

# World in a Jar: War and Trauma

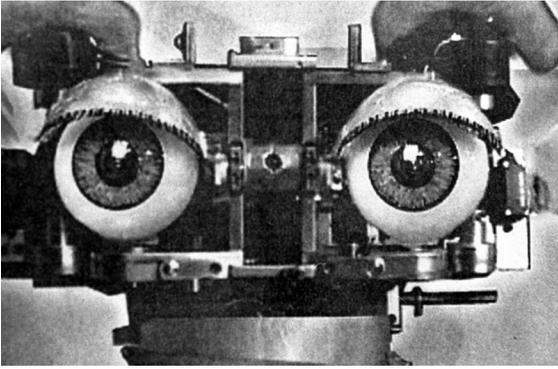


**Robert Hirsch**

**Freestyle Photographic Supplies and  
Art Center College of Design  
Los Angeles**



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To learn more about this project and other works visit:  
[www.lightresearch.net](http://www.lightresearch.net)  
Book design by Anna Kuehl.



Welcome,

I want to thank everyone at Freestyle Photographic and the Art Center College of Design for this opportunity to present and talk about *World in a Jar: War & Trauma* here in Los Angeles. As the project is available for viewing, I am going to discuss the key concepts, themes, and philosophies that informed its making in hopes of expanding your understanding of the work. Accompanying my talk is a PowerPoint presentation of select project images (images are available at [www.lightresearch.net](http://www.lightresearch.net)). I will be happy to take questions at the conclusion of my talk.

*World in a Jar: War & Trauma* curates and re-imagines key components from historical and original images to explore the workings of our collective societal memory involving loss, popular culture, religion, tragedy, and wickedness over the past four centuries. *World in a Jar* evolved out of my immediate response to the events of 9/11 and has allowed me to personalize large themes by dislocating the specifics in favor of the general. It is shaped by my

re-examination of history, which is fueled by my collecting of photography books and pictures. These sources allow me to rework and reinterpret images to explore life's Big issues and to ponder what history and images can and cannot teach us.

*World in a Jar* is a freeform sculptural montage that rethinks the customary linear narrative by offering a supermarket of moveable images. The original installation consisted of 850 individual image jars, stacked 4 high on a 50 x 4 x 2 foot serpentine display pedestal, which was surrounded by ten individually framed 40 x 60 inch prints. Each glass jar contains the same picture, a twin printed twice on a black field (akin to a 19th century stereo card), which lets the image to be viewed from multiple points of view. Each jarred image serves as an interchangeable viewing block, allowing it to be a perpetual work in progress that recreates itself each time it is installed. This permits each photograph to not only present its own split-second historical reference, but also informs the context and interpretation of the surrounding images. There are no captions to anchor the images to particular events, which allow the images to transcend their specific time-based circumstances. Rather, images freely float in an ambiguous and enigmatic space, encouraging viewers to interact and expand meanings based on their own experiences. This engagement is a reminder how photographs continue to seduce us into believing that they are objective records, when in fact all images are not what they initially appear to be and require thoughtful interpretation. This

open-ended production, emulating how the puzzles and paradoxes of our own memories are constructed, can convey an endless tale about the human condition that exists outside of chronological time.

### **Where Does Art Come From?**

Through the process of making representations of representations, I deal with issues of originality and reproduction. Photography is an ideal medium for exploring such questions because it recycles the real, allowing subjects to be put to new uses and assigned new meanings. Originality is the ability to think and act independently and in turn to express ideas differently from previously recognized views of a similar subject. Fresh ideas come from re-contextualizing the past. We draw in memories of things we never directly experienced. The more one knows about how art is made, the more derivative and evolutionary one knows art is. For artists, nothing dies; instead everything is grist to be transformed into something else.

