

Hito Steyerl

Missing People: Entanglement, Superposition, and Exhumation as Sites of Indeterminacy

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X.

In 1935, Erwin Schrödinger devised an insidious thought experiment. He imagined a box with a cat inside, which could be killed at any moment by a deadly mixture of radiation and poison. Or it might not be killed at all. Both outcomes were equally probable.

But the consequence of thinking through this situation was much more shocking than the initial setup. According to quantum theory, there wasn't just one cat inside the box, dead or alive. There were actually two cats: one dead, one alive – both locked into a state of so-called superposition, that is, co-present and materially entangled with one another. This peculiar state lasted as long as the box remained closed.

Macrophysical reality is defined by either/or situations. Someone is either dead or alive. But Schrödinger's thought experiment boldly replaced mutual exclusivity with an impossible coexistence – a so-called state of indeterminacy.

But that's not all. The experiment becomes even more disorienting when the box is opened and the entanglement (*Verschränkung*) of the dead and the live cat abruptly ends. At this point, either a dead or a live cat decisively emerges, not because the cat then actually dies or comes to life, but *because we look at it*. The act of observation breaks the state of indeterminacy. In quantum physics, observation is an active procedure. By taking measure and identifying, it interferes and engages with its object. By looking at the cat, we fix it in one of two possible but mutually exclusive states. We end its existence as an indeterminate interlocking waveform and freeze it as an individual chunk of matter.

To acknowledge the role of the observer in actively shaping reality is one of the main achievements of quantum theory. It's not radiation or poison gas that ultimately decides the fate of the cat, but the fact that it is identified, seen, described, and assessed. Being subject to observation provokes the second death of the cat: the one that ends its state of limbo.

X.

According to common logic, a missing person is either dead or alive. But is she really? Doesn't this only apply at the moment when we find out what happened to her? When she turns up or when her remains are identified?

But what, then, is the state of missing itself? Does it take place inside Schrödinger's box, so to speak? Is it being both dead and alive? How can we understand its conflicting desires: to want and to dread the truth at the same time? The urge to both move on and keep hope alive? Perhaps the state of missing speaks of a paradoxical superposition that cannot be

understood with the conceptual tools of Euclidian physics, human biology, or Aristotelian logic. Perhaps it reaches out to an impossible coexistence of life and death. Both are materially interlaced in limbo – as long as no observer opens the “box” of indeterminacy. Which is, in many cases, a grave.

X.

In 2010, Spanish prosecutor Baltasar Garzon brushed up against the state of superposition.¹ Two years prior, he had brought charges against leading officials of the Franco regime, including General Franco himself, for crimes against humanity. He opened investigations into the disappearance and suspected murder of around 113,000 people – mostly Republicans from the Civil War period – as well as the forceful appropriation of 30,000 children. Many of the disappeared ended up in mass graves around the country, which at that time were being patiently dug up by relatives of the disappeared and volunteers. None of the thousands of kidnappings, disappearances, summary executions, and killings by starvation or exhaustion had ever been prosecuted legally in Spain. And total impunity had been made legal by a so-called amnesty law in 1977.

