

## **The Impossible Photograph: Blur and domestic violence**

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## **Abstract:**

In photojournalism and documentary photography, blur usually serves to signal an ‘authentic’ encounter of one kind or another. In cases of physical violence, blur can indicate authenticity in a uniquely powerful way, constituting a disruption (or *violation*) of the aesthetic order of the photograph, just as violence itself disrupts the order of everyday lived experience. Physical violence is not just movement, but movement that is somehow out of control. The moving thing (such as a fist) becomes an abstraction that bursts its borders and confronts us with still photography’s limited capacity to render moving things still. This paper uses one particular photograph from Donna Ferrato’s 1991 work, *Living with the Enemy*, to consider photographic blur as both an indexical and symbolic marker of violence, and to argue that domestic violence remains, despite Ferrato’s seminal work on the subject, essentially un-photographable.

Keywords: blur; photography; violence; domestic violence; aesthetics;  
documentary; photojournalism

*Word Count: 6986*

## Introduction

My subject here is a photograph of a man hitting a woman in the face. Specifically, it is about the the man's hand, which is caught by the camera in mid-air at the moment before it strikes, and which, despite being at the very centre of the picture in plain view, we can both see and not see. The picture was taken by Donna Ferrato in the bathroom of a New Jersey house in 1982. She had developed a friendship with the couple, named Bengt and Elisabeth, while working on an assignment for Japanese *Playboy* about love – or, specifically, sexual liberation. Late one night, woken by the sound of shouting, she went quickly down the hall with her camera. She found Elisabeth being viciously beaten by Bengt following an argument. The resulting series of photographs remains one of a very small number of instances of domestic violence<sup>1</sup> captured in real time by an eyewitness and made publically visible in the media, and it formed the basis of lifetime of activism for which Ferrato is now internationally renowned.<sup>2</sup> Except that, to be precise, the assault was not *quite* captured, and not *quite* made visible, because it remains obscured by blur. The precise location of the violence is not precise at all, and yet this blur, despite being a technical failure, does not diminish the impact of the photograph. Instead it increases it, because of the signification that photographic blur has acquired over the past hundred years or so. This is a paradoxical picture, in which Bengt's hand is loaded with signifying power, representing millions of incidences of hidden and ongoing domestic abuse, its blur augmenting that power by amplifying its violence, while at the same time attesting to the fact that domestic abuse remains invisible, even here. John Loengard, editor of *Life* magazine, remarked to Ferrato when he first saw the picture, 'You have done the impossible. I didn't think domestic violence was photographable' (Ferrato in Anon, 2016). But he was right on

both counts.

‘Photographs appear as devices for stopping time and preserving fragments of the past, like flies in amber.’ (Wollen: 76) With this statement, Peter Wollen begins his discussion of the formal and conceptual comparisons between still photography and film, suggesting a set of categories and definitions for the ‘internal temporal structure’ of various types of still photograph, for which he uses the linguistic term, ‘aspect’. Here, I would like to consider photographic blur as an instance of technical failure in which the still photograph defies its expected capturing of time, and to consider blur not as merely obscuring, but also as constituting, capturing, and signifying the event of violence on more than a symbolic level. Photography can try to arrest time, but in certain situations time will still get away, leaving traces of its struggle in the form of blur. I will refer to Mieke Bal’s concept of the ‘sticky image’ which, though she does not use it to talk about blur, is nonetheless very useful in considering blur’s effect (and, more to the point, its affect). In a sense, blur is an exception to any schema by which we try to account for the still photograph’s capturing of a moment. And yet blur also *belongs* to photography. It betrays something of its essential *photography-ness* or medium specificity, having been present in still photography for at least as long as the perfectly arrested moment.

### ***Living with the Enemy***

And then I grabbed my gun – which is a little Leica M4 – and went running down the hall. As soon as I walked into the bathroom off the bedroom, I saw that he was getting ready to hit her and I took the picture. I thought, if I don’t take this picture, no one will believe this ever happened...if I chose to put down my camera and stop one man from

hitting one woman, I'd be helping just one woman. However, if I got the picture, I could help countless more. (Ferrato in Anon, 2012)

The photographs Ferrato took on that night in 1982 changed the course of her career. She spent the rest of the decade intimately involved in the lives of domestic abuse victims, culminating in the seminal book, *Living with the Enemy*, which has been reprinted by Aperture four times in the intervening twenty years. In 2016, the photograph was featured in *Time* magazine's '100 Photos' book, and was the subject of a short documentary film in which Elisabeth for the first time reveals her true identity and tells the story of the photograph, her friendship with Ferrato, the full extent of her husband's abuse, and the rebuilding of her life following her divorce. In the same film Ferrato also notes the significance of *Time*'s republishing the picture as part of a cover feature coinciding with the OJ Simpson trial in 1994, describing this as a watershed moment for the public perception of domestic abuse in America. (Moakley and Kramer, 2016).<sup>3</sup>