Our society's cultural heritage is founded on a practice of transformative art—one of borrowing, sharing, re-borrowing, and amending—the full range of ways new art learns from, builds on, and emerges out of the old. In music one can hear how Scott Joplin borrows from W.C. Handy, George Gershwin borrows from Joplin, Igor Stravinsky and Miles Davis from Gershwin, Aaron Copland from Stravinsky and Davis, and now movie composer John Williams, who has scored all of Steven Spielberg's blockbusters, from Co-

pland. Consider one of our popular cultural icons: *Steamboat Willie*, the 1928 Walt Disney cartoon that introduced Mickey Mouse. *Steamboat Willie* is based on Buster Keaton's 1928 silent film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, which itself borrowed from a 1910 song, "Steamboat Bill." Disney snatched creativity from the life around him, mixed that with his own talent, and then imprinted that mixture into the character of our society. Select an art form and you will find this 1-2-3 combination of snatch, mix, and imprint. As Pablo Picasso quipped, "Bad artists copy; great artists steal."

### **Thing in Itself**

My motivation is to evoke an inner state of consciousness and grapple with a subject beyond its external physical structure. This approach can be likened to the Japanese concept of *shashin*, which says something is only true when it integrates the outer appearance with the inner makeup of a subject. American writer Herman Melville referred to the purely surface view of reality as "a pasteboard mask." Such a multi-sheeted mask conceals the intuitive world of the "thing in itself"—a deep structure of cultural, political, and psychological models that inform the realities "behind" or beyond what we can observe with our five physical senses—an idea dating back to Plato's concept of delving into the multifaceted, interior panorama of the world.

### **What do Pictures Mean?**

Most of the images in this project were made from other photographs, as well as from drawings, paintings, and prints for the purpose of

questioning the nature of the photographic image. It is a Socratic process allowing me to engage in a philosophical and visual dialogue with other times, places, and makers, flowing from the principle there is no correct first version of how an image should look. I am not redefining an image as much as I am inquiring into the metaphysical contradictions and opposing social forces that swirl around each image. I am asking each picture a question while examining the origin of the image and how its significance has changed over time.

Plato understood the importance of this communication practice when he observed, “those who tell the stories also rule.” Plato also believed most people were not very bright. He thought the masses would follow a self-destructive path and therefore needed a Big Noble Lie to maintain social order and moral behavior. The falsehood is the means of achieving the primary objective of a well-ordered and moral society.

Our current presidential election process makes evident that the power elite appreciate that images, as well as words, rule dreams and dreams rule actions. Such images, dreams, and actions are not necessarily benevolent and can, in fact, be malevolent. Evil always has an obligatory fairytale in which one group concocts a narrative of self-glorification that dehumanizes another group. This mythmaking converts Those people into powerful enemies whose existence is responsible for society’s ills and poses a terrible danger to the future of the group seeking power and thus must

be eliminated from the society at-large to save it. The Nazis fabricated giant lies, such as the 1940 film *The Eternal Jew*, which portrayed Jews as wandering cultural parasites. In 1994 a similar dis-information campaign was carried out in Rwanda where the Hutus demonized the Tutsis as “cockroaches” who had to be evicted or destroyed and then preceded to indiscriminately murder 800,000 of them in a genocidal campaign lasting just 100 days.

During the 20th century 40 million humans were killed in wars, while at least another 60 million people were murdered in genocidal purges organized by their own governments. The bigger the lie, the more the perpetrators seem to be motivated by it. Eventually these lies become ubiquitous, contaminating the entire society with falsehoods. As the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay pointed out, “It’s not true that life is one damn thing after another. It’s one damned thing over and over.”

Even now that Photoshop has become a verb, people still want to trust their own eyes, even when they are aware they are only seeing pixels, thus validating Groucho Marx’s observational wisecrack, “Who you going believe—me—or your lyin’ eyes?” Yet people continue to expect photography to render reality transparent and understandable rather than acknowledging its inherently devious nature and ability to make lies visible.

During the mid-twentieth century Henri Cartier-Bresson’s concept of “The Decisive Moment,” that fraction of a second when the

essence of a subject is revealed, defined full-frame 35mm photographic truth. Its foundation was constructed around the handheld camera's ability to freeze and isolate action, giving it the appearance of truth. Unfortunately this theory ignores that such Decisive Moments were disconnected from their original context and sequence of events. This omission overlooks the time before and after the shutter is clicked during which any subject before the lens is open to infinite manipulation of meaning. The mainstream embrace of this notion conflated photography's ability to capture detail with its capacity to deliver the truth.