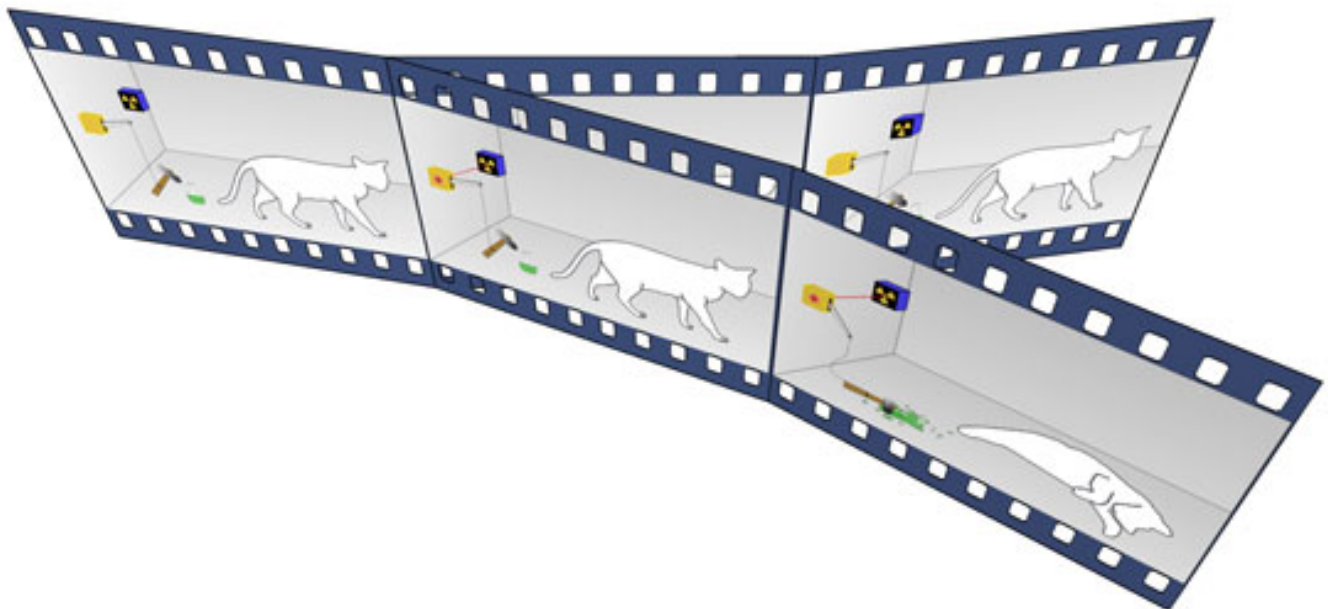
Garzon’s case was the first to challenge this situation. Predictably, it ran into immediate controversy. One of the many points on which he was challenged was that many of the accused, including Franco himself, were dead. And according to the law, if they were dead then

Garzon had no jurisdiction. He found himself in a legal deadlock: he had to assert that the dead were still alive in order to investigate whether they were dead in the first place and guilty in the second.

This is where superposition comes into play, since a potential legal argument in this case can be derived from Schrödinger’s paradigm. Garzon could have argued that one had to get to the point of being able to open Schrödinger’s box. Only then could one determine whether the defendants were dead or alive, and until this happened, a state of superposition between life and death had to be assumed. Franco, for instance, had to be proven dead. If not, it had to be assumed that he was in a state of superposition, until proper observation and measurement could take place. As long as Franco was at least potentially alive, investigations into the crimes of the Franco period could continue.

But the state of superposition not only affected the accused perpetrators. It also determined the legal status of many of the disappeared. As lawyer Carlos Slepoy argued, any disappeared person, regardless of the date of disappearance, had to be assumed to be alive. As long as he or she was in a state of having been kidnapped and not yet found, the crime was ongoing. It could not fall under any statute of limitations. As long the victims weren’t proven dead – as long as they were still missing – they were in a state of superposition and indeterminacy. While the crime was lingering,

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The metaphor of film can illustrate the two possible states of Schrödinger’s cat in time.

Schrödinger's box remained closed and both a potentially dead missing person and a potentially living missing person were entangled in a paradoxical legal quantum state. This state of indeterminacy enabled the cases to remain open and investigations to proceed.

X.

Schrödinger's mental exercise in indeterminacy echoes another famous thought image: the idea of the two bodies of the king. In 1957, historian Ernst Kantorowicz described how the bodies of medieval kings were split into a natural body and a body politic.² While the natural body was mortal, the body politic, which represented the mystical dignity and justice of the realm, was immortal. While the king was in power, both states were superimposed on his body. He incorporated the nation in a body politic that was immortal and immaterial.

In addition, the king also possessed a natural, material body that was subject to passion, foolishness, infancy, and death. The idea of the twin body of the king became one of the defining factors in developing the concept of sovereignty – ruling power incorporated within a body, in which death and eternal life are superposed.