In the pivotal bathroom shot of Bengt and Elisabeth (whose names are changed in Ferrato's book to Garth and Lisa<sup>4</sup>), Bengt's presence fills the upper right hand side of the frame, his form bearing down upon Elisabeth, who recoils, leaning back over the countertop as he moves in to strike her across the face with the back of his hand. He also dwarfs the photographer herself, who has been captured in the bottom left hand corner of the frame, in a fragmented double-self-portrait by the mirrored walls of the room. She has had the presence of mind to crouch down to a low angle in order to capture the most dynamic and impactful view of the situation, but in the resulting composition, she herself consequently appears both tiny and cowering, in comparison to Bengt's huge presence. Ferrato's presence in the image heightens the the viewer's stake or shared perspective, as well as our awareness of her participation in what we are

seeing. These layered and refracted gazes have a powerful cumulative effect, contributing to the impact of this image as documentary evidence, and the viewer's sense of witness-bearing. These effects are also heightened by the blur itself, which, signifying an action in progress, draws us into a shared anticipation of the blow in a way that is felt in the body: maybe we flinch or stiffen, more so than if the direct impact had been clearly captured as a *fait accompli*.

Ferrato attests that she was acting on a belief that taking pictures would make Bengt stop. In one sense, she has indeed suspended the hand before it hits Elisabeth's face, but her intervention has in another sense failed. Moakley and Kramer's film reveals this photographed moment as being a kind of tipping point in their relationship, after which the abuse both escalated and began to unravel – the presence of the camera did not stop the violence, but it did seem ultimately to sharpen Elisabeth's awareness of her situation and begin the process of her finding the courage to leave. It did not, however, seem to have had any effect on Bengt's behaviour. The blurred patch at the centre of the picture is representative of the complexity of this situation – there is no clean break or simple narrative here. As in so many cases of domestic abuse, it is a messy and nuanced story. Not only has Ferrato's camera been unable to 'stop the violence' in real terms (a few pages later in the book, we are shown the bruise that will encircle Elisabeth's right eye), but it has not even been able to arrest it pictorially – the blurred hand has evaded capture. It remains an out-of-control, un-freezable, rogue element – quite literally, a site of struggle.

### **What is blur?**

'Photography is like a point, film like a line', writes Wollen (2003: 76). The key word, here, is 'like'. When motion blur occurs in a photograph, it is a demonstration of the

fact that no photograph is instantaneous. All still photography is inhabited by duration – albeit most modern photographic technology is able to record duration in such minute increments as to deny it almost entirely. The hand in Ferrato’s picture ceases to be a point – it stutters and drags as if trying to become a line. It cannot be a filmic ‘line’ (indeed, ironically, moving images in cinema depend on a succession of the most precisely arrested photographic ‘points’ of all), but still it resists arrest, pulling the moment across the image. In a definition offered by Keith Allen, ‘blurred experiences provide too much, inconsistent, information about objects’ spatial boundaries, by representing them as simultaneously located at multiple locations.’ (2013: 257) As such, the blurred object is ‘over-represented’. This definition is concerned not with photography, but with blur as a phenomenon of vision, such as (Allen continues) ‘when a short-sighted person removes their glasses [and] things appear blurry’. What photography does is to take a version of this phenomenon and turn it from an experience into a signifier. The idea of ‘over-representation’ is helpful here, because of its connotations of excess: excess force, excess motion, excess feeling breaking into violence.

An aesthetics of photographic error, including blur, would begin with a recognition of aesthetics itself as an account of seeing, or any of the other senses, as bound up in the bodily and the visceral. As Terry Eagleton writes, aesthetics refers to ‘the whole of our sensate life together – the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world’ (1990: 13). In Ferrato’s own words, ‘photography is not just visual, it’s all five senses at play. It’s about the smell, it’s about the sound, it’s about touch.’ (in Redfitz, 2015). An implication of this is to extend our understanding of blur as not simply a formal flaw

that impacts the aesthetic qualities of an image and therefore a viewer's detached appreciation of it, but as a sensory phenomenon in itself, one which impacts more than our vision. In other words, we should be concerned with what blur *does* as well as what it signifies.