Today we can have dynamic, digital moments constructed from many different pieces of time and space. These images challenge past assumptions by asking: Is a constructed image innately less truthful than a Decisive Moment, and can an assembled picture reveal previously unseen truths? Consider Jeff Wall's highly structured image *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)*, 1992. Wall's elaborate fabrication, camouflaged as truth, describes a real situation that defied the photographic approach of grabbing a scene out of the flow of real time. Wall's methodology skates on the edge between life and theater to point out that The Truth is actually where our legends commingle with fact to form an accepted cultural reality, which is why allegory or symbolic expression remains a favorite method for representing moral, political, and spiritual messages.



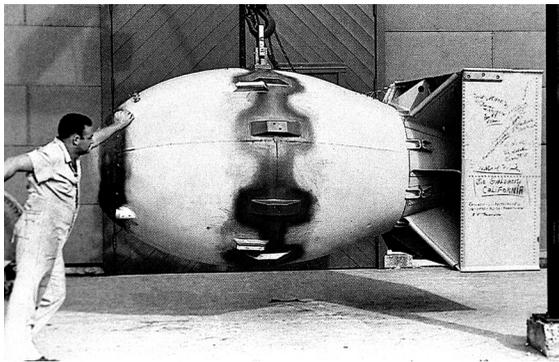
### **Illness**

When I was five I became deathly ill with Rheumatic Fever for months. I recall lying in bed at night crying because I thought I was going to die. I realized my parents couldn't help me and I was alone in the world. It left me physically weakened for years and made me acutely aware of my mortality. I lost my child-like sense of indestructibility, which separated me mentality and physically from my peers.

### **Religious Training**

While recovering from Rheumatic Fever, I wintered with my mother's parents in Miami Beach. My grandfather was a religious man, and I went to Hebrew school three times a week including Saturdays, which was "Shabbat" or the "Sabbath." Yet I didn't feel like one of God's Chosen children. I questioned the teachings about stories in the Torah or Hebrew Bible and was placed in a class for disruptive boys that was ruled over by the lumbering and pockmarked Mr. Stein, who we referred to, rather uncharitably, as Frankenstein. Eventually, I did make my Bar Mitzvah, officially becoming a man in the eyes of

Judaism. Ironically, at age 13, this empowered me to drop out of the Synagogue, which I did, leaving behind the religious traditions of Judaism. Nevertheless, I remain a member of the Tribe whether I want to or not, for it is imposed upon me from within and by the outside world. Given the state of cultural identity politics, I am potentially pinned down to what my worst enemy says I am, simultaneously both an heir to the Auschwitz nightmare and to the kid on the street who wants to feel my horns. In the end, when push comes to shove, I will always be identified as a Jew. That said, I do not believe in an afterlife and I don't think that moral principles or the meaning of life depends on any organized religion. What matters are actions we take in this ONE life we have to live in the here and now.



### **The Atomic Bomb**

Going to elementary school during the Atomic Age of the Cold War, I was subjected to the “Duck and Cover” drill. A siren would sound through the school’s PA system. Without explanation, our teachers would lead us to our hallway lockers where we were instructed to silently get down on our knees and put our hands over our heads as we heard the bomb

doors being closed and locked behind us. I knew the US had dropped two atomic bombs on Japan and had watched *Godzilla* (1954), a monster created by atomic testing who ravished Japan. Life magazine printed photos of people building and stocking fallout shelters as well as arming themselves to fend off unwanted visitors. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis took the country to the brink of nuclear war. Global, above ground, atomic testing produced such high levels of strontium 90 that milk was no longer served in our school cafeteria. Living through such everyday threats of nuclear terror made me an existentialist before I even knew what one was. Today there are still over 25,000 nuclear weapons, many in unsecured locations.

