

## In the Dead Letter Office

Joshua Craze

1.

Behind the canvas, the water looks cold and unforgiving. It is as if the words were written onto ice crystals, black on blue, and where the canvas is still dark and liquid, I have to step closer in order to read them. Only when I lean in can I see the file number 0062-04-C | D 369-69278 at the top of the page, which indicates that the painting is based on a government document. It is difficult to read the words (Fig. 1).

Slowly, I make out the handwritten lines that begin page 99 of the U.S. military's report on the actions of the Special Forces personnel that beat and burnt eight prisoners in Gardez, Afghanistan, before dousing them with cold water and sending them out into the snow and ice. It begins: "I that my Renown is mentioned in (JIHAD) time I was a childe."

2.

As a journalist and researcher, I have spent years poring over the thousands of documents that constitute the archival record of the war on terror: government inquiries into CIA abuses, interrogation records, and official memoranda, all of them only released into the public realm after Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests made by the media and organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Over the last decade, journalists have used these documents as crucial sources of evidence in uncovering the American government's use of extradition, detainment, and torture. They tell the stories of many of the detainees still languishing in Guantanamo, as well as a more banal yet chilling tale – one of bureaucratic indifference amid the humdrum emails of office life.

When these documents finally enter the public realm, they have been redacted, and on page after page, dissonant phrases appear, lonely amidst the black marks left by the redactors, who remove information for reasons of national security.<sup>1</sup> Some of these documents, such as "Other Document #131" (Fig. 2),



Figure 1. *in (JIHAD) time*, 2014.

are so heavily classified that only a few words remain on the page. In others, I am forced to make sense of sentences in which redacted subjects do unmentionable things to redacted objects. After a year of reading, I realized that I had stopped seeing the black and begun treating the documents simply as sources of information. My eyes skimmed the pages, pausing only on the words, trying to derive what sense I could from the scattered phrases; I treated the redactions as obstructions put in my path.

For as long as I have been writing about these documents, Jenny Holzer has been painting them. Her work doesn't only look at the words – it focuses on the redactions, and transforms them. The first series she made, her *Redaction Paintings* (2005), are silk-screen copies of redacted documents, colored and enlarged. The paintings recall Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series: fleeting images of contemporary violence snatched from the media cycle and turned into objects of contemplation. Each canvas is at least three times the size of the document on which it is

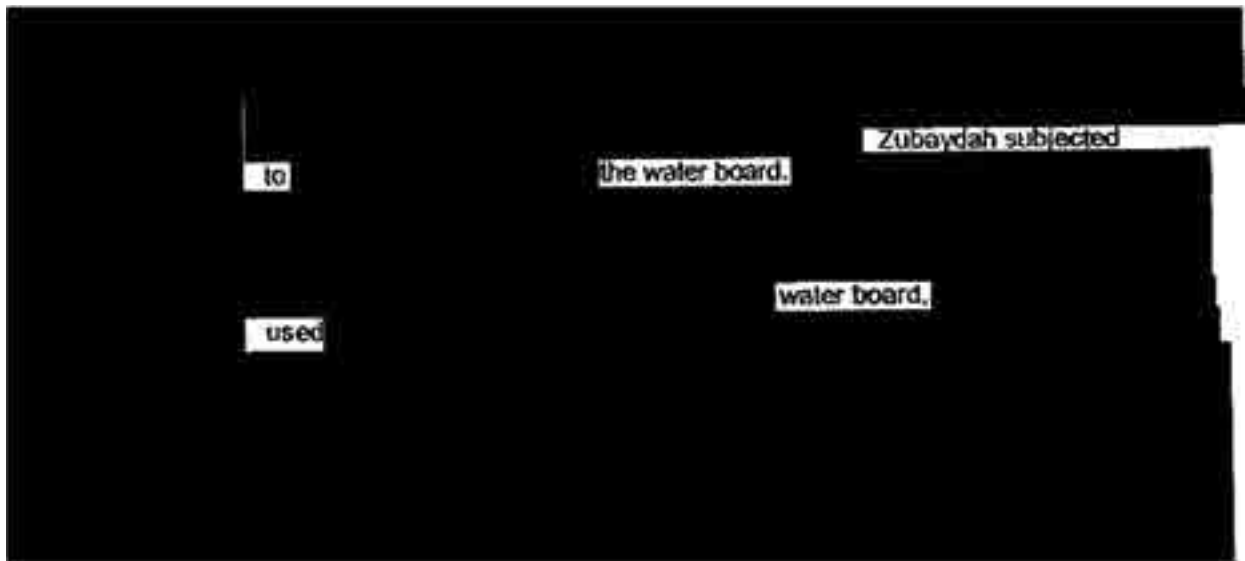


Figure 2. "Other Document #131," CIA, 2002.

based, as if the paintings were calling us to attention, as if, somehow, we missed something the first time we saw the documents.