Aesthetic failure such as blur has come to be associated with a kind of privileged authenticity in photojournalism, precisely because of the way in which it signals the chaotic, "out-of-control" movement that is physical violence. In a BBC Radio documentary in 2011, media journalist Matthew Sweet asked the question, 'when the quality of camera phone technology becomes as good as professional cameras, how will viewers know what's authentic and what isn't?' (in Marling & Rosenfelder, 2011). The implication is that amateurish, or bad, photography can be relied upon to signify the real, and that by contrast professional photography, or photography that is *too good*, is somehow suspect. This is a tension that has attended photojournalism, and in particular the photography of war, for generations, summed up most famously in Susan Sontag's remark that when it comes to atrocity, audiences want 'the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry' (2003: 26-27). The dismissal of photography that is 'too good to be true', and the associated rejection of 'art' as a category in opposition to real photojournalism persists in judgements like Sweet's, above. However, it is a truism that has traceable roots in particular moments within the history of photojournalism – perhaps most specifically to Robert Capa and the closing chapter of World War II. Capa is the archetype of Sontag's ideal of 'pure witnessing'. Despite being a highly skilled photographer attuned to compositional sensibility and form, Capa is most celebrated for a handful of what are, technically speaking, his worst photographs. His record of the D-day landings on Omaha Beach on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944 is blurred, shaky and appears either very hastily composed or not consciously composed at all, but rather snatched from a



sequence of events that was chaotic and terrifying. Capa was, these images seem to indicate, too busy “witnessing” to worry about anything as superficial as composition or even focus. They have become the quintessential markers not only of this particular event, but of war photography in general. Their aesthetic ‘failure’, which is not the result of any lack of skill or care but of an accident of history (Capa took four rolls of film and made 106 exposures on that day, but, as the story goes, in the rush of the aftermath a darkroom technician at *Life* magazine’s London office overheated the film, destroying all but eleven of the negatives), becomes the accepted mark of their authenticity. More importantly, this accident goes on to shape the expectations placed on photography for later generations, culminating in Sweet’s concern that without it, audiences cannot be expected to recognise what is real. The blur in Capa’s iconic D-Day photographs is not simply representative of ‘failure’, of course. What makes them iconic – which is to say enduring historic markers of an event – is that this blur very successfully, if unintentionally, conveys an energy and dynamism that not only connotes but also evokes a sense of authenticity in a quite visceral way. This energy is the reason why photographers and artists have so often used blur deliberately as a tool in their work.<sup>5</sup> It happens that, like Ferrato, Capa used it by accident. Both were in a violent and tense situation, instinctively responding to a rapidly unfolding event, creating images that had an un-planned level of power because of the ‘failure’ of their analogue film-speed.

### **Event in process**

*Living with the Enemy* is journalistic and investigative in nature, and positions itself very clearly as having a public service function: a large section of text at the beginning of the book is adapted from an activist handbook called *Domestic Violence: The Facts*, with warning checklists, helpline numbers to call, and other practical advice

for victims or concerned friends and family members. These are features not typically associated with the photobook form. Yet, because of the cyclical characteristics of the narrative built by the book, and the fact that this subject continues to recur every day<sup>6</sup>, it works as a document that is at the same time specific and universal; immediate, historical and timeless. Of the categories of state, process and event, which Wollen offers as a way of defining the kind of internal time that a still photograph can be said to represent, this is a work that is occupied largely, though not entirely, with state. Women are pictured in refuges caring for their children or in group therapy, reunited couples are shown trying to rebuild their lives, and there are many photographs of wounded and bruised bodies. But the project as a whole was prompted by a “real time” encounter with one single, pivotal event: the moment when Bengt assaulted Elisabeth in their bathroom.

As a means of distinguishing between process and event, Wollen proposes asking the question, ‘if it is a changing, dynamic situation, is it seen from outside as conceptually complete, or from inside, as ongoing?’ (2003: 77) According to this logic, the picture of Bengt hitting Elisabeth signifies a not an event (conceptually complete), but a process (dynamic and ongoing); process being the type of temporality usually associated with documentary photography (as opposed to news photography or the kind of art photography more usually found in photobooks). Yet we recognise it as an event.<sup>7</sup> In a sense, what the blurring of the image does is to open out an event that is in process, or, perhaps more accurately, the process of an event – both the event of the assault and of the photograph’s making. The blur shifts it from one semantic category to another; literally blurring the boundary. In the book, this image is presented as part of a sequence, and is not actually the one given greatest prominence. There are four pictures laid out across a spread, which, one by one, show the moments that make up the assault.