### **The Black-and-White Post-Holocaust World**

In 1961, I watched, on a black-and-white television, the trial in Jerusalem of Nazi official Adolf Eichmann for crimes against humanity for his role in administering the mass deportation of “undesirable” people to ghettos and extermination camps. Watching with me was with my mother’s father, whose family had vanished up the death camp’s chimneys. I was stunned. My family had never talked about it. I knew my father had left college to enlist in the Army Air Corp before Pearl Harbor and spent 5 years in military service during World War II, but I had no perception of the enormity of the Nazi atrocities. I could not comprehend systematically murdering people, including one million children, based on no more than faith in a fictitious, racist view-

point. I wondered how anyone, including my religious grandfather, could believe in such an angry God that would allow such things to happen. It seemed most people would rather believe in an invisible, all-controlling but volatile God rather than face the unpredictability of human beings, thereby encouraging people to make the same mistakes over and over again. I think Russian writer Anton Chekhov got it right when he wrote, “Man will become better when you show him what he is like.”

Seeing the black-and-white photographs made at the concentration camps after the Allied liberation, naked corpses of women and men with numbers tattooed on their arms, degradingly piled like so much kindling, made me feel as if my head had been split open and filled with monstrous fiends who pursued total annihilation. No images, before or since, have so powerfully affected me. They left an indelible streak of anxiety upon my psyche. Clearly, everything I had previously been taught to believe about the world was wrong. Suddenly, I found myself bound up with ancient hateful beliefs, a rapidly spreading mental plague that resulted in the horrific deaths of millions of people. Their anguish, sorrow, and terror, like undeveloped film, were latently tattooed inside me.

These appalling, grainy, black-and-white photographs of the Shoah subconsciously influenced my future direction to work in black-and-white photography, which I saw as being more authentic and essential than the glossy patina of color photographs. I began mak-

ing interpretive images about the Holocaust when I was in my mid-twenties, but it took me 30 years of intellectually wrestling with the enormity of these ghastly crimes before I was satisfied I was not trivializing the subject. Although I have taught and extensively written about color photography, it has only been since completing this project that I have begun to make color pictures.

As a member of “the hinge-generation,” Jews living between the experience of the Holocaust and its memory, I believe that as the last of the Holocaust survivors die, it is essential for artists to find innovative ways of remembering what happened. Memory is mutable. It is only as real as the last time it is remembered, and the failure to renew these memories is akin to a belated Nazi victory because what they did will quickly and deliberately be concealed and forgotten. Therefore I think about the village (shetl) where my grandmother was born in Lumja, Poland, which was physically obliterated to erase any cultural memory of the Jewish life that once informed that culture. Yet even now Holocaust deniers, such as the President of Iran, cynically attempt to rewrite history and edit out the Shoah. Such fundamentalist fascists want to eradicate Jewishness, the core of all Abrahamic monotheistic faiths, from the region where it originated and to weaken and undermine the humanist values of the rule of law, tolerance, and respect for core rights, such as free expression and protection of minorities, that we have fought for over time.



That said I reject the notion of myself as a victim of victims, damaged by calamities committed on someone else by unknown demons in another time. I don't believe that actual trauma is transgenerational, but I do think the complex web of cultural inheritance involving ideals, mandates, prohibitions, and values allows a wounded spirit to be passed on to the next generation. However, what is paramount is recognizing and confronting those who are responsible for humanitarian offenses and bringing them to justice.

In a world that often displays its hatred of the intellect, the key problem remains: Is it still possible to believe in other human beings? Ideally, *laissez-faire* societies do not appeal to a higher authority or legislate deep disagree-

ments about what constitutes virtuous behavior. Instead they agree to leave each of us the social space to do as we please as long as it does not harm other members of the society. When this open space to exchange and debate ideas is prohibited, there can be no social peace.

My rude awakening to the Holocaust sensitized me to how people responded to others in times of need. In 1964 a young woman named Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death over a half hour period in Kew Gardens, Queens, where I had lived as a child. Reportedly dozens of her neighbors did absolutely nothing. I was fascinated by this collective failure to act, a psychological phenomenon now called the bystander effect, in which someone is less

likely to intervene in an emergency when other people are present and able to help than when a person is alone. Years later I aided a man who suffered a heart attack. After calling 911, my wife and me gave this stranger CPR while others told us to leave him face down in the icy gutter or his family would sue us. Even when the ambulance didn't come in a timely manner, none of the bystanders offered to help and the man died. Their craven indifference prompts me not to count on the kindness of strangers; and reminds how we must struggle to overcome apathy and ennui to improve the human condition.

