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Troy Brauntuch, *Untitled (Sleeping)*, 1978.
C-print, 16 1/4 x 16 1/4 in. (41 x 41 cm). Private collection (artwork © Troy Brauntuch, provided by Petzel Gallery, New York)

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The Sleeping Man

In 1979, Troy Brauntuch (b. 1954) held his debut solo show at The Kitchen in Chelsea, New York. Within the walls of the gallery, he displayed a series of works which appropriated, repeated, and fragmented the same image of the back of a head. At the very entrance to the gallery was a huge, sixteen-by-sixteen-inch black and white image of the head, tightly cropped, wearing a cap that was almost like a helmet.

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Hitler Asleep in the Mercedes

At the far end of the gallery space was a long screenprint, which contained two images: on the left side was a photograph of an open-top Mercedes being driven through the countryside, with a uniformed driver and a man bent over in the passenger seat. On the right side, Brauntuch had blown up and highlighted a church which was visible in the background of the photograph. Bathed in a demonic red field, the screenprint was flanked by two tall black wings, white verticals shooting up from the bottom.

Finally, on another wall was a triptych of architectural designs alongside two large reproductions of drawings of figures. There were no labels on the wall and no catalog to help people identify these images.

The critic Jeanne Silverthorne would later write at length for *Artforum* on these works, without being able to identify their subjects. She ruminated that "looking so hard generates doubts about what is seen; as in recalled dreams, the more intense our pursuit of a scene, the farther it recedes."¹ Brauntuch wanted his audience to be disoriented, cast adrift amongst the signs of the past. The old-fashioned clothes, the Mercedes badge on the bonnet of the automobile, the texture of the images themselves all seemed to imply that they belonged to the 1920s or 1930s, but there was no clue to reveal that the sleeping man was, in fact, Adolf Hitler. Armed with this knowledge, the viewer's understanding of the installation was completely transformed, even though the images themselves remained the same.

The image of Hitler asleep in his Mercedes had been taken by his official photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann (1885–1957), in 1932; Brauntuch had found it reproduced in *Inside the Third Reich*, the autobiography of Albert Speer (1905–1981), published in English in 1970.² The architectural plans and the drawings were by Hitler; the panels streaked with white were blown-up images of the light displays at the Nuremberg rallies. The whole installation staged the imagery and aesthetics of Nazism without naming it. Perhaps some in the audience would have recognized Hitler asleep, as Speer's book had been a bestseller, but others, like Silverthorne, could only be enveloped in confusion.³

Brauntuch, part of the Pictures Generation of artists in New York in the late 1970s and early eighties, was compulsively drawn to images representing or created by Nazis, without ever explicitly identifying his subject matter. He shared this fascination with Robert Longo (b. 1953), who helped arrange Brauntuch's exhibition at The Kitchen, and Jack Goldstein (1945–2003), who would go on to paint B-17s bombing German cities.⁴ Fascist imagery was an important part of the early wave of postmodernist art, with Brauntuch's 1979 show the most extended meditation on the representation of Hitler himself. How did his appropriation create a postmodern fascist aesthetic? This critical question interrogates the role of fascism in 1970s America. Brauntuch's exhibition used these fragmentary pictures to create a controlled atmosphere which was rooted in the representational tactics of fascism itself.

I would like to thank Alexander Nemerov for provoking my initial investigation into the tangled, intertwined images created by Hoffmann and Brauntuch. Amir Eshel and David Peters Corbett both provided invaluable opportunities to present earlier versions of this article at the Contemporary colloquium at Stanford University and at the Centre for American Art at the Courtauld Institute of Art, respectively. Finally, the comments and challenges from the two anonymous peer reviewers have been pivotal to strengthening the article's argument. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

1. Jeanne Silverthorne, review of *Troy Brauntuch*, Mary Boone Gallery, New York, *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (September 1982): 76.

2. Douglas Eklund, "Troy Brauntuch: The Early Work in Context," in *Troy Brauntuch*, ed. Lionel Bovier (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2010), 57; Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970).

3. Holger H. Hervig, review of *Albert Speer: The End of a Myth*, by Matthias Schmidt, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, *Military Affairs* 51, no. 2 (April 1987): 102.

4. Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 233.

