I want to take it as something important, and I want to see this redundancy as a form. We do not want to accept the redundancy of
such images because we don’t want to accept the redundancy of cruelty toward the human being. This is why it is important to look at images of destroyed human bodies in their very redundancy.

The incorporation of the woman’s hand monumentalises the redundancy of shocking images of corpses in war, to which their cultural weight bears as much significance as the next image. As Hirschhorn reminds us, the images contain human bodies – and he does so because being so unaffected means that we need reminding. When viewing Touching Reality in the context of online visual culture, and viewing the work online, the work implicates us, the viewers, by mimicking the contemporary habits of online slacktivism and apathy by framing our gaze to be synonymous, or performed by the woman scanning through the image. We are positioned to let her scan, magnify, scroll and be apathetic for us.

Suffice to say that there is ample conversation around the affects that documentary photographs produce: Feelings of shock, removal, and distance have been widely discussed by seminal figures Judith Butler, Susan Sontag. Hirschhorn’s use of remediation in Touching Reality further contributes to the mechanisms of removal, not only because there is an ambiguity around where the images came from, but also through the use of meta-framing where we are watching her view the images. As viewers of the artwork we are removed from the scenes that take place from the interface of the video, the touchscreen, and the camera. What is produced is a commentary, not on documentary, or framing, however, but of the contemporary gestures that signify ambivalence through the woman’s caress and scroll of the touchscreen.

Feelings of removal are common to discussions around the documentation of violence. As Strauss identifies in Between the Eyes, “there has always been something about ‘real pictures’ of real violence that undercuts their political effect, and separates them from experience” (81). Documenting an experience will always create a shortfall between the representation and the real. Following Barthes, Strauss stresses that signifying violence only confirms that viewers have not had to experience that violence themselves, “because, as we look at them, in each case disembarrassed of our judgment: someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us nothing – except a single right of intellectual acquiescence” (81). Consequently for Strauss, “such images do not compel us to action, but to accept” (81). According to Strauss, violent images lack a shocking affect because “the action has already been taken” and consequently “we are not implicated.” However, in Touching Reality, our reaction to shocking images online is implicated by the woman’s behaviour in the video. There is an amplification of this shortfall because we are made to view a video of a woman scrolling through images of war, and we are also compelled to a similar kind of acceptance.

Consequently for some, Touching Reality leaves viewers feeling cold rather than shocked. As Ryan Johnston commented, “I was bothered by not being bothered by it” (7). (Similarly, my undergraduate students studying Contemporary Art never wonder why these images are taken and are easily accessible in the first place. Instead they question their very boredom and own political ambivalence without being propelled into emotion.) Perhaps part of this reaction is due to the fact that the work requires us to move beyond the question “can we look at these images,” and come to the realisation that we already do and that they have become a part of the digital visual vernacular.

Much more could be noted about the affects produced by Hirschhorn through Touching Reality in regards to images of war, documentation, violence and the object that relates specifically to digital culture. However, when focusing on how digital culture historicises our contemporaneity online, remediation produces ambiguity and ambivalence around time, place, locality, and context, and images fall into and are perpetuated within the temporal here and now online present. Despite Hirschhorn’s intention of creating an artwork that critiques mass media outlets such as tabloid newspapers and magazines, Touching Reality also acutely presents a relationship to digital media texts that is common to our contemporaneity online; one that might historicise the nature and characteristic of contemporaneity today. The use of remediation by Hirschhorn in Touching Reality historicises digital culture and characterises it by a spatial and temporal shrinking that produces ambivalence around the providence of media texts, such as documentary photographs. As I have identified, Touching Reality performs a contemporaneity similar to the approaches of Terry Smith and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. The collapsing of temporal distinctions show ‘everything that exists in the world is of my time’ to the point that there is an indiscernibility around where and when the images in Touching Reality occurred.

My approach to remediation through Touching Reality is a departure from Bolter and Grusin who have argued that remediation reforms and reignites older texts and media formats. While Bolter and Grusin’s approach might be the case in some situations, remediation also has the ability to produce other affects such as ambivalence for the providence and context of singular texts such as images of war. In Touching Reality, there isn’t a nuanced reaction of the images performed by the view in the video. For us, the images are decontextualised, repetitious, and there is an ambiguity about the specificity of the time and place in which they were taken. They are seen but not registered and indicate a larger historical present that is perpetuated in online culture.

Some might cautiously note, Touching Reality can be regarded as an artwork intended to produce affects in the viewers and even be manipulative in intent. The work is undoubtedly disturbing, not only because of what is depicted in the images, but because Hirschhorn uses them to amplify and intensify contemporary online habits around the aestheticisation of disaster. As Colman has observed, via Deluze, the online mediation of war means, “we are called, perhaps more than ever, into the site of the intolerable” (156). If the ongoing experience with screen that “suspends the intolerable, rendering it an ordinary experience of daily life” (Deluze, 168-9), then Touching Reality indicates that the site of intolerability is destroyed bodies from war. The artwork resonates much more strongly with an online visual culture that is thrust in front of media containing unspeakable violence to the point that it becomes a part of the habitual daily narrative. The woman’s hand leisurely swiping across these images is indicative that the mediation of intolerable war imagery is what Colman terms as having ‘passed into the vernacular of essential conditions of living’ (156).

Conclusion

While much could be written about how Touching Reality taps into the history of documenting war, affect, and the aestheticisation of disaster, the artwork is also useful for unpacking current approaches to contemporaneity, and how online digital culture might be historicised in the future. If according to Christov-Bakargiev everything that we remember is of our time, then there is a collapse in temporal distinctions, and spatial contexts through the practice of remediation online. Images of bodies are digitally available, shared, and distributed, images can be easily consumed. In a post-Baudrillard world, we Google “gross images of dead people” and find images of atrocity mingled in with images of makeup tutorials of zombies, and stills from The Walking Dead, and hence origin and context might be traceable, but temporal and spatial nuances are folded into the temporal present, and are indicative of our expressions of contemporaneity today.

References


