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2013

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13199>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hausken, Liv: Doing Media Aesthetics: The Case of Alice Miceli's 88 from 14.000. In: Liv Hausken (Hg.): *Thinking Media Aesthetics. Media Studies, Film Studies and the Arts*. Berlin: Peter Lang 2013, S. 161–188. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13199>.

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Doing Media Aesthetics: The Case of Alice Miceli's *88 from 14.000*

Liv Hausken

Alice Miceli's video installation *88 from 14.000* (2004) is a 56-minute loop-projected digital video, presenting 88 black-and-white portrait photographs of victims from the Cambodian Tuol Sleng death camp known as S-21. The 88 portraits are projected on a screen of falling sand. This projection was recorded on video and then re-projected onto a screen hanging from the ceiling, while a rather loud track of ambient sound was edited in synch with each change of photographic projection. The portraits are shown one by one, at irregular intervals of time. Confronted with this art work, the first thing that struck me had nothing to do with art as such, or video. It didn't even concern the way a selection of prisoner portraits from Pol Pot's death camp has been de-contextualized and re-contextualized in the Western art world. Rather, my first reaction had to do with the screen of falling sand displaying the 88 photographs. This screen of falling sand seemed to demonstrate, in a powerful and disturbing way, the materiality of the photographs. Rather than neglect this subjective experience and the impact that such experiences normally have on perception, not only in everyday life but also in research, I will take it for what it is. Without generalizing it as an experience, I will use it as a preliminary tool, a first step towards a qualified research question. This subjective stance leads me to ask the following questions: What do we know about the mediation of photographs that is normally taken for granted, unthematized, in our contemporary culture in general and in the theoretical fields of media and photography in particular? What can Miceli's video installation help us to see and conceptualize in a more qualified manner? These are my initial questions as I sketch an investigation of the video installation *88 from 14.000* in terms of what it has to say about mediating photographs. The subject at hand is also to try out the idea of using the case study as a media aesthetic strategy. Throughout the text, I will demonstrate a media aesthetic perspective that foregrounds the case study as a research strategy, based on the belief that the best way to develop and discuss concepts and conceptions are through theoretically reflected analyses of specific phenomena. The aim of this chapter is therefore threefold: first to sketch an analysis of *88 from 14.000*; second, through this analysis of Miceli's video installation, to contribute to the theoretical reflection on photography and mediation; and third, to further develop, both theoretically and methodologically, the emerging field of media aesthetics.

Certain aspects of contemporary phenomenology inspire the research strategy I will employ here, most important of which is the phenomenological mode of *description*.¹ Also relevant is what is often termed the *variational method*, to which I will return during the analysis. As in contemporary phenomenology, a certain initial weighting occurs that has been characterized as radically empirical, in the sense that what is first dealt with is what is taken to be the experience. As Don Ihde pointed out in 1977 in his influential introductory book on phenomenological methodology, *Experimental Phenomenology*, “such a radical empirical beginning, while not lacking a definitional dimension, stands in contrast to other initial choices of theory [...]” (Ihde [1977] 1979, pp. 30-31). Whereas, for example, “an axiomatic-constructive theory begins with a series of definitions and formal relations prior to investigation,” phenomenology, in contrast, “begins with a kind of empirical observation directed at the whole field of possible experiential phenomena [...] Thus, its first methodological moves seek to circumvent certain kinds of predefinitions” (ibid, p. 31). The challenge is to pay attention to what seems to be taken for granted in a certain perception, that is, the sense of what is given. This does not imply that all givenness disappears, but rather, that the significance of the given is transformed.

So far, the media aesthetic research strategy that I am unfolding here goes hand in hand with contemporary phenomenology. However, in contrast to phenomenology, the purpose here is not to elicit structures or invariant constituents of a particular phenomenon, but rather to confront the culturally ignored or unthematized aspects of a particular phenomenon with theoretical conceptions in the aesthetic field. During the analysis of a particular object of experience, as, for example, with Miceli's *88 from 14.000*, this ongoing confrontation implies a certain amount of theoretical choice. The ideal for me would be to make these choices as explicit as possible during the process of reflection, both to be able to extract the theoretical conclusions that can be drawn, and to make it possible for the reader to retrace my route, question my choices and thereafter contest (or agree with) my conclusions.²

1 The phenomenological perspective employed here is particularly inspired by the philosophies of Paul Ricoeur and Don Ihde. Among the basic insights from Ricoeur are his concepts of understanding and self-understanding as symbolically mediated (see for instance Ricoeur 1984 and 1995). Ideas from Ihde will be presented throughout the text.

2 Different parts of this chapter have been presented as papers at the *Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference* in Chicago, March 2007 (later published as an exhibition essay “The Materiality of Mediation – the Immateriality of Photography” during the exhibition of Miceli's work at Gallery Meulenstein, New York, U.S.A. from January 13 through February 19, 2011); at the *5th Annual Meeting of the Nordic Network for the History and Aesthetics of Photography* in Paris, September 2007; at the *Thinking Media Aesthetics* conference in Oslo, October 2007; and finally at the international seminar *Ghostly Media* in Oslo, February 2008, in relation to the art exhibition *Ghost in the Machine*, February 8 – March 16, 2008.

Initial reflections: what is well known

Information: Alice Miceli's work *88 from 14.000* was first presented in 2004 in São Paulo, where it was nominated for the 4th Sergio Motta Art and Technology Award in 2004. In 2005, the work was shown at several major occasions such as the *New York Independent Film and Video Festival* and the *Basics – transmediale.05* exhibition (HKW, Berlin, Germany) where it was also nominated for an award.³ The work has been shown at art festivals in Europe and in South America, as well as in collective art exhibitions such as the intuitively suitably titled *On Disappearance. Loss of World; Escaping the World*,⁴ in Dortmund, Germany (2005), here illustrated by a photograph of a view of the installation.⁵



Ill 1: Alice Miceli, BR: 88 from 14.000, 2004, On Disappearance. Loss of World; Escaping the World, HMKV at PHONIX Halle, 2005. © Thomas Wucherpfeffnig.

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- 3 An initial version was presented in Rio in 2004 in a large group show, but the finished version premiered in São Paulo at the end of 2004 (personal conversation with the artist by email, February 5 2009).
 - 4 *Vom Verschwinden. Weltverluste und Weltfluchten.*
 - 5 Thanks to Arild Fetveit for drawing my attention to this art work.

A brief explanatory text about the origin of these photographs is presented in the video. A similarly brief text is also included in the festival program and is presented on the gallery walls next to this video installation, giving information about the production of the artwork and the circumstances under which these photographic images were produced. The explanatory text about the art work says that “Falling sand is used as a projection screen for portraits (b & w photographs) of executed Cambodian prisoners and the duration of the sand falling represents the time between the imprisonment and the execution of each prisoner, respectively.”⁶ The portraits are said to be of prisoners in a Cambodian death camp during the regime of the Khmer Rouge., from April 1975 to February 1979. The information given here is not very rich, but it may work as a reminder for those who know, or at least have heard of, this particular historical event.