In her Endgame series (2012) and then in her Dust Paintings (2014), Holzer's work changes focus. Rather than primarily painting the bureaucratic corpus of torture memos and legal rulings related to the war on terror, Holzer paints interrogation reports, and the voices of the detained become increasingly present on her canvases. At the same time, the form of the work shifts. The silkscreen copies of the Redaction Paintings are replaced by oil paintings, in which each word is painstakingly written onto linen – bureaucratic horror rendered as calligraphy. If the Redaction Paintings make visible the abstract bureaucracy of secrecy, these later canvases restore materiality to testimony that is otherwise too quickly reduced to a two-paragraph story in the newspaper.

Two large blocks of color dominate one of the Dust Paintings (Fig. 3). They could be landscapes, set vertically: two beaches at sunset, the sun red as it dips below the horizon. Above these holiday scenes is a yellow block, and just below it, some faint type:

A GROUP PRESENTLY IN THE  
 UNITED STATES PLANS TO CONDUCT  
 A TERRORIST OPERATION INVOLVING THE USE  
 OF HIGH EXPLOSIVES

The effect is startling. In the original document (Fig. 4), there is the capitalized phrase, and underneath, two long empty rectangles (sometimes government redactions are black blocks, and sometimes – in ink-saving mode – white shapes with black outlines) that obliterate the contents of the rest of the page. Holzer redacts these redactions, transforming the empty white columns of the original into abstract blocks of color, the material abstraction of the painting overlaid onto the abstract logic of bureaucracy.

After nearly a decade of looking at these documents and struggling to find sense amid the redactions, I feel like I am encountering them again for the first time, though I am in a gallery, and in front of me is a linen canvas.

### 3.

In one of her Redaction Paintings, *Samarra Bridge Incident* *deep red*, an inquiry into military abuses in Iraq is printed in red, and the redacted text becomes childish blocks of orange. In *JAW BROKEN BROWN* (Fig. 5), parts of the canvas are black, and elsewhere it has an almost metallic sheen that makes it difficult to read the words – the canvas here reproduces in material form some of the difficulties faced by researchers in acquiring these documents and making sense of them; seeing clearly and truthfully, these paintings remind you, takes effort.

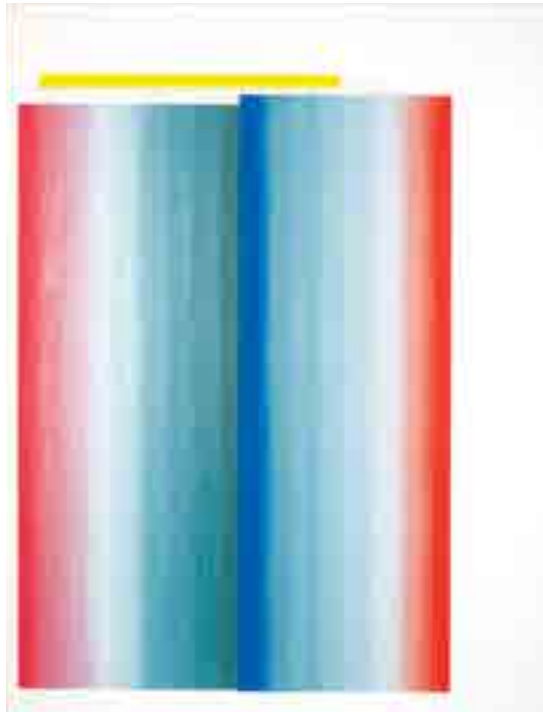


Figure 3. *PRESENTLY IN THE UNITED STATES*, 2014.



Figure 4. Title excised, excerpt from a CIA report on potential terrorist activity in the United States, 2001.