Neither Schrödinger nor his numerous interpreters took into account the fact that in the twentieth century, his thought experiment was uncannily echoed by new experimental forms of asserting sovereignty. The result was a state that no quantum physicist could foresee.

In the twentieth century – the age of genocide, of racism and terror – the superposition of life and death became a standard feature of various forms of government.³ In these experiments, Schrödinger's "box" became a site of lethal detention or mass extinction by radiation and poison gas – as in Schrödinger's original setup – or by explosives, which Albert Einstein eagerly added to the quantum list of WMDs.⁴

Schrödinger even went as far as to explicitly mention the name of the poison gas that threatened the cat's life in 1935: hydrocyanic acid. In 1939, hydrocyanic acid was used in a Nazi gas chamber in Poznan to kill disabled people. Later on, it was produced industrially as "Zyklon B" by a company called Degesch and employed in the gas chambers of all the major extermination camps of the National Socialist empire.

X.

In 2011, I was in the Spanish town of Palencia, where a mass grave from the Civil War was being exhumed on the site of a children's playground. Volunteers rushed to recover as many remains as

possible from the roughly 250 people suspected to be buried there, who were summarily shot by Francoist militias. Funding was going to be cut off within days, so every volunteer was given equipment to participate in the excavation. I was assigned a grave in which a baby's coffin sat on top of the bones of a person, who was most likely executed. The arm bone of this person revealed perimortem trauma – a wound sustained around the time of death and an indicator of a violent demise.

But why would a baby be buried on top of a murdered Republican? The archaeologist explained that babies who died unbaptized were (or even still are) believed to go to limbo. The limbo of infants has been a subject of discussion in the Roman Catholic Church since the days of Augustine. The question is whether unbaptized infants can be granted salvation, since their original sin isn't purged by baptism. On the one hand, unbaptized people are supposed to go to hell after they die. On the other, deceased babies haven't had time to commit many sins, so it was thought that their punishment should be rather mild. The solution was the limbo of infants.

The limbo of infants – an intermediary state between salvation and damnation, bliss and torture – is thus not just a place of eternal boredom and hopelessness. In limbo the children might even ascend to a state of ultimate happiness by establishing a different vision of things – being unresolved things themselves, dumped onto the bodies of people shot as terrorists and insurgents. Things superposed onto other things in a cemetery superposed on a children's playground, as the first Spanish republic shines uncomfortably through the second.

The baby was gone. The crumbling coffin was empty. Its remains had possibly been taken along when the bones of the richer people in the cemetery were moved to a new location. Only a tiny finger bone remained, which mixed with the remains of the executed supporter of the Republic.

X.

In 2011, a plaster cast of a skull said to belong to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz was put on display in Hannover. But many doubt whether the skull really belonged to the philosopher.

In 1714, Leibniz developed the idea of the monad. According to Leibniz, the world is made of monads, each of which encloses the whole structure of the universe. He calls them "perpetual living mirror(s) of the universe":

All is a plenum (and thus all matter is connected together) and in the plenum every motion has an effect upon distant



Trash being dumped into site of suspected mass grave at Kasapderesi Siirt Province Turkey, Oct. 2011.



Burnt photo roll in situ between guerilla uniform rags belt buckle and 20mm ammunition case. A shoulder blade is stuck between rocks close by.

bodies in proportion to their distance, so that each body not only is affected by those which are in contact with it and in some way feels the effect of everything that happens to them, but also is affected by bodies adjoining itself. This inter-communication of things extends to any distance, however great. And consequently every body feels the effect of all that takes place in the universe, so that he who sees all might read in each what is happening everywhere, and even what has happened or shall happen, observing in the present that which is far off as well in time as in place.⁵

But monads also have different degrees of resolution. Some are more clear in storing information, some less. Like monads, bones, skulls, and other objects of evidence condense not only their own history, but – in an opaque and unresolved form – everything else as well. They are like hard disks that fossilize not only their own history, but the history of their relations to the world. According to Leibniz, only God is able to read all monads. They are transparent to his gaze alone and remain vague and blurry to ours. As the only being able to read them, God is in all things.