Recognition: The Khmer Rouge. genocide is familiar to many in the West. It has been exceptionally well documented, both in written files and in photographic images (see Chandler 1999).⁷ The stories about the Khmer Rouge. genocide in Cambodia are known from the news and from feature and documentary films, like Roland Joffé’s feature film *The Killing Fields* (1984) and Rithy Panh’s documentary film *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2002). The sites commonly called the Killing Fields are today a top tourist attraction in the country. The international tribunal investigating the crimes committed by Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge leaders, as well as the trials currently being conducted in Cambodia (2009) and on several earlier occasions, serve as reminders of this widely recognized genocide in recent history.⁸

Even the photographic *portraits* are known in the West. One hundred of the images form a separate collection that has been circulating throughout Europe and the Americas by way of a range of different channels.⁹ Some of the portraits

6 See <http://www.transmediale.de/05/page/detail/detail.0.projects.203.2.html>. See also *Hartware MedienKunstVerein*, http://www.hmkv.de/dyn/e_archive_artist/detail.php?nr=612&rubric=53 [last checked November 6, 2009]

7 Many commentators have underlined this. Chandler discusses it in several places in the book, for instance, on pp. 6-7 and p. 49.

8 The current trial started March 30, 2009. For full coverage of the earlier trials, see *Phnom Penh Post*, April 13-29, 2000 (see Ly 2003 p. 67n2). For tribunal news, see also information on the Khmer Rouge Genocide Tribunal at the Yale University ran Cambodian Genocide Program at <http://www.yale.edu/cgp/news.html> [last checked, November 3, 2009].

9 In 1993, two US photographers, Chris Riley and Douglas Niven, secured permission from the Cambodian government and formed a small nonprofit organization called the Photo Archive Group to raise money to clean, catalog, and make contact prints of the existing negatives, close to 6,000 in all. In exchange for their work, Riley and Niven were given the rights to one hundred images and permission to print six sets of these images to exhibit outside Cambodia, and to produce a book to recover some of the costs of the preservation project. The book, called *The*

have been presented in documentary films like Rithy Panh's *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2002)¹⁰ mentioned above, while a few of the portraits are known as photographic prints from exhibitions in art galleries in Europe and the United States, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1997).¹¹

Reflection: As with the video installation, the presentation of these photographic silver prints in programs and on gallery walls includes a brief explanation about the circumstances for their production. These images were produced as prisoner portraits – standardized portraits of criminal inmates normally used for disciplinary effect and legitimized by the need in modern societies for identification and future surveillance of convicted criminals.¹² Yet, the purpose of prisoner portraits in a death camp is not quite obvious: In an article on the MoMA exhibition of the photographic prints, Lindsay French claims that the S-21 prisoners were photographed upon intake “In a demonstration of administrative thoroughness uncharacteristic of the Khmer Rouge”. (French 2002, p. 131). In his book *Voices from S-21*, David Chandler also suggests other possible explanations, among them the terrorized desire of the prison staff to prove that their work had been carried out with extreme care (Chandler 1999, pp. 49-51 and 106-109. See also French 2002, p. 152n2). From the perspective of the Khmer Rouge, the existence of these prisoner portraits might also be connected to the upper-level party's intention to create documentation for a history of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, CPK, which was in fact never written (see Chandler 1999, p. 50).

Killing Fields (1996), contains 78 of the hundred images. The collection is often referred to as the “Facing Death” exhibition (see French 2002 p. 134) and was published in its entirety as a single topic issue of *Photographers International* in 1995.

10 This is briefly discussed in Guerin and Hallas 2007 p. 20n51.

11 *Photographs from S-21 1975-79*, MoMA NY, May 15 – October 7, 1997, http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/archives/archives_exhibition_history_list#1990 [last checked November 5, 2009]. The Ansel Adams Center for Photography in San Francisco, the Photographic Resource Center in Boston, the Museum of Design in Zurich, Museet for Fotokunst in Odense (Denmark), the Australian Center for Photography in Sydney, and the Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie in Arles, among others, have exhibited some or all of the hundred images of the Riley and Niven collection (see, for instance, French 2002, pp. 133-134).

12 The picture format of these prisoner portraits are less standardized than was common at the time in other places in the world, but there is no doubt that they belong to the genre of the police portrait.



Ill. 2: One of the 22 photos from the exhibition Photographs from S-21: 1975-1979 at MoMa, NY May 15–Sept 30, 1997. Ein, Nhem (b. 1959): Untitled (prisoner #3 of the Khmer Rouge.; young boy), 1975-79. Printed by Photo Archive Group, 1994. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Gelatin silver print, 10 5/16 x 10 3/8' (26.2 x 26.3 cm). Arthur M. Bullowa Fund and Geraldine Murphy Fund. Acc. n.: 678.19e95. © 2013. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

This variety of explanations for the very existence of these portraits also reflects the complexity in how we must expect them to have been perceived at the time of their production. From an official Khmer Rouge. perspective, these prisoner portraits have presumably been regarded as an ordinary function of incarceration.

The prison staff at S-21, however, most likely experienced a tension between the criminal body and the innocent victim in these prisoner portraits, given that they, as Chandler and others have documented, were constantly at risk of being accused of political betrayal, imprisoned on the same terms as the inmates, and tortured and killed by their former colleagues.¹³ After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, it seems possible to perceive this tension as transformed into a less tense, but doubly layered portrait of victims: Since it was now *impossible* to look at these images as portraits of suspected criminals, the survivors¹⁴ and the public are somehow forced to look at them not only as victims of a crime, but of a crime that criminalized the victims.

Exhibiting these portraits also transforms the way they may be perceived. Some of the portraits have been exhibited in art galleries, such as the MoMA in 1997, which was one of the first exhibitions to introduce the Tuol Sleng prints to the art world. But this photographic material had already been exhibited at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, where it can still be seen, located in the very same rooms where prisoners were tortured.¹⁵ The Cambodian Genocide Project (run by Yale University to help Cambodians identify missing relatives) has also loaded these images on the Web.¹⁶ They are, in other words, on display in several places. However, I will suggest that *exhibiting* this material in a museum or gallery, be it inside or outside of the art scene, has an emotional and cognitive impact upon the portraits that the database of the Cambodian Genocide Project does not have, or has only to a certain degree: Exhibiting these prisoner portraits seems to unsettle the well-known duality between the honorific and the repressive in the portrait genre (see, for instance, Sekula 1986, p. 6). The head-on pose of the police portrait normally signals cultural subordination, in contrast to the cultivated asymmetries of the aristocratic posture one might find in a commissioned portrait. The exhibitions of photographs from this prisoner portrait archive transform the repressive portraits of the criminal into a twisted version of the honorific portrait of the bourgeois subject: the honorific victim.

13 Records with confessions from 79 former workers (interrogators, document workers, guards) were found in the S-21 archive. These also include entry and execution records (see Chandler 1999, p. 11). If negatives also exist of the prisoner portraits at the Tuol Sleng Museum, their portraits may be included in Miceli's video installation.