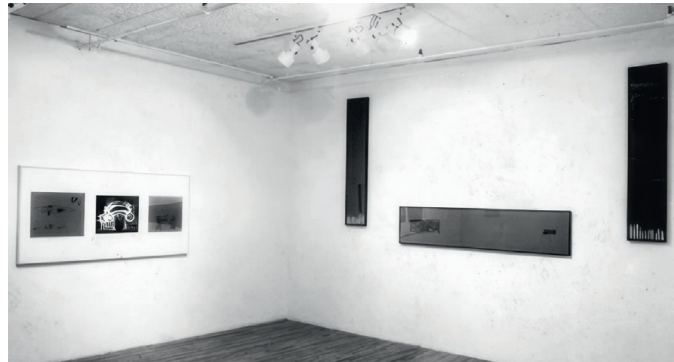
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Troy Brauntuch, *Untitled (Mercedes)*, 1978. C-prints, three parts: 72 x 95 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (182.9 x 243.8 cm). Private collection. (artwork © Troy Brauntuch, provided by Petzel Gallery, New York)

Troy Brauntuch, 1 2 3 (*Opera, Staircase, Tank*), 1977, and *Untitled (Mercedes)*, 1978. installation view, The Kitchen, New York, 1979 (artworks © Troy Brauntuch, photograph provided by Petzel Gallery, New York)



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Heinrich Hoffmann, *Auf der Fahrt*, 1932, photogravure, as published in Hoffmann, *Hitler wie ihn keiner kennt: 100 Bild-Dokumente aus dem Leben des Führers*, Berlin: Zeitgeschichte, [1933], 61 (photograph by the author)

The original photograph of Hitler asleep in his Mercedes defies how Hitler was usually portrayed: he is unrecognizable, not presented as a leader, and is shown as lost to the world. Brauntuch pounced upon the confusion generated by this singular image in order to immerse the audience in an installation where the photograph appeared both familiar and distorted. To understand what Brauntuch did at The Kitchen, I will adopt Roland Barthes's analysis of photography in order to understand the pull of Hoffmann's photograph and how Brauntuch homed in on its potency, a framework all the more appropriate considering Barthes's influence on writers and artists in 1970s America.⁵ All that Brauntuch purposely left out of his exhibition will have to be excavated: first, I will identify the original contexts of Hoffmann's photograph, and how it was used in Nazi photobooks in the early 1930s. I will then show how Albert Speer's reprinting of this image in 1969 influenced Brauntuch, before finally developing a reading of The Kitchen show, which will be contextualized in relation to the role that Nazism played in the United States during the 1970s as well as the ways that postmodern appropriation, meant to emphasize the distance of the image, could be used to restage the ravishing allure of fascism itself.

The Photographer

How can the viewer know that this is actually Hitler? And if it is, that he is in fact asleep, instead of perhaps just bending over? A close examination of the photograph shows it to be rich in details but still frustratingly ambiguous. The photographer sat in the back of the open-top Mercedes and took his medium-format camera and,

5. Margaret Iversen, "Pictures Without Theory," review of *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, by Douglas Eklund, *Art Journal* 69, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 128.

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aligning it with the leading edge of the seat, shot the driver and the passenger, who both appear to have been unaware that they were being photographed.

The driver is wearing a greatcoat, cap, and leather gloves; he leans back, relaxed but alert. Up ahead, on the brow of a hill, there's an onion-domed church. A vast, lowering sky takes up half of the image, showing how exposed these figures are to the elements, to the rain and wind.

The passenger slouches over. The helmetlike driving cap depersonalizes him while its brim cuts into the Mercedes badge on the bonnet, a three-pointed star enclosed in a circle, emblematic of German automobile manufacturing. The photograph promises intimacy—couldn't one just reach out and touch this man's shoulder?—while withholding knowledge.

The photograph resides in Munich's Bavarian State Library, in the Hoffmann Photo Archive, where it is identified only as "Adolf Hitler in civilian clothing"⁶ The library acquired this archive in 1993 from Hoffmann's son. Following the Nuremberg trials, Hoffmann spent five years in prison for war profiteering (he had made a specialty of dealing in art stolen from Jewish families and selling it to senior Nazis); during his incarceration, he had been put to work archiving his vast photographic output of 2.5 million photographs.⁷ This collection then went to the US National Archives and Records Administration but somehow, under circumstances which are still unclear, he hid another portion of his archive which, after he died in 1957, went to his son, Heinrich Hoffmann Jr., who successfully commercialized it as the "Heinrich Hoffmann Contemporary History Archive" and charged licensing fees from publishers and filmmakers until the Bavarian State Library purchased it.⁸