But humans are also able to decipher some layers of monads. The strata of crystalized time in each monad capture a specific relation to the universe and conserve it, as in a long exposure photograph. In this way, we can understand a bone as a monad – or more simply, as an image. But equally, these objects condense the forms of observation that produce them as durable and individual objects, and snap them back into one distinct state of materiality. This also applies to the plaster cast of Leibniz's skull, as well as to the story of its retrieval. Already at the time of its "recovery," many people doubted whether the skull triumphantly presented as Leibniz's was really his.

These doubts were exacerbated by the fact that the church documents relating to Leibniz's burial had been lost. Eventually, on Friday 4 July 1902, the remains under the Leibnizian marker were exhumed. On Wednesday 9 July 1902, they were examined by one Professor Dr. W. Krause, by order of one Herr Waldeyer. Whatever casket had occupied the grave was by then entirely rotted away and thus left not a clue as to its original occupant. Nevertheless, Krause concluded that the skeletal remains were indeed those of Leibniz.⁷

While the origin of the skull is contested, the provenance of the cast seems better established:

The cast was part of the estate of a former NS civil servant. His 90 year old widow offered it for sale 15–20 years ago, along with 3000 books about racial science. A report of the institute für Germanic Volk and Race Science in the Gau capital Hannover indicates that Leibniz' grave was opened between the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944.⁸

Leibniz, the co-inventor of mathematical probability, might have computed the likelihood that the skull belonged to him. But could he have imagined that the skull was both his and not his?

X.

Probability became the crucial difference between the experiments in political sovereignty and Schrödinger's experiment. In Schrödinger's experiment, the probability that a live cat would emerge from the box was 50:50. But whenever the metaphorical "box" of political laboratories was opened, this probability would drop to extreme lows. And whatever emerged wouldn't be a cat, but humans – more precisely, corpses upon corpses. The "box" became a site for the superposition of death upon death, and a factory for the breathtaking multiplication of victims. The twentieth century radically advanced the development of all kinds of weapons of mass destruction. It took the box and turned it inside out so it would spill all over the planet. Why stop at two dead creatures? Why not millions and millions?

Additionally, the twentieth century also perfected observation as a method of killing. Measurement and identification became tools of murder. Phrenology. Statistics. Medical experimentation. Economies of death. In his lectures about biopolitics, Michel Foucault described the stochastic calculus that determined life or death.⁹ Counting and observing were radicalized to make sure that anything that entered the box died when the box was reopened.

This development also signified the death of the political idea of the two bodies of the king, one dead, one immortal. Now one had to imagine two dead bodies: not only the natural body, but also the body politic. Not only were natural bodies killed in and outside the insidious boxes of sovereignty. The body politic, which was supposed to be immortal, died as well. The idea of a state, nation, or race incorporated within a single body was radically denied by thousands of mass graves – the *fosses communes*, which were

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deemed necessary to violently manufacture a “perfect” and homogenous body politic.

The mass graves thus formed a negative image of the desired incorporation – and its only tangible reality. Any idea of a natural “organic body” of the nation (race, state) had to be painfully realized by extermination and genocide. The *fosse commune* was the body politic of fascism and other forms of dictatorship. It made perfectly clear that the “community” that produced it was a “fausse commune,” a complete and disastrous fake vying for legitimacy.

Schrödinger’s innocent if eccentric quantum state of indeterminacy was echoed in political laboratories of sovereignty. Here, gaping political limbos were created in which law and exception blurred in deadly superposition, transforming certain death into a matter of probability. Schrödinger’s thought experiment came to presence the mass graves that violently ended many possible superpositions and entanglements of humans and things. And the dream of parallel worlds in which impossible realities coexisted was transformed into the proliferation of possible deaths and the impossibility of any world other than the one that miserably dragged on existing.

X.