It is these early Redaction Paintings that seem closest in spirit to Warhol's work. In 1963–64, Warhol made a series of silkscreen paintings from Charles Moore's photographs of civil rights protests in Alabama, shot for *Life* magazine. In one of Moore's original images, a police dog rips the pant leg from a demonstrator. The lines of the composition focus the viewer on the singular moment of violence. In Warhol's 1963 silkscreen version, *Race Riot*, distinctions leak away. The dog is as white as the background, and the photograph's immediate violence recedes into an abstract geometry of black and white; the moment is reworked in terms of its structural conditions. The police dog biting the protestor is unsettling, *Race Riot* suggests, not simply because of the immediate violence suggested by the image, but because this violence is normal, part of a broader political economy of structural and racial violence that endures long after the wound left by a bite has healed.

In Holzer's Redaction Paintings, violence is also mediated via silkscreens, but the calculus is different. The immediate violence of Moore's images is almost too visible, whereas that of the redacted documents is almost invisible. If Warhol's work is a commentary on a media landscape saturated by images, Holzer's series looks at a world in which the problem is not simply uncovering structural violence, but being able to see it, even when it is right in front of us. In turning

the words of the redacted documents into images, Holzer points to a problem with the way we have previously seen these files.

The first problem: we haven't. The redacted documents exist in the public realm, and the public does not see them. There is a redacted hand (Fig. 6), as large as life, and it might as well be invisible. Addressed to the public, the documents are consigned to a dead letter office. The public sphere does not have a forwarding address. Jenny Holzer would prefer not to accept this state of affairs.

For many looking at Holzer's paintings, this is the first time that they will see redacted documents. Most of the American public doesn't read the files; at best, it reads about them in the newspaper. We shake our heads in disgust at what these pages reveal and then go about our day: there are too many pages, too many leaks, and too much to do. Though the documents are publicly available, they might as well be written in code. Spending days reading them is a task left to the specialist. The rest of us wait for television's talking heads to explain what they mean. After a week, the news cycle moves on, and so do we. (And doesn't this seem perfectly reasonable? What would one do with these documents? What could one possibly say that might have any effect on American political life? How could one even work out what to say about them?)



Figure 5. *JAW BROKEN BROWN*, 2006.

In journalistic accounts of the war on terror, the documents are digested and reproduced as sources of information from which facts are obtained, just as they would be from an interview. In media coverage, the redactions of the redacted documents don't exist, just as the government would want. Journalists have to write about content, not absences, and writing about the redactions themselves is outside their purview. Holzer's paintings insist that these documents have a content that is not reducible to information: she is letting the absences exist, and insisting that we look at them.

Some critics have reacted to this strategy with anger. A *New York Times* review of the Endgame series claimed that "It is hard to enjoy fine art in a fancy gallery when you are reminded that people are suffering elsewhere."<sup>2</sup> Enough with politics! Leave me to my fine art! The reviewer reads Holzer's paintings as "black-and-white righteousness" – a tired attempt to bring politics into art, to which he responds: Enough already, the media has gone through the documents. We know the facts and there is nothing more to add.