The fourth of these, in the lower right hand corner, is the one with the blurred hand. Then, overleaf, there is a final view, a single image occupying a full-bleed double page spread, of Bengt pinning Elisabeth down on the bathroom counter with the force of his body.

This sequence taken together can be said to constitute the event of Bengt's assault, while the individual pictures narrate the process. But the incidence of blur in the fourth picture complicates this. In Wollen's terms, process is the preserve of the documentary mode of photography, in the sense that the kind of scene it typically records is one in which some kind of action is in unfolding in front of the camera. In which case, he goes on, 'then a documentary photograph would imply the question: "Is anything going to happen to end or to interrupt this?"' (2003 p.78) The photograph of Bengt's hand suspended in the process of striking Elisabeth's face not only implies this question, but puts the photographer herself at the centre of it. 'If I take a picture, it'll make him stop', she recalls thinking in the moments leading up to the attack (Ferrato in Anon, 2016). On this occasion, Ferrato's presence did in fact make him stop.<sup>8</sup> But he kept being physically violence towards Elisabeth on subsequent occasions, and as viewers of the image, we know that we are not seeing the process through. We don't see the impact of the hand on Elisabeth's face, though we do see what happens to her afterwards. The book shows a portrait of Elisabeth in what appears to be the immediate aftermath of the attack, seated, addressing the camera directly with tearful anguish on her face. It shows – literally, returning to Wollen's terms – her state. This portrait has some things in common with another famous documentary photograph that represents domestic violence by way of its aftermath: Nan Goldin's 1984 self portrait, 'Nan one month after being battered'. But unlike Goldin – who photographs herself in full makeup, with styled hair and jewellery, her black eye uncompromisingly visible and her

gaze seeming to pierce the camera lens like a direct challenge to the viewer - Elisabeth is not defiant or composed. She will go on to show these characteristics when we see her later, navigating her separation from her husband, raising her son alone, volunteering and returning to education, but at *this* moment she is still reeling, and her bruises have not even had time to appear.

### **Blur as violence**

Wollen's reference to amber (which arguably only makes sense on a subjective literary, rather than strictly theoretical level) evokes Mieke Bal's peculiar category of the 'sticky image' – that which 'in one way or another produces a bodily sense of duration' (in Bailey Gil, 2000: 79). Sticky images are sticky in the sense that they are not easy to let go of; they drag, cling or otherwise resist the easy detachment that typically characterises the viewing of pictures. That the stickiness of an image would, as Bal asserts, be inseparable from the bodily sensations of the one who looks at it is not a coincidence. Since the Renaissance invention of linear perspective, it has been an aesthetic offence for a still image to betray its own fixity and the privileged disembodiment of the viewer. So deeply embedded are the conventions of linear perspective within Western visual literacy, locating the eye of the viewer at a static point around which the perception of three-dimensional space is arranged either 'correctly' or 'incorrectly', that it is taken for granted as a natural fact of vision. That cubism and the modernism that followed has freed painting from these constraints has not affected their dominance of photography in the slightest – least of all photography that is supposed to reassure us that we are witnessing any kind of objective truth. Market forces generally dictate that photojournalism should package and frame its witnessing in aesthetic terms that afford detached knowledge of an event, not experience of it. Ferrato's picture, is an image of violence which betrays the terms of

photojournalistic witnessing by failing properly to freeze the action and thus not sufficiently detaching the viewer's eye from the rest of her sensate body. To invoke Eagleton's definition, the image strikes the viewer's body, not because it is a photograph of man striking the body of a woman *per se*, but because the blur affronts and shocks us out of what Bal calls 'the disembodied gaze that we have learned to cast on images, the gaze that is a-temporal and does not even know that it has a body let alone a body involved in looking, the mode of looking which is not only a desirable one...but also the only possible one, the one that leads to *seeing*'. (Bal in Bailey Gill, 2000: 88)

But there are further, subtler layers of violence implicit in the photographic apparatus itself, even when its imagery is not blurred. Conventional photography can only capture the world from, in the words of David Hockney, the point of view of 'a paralysed Cyclops, for a split second' (in Weschler, 2008: 6). In other words, even when it operates perfectly, photography is somehow by definition monstrous. We cannot even talk about the idealized Cartesian spectator (who gave rise to photographic seeing in the first place) without raising some fairly violent metaphors: the disembodiment of the eye or the mind is very close to dismemberment. If photography's routine limitations – its paralysis, its disembodied, cyclopic half-blindness, its momentary snatching from the flow of time – strike at the heart of its medium specificity, or its essential photography-ness, the incidents of its failure can bring us even closer to the nature of photographic seeing and its drives. The blur of violence is a kind of excess: a transgressive movement that succeeds, finally, in breaking through the frozen frame. The photographer and the viewer are both denied the kind of stable, graspable knowledge we were hoping for. The moving thing becomes a shapeless abstraction that bursts out of its borders in order to confront us with the impossibility of

what we are seeing (ie. an artificially stilled image), or wilfully to remind us of still photography's limited capacity as disembodied, paralyzed and yet grasping at order.