As quantum theory predicts, the state of entanglement is transitional. It can even be exceptionally short – a window of opportunity made to be missed. And as mass graves were successively excavated, states of indeterminacy ended too, forcing decisions between the state of life and the state of death, which – the twentieth century being what it was – overwhelmingly fell on the side of death. Missing persons were identified and their remains where reburied or returned to relatives. And as the bones were retransformed into persons and reintroduced into language and history, the spell of the law over them ceased.

But many of the missing remain nameless. The remains of some of them are stored in the anthropology department at the Autonomous University of Madrid for lack of funding to proceed with DNA testing. This lack of funding is of course connected to the precarious political situation in which this investigation finds itself in. The unidentified skulls and bones speak about anything but their names and identities. They show perimortem trauma and indicators of stature, gender, age, and nutrition, but this doesn’t necessarily lead to identification.¹⁰ More than anything, the unidentified remain generic, faceless, all mixed up with combs, bullets, watches, other people, animals, or the soles of shoes. Their indeterminacy is part of their silence, and their silence determines their

indeterminacy. They maintain an obstinate opaque silence in the face of sympathetic scientists and waiting relatives. As if they chose not to answer to their last final interrogators either. Shoot me all over again, they seem to say. I’m not telling. I will not give it away. But what is the thing they refuse to betray?

Perhaps the bones refuse to reenter the world of relatives, family, and property, the world of name and measure, in which skulls are forced to speak of race and rank instead of love and decomposition. Why should they want to reenter an order that sustained and strengthened itself over their dead bodies? That had to execute them in the first place in order to keep the realm of belonging, faith, and knowledge intact? Why should they want to return from the world of naked matter in which they freely mix with the dust of the universe?

This is what the unidentified missing teach us: even as their bones are carefully handled by forensic anthropologists, they staunchly remain things, refusing to be identifiable in the register of human beings. They insist on being things that decline to be named and known – things that claim the state of potentially being both dead and alive. They thus transgress the realms of civil identity, property, the order of knowledge, and human rights alike.

X.

In 2011, Hüsni Yildiz went on a hunger strike to force the exhumation of his brother, who disappeared in 1997 while fighting as a leftist guerilla. His grave had been located in early 2011 among hundreds of other nondescript mass graves in the Kurdish region of Turkey. Thousands of bodies, most killed during the dirty war of the 1990s, are believed to have been dumped into shallow graves, waste dumps, and other places of disposal.¹¹ As more mass graves are discovered every day, Turkish authorities have for the most part refused to open investigations or even recover the remains of the dead. Sixty-four days into Yildiz’s hunger strike, the grave where his brother was suspected to be buried was finally excavated. Fifteen sets of remains were recovered, but as authorities have not initiated DNA tests, Yildiz still doesn’t know whether the remains of his brother are among them. In the meantime, Yildiz has declared that not only the fifteen people recovered, but also the thousands more missing are his brothers and sisters. The indeterminacy of remains universalizes family relations. They rip the order of family and belonging wide open.

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X.

00:15:08:05

HS – I see one box which does not contain remains.

LR – Yes this is ...

HS – Can you show it to us?

LR – This is a complex case because this came from the cemetery of Toledo, a city near Madrid, and then the relatives with an undertaker of the cemetery, they went to dig in the common grave where they thought their relatives were. So they did that with a shovel and put all the bones in big plastic bags ...

So we have a mess of bones and of these shoes, we don't know if they belong to the people killed or to other, like, normal mortality, and they also went to the common grave ... But this, we found, it's very common to find, to find personal objects in the excavations.

HS – What sort of objects? Shoes?

LR – This is the heel of a shoe and that is for the shirts, the buttons, some other buttons and some coins ... well, metal objects and ... But we have found, this is the ... for the belt? Yes, the buckle. So for example all this came from one, from skeleton sixty ... ¹²

X.

But in the twentieth century and beyond, we have almost always waited in vain to access the other quantum state involved in superposition, the state in which the missing would still be alive – not potentially, but actually. Paradoxically alive, as things in a state of entanglement. In which we could hear their voices, touch their breathing skin. In which they would be living things outside the registers of identity, pure language and the utter overwhelming of senses; things superposing on ourselves as things.