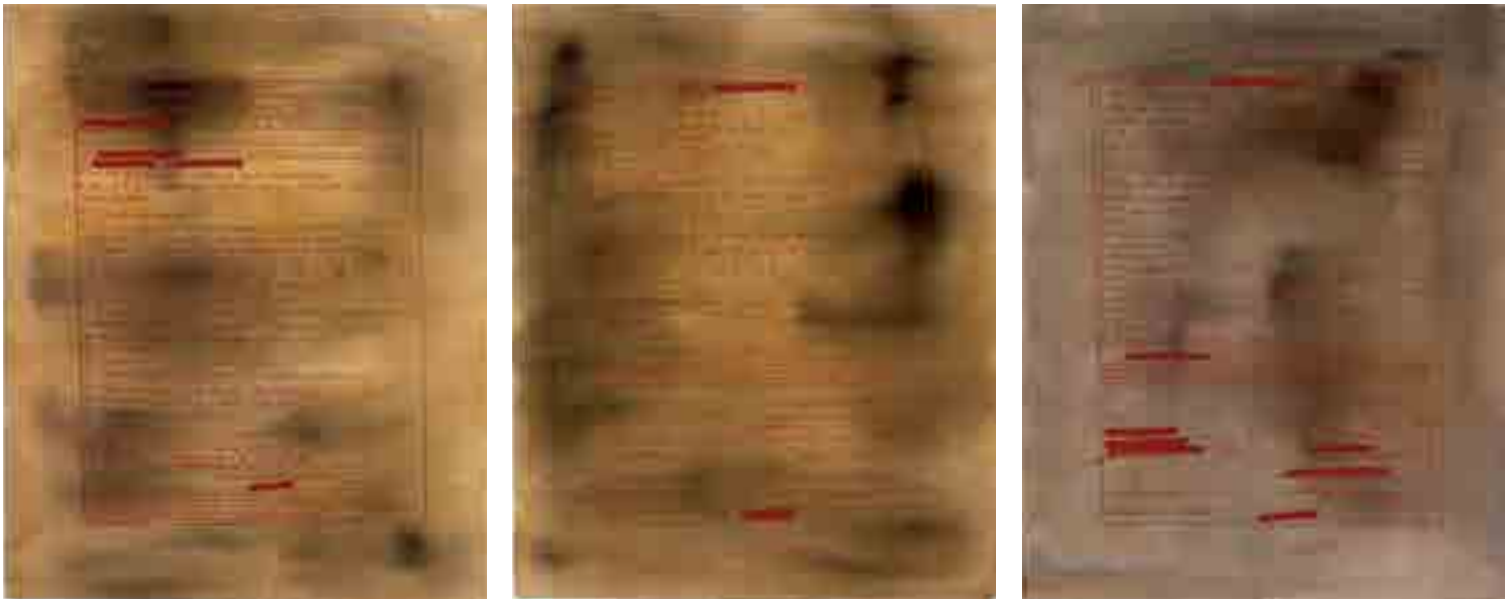
It isn't information that Holzer wants to give us: that the documents are only seen as sources of information is the problem to which the paintings call attention. We can't discard the paintings as we might yesterday's newspaper. Their scale arrests us. Here is the policy of the American government, seen as if under a microscope, rendered enormous and unfamiliar.

Looking at the documents as paintings draws attention to our own indifference. The redactions are

the double of our inattentiveness. It is this that made the documents invisible, before the government darkened their pages. The real annoyance being expressed in the *New York Times* review is that we are forced to look. What could otherwise be ignored, or read about in a newspaper article and duly digested, here becomes unavoidable. In Holzer's work, documents we cannot see are made visible in the space of the gallery, but without a definite content; there is nothing in these paintings that tells you what to think about them. They simply ask that you stop, and look.

#### 4.

Holzer's paintings contain a tension between medium and content. What happens to the words of the redacted documents if they are placed in a different medium and become images? The paintings take up the inverse position to that of the U.S. government, which insists that images – despite appearances – are nothing but content. Such an attitude is exemplified by the government's response to the ACLU's decade-long struggle to force the disclosure of approximately 2,100 images showing the abuse of prisoners in Afghanistan and Iraq. The government's claim is that we have already seen some of these images, from Abu Ghraib, and the legal repercussions have already been felt. We know everything we need to know. Nothing to see here. Move along. Its position on the release of the long-delayed Senate Intelligence Committee report on torture is analogous: Bad things happened. They *happened*. We already know. The presentation



of these documents as information allows the facts within them to be written in the past tense.

Yet people linger in front of Holzer's paintings, despite government assurances that the stories of the paintings belong to the past. It is striking that so many of the people visiting her exhibitions react to her paintings as if they were the documents themselves. Discussions around the canvases are as often about the details of the U.S. detention program as they are about the colors Holzer has chosen. Through transforming the documents into painting, the viewer is offered the possibility of experiencing the content of the documents as such, away from media debates about whether waterboarding is *really* torture.

It is important to be precise about what one encounters in these paintings. No one goes to an art gallery to connect the dots in their understanding of the war on terror. Holzer's paintings are not a total history, and the documents she paints are fragments of an already redacted record. Rather, what one encounters, when staring at the paintings, is the form of the documents. The stories that the media publish are horrifying but comprehensible. An arrest. Detention. Torture. The subjects have names. Reasons for their detention are evaluated. There is a quote from the White House spokesperson. Etc.