14 There are only seven known survivors among the prisoners in this camp, but among survivors, I would also include prison staff because of the constant threat they were facing (see above).

15 Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979 and converted the Tuol Sleng into a museum documenting the Khmer Rouge genocide.

16 See the CGP Tuol Sleng Image Database (CTS) at Yale University: <http://www.yale.edu/cgp/> [last checked, February 6, 2009].

It is *these* images that are incorporated in Miceli's video installation.

With such strong and overwhelming material as the Tuol Sleng prisoner portraits, it may seem rather provocative to take the impression of the materiality of photographs as a point of departure for analysis. However, I will explore how the initial experience of a work may open a path into the conditions for its complexity. What are the cultural and theoretical conditions for such a first impression of the work? What is taken for granted here? And how do both concepts and conceptually unrecognized assumptions about photography and mediation influence the appearance of the Tuol Sleng material in Miceli's work?

Point of departure: unusual materiality

A screen of falling sand is rather unusual for displaying photographs. Just as we easily neglect the conventional and what we take for granted, we normally notice the unusual and the unexpected. The sand is even demonstrative in its materiality. It is normally considered to be dusty, incoherent, detached, loose, and in this case also streaming, flapping; it is everything we may associate with matter without form or with form transformed into matter. Even if the sand is video-recorded and therefore not present as such in the gallery, it calls attention to itself as an important aspect of the materiality of the mediation of these photographs, to its heaviness as it flows down and the sound as it hits the ground, to the machinic regulation of its screen-like appearance, to the impression of movement in the static images, and to the way that the sound of the sand is edited in synch with the change of images so that the individual portraits are slightly marked as such.¹⁷

Arguably, all remediation reinforces the awareness of the material quality of the display. As Jane Connarty underlines in her introduction to a collection of essays about the role of the archive within contemporary artists' film and video, "Across much found footage work there is also a heightened awareness of the medium and a fascination with its material qualities" (2006, p. 9). I will nevertheless suggest that remediations of photographs are often not even considered to be remediations at all, unless they involve a very basic focus on, or alterations of, their material qualities: their stillness must be contrasted with movement, their muteness with sound. Otherwise, photographs seem to have a tendency to disappear into their referents, inviting a pointing gesture on the part of the viewer towards the image as an effect of something physically existing in front of the

17 The video was made take-by-take, portrait-by-portrait. What we hear is the ambient sound for each shot. It is actually the combination of the sounds of an old noisy slide projector running, a video camera running, and the machine of falling sand working. (Thanks to Alice Miceli for this information, email correspondence February 5, 2009).

camera at the moment of exposure. This calls for the viewer to overlook the material basis on which the image appears, the picture as a physical object. Even for the professional viewer, there are few exceptions to this tendency. These are mainly concerned with the digitization of analog, archival material (among the most notable, Edwards and Hart 2004). Truly, the new interest in print culture and imaging techniques has incorporated photographic reproduction techniques, but given the interest in print rather than photography, the photographic print is here normally compared to other printing systems rather than to other media of display, such as the computer screen.¹⁸ Even the idea of digital image technology as implying a dematerialization of photography has been less concerned with changes in the ways photographs are displayed (be it on paper or screen) than with how the photographic information is produced and stored. This seems to imply that the conception of the materiality of the analog photograph has less to do with the paper on which it has most often been displayed than with the idea of the materiality of the photographic trace. The popular imagination of digital technology as dematerialization of information neglects not only the materiality of the encoded files, but also the materiality of the image as displayed. As Johanna Drucker has argued, “The existence of the image depends heavily on the display, the coming into matter, in the very real material sense of pixels on the screen” (Drucker 2001 p. 144. Cf also Paul 2007, p. 252). The unusual and demonstrative materiality of the sand in Miceli’s work makes it difficult to ignore the materiality of the photographic images as displayed.

By attesting that a screen of falling sand can mediate photographs, this video installation seems to demonstrate that a medium does not exist *per se*, but many kinds of phenomena may execute a mediating function. More specifically, it also reminds the viewer of the material heterogeneity of photographs, that photographs can be displayed on paper and celluloid, on a slide projection screen or a computer screen, or on surfaces not previously engaged or employed as screens. Furthermore, it suggests two rather abstract conceptions of photography: photography as an idea and the virtuality of certain photographic images.

18 See, for instance, Richard Benson’s comprehensive work *The Printed Picture* (2008), which traces the changing technology of picture-making from the Renaissance to the present, focusing on the vital role of images in multiple copies. The book surveys printing techniques before the invention of photography, the photographic processes that began to appear in the early nineteenth century, the marriage of printing and photography, and the rapidly evolving digital printing systems of our time, like inkjet prints and digital chromogenic prints.

Theoretical implications: photography as an idea

Implied in the reflections above on how the screen of falling sand seems to demonstrate the materiality of photographs and the material heterogeneity of photographs, photography appears to be an *idea*, a concept or an ideal phenomenon. This may be contrasted to the often-defended theoretical position in the research field of photography that photography as such does not exist or, alternatively, that it is not worth talking about it. The work of John Tagg entertains such a position.

During the last thirty years or so, one of the most common refrains in the songs of photographic research is a line saying that there is no such thing as photography, only photographs. In his 1988 collection of essays *The Burden of Representation*, John Tagg proclaims (twice) the still today very often-quoted view that:

Photography as such has no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations that invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents that define it and set it to work. Its function as a mode of cultural production is tied to definite conditions of existence, and its products are meaningful and legible only within the particular circumstances they have. Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such (Tagg 1988, p. 63 and p. 118).

Tagg confirms this view both in his 1992 collection of essays *Grounds of Dispute* and in *The Disciplinary Frame* from 2009.¹⁹ The subtitle of Tagg's 1988 collection of texts, *Essays on Photographies and Histories*, indicates that not only is there no such thing as photography, neither can there be a uniform history of photographs. The only thing that exists are photographies and histories, both in the plural. The whole question of finding photography's nature is itself considered misguided from the beginning.

Tagg is obviously right when he argues that photography is a heterogeneous phenomenon. Even in one single, though complex, instance like the video installation of Alice Miceli, photography seems to come to the fore as a heterogeneous phenomenon. In this work, a variety of photographic *practices* are indicated by the definition and redefinition of practices along the way from prisoner portraits to art material. Projected on the screen of falling sand and displayed in a video installation, these images work as art. For some viewers, these images have already attained an art function through the exhibition of photographic prints in art galleries. The prisoner portraits included in Miceli's video also serve different informational and documentary functions in the varying contexts in which they appear: their documentary functions in the Tuol Sleng museum in Cambodia are different from the functions they serve in the Cambodian Genocide Project on

19 See 1992, p. 143, and 2009, see for instance the introduction.

the Web. These documentary functions are again different from those given by the variety of documentary settings like newspapers, magazines and books from which some of these images are well known in the West, not to mention the intended documentary function for the upper-level party's history of the Communist Party of Kampuchea. In addition to these two categories of function, the art and the documentary, we may also add the function these images served in the context in which they were produced; the disciplinary function of prisoner portraits for the inmates, the prison staff and the Pol Pot regime as a whole. We may call this the original administrative and psychological functions of these images.

