

ARTFORUM

Material Witness

By David Joselit

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DAVID JOSELIT ON VISUAL EVIDENCE AND THE CASE OF ERIC GARNER



BY NOW, IT'S A TRUISM to say that there are more images than ever before, a digital flood of pictures that shows no signs of slowing. But what about all the images that are blocked, elided, or destroyed? What about the resurgence of a kind of iconoclasm—the annihilation of the image? Such an assault on the visual was apparent when stark video footage of Eric Garner being arrested and put in a choke hold in Staten Island, New York, seemingly made no difference in the case against the police who killed him; and it was all too clear when, just before this issue went to press, the artists and journalists of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris were the victims of horrifying violence.

Here, art historian **DAVID JOSELIT** takes up the case of Garner and its challenge to the very concept of visual evidence or representation—and its denial of images and objects as evidence of fact. Joselit considers the possibility of critical and artistic practices that may counter such failures of representation, instead staging a *refusal* of representation—a refusal perhaps nowhere more potent than in the performances of **WILLIAM POPE.L**, whether the artist is literally ingesting and expelling information, in *Eating the Wall Street Journal*, 1991–2000, or, in *Foraging (Asphyxia Version)*, 1993–95/2008, covering his head with a white plastic bag that he clutches tightly below his chin. Is this act of self-erasure a gesture of annihilation, as the word *asphyxia* suggests, or is it a strategic subtraction of the body from a sphere in which that body cannot be represented anyway—cannot be visible or evident, or is subject to censure and repression?



Opposite page: Screenshot from a cell-phone video of police arresting Eric Garner, Staten Island, NY, July 17, 2014.

This page: William Pope.L, *Eating the Wall Street Journal (street version)*, 1991. Performance view, New York, summer 1991.



Screenshot from a cell-phone video of police arresting Eric Garner, Staten Island, NY, July 17, 2014.

THE FAILURE IN DECEMBER 2014 of a Staten Island grand jury to indict the policeman who choked Eric Garner, an African American man accused of selling loose cigarettes on the street, delivered another kind of indictment: an indictment of post-Conceptual art. If the excruciating video showing Garner seized and relentlessly piled on by the police could not convince a jury, how can forms of aesthetic critique based on research and visual evidence be any more effective with a general public? While the life-and-death exigencies of American race politics should not be glibly equated with art's more distanced forms of engagement, proponents of visual politics would do well to learn from the Garner case.

The pertinent art world discussion centers on *forensis*, as pursued by the Forensic Architecture project at Goldsmiths College in London and presented in an influential 2014 exhibition organized by Anselm Franke and Eyal Weizman at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. Weizman, principal investigator of the project, returns to the Latin roots of *forensis*—"pertaining to the forum"—in defining its procedures as a public debate over the evidentiary status of objects. One of the great promises of such a forum of things, as Weizman and his collaborator Thomas Keenan have argued, is that objects (including human remains) may belatedly testify to human rights violations. Weizman calls this capacity *prosopopoeia*, which he defines, via Quintilian, as "the mediated speech of inanimate objects." I am drawn to this notion of the object as witness, and I think it possesses real explanatory force with regard to recent art that engages questions of contemporary biopolitics and new philosophical perspectives such as vibrant matter, animal studies, and speculative realism. To a certain extent,

Forensic Architecture is an effort to come to grips with the political implications—and elisions—of these discourses.

Weizman has framed *prosopopoeia* as a critique of Bruno Latour's "parliament of things," a touchstone for new-materialist and posthumanist thought. "The idea of one forum of forums, the full house or the single parliament of things, is impossible," Weizman has argued. "Every forum is also a border, the edges of an arena into which we can or cannot enter, in which certain types of enunciation and types of process are allowed or not." But how can we account for the fact that the video of a police officer pressing his arm against Garner's throat—a document that could not have been less ambiguous—did not "speak for itself" before the members of a grand jury? If such a visual artifact can so blatantly fail in the task of *representation* before the law, both politically, as the proxy for an absent victim, and rhetorically, as evidence, doesn't this present a challenge to how we define the politics of art?

A productive inversion of *prosopopoeia* is encountered in *Eating the Wall Street Journal*, 1991–2000, an unsettling work realized by William Pope.L in different versions, including live action in the street, video documentation, gallery performance, and a related sculptural "artifact." In performances at SculptureCenter in New York and at the Boston venue Mobius, both in 2000, Pope.L ingested pieces of the iconic financial newspaper, using milk and ketchup to make it more "palatable," and then vomited it out. He did so dressed in nothing but a jockstrap, covered with flour, and seated on an elevated toilet, spitting globs of the masticated newspaper onto the floor around him. In a 2010 restaging

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William Pope.L, *Eating the Wall Street Journal*, 2000. Performance view, Mobius Experimental Space, Boston, January 2000.

at New York's New Museum, assistants in Barack Obama masks, rather than the artist himself, did the eating. The work is deeply visceral—indeed, the mimetic response to watching someone vomit, or seeing the evidence thereof, is to retch oneself. In his limited-edition book published in conjunction with this work, *Eat Notes*, Pope.L declares: “Consuming is not just about taking in. No. It's also about being taken in. A kind of inebriation. Delusion. Pleasure. Terror. An analgesic. All simultaneous.” In *Eating the Wall Street Journal*, the adjudication of information—or evidence—is not performed in a public forum (as in forensics) but rather takes place in the psychobiological theater of the body. Pope.L *consumes* the *Journal* but refuses to be consumed by it. Instead he expels it, in an instance of what philosopher Catherine Malabou has poignantly called “ontological spit.”

I am suggesting, then, that with regard to the Garner case, as well as to our own affairs in the art world, we need to be more skeptical of the ideological promises of representation. In his 2002 text *Hole Theory*, closely related to the procedures of ingestion and rejection performed in *Eating the Wall Street Journal*, Pope.L declares, “I do not picture the hole. I *am* the hole.” In other words, his art does not represent but rather suggests an elusive alternate space for consuming information—not the ostensibly democratic sphere of the forum, but the much more slippery, biopolitical locus, or threshold, of the *hole*. Indeed, a concept like “the hole” may present opportunities for those who, like Garner, cannot command presence in official forums. It is what Fred Moten calls being “in the break,” or what he and Stefano Harney theorize as the “undercommons” in their book, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013).

According to Harney and Moten, the undercommons refuses representation in favor of an insinuating force that pervades—surrounds—conventional politics: “We got politics surrounded. We cannot represent ourselves. We can't be represented.” This perspective is difficult to grasp and should not be mistaken for abjection—or, even worse, another episode in the long history of primitivizing black bodies. Instead, Harney and Moten indicate a force that, like theorizations of the multitude, is founded in practices of everyday life that escape reductive categories of identity intended for easy media consumption. The hole might be a site of operations beyond such oppressive icons—what Weizman calls a border. An art of the hole would thus implode representation, as Pope.L has done, insisting instead on the right and capacity to decide how information is consumed. In other words, the presumed Enlightenment rationality of the forum—of forensics—is contradicted by the particularity of individual bodies.

It is tragic and deeply troubling that Garner could not be represented in that Staten Island courtroom. But it's a fact. A fact that thinkers like Harney and Moten have confronted by recognizing another kind of space, beyond or beside democratic forums—a space that Pope.L has also imagined and inhabited. The police choked Garner—his last words were “I can't breathe”—and he was silenced again in the courtroom. Forensics failed him, which is why Pope.L's decision to vomit out information rather than trusting it to speak for itself is significant. Information is never innocent. Its toxicity depends on who is consuming—and who is consumed. □

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