Holzer ruptures these narratives by letting the documents speak. In some, names are redacted, while in others, only lines of speech remain, cut away from any recognizable subject. The characters of the documents are often unknown and act out scenes that

are variously painful, terrifying, and absurd, but that have no referent. Looking at Holzer's paintings, I was forced to come to terms with these haunting citations, and would scramble to contextualize them and give names and places to the scenes unfolding on the canvas. It was a mistaken search. Context dulls the impact. One's work, in front of the paintings, is to be an absurdist journalist. To find meaning and significance in the words, but without reference.

The real characters of the paintings are the documents themselves. Holzer cites their sentences, and in so doing, decontextualizes them, allowing the viewer to encounter them on their own terms, outside a media narrative that reduces the stories of the detainees to figures in the calculus of national security. There, on the page, is the sentence (Fig. 7): "They came to the pass & we gave them chi We were arrested." It is these details that strike me, again and again. The presentation of these citations as images forced me to confront the lives suggested by the canvases, written between the words, and written out of the government's statements.

In many of the documents represented in the Redaction Paintings, one struggles to find a meaning underneath the seemingly endless bureaucratic details of torture. Gazing at the paintings, without the media's explanatory voice beside me, the strangest fact about the U.S. torture program becomes apparent: it often had no end. Time and again in these documents, the overall goal seems uncertain. Actions proceed as if the violence itself is an end, and political



Figure 6. *Big Hands yellow white*, 2006.



justifications and intelligence-gathering goals are merely post-facto rationalization. It is the nature of this violence that is occluded in media accounts and that is on display in these paintings.

The documents shown in the Redaction Paintings are also eerily familiar. Strip away the language of torture (something often achieved by the redactions themselves), and many of these documents seem like conventional products of bureaucracy: the results of protocols established and emails sent. One of the unnerving conclusions one reaches is how humdrum these documents can be. In 2014, I wrote a grammar of redaction, which analyzes some of the logics that emerge from the redactions themselves – the way these documents take on a life of their own. Holzer’s work allows you to encounter some of that grammar, and in so doing, witness some of the unintended comedy of this secret world. In *He Did Not See Any Americans blue* (Fig. 8), the viewer is confronted with an entirely redacted page except for the phrase “He did hear planes flying overhead,” and just below “He did not see any Americans.”

Holzer’s paintings convey the world of the redacted documents better than any journalistic interpretation of their significance. The documents have a sense aside from their putative context. Denuded of explanatory content, the paintings force one up against the words on the page.

5.

The *New York Times* reviewer quoted above said that he didn’t like to be reminded of people suffering “elsewhere” – as if Guantanamo had no relation to America and was a question of CNN and agonized feelings over a TV dinner. In a world saturated with images of suffering, to which we have, so the cliché goes, become numbed, this response raises a serious question: How does one get close to contemporary conflict?

Holzer’s Redaction Paintings reminded me of An-My Lê’s 29 Palms photographs. In 2003, having been refused access to Iraq as an embedded photographer, Lê went to a marine base in California. She took epic landscape photographs in a Mojave Desert rendered as a film set. Nothing seems real, and indeed for the marines, little was real; you see them dressing up as Iraqi police officers and writing anti-American graffiti onto the walls of a fake Baghdad, mimetically acting out the hatred they will soon invite. The American war without casualties was imagined at training bases and fought with jets and missiles, when it was not fought behind redacted documents and closed doors. How are we to get close to such a war? An intense proximity to suffering seems unavailable to us; the problem we face is precisely one of distance. Lê’s photographs give one possible answer: show the fantasy underlying the violence (also a product of

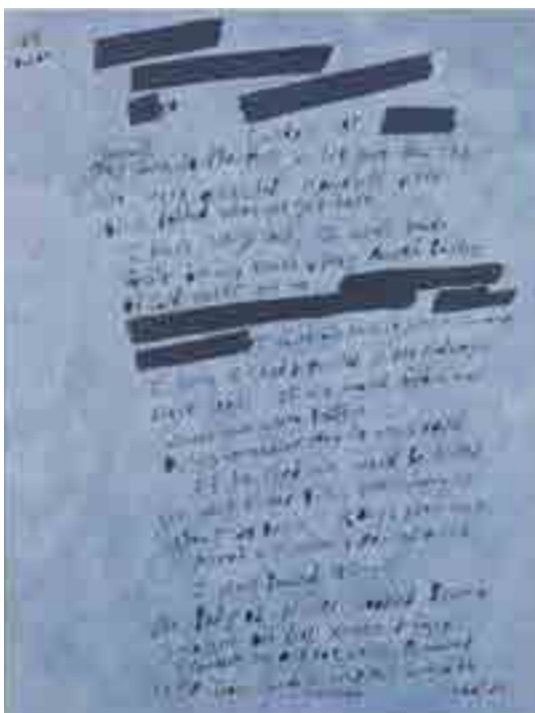


Figure 7. *cold water*, 2013.

distance) – the soldiers preparing to destroy their own demons, and much else besides.

