

Darren Almond

Galerie Max Hetzler (osramhöfe temporary space)

Written by Nuit Banai

This past summer, as Venice, Kassel, and Münster became essential ports of call for the arbiters of contemporary art, one important exhibition remained well under the radar. Housed in Galerie Max Hetzler's temporary space—a former bulb factory in East Berlin—was Darren Almond's provocatively titled "Night + Fog." Referring to Alain Resnais's seminal 1955 documentary depicting the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps, Almond presented three bodies of work that engage with the legacies of 20th-century totalitarianism. Though hardly an innocent subject, Almond's efforts became legible through the public debate regarding the possibilities of aesthetic representation—both after and about—the historical trauma of the Holocaust.

One critical issue that haunted the exhibition was Almond's use of the title of Resnais's film to label a particular series of bromide photographic prints of the dead forests of Siberia. In the past five years Almond has traveled to the nickel mines of Norilsk, formerly Norillag, one of the largest gulags of the Stalin era, and has documented the deadly effects of the elevated levels of sulphur dioxide on the nearby forests. While unspeakable crimes against humanity and the natural environment certainly occurred at Norillag, and Almond's stark black-and-white landscapes justly capture the desolation, it is troubling that this dual reference to Stalinism and acid rain is couched within the language of the Holocaust. The specific political and historical context alluded to in "Night+Fog," a reference to the arrival of prisoners into concentration camps under the cloak of darkness, the subconscious suppression of knowledge and culpability for the committed atrocities, and a 1941 decree made by Hitler authorizing the disappearance of political dissidents cannot be made into a universal equivalent for all catastrophes. Because the categorization of the Holocaust as a unique event in history is regularly undermined, Almond's elision of contexts is not exceptional but is no less disturbing. In its postmodernist negation, it raises the thorny issue of cultural and moral responsibility on the part of artists who wish to participate in this field of representation.

Despite such an initial lapse, Almond tackles this question in the installation titled *Archive* (2007). Made of galvanized steel, the piece forms an unenterable block of floor-to-ceiling archives filled with perfectly organized stacks of pristine white paper on every shelf. Commemorating the estimated number of prisoners who died at Auschwitz, it confronts an appropriate way to depict that which is fundamentally unrepresentable. Echoing the work of French artist Christian Boltanski, Almond ostensibly presents himself in the image of the historian, whose task is to inventory and reconstruct facts as faithfully as possible. He complicates any claim to authenticity or access to the "real," however, by embracing the fetishizing effects of mass culture on aesthetic memorialization. Through a strategy of cool conceptualism

and high production values, the installation becomes a sleek design object, pointing to the artist's tenuous role in negotiations between the task of mourning and the temptation of merchandising.

This duality is further explored in *Terminus*, the exhibition's grand finale, consisting of seven pairs of bus shelters relocated from the Polish town of Oświęcim (where Auschwitz-Birkenau was located). One pair, with a sign pointing to the muzeum, confronted viewers just before they turned a corner into a large hall filled with an array of shelters, stationed one across from the other, as if to signal the possibility of arrival and departure (an option that prisoners, arriving by trains, did not have). Continuing Almond's long investigation of global networks of circulation, these bus shelters are supposed to elicit a range of mnemonic significations. By transcending their physical identity as relics of a postwar transportation system, they are meant to create a framework for reflection on the relationships among the trauma of the Holocaust, the emergence and demise of state socialism, and the recuperation of these events by both contemporary art practice and a thriving tourist industry.

The question, of course, is whether such dilapidated artifacts, covered as they are by today's stickers and graffiti and used mostly by the local Polish population to move within the city, speak equally about the past and the present, and whether the gallery environment specifically nurtures this dynamic. Can such literal readymades be considered, as Almond claims, "a metaphor for the fragility of human life"? Can they provoke the viewer to reconstruct the unquantifiable magnitude of Auschwitz-Birkenau when they are standing in an art space in Germany? Or do they become spectacular, deracinated signs that create an easily digestible, ultimately banal mode of "Holocaust tourism"? Almond's work cannot encapsulate the Holocaust, nor can it fully avoid its commodification. Rather it suggests that the project of our generation is to invent an aesthetic language that opens new conduits to memory and transforms its own representational and historical blind spots into a subject for critical reflection.