### **The Vietnam War**

The increased media coverage of the Vietnam War, especially the photographs in *Life* and *Newsweek*, riveted my attention. I read about the Domino Theory and thought it sounded prudent to stop the Communists from taking over Southeast Asia. However, the photographs I saw of a Buddhist monk who set himself on fire to protest anti-Buddhist policies of the U.S.-backed government caused me to start questioning what we were being told. In the spring of 1965 I went to my first anti-war rally in New York's Central Park. By the time I graduated high school I was attending and photographing war protests and in 1967 was involved in anti-war project called Vietnam Summer. In 1971 I was drafted, but eventually declared "mentally unfit" for military service. Three years later I was accepted into the Peace Corps, but was absurdly denied final admission because of my so-called military record.

### **The Double Image & The Uncanny**

Photography is the act of seeing double. A photograph becomes a stand-in for the original. The photographic process is part of our cultural quest for no-hassle experiences and affordable status items, from the simulacra of Las Vegas to art and fashion forgeries. In the project's catalog essay (available at: [www.lightresearch.net](http://www.lightresearch.net)), Gary Nickard discusses Otto Rank's *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1925), in which the uncanny—that is the seemingly intense sensation of the supernatural, strange, unfamiliar, weird, and unsettling—arises from the doubling of reality in the form of ghosts, reflections, shadows, and twins, and how this eerie notion can include photography. In one sense, a photograph is a shadow or reflection that is formed by a lens and captured onto light-sensitive material. If a photograph can be identified as a category of Rank's "double," then it can also serve as an example of the "uncanny," an "energetic denial of the power of death."

In *Camera Lucida* (1981) Roland Barthes concluded that the relationship of the photograph to the double, its confusion with reality and time, constitutes an uncanny concern with death. Thus it is precisely the direct and real connection between the subject and its image—the certainty of a physical existence within the past—that death and photography become inextricably bound, providing a human-made process for both circumventing the grim reaper and confronting the transience of life.

I held my dog Koko as the vet “put her to sleep,” and heard her cry out as her life force vanished. I leaned into my father’s deathbed and photographed him moments after he died. We are motivated by death. Death can enrich and sharpen our focus by making us realize that we only have a short time to be satisfied that our existence was meaningful.



### The Depiction of Suffering

Since the 1980s, the sharp reproach about photographic representation by critics such as Martha Rosler, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Allan Sekula left little opportunity in the academy for documentary style work. One of their principal criticisms swirled around the depiction of suffering, a critique rarely applied to literature, music or painting. These academics contend photographs, such as those by Sebastião Salgado and James Nachtwey, should not make their subjects artistically pleasing for this practice contaminates the so-called “real” with visual pleasure, thus beautifying pain for viewers. This approach labels such images as being detrimental to constructive social engagement rather than recognizing such images might awaken one’s compassion, and

that such an acknowledgment could be a first step toward social justice. Pictures can be exploited, but de facto censorship is worst. Yes, the act of picture making involves applying aesthetic principles to a subject, but more importantly it transforms a subject. A good photographer can capture and transmit a subject’s sensibility to others. Although there are limits on what photography can represent, and any emotional attachment to an image is unstable and subject to manipulation, it is necessary to feel and acknowledge the suffering of others before we can act to alleviate it. Often we humans seem to be hopelessly overwhelmed and powerless when confronted with the suffering of individuals other than ourselves. One way we can overcome this is by recognizing the anguish of others by seeing it in pictures. Such a multiplicity of images makes one conscious of the complexity of the process of representation in a more active and inquiring way. Thus suppressing such images curtails any form of intellectual, emotional or social engagement.

