
THE BOX

October 1–October 31, 2009

William E. Jones

Killed, 2009



Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. (loc.gov)

In the vernacular of journalism, an assigned piece of writing or a photo is “killed” when the editor chooses not to print it, sometimes accompanied by a “kill fee,” and sometimes not. That’s the use of the word artist William E. Jones is invoking in his latest digital video loop, *Killed*, repeating the term Roy Stryker used in deciding the fate of each of the 145,000 photo negatives he’d commissioned as director of the Farm Security Administration between 1935 and 1943. Producing one of the New Deal’s most enduring artistic legacies, the Farm Security Administration was charged with documenting American society through photography, and in attempting that, its photographers managed to give a human face to the look and landscape of the Depression. Only adequately funded, but largely protected from political interference, the FSA photographers (listed below) effectively reinvented the practice of photojournalism (a term Stryker vigorously rejected), producing an archive now largely available for viewing and downloading through the Library of Congress’s web site. (FSA photographs are also represented in Ohio State’s own library system.)

Let us now praise famous men and women:

Charlotte Brooks, Esther Bublely, Marjory Collins, Harold Corsini, Jack Delano, Sheldon Dick, Arnold Eagle, Walker Evans, Theodor Jung, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Sol Libsohn, Carl Mydans, Martha McMillan Roberts, Gordon Parks, Edwin Rosskam, Louise Rosskam, Arthur Rothstein, Richard Saunders, Ben Shahn, John Vachon, and Marion Post Wolcott.

Based in Los Angeles, the remarkably prolific Jones (*Killed* is one of four pieces he completed over the past year, in addition to participating in the Nordic Pavilion in this year’s Venice Biennale and preparing a book on Fred Halsted for 2010) accessed the digital files for the piece via the Library of Congress’s web site, choosing from the examples the site offers of photos produced from negatives that Stryker had “killed.” From 1935 to 1939, Stryker’s method of “killing” was to take a simple hole-punch device to the rejected 35mm negatives, thereby rendering them unpresentable; some of the photographers objected to the bluntness, as it were, of this method, so thereafter the negatives were simply unprinted. Estimates vary as to how many negatives went unseen, with some claiming as many as 68,000, and among the photographers whose “killed” images Jones here restores are Evans, Jung, Mydans, Wolcott, Rothstein, Shahn, and Vachon (father, incidentally, of film producer Christine Vachon).

As Jones refabricates these images, he works almost as an animation artist, playing with the dimensions of the hole, now waxing, now waning, overlaying onto these black-and-white images a metaphor for the void no less than an indexical sign of a fatal bullet shot straight to the heart. As to whether Stryker experienced regret over having shielded so many of these photos from public view, he later argued that a number of the photographers, particularly the less experienced ones, began by producing dozens of views of a single location before gaining the self-confidence to grasp the visual essence of the story they were pursuing and hence shooting in a more judicious fashion. Stryker’s principal regret, years later in trying to assess the extraordinary achievement of the FSA project, was that its bureaucratic infrastructure was insufficiently developed to ensure that each photograph receive an accurate “caption,” this partly from his view that words—written text—were required for the viewer to more usefully comprehend the visual evidence of the photo.

An Ohio native, Jones first drew critical attention in 1991 for his unconventional documentary film on his hometown, *Massillon*. Since then, his film, video, and photo work has been presented in venues around the world, including a 2005 retrospective at Tate Modern, and his *Tearoom* (2007) was one of the highlights of the 2008 Whitney Biennial. His book on Fred Halsted is forthcoming, from Semiotext(e).

Bill Horrigan
Director, Media Arts

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Killed was supported by a creative residency in the Wexner Center’s Art & Technology Studio, as have a number of Jones’s other works and is shown courtesy of the artist. William E. Jones is represented by David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

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William E. Jones

Killed, 2009
Sequence of digital files, black and white, silent, 2 minutes looped.

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