They would form a state beyond any

statehood – one in which they wouldn't be entangled with their own dead bodies, but with our living ones. And we would no longer be separate entities but things locked in indeterminate interaction – material extimacy, or matter in embrace.

They would drag us to this place, where we would become entangled matter, outside of any categories of identification and possession. We would be waveforms leaving behind individuality and subjectivity to become locked in the paradoxical objectivity of quantum realities.

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Luís Moya Blanco, *Architectonic Dream*, 1938. Proposal for a post-Spanish Civil War fascist monument.

X.

The mass grave that is supposed to contain the remains of my friend Andrea Wolf is located in the mountains south of Van, Turkey. The gravesite is littered with rags, debris, ammunition cases, and many fragments of human bone. A charred photo roll I found on site may be the only witness to what happened during the battle that took place there in late 1998.

Even though several witnesses have come forward stating that Andrea and some of her

fellow fighters in the PKK were extrajudicially executed after having been taken prisoner, there have been no attempts to investigate this suspected war crime, nor to identify the roughly forty people supposedly buried in the mass grave. No official investigation ever took place. No experts went on site.

No authorized observer can break superposition, not because there were no observers, but because they have not been authorized. It is an impossible place, incompatible with the existing rules of political realism, constructed by the suspension of the rule of law and aerial supremacy, beyond the realm of the speakable, the visible, the possible. On this site, even blatant evidence is far from being evident.¹³ Its invisibility is politically constructed and maintained by epistemic violence. This is the main reason why the pictures on the charred photo roll remain unavailable for now, pushed into a zone of zero probability.¹⁴ Technical means, expert knowledge, and political motivation to investigate and analyze them are unavailable.

But these illegible images can also be seen from a different perspective: as poor images, things wrecked by violence and history. A poor image is an image that remains unresolved – puzzling and inconclusive because of neglect or political denial, because of a lack of technology or funding, or because of hasty and incomplete recordings captured under risky circumstances.¹⁵ It cannot give a comprehensive account of the situation it is supposed to represent. But if whatever it tries to show is obscured, the conditions of its own visibility are plainly visible: it is a subaltern and indeterminate object, excluded from legitimate discourse, from becoming fact, subject to disavowal, indifference, and repression.

Poor images take on another dimension when they expand into fractional space.¹⁶ They may be blurred 3D scans, cakes of dirt compressing buttons, bones and bullets, burnt photo rolls, dispersed ashes, or lost and unintelligible pieces of evidence.¹⁷ Just as commercial, political, and military interests define the resolution of satellite images of the earth's surface, so do these interests define the resolution of the objects buried beneath it. These indeterminate objects are low-resolution monads, in many cases literally materially compressed objects, fossilized diagrams of political and physical violence – poor images of the conditions that brought them into being. Even if they cannot show the extrajudicial executions, political murders, or shootings at demonstrations that they might have recorded, they bear the traces of their own marginalisation. Their poverty is not a lack, but an additional layer

of information, which is not about content but form. This form shows how the image is treated, how it is seen, passed on, or ignored, censored, and obliterated.

Even if its content is destroyed, the charred 35mm roll shows what happened to itself as it went up in flames, doused with unknown chemicals, incinerated along with the photographers' dead bodies. It shows the violence of maintaining this particular state of indeterminacy.

Through their material composition, these poor images reach far beyond the sphere of representation and into a world where the order of things and humans, of life, death, and identity, is suspended, and "all is a plenum (and thus all matter is connected together) ... And consequently every body feels the effect of all that takes place in the universe, so that he who sees all might read in each what is happening everywhere, and even what has happened or shall happen, observing in the present that which is far off as well in time as in place."¹⁸