However, the aftermath of 9/11 has caused some critics to revisit their previous positions. In her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag changed her stance about the power of photographs to represent deprivation, humiliation, and suffering in a positive manner. Why? Perhaps Sontag realized that pictures are more accessible and visceral than words. Since people are not intimidated by photographs they see privately in books, magazines, TV, or on the Internet, it encourages an immediate response in which individuals

can question what these photographs show them. Pictures can make us feel and even think, but only if we develop the creative power to imagine ourselves in situations besides our own. With a little imagination we can identify with the suffering of the person being pictured and substitute our image for their image. In spite of this, neither art nor artist is protection against cruelty and bestiality. Nonetheless I do think there is the prospect, if not for redemptive liberation, at least for some kind of solace in process of making and viewing pictures.



Yes, we know that photography keeps company with death, and images are not always used as a force for good. Terrorists, those armed, criminal fanatics possessing the capacity for universal homicide who intentionally attack defenseless civilians, recognize this power and purposely create and distribute abominable images, such as the brutal beheading of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, who was selected for execution because he was Jewish. Those who advocate repression and violence make what is cruel in their hearts even more callous for the purpose of intimidation, hop-

ing to make us afraid to act. Bending to such self-censorship is a first step in allowing violent beings to impose their will upon us.

In our own country, the defining image of the Iraq invasion has shifted from the official media moment of the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein to the sadistic amateur snapshots made in Abu Ghraib Prison to videos of roadside bombings posted by insurgents on the Internet. The result of such hideous pictures has been a simultaneous protective indifference and an inculcation of compassion. Why? An image's authority is determined as much by imagination and memory as it is by its indexical relationship to the real. Engaging images acknowledge the complexity of life through their capacity to sensitize and stimulate our latent exploratory senses that generate empathy. Such photographs assert ideas and perceptions that we recognize as our own but could not have given concrete form to without first having seen those images. Such visualizations can bear witness, which may raise our consciousness about our own passivity, indifference, and cruelty, allowing one to be the exception who follows the ancient Judaic inscription from the Talmud: "He who saves a single life, saves the entire world."

Yet, photographic images alone lack the capacity to bring about social change. Ponder Martin Luther King, Jr.'s observation: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. In the end, what we remember is not the work of our enemies,

but the silence of our friends.” Images can define a moment in time, draw us in, stimulate our awareness, and inspire action, but to be beneficial humans we need to understand the context and history that brought these images in being to avoid replaying the blunders of the past.

### **Nature of Evil?**

For ages philosophers have wrestled to define the nature of Evil with little success. This is because evil threatens human reason by challenging our expectation that the world makes sense. The West largely failed to understand Nazi Germany’s fanaticism because rationalism is ingrained in our thinking. Rationalism does not permit us to recognize such evilness because we think all problems can be solved through talk and compromise. In actuality evil is often irrational, generating depraved behavior on an individual level, as a result from a failure of imagination, the inability to see beyond one’s own circumstances, and the reluctance to think for oneself.

Thomas Hobbes wrote (*Leviathan*, 1651) that people were naturally wicked and basically selfish creatures who would do anything they find pleasurable or that would increase their economic and/or social position of power. Left to their own devices people would act on their foul impulses. Individuals commit vile deeds that are within their reach, making the most of their opportunities, and doing what they think they can get away with. Last week some one drove a car through the front of my studio and then drove away without knowing

if anyone inside was injured. Evil can also be contagious with people taking their clues from their peers about what constitutes acceptable behavior. Thus Hobbes thought a strong government was essential to protect people from their own odious, self-centered deeds. Without a legitimate and rational Authority, there would be no security. According to Hobbes, people would constantly be in a “state of nature”—that is, a “war of every man against every man,” thus making life “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” leaving no place for art or culture.

### **Human Evil**

In the past people believed in Natural Evil, such as earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, and tornadoes, which were brought on by a vengeful God to punish the wicked. Although fundamentalists may still believe events such as 9/11 are the result of America’s wicked ways, most people acknowledge evil in terms of human cruelty with Auschwitz as an extreme manifestation. Whether expressed in secular or theological terms, history makes it clear that goodness and evil are human constructions, and there is no intrinsic code of ethics.