Alice Miceli's use of prisoner portraits from the S-21 archive in her video installation demonstrates, as we can see, a variety of photographic practices and functions. In accordance with Tagg's argument, these photographs are also heterogeneous as far as what makes them *meaningful*. The different practices indicate different possibilities for interpretation. The same goes for different types of audiences, as may be briefly illustrated by the difference between Cambodians and non-Cambodians: the first category seeing images from their own history, some even recognizing someone they know, and the other category seeing images of cruelty and injustice somewhere else in the world – images of others.²⁰

As to the heterogeneity of *technology* in Tagg's argument, the photographic images in Miceli's installation indicate a technical transformation from analog photographs in the original archive to digital video when displayed as part of Miceli's art work. The work may also seem to point towards all the other technical differences involved in the different kinds of storage and exhibition of these photographic images as they have traveled between places and situations, be it the storage of the negative, analog material in the Tuol Sleng archive, the digital storage in the Yale archive, the images professionally printed on silver emulsion on display at MoMA, or the low quality print in a newspaper. There is a huge variation of practices and functions, meanings and experiences, and techniques and technologies involved in this example. Nevertheless, I will argue that in all these cases, we are in some way or another still talking about photography.

20 In "Exhibiting Terror," Lindsay French discusses important differences between various versions of the "Facing Death" exhibition when it comes to how they have dealt with these two categories of audiences, the Cambodians and the non-Cambodians (French 2002 pp. 146-148). The importance of understanding these differences may be illustrated by an example from Boston: The Photographic Resource Center of Boston invited groups of Cambodians to visit the exhibition. During one of these group visits, a woman discovered her husband's portrait among the photographs on the wall. She had not seen him for 20 years and did not know for sure that he was dead. Incidents like this clearly demonstrate the importance of understanding the significance of these images for a Cambodian audience (see French 2002, p. 148).

Rather than Tagg's conclusion that we should not study "photography as such," I will argue that photography should be seen as an idea embedded in history: changing technologies, practices and experiences constitute it. Photographs can neither be *reduced to* nor *deduced from* this idea. However, this does not imply that one cannot study photography as such. Rather, it indicates that the ideal phenomenon cannot be discussed in isolation from the theoretical landscape of which it is a part, as well as the way in which it appears to be relevant for actual, historically and culturally situated photographs.

Theoretical implications: virtual images

It has been argued that the mere act of re-presenting recycled visual material draws attention to its status as an image. In his book *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (1993), William C. Wees argues that,

Whatever the filmmaker may do to them – including nothing more than reproduce them exactly as he or she has found them – recycled images call attention to themselves as images, as products of the image producing industries of film and television, and therefore as pieces of the vast and intricate mosaic of information, entertainment, and persuasion that constitute the media saturated environment of modern – or many would say postmodern – life (Wees 1993, p. 32, cf also Connarty 2006, p. 10).

As recycled images, the prisoner portraits in Miceli's video installation call attention to themselves as images. They are well known as images in the media-saturated environment of modern life, as products of the image-producing industries of televised news, press photography, documentary film, feature film, and art. Their material heterogeneity, also underlined by the recycling or remediation of the photographic images in this work, may also give the impression that photographic images may exist without – or independent of – their display. Well-known photographs seem to imply an idea of a *virtual* image – ideal, abstracted, displayable. Hence, I will argue that photographs do not exist without coming into matter *once*. Distinguishing pictures from images, photographs should be considered as pictures. They are embedded in a particular medium that enables them to be perceived by the senses. Once a photograph has been displayed, all sorts of remediation and other representations produce a sense of a pure image independent of these iterations (the different pictures). It is as if the portraits in Miceli's video installation, in newspapers and in documentaries like Rithy Panh's, at the MoMA exhibition, and in the Yale database, are different pictures (instantiations) of the same (pure) images: the S-21 images. Every single one of them seems to have this quality of virtuality. However, these (pure or virtual) images cannot be presented as such. Their virtuality depends on the knowledge of them having been displayed once (the first picture).

In the critical fields of remediation and of found footage in art, there seems to be a tendency to think of the new work as pointing towards the original medium that was used. However, the new work does not necessarily reveal this information. Rather, the audience will experience the work as pointing towards *what they expect* to be the first medium, in this case, the medium of the first Tuol Sleng photographs made for Pol Pot's official and bureaucratic use. In the case of the photographic images recycled in Miceli's work, it is less important for the experience of the work that the photographs from the Tuol Sleng archive were produced with an analog photo camera than that they were most likely printed on paper (and archived together with the negatives), instead of being presented (and stored) on slides, screens, stones or textiles. Compared with the photographic silver prints shown at the MoMA exhibition and the photographic display available on a computer screen from the Yale University database, the unexpected screen of falling sand in Miceli's work seems to point toward what one might expect to be the original or first medium of the Tuol Sleng imagery: a low quality photographic print in the archive of a death camp a few decades ago – the unthematized photographic medium, the medium taken for granted.

Theoretical implications: from medium to mediation

The unusual and demonstrative materiality of the screen mediating the Tuol Sleng photographs in Miceli's work not only stresses the material dependency of photographs, the heterogeneity of this materiality, the ideality of photography and the virtuality of well-known photographic images. The screen of sand also seems to dominate the impression of Miceli's work. It may easily be treated as the primary characteristic of the medium of the work. However, I have already argued that this work seems to demonstrate that a medium does not exist *per se*, but some phenomena may execute a mediating function. This implies a methodological challenge: First, how should we decide what medium we are dealing with? In the case of Miceli's video installation, is it the sand or the video projection? the screen hanging from the ceiling? the gallery? the video as such, that can be projected on any screen, and therefore all sorts of screens? Should the photographs presented in the video installation also be considered a medium?

Everything may be considered a medium, but why should this be? On the one hand, the number of options seems endless. On the other hand, if we are looking primarily for conventional media, the work done by unconventional media may be overlooked. In addition to the number of candidates and the danger of overlooking interesting possibilities, the question of how to decide which medium to consider also involves questions of identity, that is, the question of historical,

cultural and technical variations. Are photographs to be considered one medium or several – from the daguerreotypes, via the positive-negative technique of Fox Talbot, and the Polaroid, to the digital photograph of the 1990s? According to Jan Baetens, “we no longer believe that photography is one single medium. Photographs change through time, and it is not possible to reduce all types of photography to one single model” (Baetens 2007, p. 54). This observation is not specific to photography. Should the so-called silent film from early film history be considered the same medium as the talkie of the 1930s, the blockbusters of the 1980s, and the computer-generated moving images of the 1990s?

