# Landscapes of Absence

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## ABSTRACT

The project and exhibition *Landscapes of Absence* by Brandon Bauer explores ethical issues around the use of ISIS propaganda images within the media. In particular, the project examines the use of propaganda images in the absence of reliable and journalistically objective images, since the brutal beheadings of western journalists has made it too dangerous to report from areas under control of the self-proclaimed Islamic State. The project uses images drawn from eight beheading incidents disseminated through ISIS media outlets. In the works in the exhibition, the dehumanized image of the victims has been erased, leaving only the landscape and the absence of image as a metaphor for the larger issue of the absence of reliable reporting.

## INTRODUCTION



*Figure 1. Landscapes of Absence (Caestecker Gallery Installation Views), 2016*

The project *Landscapes of Absence* explores ethical issues around the use of ISIS propaganda within the media. The project examines the use of propaganda in the absence of reliable and objective images, since the brutal beheadings of Western journalists have made it too dangerous to report from areas under control of the self-proclaimed Islamic State. While objectivity in journalism is a contested issue, the use of the term in this project is meant to indicate a fact-driven, evidence based, and verifiable approach to reporting. The project uses images drawn from eight beheading incidents disseminated through ISIS media outlets. In this project, these images are erased, leaving only the landscape and the absence of the dehumanized image as a metaphor for the larger issue of the absence of reliable reporting from this region.



*Figure 2. Landscapes of Absence (Caestecker Gallery Installation Views), 2016*

In describing these images as "dehumanized", I intend to convey that the images created by ISIS rob the dignity of these victims of violence explicitly for the purpose of propaganda as a mediated spectacle. While there is an important lineage of erasure in modern and contemporary art, this project uses erasure for a different end. Much of the use of erasure in visual art since Modernism has been for iconoclastic ends, whereas this project uses erasure as a way to reassert dignity through the signification of the absence of the dehumanized image.

The project includes a series of eight 22.5"x30" descriptive print works about the beheading incidents, four 40"x60" landscape mural prints, a single-channel video, and a poster print publication with information about the project. The project was first exhibited in April of 2016 in the Caestecker Gallery at the C.J. Rodman Center for the Arts on the campus of Ripon College in Ripon, WI.

**_Figure 3._ _James Wright Foley (April 2014)_, 2015, Archival Pigment Print on Canvas, 40"x60"**

## ISLAMIC STATE AS LANDSCAPE OF ABSENCE

The terrain under which the self-proclaimed Islamic State exerts its control has become a landscape of absence. The Islamic State emerged from the insurgency against the U.S. invasion of Iraq as an Al-Qaeda affiliate. This organization is known by several names and acronyms, such as: IS (Islamic State), ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham), ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), or in Arabic as al-Dawla al-Islamiyah fil Iraq wa al-Sham, leading to the acronym Daesh or Da'ish. [1] In February of 2014, Al-Qaeda formally cut ties with ISIS, disagreeing with their tactics and the group's focus on the seizure of territory. [2] By June of 2014, after successfully expanding its control over several Iraqi cities, ISIS proclaimed itself to be a worldwide caliphate. [3] The extra-legal territorial entity of the self-proclaimed Islamic State has little precedence, and no desire to legitimately enter the world community. In the past, even the most murderous and despotic regimes, such as the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, or the Taliban in Afghanistan, found it useful to maintain standing in the United Nations or to develop international relations through the exchange of ambassadors. As Graeme Wood pointed out in his in-depth article in the Atlantic titled "What ISIS Really Wants," from the point of view of the Islamic State, accepting these kinds of international norms is equivalent to heresy, and would constitute the recognition of "an authority other than God's." [4] Several western politicians and media pundits have described ISIS in hyperbolic language as a spreading "cancer." [5] While this moralistic language oversimplifies the issues surrounding the emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the territorial governing body they have brought into being insists upon an existence defined by a set of rules different than any recognized international norm. Currently, the Islamic State's sphere of control is imposed upon multiple existing national territorial boundaries, and its borders are in continual conflict and flux.