In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), Hannah Arendt postulated that evil, regardless of where it takes place, could simply be a function of banality—the tendency of ordinary clerks and teachers to conform and carry out despicable acts without critically thinking about the results of their action or inaction. History tells us that the suffering of the innocent is not

the result of individual power hungry, paranoid, sociopathic mass-murderers like King Leopold II, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, or Pol Pot. Rather, the mass catalog of evil is made-up by average, street-level bureaucrats who actually implement the horrendous policies and the general populace—all who benefit in some way from these death-worshipping ideologies. This sort of self-deception, where people compartmentalize and rationalize their actions, allows everyday people to carry out horrific acts. In Eichmann's case, he purposefully ignored the "Golden Rule" and its principle of humane reciprocity. Rather, he claimed no responsibility because he was just "doing his job"—"He did his duty...; he not only obeyed orders, he also obeyed the law," demonstrating how deception is evil's servant.

Immanuel Kant advocated that people are their own moral legislators; in Eichmann's case, he knowingly forfeited being the "master of his own deeds" and made Adolf Hitler his personal legislator. Here evil is the result of an absence or failure to act. Arendt insisted that moral choice remains, even under totalitarian conditions, and that this choice has political consequences even when the chooser is politically powerless, stating: "[U]nder conditions of terror most people will comply but some people will not, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that 'it could happen' in most places, but it did not happen everywhere. Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation."



## Conclusions

Just as most black-and-white photographs are shades of gray, people are rarely one thing or another. Rather, we are a continuum of numerous biological and environmental elements, which makes it possible for humans to hold several different viewpoints simultaneously. This gives us the capacity to continually ignore, change, or rationalize our actions.

Evil is not just people murdering other people. Evil also occurs in people who are members of Save the Children and recycle their trash, but who on occasion realize that the idealism they have chosen to pursue is also selfish and such selfishness seems to be hardwired. In his book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976), evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins asserts a gene will operate in its own interest even if that means destroying the organism it inhabits, thereby making Selfishness the core of human existence. Dawkins' position supports Hobbes' case for the necessity of a strong central authority to curb self-interest and maintain societal order. As American President James Madison wrote in the Federalist Papers, "But what is government itself, but the greatest of

all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.”

Quantum physics has shown that our world operates on chance and random action, thereby making Swiss cheese out of classical religious notions of predestination, heaven and hell, as well as such utopian political ideologies as communism and fascism, that have their roots in the authoritarian impulse of Faith, which criminalizes Thoughts as well as actions. Their common denominator of submission makes no distinction between public and private life and insists on arbitrating everything from diet to sex, always asking the same question: Are you one of US? Such imposed orthodoxy makes pluralism—the tolerance of difference—impossible to achieve.

People ask me if working with such subjects and images is depressing, but just as darkness is another shade of light, this state of mind can be a compelling motivator when used to commune with one’s own soul. Darkness can bring a silent calm that restores our mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. Often, compelling art is the result of angst and tears. Regardless, it is better to candidly examine the human character in order to be more prepared for what life might deliver to our door. Much of my contentment grows from being fully engaged in thinking, making pictures, and writing about the world. I reflect on what the ancient Israelites called *hochma*—the sci-

ence of the heart—the capacity to see, to feel, and then to act as if the future depended on you.

This belief system ties into the notion I call the “Possibility Scale,” which proclaims: “If I can imagine it, there could be a way to make it happen.” It is transcendent artistic thinking—one that seeks to reach beyond the range of known experiences—encouraging one to adventurously visit regions once deemed out of bounds or inhabited by demons to push the limits of our understanding. Consider Leonardo da Vinci, Jules Vern, H.G. Wells, and now William Gibson, the father of cyberpunk science fiction, all whose fantastic works, created outside the margins of their times, anticipated future inventions and societal transformations.

Time is the key. Time calls all of us and measures change. If there is no time, there is no change. If there is no change, there is no action. If there is no action, life stagnates. And we need action to foster creation, for creation propels life and provides hope. Where there is no hope, evil takes hold. The real struggle is between hope and evil for it is at this juncture that the mind’s eye can offer up possibilities for new and innovative realities. Can photography play a role in this process? I think it is possible...

Special thanks to Mark Jacobs for the suggestions and improvements he made as my first reader.

Robert Hirsch