The Redaction Paintings offer another answer. They draw your attention not simply to the details of the U.S. war on terror, but to the structural and political conditions that made it possible. The redactions of the government documents take on additional weight when painted – they become visible, not as determinate content, but as absences. In the Redaction Paintings, the black spaces proliferate, now as blue, green, and red marks. These spaces, which mark out a zone of legal impunity and national security, structure the words around them. Looking at the paintings, the way I read the documents as a journalist was reversed. I stopped looking for words amid the black and started looking at the redactions themselves. It becomes clear, staring at these paintings, that the absences are weapons of war: legal and bureaucratic means of continuing the war on terror. Holzer's paintings, then, are not reports from the battlefield, not sketches of breathless intensity made next to the scene of the fight. Instead, they are forensic analyses of one of the weapons with which the war is fought: the structure of the military and intelligence bureaucracies, and the legal impunity that veils their actions in shadow.

*Redaction Paintings*, the catalogue for Holzer's 2006 exhibition *Archive*, explores the history of these weapons. Rather than – like some hackneyed history of

the last fourteen years – beginning with 2001, Holzer starts with a document from December 3, 1990. It begins: "I appreciate the opportunity to comment on Duane Andrews' proposal to strengthen Defense intelligence and to reorganize the Defense Intelligence Agency." The next few pages are redacted, as if the black blocks were merely a silent commentary on yet another boring bureaucratic meeting. Then, right at the end of the document, we learn that Colin Powell is its author.

Another early document in the book is a letter to William Casey, then director of the CIA, about funding for the contras in Nicaragua. This isn't a paranoid history that sees the hand of American imperialism behind all the world's ills. Rather, Holzer's choice of documents decenters our history of the last ten years and suggests a longer timeline. The history that Holzer presents is one in which U.S. military campaigns abroad have always been written in black spaces, by a power that does not need to give reasons for its actions. State security is always invoked as a justification for these redactions, but it is a justification that knows no limit, for the reason state security is invoked is of course redacted, unknowable and unverifiable.

6.

Much of this essay has focused on the Redaction Paintings. In the last five years, Holzer's approach