Beyond the discussion of blur as signifying violence in certain circumstances, then, is the suggestion that blur is in itself violent: literally a *violation* of order and stillness. As Laura Wexler asks, 'Is photography a kind of violence? Is seeing a kind of force? Do photographs of violent events simply make images of the violence, or are they in themselves violence magnified and repeated?' (2004: 37) This is a valid set of questions in specific relation to photographs like Ferrato's, but I suggest asking the same about blur itself, whether that blur signifies an act of depicted physical violence or some other kind of 'ordinary' bodily movement.

In her discussion of stickiness, which is not actually about photography but a range of other modes including painting and sculpture, Bal argues that the embodied kind of look afforded by the sticky image is inevitably, by means of its holistic and sensate evocation of the whole body and thus the whole self, a 'participatory look':

...one beyond that of 'participatory observation' based on coevalness, the long-standing ideal of anthropology. This intellectual posture, this embodied look, is not only epistemologically indispensable...it is ontological. Taking into account the deceptiveness and other drawbacks of this epistemological mode, the notion of *performance* seems more appropriate for characterising it. Performance, in anthropology, is the construction of knowledge about a culture *with* the people and through collective research and discovery. (Bal in Bailey Gill, 2000: 88)

Ferrato's intention when she approached Bengt and Elisabeth's New Jersey home was to act as a participant observer. Her commitment to involve herself in the daily lives of her subject-participants for an extended period of time puts her firmly in the tradition of

documentary-making that draws on anthropological, and specifically ethnographic, practice but does not usually reference it as such. The bathroom photograph constitutes a moment in which the subject of her documentary will take a radical turn as a result of the photographer herself being caught up as a performer in a way that she did not intend, and which also graphically represents the limitations (or ‘deceptiveness’) of the anthropological position as it is articulated by Bal. Directly (or perhaps indirectly, by reflection) appearing within the frame, the photographer’s own body and camera become part of the performance – the ultimate ‘participatory look’, which, to repeat Bal’s definition, is in contrast both to conventional ‘participatory observation’ and to ‘the disembodied gaze...that is a-temporal and does not even know that it has a body let alone a body involved in looking’ (Bal in Bailey Gill, 2000: 87). Ferrato is confronted with the mirror: at the same time as seeing the violence that unfolds in front of her camera, she sees that her gaze has a body; *we* see that her gaze has a body. Her presence goes beyond the participatory look, and is drawn, via the enacted and sensate body, into a performance of violence whose moment-by-moment, real-time disorientation draws in the viewer as well.

The blur at the centre of this photograph, the indistinct but unmistakable locus of violence and the centrepiece of the performance, hovers above Ferrato’s reflected head, hovering also between tenses: past and present, event and process. ‘Not only is a performance...something which hovers between thing and event,’ writes Bal, ‘but the ontological indeterminacy which results also necessarily *takes time*’ (in Bailey Gill, 2000: 87). Just as both witnesses and victims of violence report the perceived slowing down of time in the experience of a blow, a fall or a delayed registering of pain, the blur is an abstraction that takes a split-second to read. Its spatial dragging of the moment makes it thus an apt metaphor as much as anything else: a symbol, or perhaps more

accurately, an *enactment* of a kind of violence that is not truly seen here, and is in fact never fully seen anywhere. Recalling the *Life* editor's words, this is a kind of violence that remains seemingly impossible to capture in 'real time'.

A potential caveat to this impossibility is the camera-phone, which theoretically enables family members and victims to record instances of domestic abuse in a way that was not possible during the period in which Ferrato was creating her book. Domestic abuse charities as well as the police now recognise, however, that owning and using a mobile phone can be dangerous for a person in an abusive relationship, because phones are controlled and monitored by the abuser, and photo or video surveillance in the home can itself be a mechanism of control. Typically, camera phones serve the abuser, not the victim. (See Reilly 2018 and National Domestic Violence Hotline 2014). The now routine use of police body-worn cameras (BWCs), on the other hand, has been shown to lead to an increase in prosecutions in domestic abuse cases (Pugh 2018).

