the civil contract of photography,"[15] a fundamental relationality in which the "civil imagination" is to be recuperated from the ruins of a citizenship fatally bound to the nation-state. For this purpose, she calls for a separation of the "ontology of photography" from the "ontology of the photograph." "The photograph is a platform upon which traces from the encounter between those present in the situation of photography are inscribed, whether the participants are present by choice, through force, knowingly, indifferently, as a result of being overlooked or as a consequence of deceit."[16] In other words, the "situation" in which a photograph is taken is replete with presences and subjectivities, visible and invisible, that need to be taken into account in order to overcome the standard histories construed from the single photograph. The "event of photography," defined by Azoulay as the complex scene of negotiation and struggle in which a photograph is made, perceived, and distributed, and in which an image becomes the mobile "platform" of a specific visibility, is thus foregrounded. "Thus far, scant attention has been devoted to the role of viewing in the event of photography where it is responsible for the always unfinished nature of this event."[17]

Therefore the question of authorship with regard to a given photograph's meaning and, arguably, its violence, cannot be reduced to the subject pressing the button of the camera. According to Azoulay, "a photograph is never the testimony of the photographer alone, and the event of photography, unlike the photographed event, continues to exist despite all other considerations."[18] Azoulay is not only a theorist and historian of photography but also an activist and curator committed to render visible – through the open-ended, ontologically infinite "event of photography" – the often hidden realities of occupation and destruction in Israel/Palestine. She explores the possibilities of visual activism by searching and activating state and private photography archives to write the history and present of occupation differently.

Among the premises on which Azoulay's work rests is her critical observation of the unwillingness of the state to accept the historiographical function of photographs. This relates to their systematic devalorization and suppression as historical records, or rather historical actors. The epistemic violence exerted on the visual archives of struggle and civil imagination and the testimonial potential of photographs in the extended "event of photography" is a violence performed to prevent representational justice from taking place and visual literacy from developing, not to speak of the epitome of epistemic violence, the concept of race that emerges as an abstraction supported by the photographic archive as a state-controlled technological form. Photographs, in Azoulay's vision (which owes much to Walter Benjamin's dense and difficult 1921 essay "Critique of Violence"),[19] may instead become "photos of constituent violence, documents of an incomplete history," and thus able to "potentializ[e] the constituent violence."[20] This idea bears traces of a *performative* understanding of photography as a practice designed to produce and/or alter affect and truth.

When Akhter and Ferdous speak of creating photographs "through which people can take initiatives to change things," or when Azoulay and Roberts ponder the "violence" of photographs, *performativity* appears to be quite intact as an epistemological concept through which the workings of the photographic image are to be understood. A certain transparency of inner cause and external effect, a motivation for the image to achieve its purported effect, is indicative of a causality that is implied in Western theories of subjectivity as well as in concepts of performative speech acts. Such causality remains operative in most accounts of photographs that are meant or perceived as assisting or creating social change. However, what about, in the words of performance scholar Sarah Jane Cervenak, "foregoing the presumed aesthetic and performative shapes of consequence itself?"

III.

In her essay "The Problem of After," recently published in *ASAP/Journal*, Cervenak invokes, in the lineage of Sara Ahmed and other feminist thinkers before her, the option of

nonperformativity as a political and theoretical stance or strategy.[21] The essay's point of departure is a series of photographs of Erica Garner, the daughter of Eric Garner. On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner died in Staten Island, New York, after a New York City Police Department officer put him in a chokehold while arresting him, despite the fact that NYPD policy prohibits the use of chokeholds. The officer denied choking Garner, but the medical examiner's report stated that the chokehold was the cause of Garner's death. In December 2014, a grand jury decided not to indict the police officer. In the course of protesting against the killing of her father and the not-guilty verdict of the police officer, Erica Garner – who herself died from a heart attack in 2017 – organized a series of "die-ins" at the scene of the crime, in an effort to overcome the traumatic events and to identify with her father as much as possible. In an article in a New York tabloid, she was quoted as saying: "I felt his spirit when I was walking down to the spot … I've been doing this every Tuesday and Thursday since my father's death. I do it without cameras there. I do it with cameras there, and I'm going to keep doing it."[22]

Garner was repeatedly photographed lying down on the pavement where her father died. The journalists on site who took the pictures of her reenactment published them in tabloids such as the *New York Daily News*. Engaging with Garner's performance and the photographs, Cervenak navigates a set of questions including the function of photography, the economy of protest, the aesthetics of affect, and the politics of nonperformativity. And although (or because) she writes about a series of visual images, photographs in high circulation in the local and national media, she refrains from printing and showing them alongside her article. This decision I take as a prescriptive demand. Since her argument is imbricated in the form of her writing, I would like to present a longer passage from Cervenak's text. This is how she begins:

> How do the visualities of Black Lives Matter protests relate to – maybe amble into – the nonperformative textures of mourning? What happens to the question of nonperformativity in the face of the protest photo's presumptive publicity? I ask these questions in relation to a 2014 *New York Daily News* photo of the late Erica Garner. In it, she's said to be staging a die-in in the place where her father, Eric, was killed.
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> How not to parse the visualities of mourning and protest and then, with respect to the latter, project a space where the photo's political performativity can surface uncomplicatedly as an askable question? A photo that might hide as much as it's purportedly said to show – a "protest photo" – where the hypercirculated image of a daughter dying-in is perhaps also an unregardable and unrecoverable (family) portrait? What might the challenge to a certain presumptive performativity, following Christina Sharpe's brilliant meditations on Black life and ongoing anti-Black "disaster," have to do with care as a problem of thought?
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> Care: how is it possible to know whether Erica Garner, with eyes alternately open and closed, is, at the moment of a flash, protesting or mourning or upset by the camera's presence there at all? Does this complicate or trouble how we think the after, the moral askability of the question of the aesthetic, the political, and more precisely of their performative intersection?[23]

This "performative intersection" of the aesthetic and political, a key conundrum of contemporary theory, is commonly kept in a dialectic tension or suspension of sorts – a problem either never to be solved or always already solved. The issue of *ASAP/Journal* in which Cervenak's text is published is devoted to "Art, Process, Protest," but Cervenak and other contributors also put a strong emphasis on the notion of care as a crucial extension of criticality. The introduction of care into a discussion around art and politics inevitably shifts the coordinates and widens the options. Invoking care can lead to a change in critical routines. Located somewhere between feminist-Marxist notions of care work and the etymological groundings of the term "to curate," the concept of care as suggested by Cervenak may amplify the ethics and politics of watching images whose functions ("protest") can no longer be taken for granted. Since political image-making is expected to "perform" social change, the notion of care makes it possible or even necessary to raise the question of performativity in the realm of the political image itself, questioning its presupposed functionality in favor of a different mode of attention. Moreover, a strong emphasis on "care" works towards a notion of nonperformativity that could become instrumental in dealing with images of violence by turning, again, to the inherent violence of photographic images, but from a different angle.

Caring for what Cervenak calls "the irresolvable, unencroachable heaviness and anguish of the image," the weight of what it is

supposed to represent or make visible, sheds a critical light on its actual or potential performativity.[24] Rather than looking for a cause-effect relation in which the image is supposed to play its part, attention may be directed to the relationality of what comes before, after, and beyond the image as visual fact, to the affects and intensities that traverse it without being subjugated to any representational and evidentiary function. This kind of care instills a belief in the power of images, of militant images in particular, to move and change the distribution of power. As Cervenak puts it, the "analytic of performativity," with its notion of the consequences of protests and images of protests,

> engages in a particular capturing and propertizing of Black social life, a propertizing against which insurgent Black mattering symbolically disturbs and defends itself. For this reason, *I'm interested most directly in the spacing around a protest photo's thinkability, the nonpropertizing futures it might announce, and how the unelaborated itself, the question of non- or outra-performativity, moves as an exercise of care.*[25]

Through stressing the "unelaborated" and the "nonpropertizing futures," Cervenak exerts careful pressure on the "protest photo's thinkability," which is another way of saying that Azoulay's "event of photography" demonstrates the very malleability and expandability of the event, its potentializing force. Extending the premises of Azoulay's "political ontology" towards a theory of affect and an object-oriented ontology of sorts, Cervenak thus contributes to the thinking of visuality and violence in promising, if somewhat disconcerting, ways – ways that may even run the risk of being flagged "escapist," for she seems to abandon the option of "proper," that is *performative*, activist politics.

However, the actual strategic proposal may lie exactly in the very re- or dislocation of the photographic image of protest. In the careful displacement of the already circulating photograph, an *anti-representational reappropriation* and *decolonization* takes place. The image is turned against over-rehearsed modes of viewing and reading visual "documents." Moreover, such dislocation signals a refusal on the part of the viewer to be agitated by such "documents," as prescribed by the standard protocols of affect.

This constitutes another element in a set of measures to immunize oneself against the populist notions and uses of the image. For in the suspension of the performative presence of the image of protest, the image is potentially activated to operate in unexpected and productive ways. It is reconfigured as a space for reflecting on trauma and working through grief. Through underlining (and caring for) its *virtuality*, the image-made-absent becomes a plane on which to roam more freely and speculatively, and, as Cervenak argues, in a decidedly anti-propertizing way. The image is to be kept from being "'read' through a set of properties, whether racial, sexual, ontological, ecological, spatio-temporal, or aesthetic." Such "promiscuous propertizing," Cervenak contends, was at the base of the NYPD officer's reading of Eric Garner as "criminally performative."[26]

In the final paragraphs of her text, Cervenak moves from ontology to hauntology, to a reading of the protest photograph as spectral nonperformance: "When Erica Garner 'appeared' to pay tribute to her father, and when the camera showed up to share that tribute to the world, who is to say that her father was not, is not, also in the picture?"[27] In Cervenak's construction, Erica Garner's image is freed from the visual and from any knowledge-bearing epistemic violence it may entail. As a platform, in Azoulay's sense, a photograph may function like a relay, conduit, or infrastructure, potentially avoiding the interpellating visuality of performativity and derailing the epistemic violence of photography as an apparatus of knowledge-power.