So Hoffmann's own archive identifies the man as Hitler, but it was the publication of the photograph in March 1932 which presented Hitler as asleep.⁹ In the photobook *Hitler wie ihn keiner kennt: 100 Bild-Dokumente aus dem Leben des Führers* (The Hitler nobody knows: 100 pictorial documents from the life of the leader), the image was given its own page, along with the caption:

On the ride. The Führer sometimes travels overnight from meeting to meeting. As kilometer after kilometer is covered, he sleeps, exhausted from the exertions of a huge rally.¹⁰

Hitler's disappearance into another world is framed as showing his commitment to the Nazi cause. In spring 1932, he was campaigning in the presidential election and the party had decided for the first time to capitalize on Hitler's private life. Prior to 1933, the Nazi Party "did not produce radio, film or phonograph recordings" of Hitler; people either saw his image in newspapers and magazines (invariably taken by Hoffmann) or witnessed him personally at a rally.¹¹ *Hitler wie ihn keiner kennt* was part of a more sophisticated media strategy which attempted to sidestep a recent scandal in which Hitler's half-niece Geli Raubal had been found dead in his Munich flat the previous autumn.

Hoffmann's photobook presents Hitler as a respectable bourgeois man, at ease amongst ordinary Germans; a man who, when he is not organizing a political movement, spends his time in the countryside, going on picnics and hikes.¹² The frequent photographs of him being driven in his Mercedes attest to his modernity, to being constantly on the move, while the superficially candid nature of Hoffmann's shots promises an intimacy that is constantly staged throughout

6. See "Gruppenbild (von hinten; mit Lederkappe; in e. offenen PKW Mercedes; schlafend; auf dem Beifahrersitz; Landstraße; im Hintergrund Kirche)," Fotoarchiv Hoffmann, F131, Bildarchiv, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich, <https://bildarchiv.bsb-muenchen.de/metaopac/search?id=bildarchiv25471&View=bildarchiv>.

7. See Heinrich Hoffmann, *Hitler was my Friend: The Memoirs of Hitler's Photographer*, trans. R. H. Stevens (Barnsley, UK: Frontline, 2011), 182; and Jochen von Lang, *Adolf Hitler: Faces of a Dictator; Photographs from the Heinrich Hoffmann Archives*, [translator unknown] (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), v.

8. Christina Irrgang, *Hitlers Fotograf: Heinrich Hoffmann und die nationalsozialistische Bildpolitik* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020), 181–82.

9. Despina Stratigakos, *Hitler at Home* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 23.

10. The original caption reads: "Auf der Fahrt. Von Versammlung zu Versammlung fährt der Führer manchmal Nächte hindurch. Während Kilometer auf Kilometer überwunden wird, schläft er dann erschöpft von den Anstrengungen einer Riesenkundgebung." See Heinrich Hoffmann, *Hitler wie ihn keiner kennt: 100 Bild-Dokumente aus dem Leben des Führers* (Berlin: Zeitgeschichte, [1933]), 61.

11. David Bathrick, "Cinematic Remaskings of Hitler: From Riefenstahl to Chaplin," in *Unmasking Hitler: Cultural Representations of Hitler from the Weimar Republic to the Present*, ed. Klaus L. Berghahn and Jost Hermand (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), 148.

12. Stratigakos, *Hitler at Home*, 150–51.

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Heinrich Hoffmann, *Auf der Fahrt*, 1932, photogravure, as published in Hoffmann, *Hitler Wie ihn Keiner Kennt: 100 Bilddokumente aus dem Leben des Führers* (Munich: Heinrich Hoffmann, [ca. 1942–43], 77 (photograph by the author)

the book. This tension between modernity and tradition, something the Nazi Party aimed to transcend through the elevation of a charismatic leader, is underlined by an early spread of images. The beginning of the book suggests a family photograph album, with Hitler's birth announcement "pasted" in, while the array of photographs from his childhood is suggestive of a cinematic montage.¹³

The book was a huge success, selling approximately 448,000 copies by 1942.¹⁴ It set the tone of how Hitler's private life would be subsequently portrayed in Hoffmann's later photobooks, which numbered over sixty by 1945.¹⁵ Rudolf Herz has argued that such books have continued to shape "the collective image memory" of Hitler.¹⁶ As such, the image of Hitler sleeping belongs to the significant tapestry of photographs which cemented his visual representation, even though it stands apart from his other portrayals in the book (the few other images in the book which show him from behind represent him in silhouette giving a Nazi salute from a balcony, walking down a grassy meadow, or again in his automobile, at a distance from Hoffmann's camera). Hoffmann's caption to the photograph attempts to neutralize the alterity of the image by arguing it demonstrates Hitler's dedication to his political campaign, but nonetheless the Nazi leader is shown dormant and unrecognizable, his head bent down, appearing strange and slightly ridiculous at the same time.