Another counter to the argument that camera-phones make domestic violence visible can be found in work of Ariella Azoulay. In her account of the photographic invisibility of rape ('Has anyone ever see a photograph of a rape?', 2008), Azoulay suggests particular reasons for the inaccessibility of this form of gender-based violence to the public gaze. Considering that, given the prevalence of camera technology in every home, the reason cannot surely be an absence of such images ('rape is not in principle devoid of an image – the public gaze on images of rape is what's missing' 2008: 251), one of her conclusions is that it is in society's interests to look away from these images even where they do exist, in order to avoid, or remain in denial of, a full-blown 'state of emergency'<sup>9</sup>:



In a culture of images, where everything is susceptible to being made into an image and when the economy of catastrophes and intervention in them relies massively on images and is conducted by their means, the absence of images relating to rape prevents its prevalence from being recognized as a state of emergency, a mass disaster on a worldwide scale that urgently needs to be dealt with. (Azoulay 2008: 269-270)

Recent statistics on incidence of domestic violence world-wide reveal no less of an emergency (see note 6). My argument regarding the picturing of domestic violence is, however, different from Azoulay's regarding rape. Firstly, it is easier to recognise what a photograph of physical domestic violence actually is, or looks like (rape is much more complicated in this respect<sup>10</sup>).<sup>11</sup> Photographic evidence of domestic violence certainly exists, just as that of rape, made by witnesses' camera phones, CCTV and other means. But its 'domestic' nature does make it less accessible to the photographic gaze of bystanders, and certainly of professional photographers. The privacy of the domestic space, and the legal ambiguity that this privacy engenders, is what allows for the prevalence of domestic violence, as well as for its near-total invisibility in the public sphere.

After Ferrato's pictures of Elisabeth and Bengt, the next time an incident of physical domestic violence was captured and published by a photojournalist was thirty years later, in November 2012, when Sara Naomi Lewkowitz made a small number of photographs of 'Shane' assaulting 'Maggie' in the kitchen of their Ohio home in front of Maggie's two-year-old daughter. Again, it was witnessed by accident – the photographer was working with the family on an unrelated story and so happened to have her camera ready – and again, blur serves, this time in much larger swathes, both to obscure and to signify the violence she has witnessed. Seeing the significance of what Lewkowitz had done, Ferrato helped her to get the work published on *Time* magazine's

website almost immediately after it was made. Lewkowitz went on to work closely with Ferrato in her domestic violence campaigning foundation. Both photographers also learned the lesson, thirty years apart, that the camera does not stop the abuse. Ann Jones, the journalist and author who wrote the original introduction to *Living with the Enemy*, notes that on Shane's arrest, a female police officer told Maggie, 'You know, he's not going to stop. They never stop. They usually stop when they kill you.' (Jones, 2013)<sup>12</sup>

### **State (death)**

Ferrato and Lewkowitz are exceptional in their real-time capturing of physical acts of domestic violence. But in the intervening years, and since, other photographers have not stopped addressing the issue, most often by making pictures of things that don't move. As well as portraiture (like Nan Goldin's self-portrait, discussed above), evocative still life photographs are used to tell stories of aftermath and resilience. Both of these methods are employed, for example, by Claudia Agati, whose work has involved a combination of portraiture and still life images that illustrate victims' testimonies, sometimes obliquely, sometimes directly. This fits with a long-standing photojournalistic convention of substituting symbolic objects for violence that is unseeable for ethical, editorial or practical reasons. It is not only the substitution, but the temporal displacement of violence that gives such images their power. Their stillness and composure, as well as the collaborative way in which Agati's work is made, performs a kind of therapeutic or integrative function. Her still life photographs of a meat cleaver and an iron ("...one day I left a crease on his shirt...") are menacing, but they are also carefully composed, contemplative, well-lit and sensitively pre-conceived

(Agati 2017). David Company, in his essay ‘Safety in Numbness’, calls such pictures ‘pre-frozen’, their ‘stillness complementing and underscoring the stillness of the aftermath’, and recognises that these features afford the aftermath photograph a usefulness within processes of mourning or ‘working through’. (Company 2003) But the still life form – a still image of an object that is itself already still – is in some ways a very un-photographic one: according to modernist notions of medium specificity, the long duration involved in the process of figurative painting lends it quite naturally to the motionless still life subject, while the instantaneous capturing of movement is uniquely afforded to the camera.<sup>13</sup> If, as I have argued, technical glitches such as blur reveal something of the medium’s essential photography-ness by laying bare its imperfect mechanism for stopping time, then we might say that the still life belongs more properly to other media.