I will suggest that we should not think of ‘medium’ as something given. To consider something to be a medium is a choice we make. Sometimes this choice seems to be over-determined by conventions, like when we are referring to socio-culturally instituted media in everyday life, like ‘television’ and ‘radio’. Historically, these media may be seen as culturally and institutionally given facts, but if we consider them to be defined as things – apparatuses, solid objects – we produce conceptual confusions when it comes to all forms of historical and cultural variations, remediation and technical convergence: Do we watch television displayed on the mobile phone? Are photographic images on a Web site a medium within a medium? These conceptual problems can be met if we change focus from medium to mediation: The medium, I will argue, should not be considered a thing or physical object as such, but an object performing a task. The methodological challenge is therefore not to decide which medium to examine, but rather to employ a suitable strategy for exploring the mediation that makes a difference. In Miceli’s video installation, the screen of sand opens a path into the conditions for the complexity of this work. But how can we follow that path one step further?

Methodology: Studying mediation

How does the medium of sand make a difference in Miceli’s work? To answer this question, I will suggest a comparative strategy. A real comparison of two empirical objects will not easily do the job: Comparing Miceli’s work with Rebecca Belmore’s video work *Fountain* (2005), for example, where a video is projected on falling water in the gallery, presents not only two very complex works to compare, but also yields different themes, modes, techniques and personal styles. This situation makes it easy to confuse various kinds of differences.²¹ Since we

21 This is a common problem in adaptation analysis pointed out by, among others, Barbara Herrnstein-Smith in her critique of Seymour Chatman’s analysis of Jean Renoir’s 1936 film adaptation of Guy de Maupassant’s short story “Une partie de campagne” (set in the 1860’s but first published in 1881), see Chatman 1980 and Herrnstein Smith 1980, pp 218-219. An important

are particularly interested in how the medium makes a difference, we need to arrange a comparison where the particular media in question will be forced to show their faces.

This suggests an *imaginative* comparison, a kind of thought experiment where one might think of an example and then substitute a different mediating material to see the effects of one on the other. In this case, the sand could be imaginatively varied (i.e. compared), for instance, with water, paper, canvas or other materials, the number depending on what it takes to see the very concrete work done by the particular medium in question. This variational method is inspired by the imaginative variations (or fantasy variations) of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, critically adjusted and further developed by – among others – Don Ihde in his *Experimental Phenomenology*, and later in what he has coined *postphenomenology* (Ihde 1993, 2009).²² A somewhat idiosyncratic version of this variational method (as it is termed in contemporary phenomenology) can also be found in Roland Barthes' *La Chambre Claire* (1980), a phenomenologically inspired study of photography. Although Barthes does not exclusively vary the phenomenon in his own fantasy, he does describe concrete, empirical examples (mostly well-known photographs), in order to get closer to what has been termed the essence or invariants of photography as a phenomenon. This essence is the *noema*, what Barthes eventually ends up calling the “that-has-been.” In other words, his study of photography here is not a comparative analysis of photographic images, nor is it a subjectivist analysis of reception. Rather, it is Barthes' version of what phenomenologists have called an analysis of intentionality, an analysis of the correlation of *what* is experienced with its *mode* of being experienced. An analysis from the point of view of media aesthetics may very well contribute to such an analysis of intentionality, but this is not its main purpose. The variational method suggested here is not so much to elicit structures or invariants of one particular phenomenon (see, for instance, Ihde 1979, p. 123), as it is to lodge a disturbing quality in what otherwise may appear to be a unified entity. By importing a series of disturbances, it is easier to see how the different variations make a difference. To illustrate this method, I will introduce only one variation – water – well aware that we will need several variations to get a qualified decision of the role of the medium of sand in Miceli's work.

Let us imagine that we exchange the screen of falling sand with a screen of falling water in Miceli's video installation. What does this new version reveal

dimension of this problem is also the tendency to think of the different kinds of differences between two works as differences between two kinds of media.

22 *Postphenomenology* is a neologism of Don Ihde, referring to a modified, hybrid phenomenology combining insights from American pragmatism, Husserlian phenomenology and philosophy of technology (see Ihde 2009, p. 23).

about the work of the sand? A comparison with water would demonstrate that both water and sand are *unusual* media for photographs and will therefore most likely be noticed by the viewer as *material* media. Further, in these examples, both water and sand fall in a downward direction. Due to their heaviness, they make a lot of noise doing so. As screens for displaying images, both these heavy and somehow unformed materials blur the differences between the photographs displayed, even if the editing of the sound in synch with the change of images works against this blurring effect. To be sure, the *projection* of photographic stills gives them a temporal dimension, a fixed duration: Someone or something regulates the time of the viewing. Both sand and water, however, magnify the impression of temporality due to the flowing motion of the mediating material. Finally, both sand and water give the impression of *movement* in the images; the photographic images flicker rather than remain durably instantiated.

Combined with the attention drawn towards the demonstrative materiality of the mediating screens of sand or water, this impression of movement in the images seems to reinvest the culturally formative figure of presence and absence connected to photographic images, the impossible combination of here and now with there and then. This tension seems to be most notable in photographic portraits. Since this is highly relevant for the experience of Miceli's video installation, allow me to explicate this culturally formative figure a bit further before I return to the impression of movement in the photographic images of this work.

Theoretical reflection: photographic ghosts

It is as if the *portrait* as such draws attention to the voyeuristic relationship of the viewer to the person portrayed. So much more so for *photographic* portraits, where knowledge of the time and place of the photographic exposure so easily encourages the illusion of geographic and historical continuity between the life of the person portrayed and the life of the viewer. As Barthes expresses it in the opening paragraphs of his *Camera Lucida*, confronted with a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother Jerome (1852) he realized that he was "looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor" (Barthes 1993 [1980], p. 3). Confronted with the prisoner portraits from Tuol Sleng, we are looking at eyes that looked at their torturers.²³

23 Confronted with the portraits at the MoMA exhibition in 1997, Lindsay French expresses a similar experience: 22 prints of identical size hung equidistant from each other at eye level around three sides of the small gallery, anonymous, intimate, portraits of individuals staring into the camera: "They are, in effect, facing their executioners in the lens of the camera, and we stare back at them from the place of the executioner. It is extremely unsettling" (French 2002, p. 135).

Even when the portrayed person is still alive, the photographic portrait has been associated with the presence of a ghost in Western culture. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes opens up this path after just a few pages, reflecting on what his body already knows of photography and observing that a photograph can be the object of three practices, emotions or intentions: the photographer's taking of the picture (the *Operator*), the *Spectator* viewing, and the person or thing photographed, which he calls "the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to 'spectacle' and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead" (Barthes 1993, p. 9). This figure of the ghost is part of a rather complex notion of photography being existentially interwoven with death, mourning and loss in our culture.