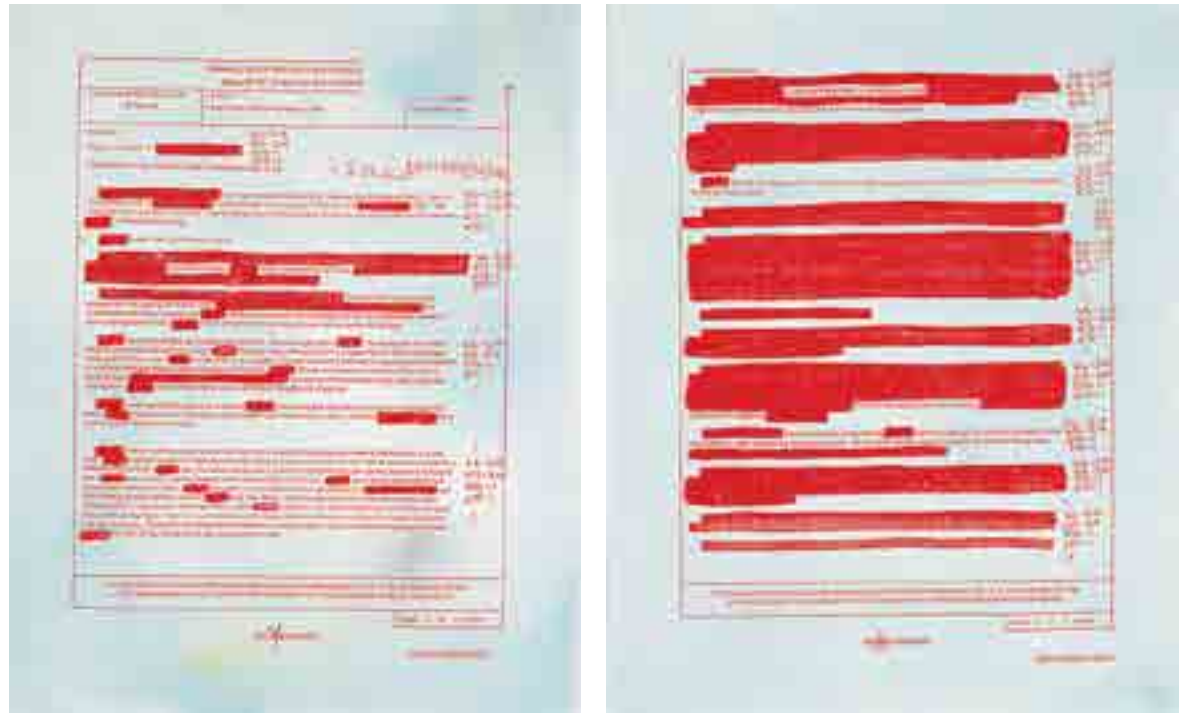


Figure 8. *He Did Not See Any Americans blue*, 2006.

to the redacted documents has changed. Her earlier work focused on the economy of information: the way these documents get assimilated into media narratives and then discarded. In the Endgame series, and then in the Dust Paintings, Holzer's work becomes more stridently material, as if simply reproducing the documents were no longer sufficient, and she needed to actively transform them in order to continue looking. Rather than make silkscreens, Holzer began painting the documents, and the focus of her work shifted to interrogation reports and the Afghan and Iraqi voices to be found in them. Many of the Dust Paintings take as their material pages of testimony from the Afghan prisoners who were interrogated as part of the U.S. Army's investigation into the torture of the Afghan prisoners mentioned at the beginning of this essay. The colors of the canvases evoke these conditions: black holes, blue ice. In so doing, the nonfigural elements of the painting situate the words of the documents, which would otherwise hang, abstract and decontextualized, on sparse white pages. They force me to imagine the prisoners.

The paintings are often very beautiful. In some of them, the plain white sheets of government reports are transformed into pale, dense surfaces, and the letters are dark and heavy, as if chiseled into granite. In others, the painted backgrounds are heavy, but the letters are in white, as if Holzer were writing with light.

In the Dust Paintings, it is the materiality of the paint that forces us to confront the words: to peer at them, squinting, and face the results of the abstractions of the U.S. military and the CIA. This is a negative equation; the abstraction of the artwork, placed against the abstraction of the torturer's formulas, allows us to arrive at concreteness: the interrogated voice – outside of any putative justifications and government statements – on the canvas in front of us.

The sympathetic passage that the viewer goes through when looking at these paintings has a resonance with Holzer's own passage. These are the first paintings she has made since art school. Looking at them, I can imagine what it must be like to live with these documents for such a long time, and to spend so long internalizing them, as one writes them out onto canvas, and writes them out of the world of the media cycle, not as a protest, or as a commentary on the contemporary, but as an ethical response to what they contain.

She turns words into images so that we can read them.





#### REFERENCES

1. There are a number of reasons that the government can either deny a FOIA request in full or else redact elements of a document. Most of the criteria for redaction are related to the national security risk posed by exposure of information contained in the documents, the danger presented to a private individual by publication of records related to them, or the necessity of concealing ongoing covert activities. None of these criteria is able to explain the way the words form a sentence in "Other Document #131." See Joshua Craze, *A Grammar of Redaction* (New York: New Museum, 2014), 4.
2. Ken Johnson, "Jenny Holzer: 'Endgame,'" *New York Times*, March 15, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/16/arts/design/jenny-holzer-endgame.html>.

#### AUTHOR BIO

Joshua Craze is a writer. He was a 2014 UNESCO-Aschberg laureate in creative writing and is currently an assistant professor at the University of Chicago. In 2014, as part of the New Museum's Temporary Center for Translation, he exhibited a grammar of redaction, which analyzes the aesthetic logic of redacted documents from the American war on terror. An excerpt from the grammar is also forthcoming in the edited volume *Archival Dissonance: Knowledge Production and Contemporary Art* (I.B. Tauris/Ibraaz, 2015). You can read the grammar here: <http://www.joshuacraze.com/exhibitions>.