Since the succession of brutal beheadings of journalists operating in ISIS territory during the autumn of 2014, objective reporting has effectively ceased. News agencies have stopped sending journalists into the region due to the dangerous situation on the ground, and some major global news agencies have stated they will not accept work from freelance reporters so as not to encourage others to risk their lives. [6] ISIS has issued its own rules for journalists operating in their territory. The first rule requires all journalists within their territory to swear allegiance to the Islamic State. [7] Given the lack of regular and reliable reporting, little is known about daily life within what has been described by counterterrorism expert Brian Fishman as a "governmental amoeba" that constitutes the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Fishman coined this term in a March 2007 essay titled "Fourth Generation Governance," written for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. His essay described the theoretical foundations for the justification of a modern Islamic nation-state by ISIS in their document "Informing the People about the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq." With this document, written before the group claimed any territory, they envisioned an Islamic State as an amorphous state of constantly shifting zones of control, with borders extending "so far as men stand with guns to defend it." [8] ISIS propaganda directed at the West focuses on war, provocation, and intimidation, but in the areas it controls or is attempting to take over, it paints a picture of the caliphate it wishes to build as a family-friendly, Islamic utopia. [9] Reports from refugees and others who have escaped ISIS territory reveal a different reality. As a United Nations report outlining ISIS war crimes in Syria states:

> "ISIS has perpetrated murder and other inhumane acts, enslavement, rape, sexual slavery and violence, forcible displacement, enforced disappearance and torture. These acts have been committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population […]." [10]

Without regular and reliable reporting these horrific conditions are essentially out of sight, while at the same time the 24-hour news cycle in the United States churns out the Islamic State's own sophisticatedly crafted propaganda images of shock and horror, or the ISIS battle footage of black clad militants marching defiantly and triumphantly into cities as B-roll footage and visual shorthand for the group. As Emily Horne, spokeswoman for the U.S. State Department's special envoy leading the international coalition against ISIS, stated, "When that file footage gets out there it actually risks bolstering their image, and can contribute to foreign fighter recruitment and supporting the myth of their invincibility." [11] These images inspire fear and outrage as they cycle on in the media, and they are meant to. The U.S. State Department and the Pentagon have urged broadcasters to use alternate images of the conflict, for instance footage of U.S. troops training Iraqi security forces or video of airstrikes against ISIS targets. [12] These suggestions would supplant a narrative of the conflict with an official U.S. counter-narrative, but would unfortunately get us no closer the truth on the ground for those living within the self-proclaimed Islamic State. In the absence of objective counter-images uncovering the reality of the situation, the propaganda ISIS creates is a seductive spectacle, yet these images continue to underscore the narrative they intend us to see.
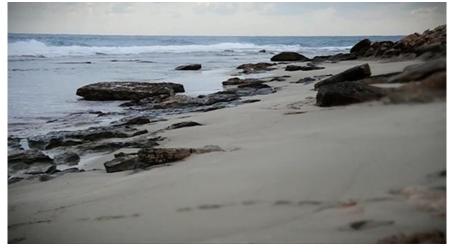
## IMAGE ETHICS AND ISIS PROPAGANDA

ISIS crafts provocative propaganda for maximum impact and shock in the West, yet these atrocities are all too present in the areas under ISIS control. The creators of these images exploit the spectacular nature of the propaganda they create. As the cultural critic Susan Sontag noted in

her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, the nature of the spectacle is a privileged position. She writes, "To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment." [13] As Sontag points out, the rhetoric of spectacle conceals the all-too-real lived experience beyond the facade of the images we consume. The brutality of the Islamic State's medieval sense of justice is put on display in the public squares of the cities they control, but their brutality is also crafted for Western audiences through sophisticated networks of communication, where "YouTube becomes the pike on which the severed heads are displayed." [14] The sensational spectacle of beheadings is meant to serve several simultaneous purposes; as gruesome propaganda calling attention to ISIS and their aims, as direct provocation to Western governments and religious authorities, as a demonstration of the Islamic State's medieval sense of justice, as a way to lure new recruits, to assist fundraising, and finally as an assertion of the Islamic State's control over their own image. The highly sophisticated propaganda videos by ISIS seem to be created specifically to circulate through Western broadcast and social media. The now infamous beheading videos do not actually show the details of the gruesome acts. As Alex Gibney, a documentary film director and producer, commented:

> "It is an interesting aesthetic choice not to show the actual beheading, I can't be sure, but they seemed to dial it back just enough so that it would get passed around. In a way, it makes it all the more chilling, that it was so carefully stage-managed and edited to achieve the maximum impact." [15]

This deliberateness speaks to the sophisticated nature of their efforts. These are not the crude low-quality ransom videos that have been created by other militant organizations. These videos are scripted and planned, shot in High Definition video using multiple camera angles, and employing sophisticated graphics and logos. There has been much speculation about the manipulation of images in their videos using advanced techniques like green screen production and rotoscoping. [16] By continuing to circulate these images, their message and their provocation echoes around the globe.



***Figure 4.*** *Cut: [The Sea Is All That Remains] (Video Still), 2015, Single Channel Video, 05:33, Color/Sound (Looped)*

# ICONOCLASM, ERASURE, ABSENCE, AND UNDOING THE DEHUMANIZED IMAGE

Beyond the dehumanization of the victims in the beheading videos, ISIS has also been waging a war against world heritage and history by destroying culturally important archeological sites within their territory. These acts of destruction have been broadcast for a worldwide audience as another act of ruthless provocation. This cultural erasure is a barbaric fulfillment of the kind of iconoclastic language found in early Modernist literature. The foremost example being the call to "destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind" found in the 1909 'Founding Manifesto of Futurism.' [17] There have been several absurdist articles making the connection between the iconoclasm of ISIS and the statements of the Futurists. For example, the April 1, 2015 article published by the editors of Hyperallergic titled "ISIS to Exhibit Floating Pavilion of Art Destruction at Venice Biennale." This article describes an unauthorized Islamic State pavilion on a boat in which Biennale participants bring artworks to destroy, create viral videos, and leave with limited edition ISIS tote bags in hand. [18] While being an April Fool's Day prank, the article cites the clear iconoclastic lineage these early Modernist provocateurs gave rise to. They cite works such as Robert Rauschenberg's 1953 drawing *Erased de Kooning*, the Jean Tinguely's 1960 self-destructive sculpture performance *Homage to New York,* Ai Weiwei's 1995 photo-documented *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, as well as the "Art Amnesty Project," a 2015 exhibition at MoMA's PS1 by Bob and Roberta Smith, in which the public was invited to throw their art into dumpsters. These citations are familiar justifications for continued acts of contemporary artistic iconoclasm, and this thread of art history continues to inform and celebrate a wide range of acts of cultural negation. This connection between Modernist provocation and the actual destruction of world heritage sites calls into question an art historical lineage founded upon the ideas of self-proclaimed fascists who also stated in the same manifesto "We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene." [19] Despite all of the gallows humor about the art historical precedents for the destruction of these archeological treasures, the ruination of these sites represents an immense cultural loss for the world. As Irina Bokova the head of The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stated:

> "You deprive [people] of their culture, you deprive them of their history, their heritage, and that is why it goes hand in hand with genocide. Along with the physical persecution they want to eliminate – to delete – the memory of these different cultures." [20]

This statement echoes the German Romantic-era writer and critic Heinrich Heine's observation in his 1821 play, Almansor: "That was only a prelude, there where they burn books, they burn in the end people." [21] This quote is memorialized on a bronze plaque as a part of the Book Burning Memorial at Bebelplatz, the site of the infamous 1933 book burnings by the Nazi Party in Berlin, Germany. Heine's quote was a reference to an earlier act of destruction and dehumanization, the burnings of the Quran and persecution of Muslims during the Spanish Inquisition. [22] ISIS has shown the world once again that the destruction of culture goes hand in hand with the destruction of living bodies.