But who is the ominous reader in Leibniz's text? Is he the ultimate observer endowed with unlimited authority? Whoever he is, he is not up to the task.¹⁹ We cannot leave the task of observation to some obscure monotheist idol, who supposedly reads and knows everything. And we do not need to. The zone of zero probability, the space in which image/objects are blurred, pixelated, and unavailable, is not a metaphysical condition. It is in many cases man-made, and maintained by epistemic and military violence, by the fog of war, by political twilight, by class privilege, nationalism, media monopolies, and persistent indifference. Its resolution is managed by legal, political, and technological paradigms. A bone which would be abject debris in some parts of the world, a poor image mixed with trash and dumped into landfills alongside broken TVs, could be overexposed in others, scanned in HD or 3D, highly resolved, investigated, tested, and interpreted until its mysteries are solved.²⁰ The same bone can be seen in two different resolutions: once as an anonymous poor image, once as a crystal-clear piece of official evidence.

Positivism is thus another name for epistemic privilege, assumed by official observers who control hi-tech tools of measurement and are authorized to establish facts. But mistaking this privilege for a solution, when it is just proof of superior epistemic resolution, is sloppy and convenient thinking. It not only denies the existence of expanding pockets of zero probability and gaping limbos in the rule of law. It also shields itself from the unsettling thought that everything could be different and that probability cannot reign in

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contingency.

If Leibniz's omnivisionary male observer is impotent, then justice is blind to resolution. She carefully runs her fingers over the edges, gaps, and rifts of rugged and glossy images, of low-resolution monads left in fractional space, registering their tectonic profile, feeling their bruises, fully confident that the impossible can and indeed will happen.

x

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1
Thank you to Jenny Gil Schmitz, Emilio Silva Barrera, Carlos Slepoy, Luis Rios, Francisco Etxeberria, José Luis Posadas, Marcelo Esposito for all information relating to this issue and for their generous hospitality. This first part of the text owes very much to discussions with Eyal Weizman.

2
See Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

3
See Giorgio Agamben's *The State of Exception* and *Homo Sacer*. See also Foucault on biopower.

4
In a letter written in the 1950s.

5
G.W. Leibniz, *Monadology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898), 251.

6
www.gwleibniz.com/leibniz_skull/leibniz_skull.html.

7
Michael Grau, "Universalgene Leibniz im Visier der Nazis," Sept. 12, 2011, *Berliner Morgenpost*.

8
Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2008).

10
L. Ríos, J. I. Ovejero, and J. P. Prieto, "Identification process in mass graves from the Spanish Civil War," *Forensic Science International* (June 15, 2010).

11
"Discovery of Kurdish Mass Graves Leads Turkey to Face Past," voanews.com. Howard Eissenstat, "Mass-graves and State Silence in Turkey," March 15, 2011, blog.amnestyusa.org.

12
Interview with Luis Rios, Sept. 12, 2011.

13
Thank you to Tina Leisch, Ali Can, Necati Sönmez, Şiyar, and many others whose names cannot be mentioned.

14
In the meantime, this text has been redeveloped into part of a joint performance with Rabih Mroué called "Probable Title: Zero Probability." I am deeply indebted to Rabih's contributions, especially in his brilliant text "The Pixelated Revolution," which gives other examples of low-resolution evidence.

15
I discussed some examples of documentary pictures, mainly from Georges Didi-Hubermans essay "Images malgré tout," in Hito Steyerl, "Documentarism as

Politics of Truth," republicart.net/disc/representations/steyerl03_en.htm.

16
See Jalal Toufic, "The Subtle Dancer," p. 24: "a space that is neither two-dimensional nor three-dimensional, but between the two." Available at d13.documenta.de

17
"Bones of the Disappeared Get Lost again after Excavation," bianet.org.

18
G.W. Leibniz, *Monadology*, *ibid*.

19
For him, whatever is the case is necessarily the best of all possible worlds anyway.

20
This applies particularly to the bones of murdered Kurdish individuals, which get extremely different treatment according to whether they were killed during the Anfal operations ordered by Saddam Hussein in Iraq, or by Turkish armed forces and militias during the civil war of the 1990s. The Anfal mass murders were investigated by world-class military specialists and interdisciplinary teams, whereas the Turkish cases were barely investigated at all.

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