Photography has been characterized as *thanatology* (Dubois 1983, p. 160), as "the inventory of mortality" and *memento mori* (Sontag (1979 [1973], p. 70 and p. 15). It has been said that "[t]he photographic *take* is immediate and definitive, like death" (Metz ([1985] 1990, p. 158) and that the paradigm "*Life/Death* [...] is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print" (Barthes 1993 [1980], p. 92), that "the photographic has something to do with loss, with pastness, and with death" (Sobchack 1994, p. 93), and that "[p]erhaps the real measure of a photograph's greatness is that in its presence we experience a priceless relief from mortality, we engage in such intense thought that we have a sense of being outside ourselves, even for the eternity of the moment" (Justim 1989, p. 60), and that in "the illustrated magazines the world has become a photographable present, and the photographed present has been entirely eternalized. Seemingly ripped from the clutch of death, in reality it has succumbed to it all the more" (Kracauer 1993 [1927], p. 433). I am far from proposing that all this can be reduced to one single figuration. Rather, I intend to briefly allude to the field of connotations concerning the experienced relations between photography and death in our culture before following one of these trajectories a few step further, the path set out by Roland Barthes.

The *knowledge* of the portrayed person being dead, be it the general acquaintance of the average human life span (we may take for granted that Napoleon's brother Jerome is dead) or more specific information about the death of the photographed person (like the death of Barthes' mother or the execution of Lewis Payne, both central characters in *Camera Lucida*), seems to stimulate the notion of what Barthes refers to as "the melancholy of Photography itself" (p. 79).²⁴ While standing in front of the photograph of his mother as a child – the Winter

24 Given that Jérôme Bonaparte was born in 1784, the viewer of his photograph in Barthes' book (1980) may take for granted that he now is dead, even if we do not know that he died at the age of 75 in June, 1860.

Garden Photograph – Barthes tells himself: “she is going to die”; he shudders “over a catastrophe which has already occurred” (p. 96).²⁵ “Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe,” he adds (p. 96). I find it nevertheless reasonable to argue that not every photo will be experienced as if it were a catastrophe. This is a view I believe Barthes would support, given his criticism of the taming of the photograph by art and by mass consumption (p. 117-119) and his notion of the *punctum* in the second part of the book – an overwhelming experience of “that-has-been,” a “vertigo of time defeated” (p. 97).²⁶ Every photo may basically be experienced as a “that-has-been,” as a cultural premise, unthematized, taken for granted. But once in a while, one may be overwhelmed by this cultural figure in the way Barthes has described, as it comes to appear in a specific photographic image.

If this makes sense, the logic of Barthes’ argument seems to imply that the knowledge of someone being killed, be it by accident or in accordance with a socially accepted legal system, like Lewis Payne, informs the photographic take with a double arrest: The photographic arrest is experienced as an anticipation of the death of the portrayed: “he is dead and he is going to die ...” (Barthes 1993 [1980], p.95). This phrase, which captures Barthes’ experience of the prisoner portrait of Lewis Payne (1895),²⁷ outlines the existential structure of photographic temporality as he sees it: Lewis Payne is dead by hanging, and alive in his photograph, soon to be dead; at the same time, Lewis Payne is arrested by the camera, symbolically killed, and as such already an image, a reminder of his future death. During Barthes’ process of reflection, this existential structure of photographic temporality is extrapolated; it becomes a reminder of the mortality of the viewer: “It is because each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death that each one, however attached it seems to be to the excited world of the living, challenges each of us, one by one, outside of any generality (but not outside of any transcendence)” (p. 97). This may sound like an echo of Susan Sontag and others noting the experience of photography as *memento mori* (Sontag 1979 [1973], p. 15), but where Sontag and others just state the reality of this culturally

25 The last phrase is in italics in the original.

26 *Camera Lucida* is divided into two parts. In the first part, to which most commentators refer, *punctum* is an emotional experience of photographic presence put in contrast to *studium*, the attitude of the cultural analyst vis-à-vis a photographic picture. In the second part of the book, this contrast has played out its role. Barthes nevertheless introduces a second *punctum* in this second part of the book, this time more explicitly related to the temporal logic of photography. My argument is based on the conception of the second *punctum*.

27 Along with a series of pictures of Lewis Payne, this portrait was taken by the Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner while Payne was held in federal custody before he was executed for his crime on July 7, 1865.

formative figure, Barthes *explicates* this experience during his phenomenologically-inspired process of reflection in *Camera Lucida*. Through this reflection, one may grasp the *logic* by which the notion of the ghostly presence in photography comes to the fore: Every photo is *potentially* haunting and some photos may overwhelm the viewer with their ghostly presence due, for instance, to knowledge of the death of the portrayed.

Following this logic, it therefore seems reasonable to suggest that the haunting quality of the photographic ghost must be even more pressing in cases of violent injustice, like homicide or genocide.²⁸ The prisoner portrait of Lewis Payne may be seen as representing the violence of a more or less acceptable legal system. Confronted with the Tuol Sleng prisoner portraits, we may be overwhelmed by the temporal logic of photography saying “they are dead and they will die,” but one must expect that these portraits will work less as a reminder of the mortality of the viewer than a reminder of the horror of Pol Pot’s unjust judges, or more generally of systems of injustice anywhere in the world today or in history.

This effect may also be supported by the *seriality* of the Tuol Sleng portraits both shown and hinted at in Miceli’s work – the 88 prisoners, the 14,000 killed.²⁹ As a genre, the prisoner portrait strongly signals the subordination of the singular to the series. Barthes picks up a single portrait from this genre, the portrait of Lewis Payne, and points to the individuality of the person portrayed. Miceli shows us 88 portraits from the Tuol Seng series. The seriality of the presentation multiplies a singular moment of the past involved in the existential logic of the photographic temporality sketched above: there are 88 past moments in a row. The singular moments of past life seem to demonstrate the individual lives as subordinated to the regularity of the photographic practice. As art critic Michael Kimmelman noted in his review of the MoMA exhibition, knowing what we do about the violence involved in Pol Pot’s production of this particular series, “they depict a quiet bureaucratic moment before the terror of execution” (see French, p. 137). Face-to-face with the portraits of victims from a death camp, the

28 My argument here is based solely on the second punctum in Barthes’ text and relates to a probable experience of the prisoner portraits presented in Miceli’ work as they appear as a series of ID portraits which does not reveal the terror that produced them. Photographic representations of terror would not lend themselves to the logic explicated here.

29 The conservative estimate of victims from the Tuol Sleng camp is 14,000 (see Chandler 1999 p. 6), but less than 6,000 prisoner portraits seem to exist, and strictly speaking, only 5,000 of these appear to be standardized prisoner portraits (see Chandler 1996 p. 103, and see also the photographic database at Yale University, <http://www.yale.edu/cgp/img.html>). Among these, Miceli has included in her work all portraits with existing negatives and records for both entry dates and execution dates, 88 in all (email correspondence February 5, 2009).

S-21, the demonstration of the seriality of the police portrait in Miceli's work seems to foreground the disciplinary power of this photographic genre and the haunting quality of the photographic portrait as enforced by the knowledge of violent injustice.