Except, perhaps, when the subject of the still life is not life but death. Death is the subject of some of the earliest photographs we have: the camera has, since its invention, been able to “keep up with” (as well as, in Sontag’s words “keep company with”) death, because death doesn’t move. It is also, of course, a central concept within some of the most canonical writing on photography, most notably from Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1980) and Andre Bazin in ‘Ontology of the Photographic Image’ (1945), who used funeral rites and death masks, respectively, as metaphors for the social practices of photography. Company carries this association into his discussion of aftermath by naming the camera’s (as opposed to the photographer’s) function as that of ‘undertaker’ (Company 2003). Despite all of the deathly references, however, none of these three writers is actually talking about pictures of dead bodies. So, in the case of such pictures, we might see all of their conceptual observations as re-doubled; a kind of *death squared*. A photograph of a body ceremonially laid out for burial constitutes a

different kind of aftermath, one in which we are in some sense confronted with the ultimate violence, but only by association.<sup>14</sup> As in Agati's photographs of knives and irons used as symbolic markers, the body indirectly symbolises or alludes to the violence of its own death, and can perform the integrative function of mourning through its composure, peace, reverence, sensitivity and, again, temporal dislocation. The camera undertakes the work of the undertaker; the preservation of an act of preservation, a stilling of the already, eternally, stilled: mourning squared?<sup>15</sup>

The very first image in Ferrato's book is such a picture. Its caption reads:

In Washington, D.C., on May 25, 1993, Diane Hawkins, mother of six, and her thirteen-year-old daughter Katrina, were found fatally stabbed and mutilated.

Hawkins had been disemboweled, her heart cut out. Her daughter had been decapitated. On August 15, 1994, Hawkins's ex-boyfriend, Norman Harrell, was found guilty on all counts for their murders. (Ferrato, 1991: 4)

Mercifully, there is a gulf between this caption and the photograph to which it is attached. The caption does not actually describe what is pictured, in the way that documentary or news photography captions conventionally do, but instead explains. What is described is a process, of the most violent mutilation and murder imaginable, but it is given to us in the past perfect tense, a description of the 'state' in which Diane and Katrina 'were found'. This is a layering of time and aspect that accounts for the state that we can now see, and in that sense it is fitting, though also strange, that it would be the very first picture in the book. We begin, here, with death – with a reminder that death is the 'after' that is the ultimate context to all that we are about to see. 'State results in state,' Wollen says of images of dead bodies, 'a triple registration of stasis – body, pose, image.' (2003: 78) Death is both a state and an event. In the

case of Diane and Katrina it is also, horrifically, a process. And murder is the ultimate objectification: the turning of a person into an object, that is, a corpse. These things are, in many troubling senses, unseeable.

Bal's sticky images are not only sticky by virtue of their internal structures of duration. They are sticky in another sense, too. 'They stick to you', she explains, 'long after the intense experience of time has faded back into everyday life.' (Bal in Bailey Gill, 2000: 99) In these cases, time 'can inhabit the still image not by encapsulating it but by using it as a medium to reach out into the social world' (Bal in Bailey Gill, 2000:80). I have borrowed Bal's notion of stickiness here, which is employed within the context of art history and applied to painting and sculpture, to describe an image that does these things in a completely different, which is to say more urgent and less consciously premeditated, way. Ferrato's book, prompted and anchored by this particular photograph, stuck: it caused her to re-orientate not only her entire practice but her life, to dedicate herself to representation and advocacy on the part of victims of domestic violence, far beyond the decade that the book took to produce. The picture of Bengt attacking Elisabeth in the bathroom became, in the most acute version of Bal's idea, a social agent: 'the performative work', Bal writes, 'is ontologically anchored in time, even if the 'thing' that constitutes its dead letter exists in space.' (in Bailey Gill, 2000: 88) In other words, it sticks in the present, too, as a representation of a past moment that is performed invisibly, behind closed doors all over the world, every day. Azoulay writes that rape 'is an event that has been left in the dark, a consecrated residue that attests to a flaw in the citizen status of rape victims.' (2008: 269). The fact that domestic violence often includes rape, or specifically that there was such a thing as marital rape, was not recognised in the UK until 1991, and it was not explicitly set out as illegal until 2003 (Williamson 2017). This amounts to a similar flaw in the

citizenship of domestic violence victims, who are also left in the dark. Ferrato and Lewkowitz's 'sticky images' of women being physically attacked by their partners in their own homes can reach out into the social world and pull us in, performing, not least through the symbolic excess of their blurriness, a complicated, ambiguous, direct and indirect intervention.