"There is a real contrast between the violence of the act of representation and the internal calm of representation itself," as Jean-Luc Godard rephrases the ontological distinction between photography and photograph in his most recent film, *Le Livre d'image* (*The Picture Book*). When paradoxically made invisible in order to actually function, a photograph, a representation, may serve and care for the struggle around the deadly, "propertizing" performativity of race. It is not necessary (and wouldn't be wise) to trash the politics and theory of performativity wholesale. But to work towards the suspension of the *violence of performativity* may prove crucial to make palpable, to *make real*, a post-visual politics. At any rate, photography's role as witness and source of evidence becomes tremendously complicated, if not replaced. Meanwhile, the striving for photography's alleged performativity may be brought to at least a temporary halt through acknowledgment of the image's internal calm, its quiet, spectral dimensions. In absenting the photograph, in disturbing its evidentiary and documentary functionalities, these quiet dimensions, however, turn out to be disquieting to the extreme.

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The literature on the problem of photography's relation to violence and its aestheticization is vast. See, e.g., *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, eds. Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, and Erina Duganne (Williams College Museum of Art/University of Chicago Press, 2007); David Levi Strauss, "Nikons and Icons. Is the Aesthetization-of-Sufferin g Critique Still Valid?," *Bookforum*, Summer 2007: 16–17; Dominique Baqué, L*'effroi du présent: Figurer la violence* (Flammarion, 2009).

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Hannah Harris Green, "Photographer Ismail Ferdous On Documenting the Rana Plaza Factory Collapse," *The Aerogram*, May 15, 2014 http://theaerogram.com/trage dy-still-speaking-ismail-fer dous-discusses-documenting-r ana-plaza-factory-collapse/.

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The term has been introduced by Ariella Azoulay. See her "Getting Rid of the Distinction between the Aesthetic and the Political," *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 7–8 (2010): 239–62; and "Regime-Made Disaster: On the Possibility of Nongovernmental Viewing," in *Sensible Politics: The Visual Cultures of Nongovernmental Politics*, eds. Yates McKee and Meg McLagan (Zone, 2012), 29–41.

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Time Photo Department, "A Final Embrace: The Most Haunting Photograph from Bangladesh," *Time*, May 08, 2013 http://time.com/3387526/a-fi nal-embrace-the-most-hauntin g-photograph-from-bangladesh /#1.

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See Shahnawaz Khan Chandan, "All Talk and No Action?," *The Daily Star*, April 20, 2018 https://www.thedailystar.net /star-weekend/spotlight/all-talk-and-no-action-1564897.

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Taslima Akhter, interview by Karen Knorr, Global Archive Photography, May–June 2012 https://globalarchivephotogr aphy.com/project/the-life-st ruggle-of-garment-workers/#p roject-interview.

7
Taslima Akhter, interview by Karen Knorr.

8
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 295. I will not engage deeper here with the strong, and arguably controversial, claims which Spivak made about the "subaltern woman," something that has been done by many feminists and postcolonial studies scholars since. See, e.g., Sara de Jong and Jamila M. H. Masca, "Relocating Subalternity: Scattered Speculations on the Conundrum of a Concept," in *Cultural Studies* 30, no. 5 (2016): 717–29.

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Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–77*, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (Pantheon, 1980), 82.

10
Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 281.

11
Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), trans. Richard Philcox, with commentary by Jean-Paul Sartre and Homi K. Bhabha (Grove, 2004), 9. I must emphasize and account for my own position from which I pose the question of decolonization. Given that I am a consumer-citizen in the affluent North who, if not knowingly, then certainly unknowingly benefits from the obscenely underpaid, exploitative, gendered, and racialized labor that went into his garments, one may argue that my attention to the Savar situation (like any Western commentator's) may inherently contradict or even harm any decolonial agenda.

12
John Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 150.

13
Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations*, 160. Italics in original.

14
Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations*, 161.

15
See her *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Zone, 2008).

16
Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, trans. Louise Bethlehem (Verso, 2012), 24.

17
Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 25.

18
Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 25.

19
Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" (1921), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings: Volume 1 (1913–1926)*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Harvard University Press, 1999), 236–52.

20
Ariella Azoulay, "Potential History: Thinking Through Violence," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 548–74, 574.

21
Sarah Jane Cervenak, "The Problem of After," *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 2 (May 2018). The quotation above is from 308–9.

22
Dan Friedman, Rocco Parascandola, and Bill Hutchinson, "Eric Garner's daughter holds 'die-in' at Staten Island location where her father was put in fatal police chokehold," *New York Daily News*, December 11, 2014 https://www.nydailynews.com/ new-york/garner-daughter-hol ds-die-in-article-1.2042603.

23
Cervenak, "The Problem of After," 306.

24
Cervenak, "The Problem of After," 307.

25
Cervenak, "The Problem of After," 307. Italics in original.

26
Cervenak, "The Problem of After," 309.

27
Cervenak, "The Problem of After," 309.