The movement induced by a screen of falling sand seems, just like a screen of falling water, to give an impression of *liveness* in the images. In contrast to live-action cinema where the pastness of the photographic film image normally seems less pressing due to the appearance of unfolding action, the movement caused by the screens of falling sand or water is a movement in the flat surfaces of the photographs. The photographic arrest, and the stasis of this arrest, to use an expression from Barthes (p. 91), do not disappear in the movement of the image. On the contrary, the rapid movement of the falling material produces a tension between the stasis of the photographic portraits and the *aliveness* of the photographed persons at the moment of exposure. The impression of liveness in these images seems therefore to *intensify* their haunting quality.

Variational analysis: a brief sketch

So far, a screen of falling water seems not very different from the screen of falling sand in Miceli's work. Both these media of photography also seem to differ from the photographic print in the same manner. But the *material* quality of these two media seems nevertheless to differ in important ways; the same can be said of the symbolic value of their materiality.

If we imagine the sand actually falling in the gallery, just like the water can actually be felt in Belmore's *Fountain*, the dust from the sand makes a profound contrast to the clear, clean and fresh water imaginatively mediating the same photographic images. As to their symbolic value, the water-screen mediated photographs may be experienced as a symbol for the purity of the soul, or refer to stories about the innocent victim in the lake or people trapped behind waterfalls. The sand, on the other hand, informs the images with qualities of being worthless, gritty and dusty, with the allusion to the hourglass and the notion that the sand of life has almost run out.

This may imply different ghosts or different ways of haunting. I believe that the haunting quality of the figure on the water-screen has more in common with the dead twin sister in Thomas Vinterberg's Dogme 95 film *The Celebration* (*Festen*), or with the gothic tale of the lady in the white dress walking restlessly in the attic at the old rectory, than with the ghostly presence of a figure in the sand, haunting the viewer like zombified individuals buried alive without a coffin in a shallow grave. They seem to watch us *through* the non-transparent veil of

sand, as if the sand cannot hide them properly no matter how dark, dirty and dusty. The prisoners seem to look through the sand, and at the same time the sand seems to fall through them, as if they had a vague, airy, three-dimensional shape and the dusty sand were a fog that not only hides them but also makes these low density figures visible, present.

The video complicates the picture. Because of its technical properties, the video seems to make the strangeness of the sand less strange and the material quality of the sand less present. It weakens the material presence of the falling sand by transforming its presence into its visual and auditive appearances. The images projected on the screen of sand are incorporated in, and transformed by, a temporal medium conditioned by the *falling* of the sand. It is, however, the *video* that makes this temporality of the falling sand *present* for the public.

The video draws the sound and the projected images together in a temporal stream of a fixed rate, rhythm and duration. It makes the images projected on the sand present and unfolding: it is here, it is coming, and it is (as with all recordings) already in the past. It is like a machine controlling the frame, the temporality of the presentation and the presence of the portraits in the sand.

The temporality of a filmic machine like this always controls its presentation according to certain principles. In the classical Hollywood film, sound and images are edited to create the impression of a coherent narrative universe where the action can take place. In Miceli's video, it is the *seriality* of the portraits that emerges. Three editorial strategies seem to be particularly interesting in this respect: the choice of picture format, the projection on a screen of falling sand and the editing of the sound.

The portraits are presented as medium close-ups, showing the subject's head and shoulders. Compared with the portraits at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide, the prisoner portraits in the Yale database and the portraits presented in Riley and Niven's book *The Killing Fields* (1996), where some of the images show the subject from the waist up and sometimes include a hand from another prisoner or the face of a small child holding the hand of its mother, all the portraits in Miceli's video seems to have the *same format*. Whether this is due to cropping or to chance³⁰, the collection of portraits in Miceli's work appears in any case to be more *homogenous* than the other collections of the Tuol Sleng portraits available. They are presented as a series of identification portraits.

A portrait executed in the subject's environment, such as in the home or workplace, typically illuminates the subject's character or social condition. This can also be seen in some of the Tuol Sleng portraits where the relation between

30 It is logically possible that all portraits with existing negatives and records for both entry dates and execution dates (88 in all) had the same format.

prisoners and the situation they are in is part of their presentation. The identification portrait, on the other hand, focuses on the physical traits of the subject's head: the eyes, ears, hair and facial expression. Their purpose is merely to be able to identify a likeness of the subject's physical features. In Miceli's video, however, these physical traits are made less distinct by the projection of the portraits on the screen of falling sand blurring some of the evident individuality of the persons portrayed. In addition to this blurring of facial distinctions, the screen of falling sand also makes other details in the image hard to identify. Due to both the choice of picture format and of the projection of images on a screen of falling sand, the room surrounding the prisoner can hardly be recognized at all. If you expect it to be there, you may assume the vague, visual presence of a prison number on the chest of the prisoner, a detail underlining the seriality not only of the images but also the prisoners as such. Altogether, the prisoners are presented as a series of similar (imprisoned) individuals in a neutralized room.

The choice of one single picture format – the ID portrait – and the projection of the portraits on a screen of falling sand seems not only to single out the *seriality* of the portraits as important. It also contributes to a homogenized appearance of both images and persons in the video. Where the photographic prints exhibited at the MoMA individuated the portraits and, by this, the suffering of the victims as well, the video seems to homogenize them so that their individuality is transformed into a general or generalized human being. The editing of the sound may, on the other hand, suggest that the seriality of the portraits is more important than their homogenization. The video was made take-by-take, portrait-by-portrait. What we hear is the ambient sound for each shot.³¹ Nothing is done to conceal this. As an editorial strategy, it divides the first portrait from the next, producing a *formal* distinction between them which contributes to the seriality of the presentation of images.

This formal distinction between the images is underlined by the impression that some of the portraits are given more time than others. It does not seem to happen at fixed intervals, which would give a regular beat to the presentation. Without knowledge of the underlying principle, it is hard to know what to make of it.³² As it turns out, the main criterion for the selection of the 88 portraits out of about 5,000 was Miceli's request for images with full records for the prisoner's entry and execution days. This information constitutes the basis on which the editing of the portraits was made. The pictures are taken at the time of their detention, and the actual time of projection is proportional to the individual's time in prison. The amount of sand corresponds to the time of the video like this: 1 day of life at

31 Thanks to Alice Miceli for this information (email correspondence February 5, 2009).

32 Information about this editing principle is briefly presented in programs or at gallery walls.

the S21 prison = 1 kg of sand = image displayed for 4 seconds.³³ This knowledge imbues the editorial strategy with an existential dimension. But even without this information explaining the irregular frequency of images, this editorial strategy works against the homogenization of the portraits and adds an irregular pattern to the impression of seriality that otherwise dominates the photographic display in Miceli's video installation.

In other words, the video alters the importance of the sand and the appearance of the photographic portraits in several ways due both to technical properties and editorial strategies. The video installation also transforms the Tuol Sleng photographs just by virtue of the fact that it forms a work of art, a production. The work integrates the photographic material in a new unit different from the other units in which they belong: the photographic *archives* (as in the archive at the Tuol Sleng Museum in Phnom Penh or the CGP Tuol Sleng Image Database (CTS) at Yale University),³⁴ the photographic *collections* (like the Niven and Riley collection), and the photographic *exhibitions* (like the exhibition at the MoMA in 1997). This unit is not just another gathering of images, rather, it forms an entity of its own with a title that makes it distinct from the other units in which the portraits can be found.