In the project *Landscapes of Absence* the act of erasure is used for a different end. The act of erasing the image of these victims kneeling with their executioner standing over them is not an act of iconoclasm. This erasure is not an act of negation. It is an act to restore humanity and dignity.
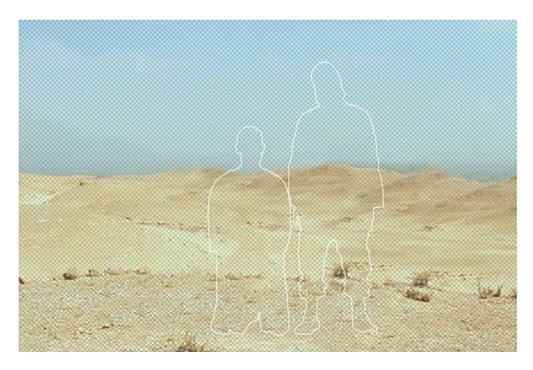
***Figure 5. James Wright Foley*** **(Detail), 2015, Archival Pigment Print on Rag Paper, 22"x30"**

In many ways this project began with a set of questions: How should I, as an artist, respond visually when the only image we have of these lands is through the lens of propaganda and provocation, when human beings are deprived of their dignity and their gruesome murders are circulated around the globe as a purposely-crafted, horrific spectacle? How can we see a truth of this land that is hidden behind the provocative images presented to us? In this project, I wanted viewers to think deeply about the kinds of images circulated as spectacle, and how broadcast and social media becomes an unwitting accomplice in the continual dissemination of these images.

This project shares a similar sensibility in the act of creating a space of absence with the work of the sculptor Micha Ullman, and his *Empty Library* Memorial in Bebelplatz as a part of the Book Burning Memorial in Berlin. *The Empty Library* consists of a plate glass window embedded in the cobblestones of the plaza where the Nazi book burnings took place. Peering in the window one sees an empty space lined with bookshelves, enough to hold the reported 20,000 volumes the Nazi's incinerated. As Ullman has said of the work, "You can see the emptiness and the silence. Those are the two important materials the monument is made of." [23] I, too, felt that a moment of contemplative memorial silence, not just for the victims of these beheadings, but for all the unseen crimes carried out in the territory ISIS controls, is an appropriate response to their clamor of propaganda and provocation. I find this response especially important for myself as an artist living in the West, and not directly affected by the violence of daily life within the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

There are many brave artists and activists working within these conflict zones who are asserting their own voices and the right to their own image. A prime example is Abounaddara, the Syrian 'emergency film' collective. In their videos and exhibitions they attempt to reclaim their images

from what they describe as hyper-mediatized images of victims in situations of war. As they state in their concept paper titled, "A Right To The Image For All":

> "The images of the human debris of human madness are too frequently about mutilated and starved bodies, not about persons; they are too frequently images of the dystopian landscapes of wretched camps and the ruins of devastated neighborhoods and not images of the network of social relations and forms of collective cultural and political life that sustains individuals in their struggle for life in dignity and peace." [24]

In their paper, Abounaddara claims that the right to the image is a human right "from a holistic reading of the existing corpus of international human rights law." [25] Their work asserts a complex human portrait of those affected by their daily life within areas of conflict.

Hito Steyerl, the German artist and writer, asked a profound question for artists of conscience working in the current moment after she viewed the Syrian conflict from the Turkish border. In her piece "Kobanê Is Not Falling," published in e-flux in 2014, she queries: "What is the task of art in times of emergency?" [26] For the Abounaddara film collective, this task of art is to reclaim a humane image from the hyper-mediatized images of victimhood. With the *Landscapes of Absence* project, I offer that artists, living in what Susan Sontag has described as "the rich part of the world," have a special ethical responsibility to examine our privileged provincialism and to think deeply about the images we consume and the images we create. We need to counter this targeted spectacle not with absurdity, reactionary iconoclasm, or with hyper-mediatized images of victimhood. We need to counter these images with an assertion of humanity and dignity.
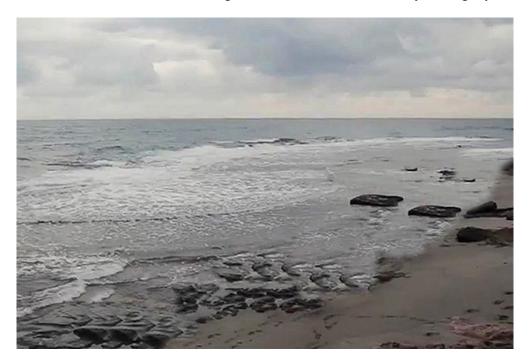


*Figure 6. 21 in Libya (February 2015)*, **2015, Archival Pigment Print on Canvas, 40"x60"**

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## AUTHOR BIO

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