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<sup>1</sup> Though this term has limitations in terms of its specificity, and other terms including ‘intimate partner violence’, ‘violence against women’, and ‘domestic abuse’ are also widely adopted by academics, charities and advocacy groups, I use ‘domestic violence’ here because I believe it to be the most widely recognize and understood.

<sup>2</sup> Most recently in a new retrospective book and solo exhibition, titled *Holy*, at PHotoESPAÑA, Madrid in Summer 2019.

<sup>3</sup> The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed by the Unites States Congress in 1994, and Ferrato continues to campaign on the subject through her education platform *I Am Unbeatable* ([iamunbeatable.com](http://iamunbeatable.com)), launched in 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Ferrato first visited the famous New York swingers club Plato's Retreat to photograph owner Larry Levenson for New York Magazine, which led to her meet and photograph the couple ‘Garth and Lisa’ for Japanese Playboy. As well as revealing Lisa’s true identity as Elisabeth, the aforementioned 2016 *Time* documentary also reveals that a long-term friendship was formed between Ferrato and the couple after the initial *Playboy* assignment, and that Ferrato was invited to the house by Elisabeth when her relationship had deteriorated, perhaps as a cry for some kind of intervention, knowing that Ferrato would have her camera (Moakley and Kramer, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> See for example the work of Robert Frank, William Klein, Daido Moriyama, John Moore and Tim Hetherington (who have embraced apparently unintentional incidents of blur in their work) and also Marco Vernaschi and Antoine D’Agata (who set out deliberately to use it for aesthetic reasons). For further discussion of this phenomenom, see Stiegler: 2012.

<sup>6</sup> In 2017, the World Health Organization reported that approximately 1 in 3 (35%) of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner or a non-partner in their lifetime, and that almost one third (30%) of women who have been in a relationship report having experienced some form of physical and/or sexual

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violence by their partner. It also reports that, globally, as many as 38% of murders of women are committed by a male intimate partner. See *who.int*, 'Violence against women: Key Facts' 29<sup>th</sup> November 2017.

<sup>7</sup> With Ferrato's help, Elisabeth recognized it as an 'event' too, in the sense that despite having secretly lived with Bengt's abuse for some time, this was the night that prompted her to see him differently, eventually taking action to halt the process by escaping and divorcing him.

<sup>8</sup> Moakley and Kramer, 2016

<sup>9</sup> A more recent commentary on the visibility and invisibility of rape is offered by a 2018 exhibition titled *The Un-Heroic Act: Representations of Rape in Contemporary Women's Art in the US* at the Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery at John Jay College, New York City. Exploring the subject of rape using a range of visual forms, the works in the show fall short of showing any photographic image of a rape in progress – all are subjective reflections, interpretations or re-stagings (most notably Ana Mendita's *Rape Scene, 1973, 2001*). However, the exhibition does still succeed in addressing Azoulay's call for an uncompromising recognition of rape as a disaster and a state of emergency by means of visual images in the public sphere. (See La Prade, 2018)

<sup>10</sup> Azoulay discusses in some depth what a difficult proposition it is to recognize what rape actually looks like when it appears in photographs: 'Rape "itself" cannot be photographed except in part, and in such a way that an active gaze is required to reconstruct the event and acknowledge it as rape.' (2008: 251)

<sup>11</sup> Of course, domestic abuse also includes invisible and non-physical characteristics that are emotional, psychological and financial. Coercive control became recognized as a criminal offense in the UK in 2015. Like rape, coercive control is very difficult to prosecute, and even more difficult to photograph.

<sup>12</sup> Jones's book on domestic violence is titled, *Next Time, She'll be Dead: Battering and how to stop it*, Beacon Press, 2000.

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, just as photographers such as those mentioned here can create still life images with much success, so painting has dealt with motion of many kinds. However, the idea of medium specificity is concerned with the affordances that are most unique and specific to a particular medium, and with the the privileging, pushing or maximizing of those particular affordances in practice, hence my rather rhetorical argument.

<sup>14</sup> For variations on post-mortem photography in a documentary (as opposed to medical or forensic) context that evoke this concept of the ‘preservation of a preservation’, I suggest the work of James Van Der Zee (*The Harlem Book of the Dead*, 1978), Sally Mann (*What Remains*, 2003), Jordan Baseman (*Deadness*, 2013) and Jeffrey Silverthorne (*Morgue*, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> For further discussion of these funereal analogies in photography theory and criticism, see Jennifer Good, *Photography and September 11<sup>th</sup>: Spectacle, Memory, Trauma*, Bloomsbury 2015: 91-112.