The title, *88 from 14.000*, indicates that this sample of 88 is not a sample of the Tuol Sleng prisoner portraits (which is between 5,000-6,000 portraits). It is not even a sample of *images* in *any* relevant archive (for instance the 10,000 images in the Yale database), but rather, it is a sample of pictures of an estimate of *victims* from a particular death camp, the S-21. Although Miceli's work also refers to all the pictures well known from exhibitions, books, films and news reports, this specific title of the work makes it point rather explicitly toward the victims of Pol Pot as such, the victims from S-21, and presumably also toward all the Khmer Rouge's victims, and maybe even to every political victim in the world. For a non-Cambodian audience, then, the work seems to portray in a rather dimmed but nevertheless overwhelming way, a de-contextualized, re-contextualized, and homogenized *index* pointing toward political injustice in the world of others.

33 See Miceli 2007, <https://mail.cofa.unsw.edu.au/pipermail/empyre/2007-September/msg00105.html> [last checked November 3, 2009].

34 The Cambodian Genocide Program's photographic database (CTS) contains more than 10,000 photographic images pertaining to various aspects of gross human rights violations under the Khmer Rouge regime. They have over 5,000 prisoner portraits from Tuol Sleng prepared by the Photo Archive Group (see <http://www.yale.edu/cgp/img.html> [last checked November 3, 2009]).

Concluding remarks: Mediating photographs

Alice Miceli's video installation *88 from 14.000* demonstrates how photographs can be transformed and remediated and yet still retain this insistence on pointing toward something physically present at the moment of exposure. Where *the sand* indicates that photographs can be *displayed* in various ways and still be photographs, *the video* indicates that photographs can be technically transformed in various ways, not only as to how they are displayed but also as to how they are *stored*, be it as analog photographs or digital video, without losing their character of being photographs. In other words, Miceli's video installation may seem to imply some *general* ideas of photography. But it also transforms these *particular* photographs in a certain way, because of its technical properties, because of its editorial strategies and by the title chosen for the work.

Alice Miceli's video installation compiles a rather standardized collection of photographic portraits from Tuol Sleng, homogenizes them, generalizes them, and makes them appear as ghostly presences of political victims from our recent history. Compared with the exhibition at the Tuol Sleng Museum on the one hand – where one might easily become overwhelmed by the traces of brutality at the place and the enormous amount of pictures of victims, as Lindsay French puts it, “room after room of photographs of the soon-to-be-killed” (French 2002, p. 132) – the portraits in Miceli's work are presented in the cool clarity of the art gallery, one portrait at a time, each one similar to the other, less distinct in their individuality, less overwhelming by their numbers. Compared with the exhibition at the MoMA on the other hand, where 22 prints of identical size were hung equidistant from each other, at eye level, around three sides of a small gallery so that the audience may feel compelled to look at each face individually, the portraits in Miceli's work are presented as subordinated to their genre, more overwhelming by their number and the amount of victims hinted at by the title, less overwhelming in their individuality. Compared with the high quality photographic silver prints at the MoMA and the tension that is easily produced between the beauty of the pictures on display and the brutality of the situation where the photographs were taken, the portraits in Miceli's video are buried in sand and displayed along with the noise of the work of production. They are not presented as emotionally overwhelming or unbearably beautiful. There is no historical dramatization – just a series of portraits, one at a time.³⁵ The seriality

35 A common strategy in books and films that deal with genocide is to focus on the fate of an individual person or family. Some archival projects, however, focus on the archive as such. For instance, we find this in Uriel Orlow's work *Housed Memory* (2000-2005), a nine hour-long handheld tracking shot along all the shelves of the Wiener Library Collection. As an interviewee in *Housed Memory*, a Holocaust survivor who works as a volunteer at the library points out, “... you realise that the lack of drama is the whole drama. Make a list!” (see Orlow 2006, pp. 38-41).

of this photographic display underlines the formalization and stylization of the prisoner portrait as a genre. Knowing that the portraits were produced in a death camp, the video also seems to signal the administrative thoroughness of both the photographers and executioners. Information about the principle regulating the irregular rhythm of the display also directs attention toward the torture experienced between the moment of the photograph and the moment of death, repeated nearly endlessly, displayed 88 times in a loop and pointing toward all the others, the 14,000. The seriality, the sand, and the attention drawn toward the intervals between the photographs and the individual deaths seem to display the portraits and, at the same time, display an unportrayable situation. We know these images. We have seen them as horrible and as unbearably beautiful. Miceli's work displays them as dirty, dusty, noisy, and at the same time, she displays them at a distance, stylized, generalized, and maybe most important of all, *serialized* so that the disciplinary effect of the genre is demonstrated as an instrument of power that can be used and misused.

Concluding remarks: Doing media aesthetics

In this chapter, I have sketched an investigation of Miceli's artwork *88 from 14.000* in terms of its mediality. The guiding question for the analysis has been: what can Alice Miceli's video installation *88 from 14.000* say about mediating photographs? During this analysis, I have also outlined a way to analyze mediation. Media aesthetic analysis is concerned with the question of how the medium matters. It never takes a particular medium as its point of departure. If it did, it would not see anything else. The media aesthetic analysis suggested here starts with what seems to appear. The description calls for *distinctions* and the concrete reflection calls for imaginative *variations* of the aspects or dimensions that are of interest in the particular analysis. Since I have been particularly interested in how the *medium* makes a difference, the imaginative variations were chosen based on their capacity to make the function of the *medium* apparent in the case in question. The objective is to develop and practice an analytical sensitivity towards medial aspects that make a difference for the aesthetic expressions in question. This is not to suggest that what I am proposing is entirely new. Rather, my point here is to stress the call for a more empirically-based theoretical reflection in philosophies of media and further, to welcome the opportunity for challenging the researcher's theoretical apparatus in empirical research. Both theory and empirical analysis would benefit from taking this encounter seriously. The point is to develop a way of doing theory and analysis that can actually fulfill the ideal of an analysis that is sensitive to the nuances of media and that responds to the constant need for theoretical thinking and rethinking.

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- 2011 Gallery Meulensteen, New York, U.S.A.
- 2006 General Archive / Parallel São Paulo Biennial, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
- 2006 INTERCONNECT – Media Art from Brazil. ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany.
- 2006 paradoxos brasil. Itaú Cultural. São Paulo, Brazil.
- 2006 EXcESs. Z33 – center for contemporary arts, Hasselt, Belgium.
- 2005 On Disappearance. PhoenixHalle, Dortmund, Germany.
- 2005 21 Internationales Kurzfilmfestival. Hamburg, Germany
- 2005 Basics – transmediale.05 exhibition, HKW, Berlin, Germany.
- 2005 15 Videobrasil. Play Gallery. São Paulo, Brazil.
- 2005 NY Independent Film and Video Festival. New York, U.S.A.