Hitler wie ihn keiner kennt went through multiple editions, with Hoffmann removing photographs of Nazis who had fallen out of favor with each iteration. Images of Ernst Röhm, the head of the paramilitary *Sturmabteilung* (SA) murdered on Hitler's orders in 1934, and of Rudolf Hess, the deputy führer who undertook

13. Ibid., 151; and Irrgang, *Hitlers Fotograf*, 108.

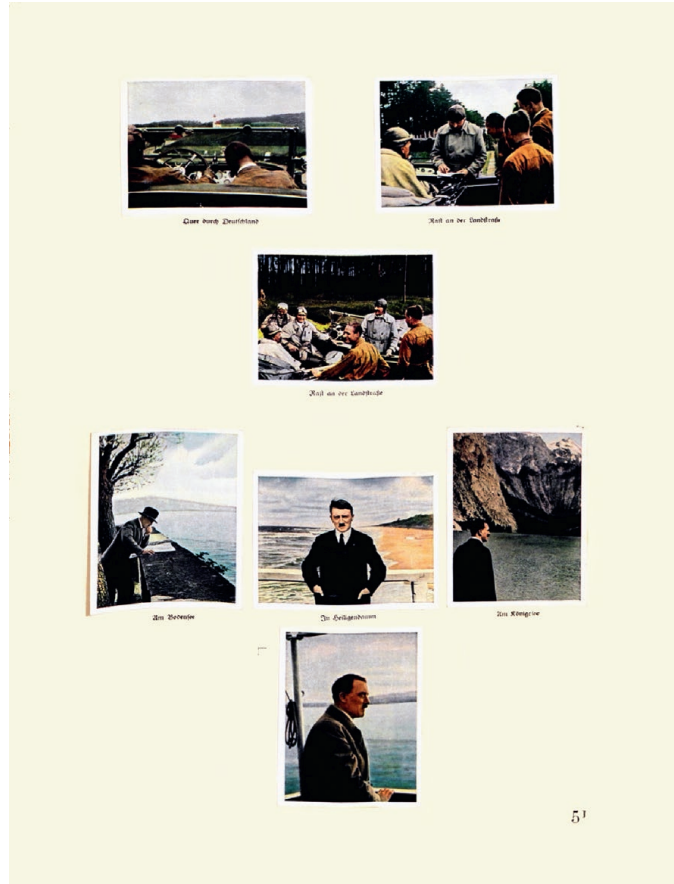
14. Irrgang, *Hitlers Fotograf*, 104, 104n100.

15. Ibid., 88.

16. Rudolf Herz, *Hoffmann & Hitler: Fotografie als Medium des Führer-Mythos* (Munich: Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1994), 13.; and Irrgang, *Hitlers Fotograf*, 88.

17. Ibid., 125.

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Heinrich Hoffmann, spread of hand-colored photogravures, ca. 1932, as published in Hoffmann and Leopold von Schenkendorf, *Kampf um's Dritte Reich: Eine historische Bilderfolge*, Altona-Bahrenfeld: Cigaretten-Bilderdienst, 1933. 51 (photograph by the author)

a quixotic flight to Scotland in 1941, were excised in later editions.¹⁷ The image of a sleeping Hitler remained, however, and always with its own page—although a comparison between an edition from 1933 and one from 1942–43, shows that Hoffmann continued to adjust how it was printed. The earlier version placed the image in an unusual dark grey frame, with the photograph printed in sepia, the tones carefully gradated across the surface. The later version dispensed with the frame and was enlarged, reaching up to the gutter of the book. Hoffmann slightly cropped the photograph and printed it in more high contrast black and white, with the image becoming grainier and more immediate, like a newsprint photograph. Hoffmann's practice testifies to Barthes's claim that "the press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic, or ideological norms."¹⁸ The photographic negative becomes a starting point for a potentially infinite series of manipulations, molding the image until it becomes a vessel for a political message.

18. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," trans. Stephen Heath, in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 198.

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Heinrich Hoffmann, *Quer durch Deutschland*, 1932, hand-colored photograph, as published in Hoffmann and Leopold von Schenkendorf, *Kampf um's Dritte Reich: Eine historische Bilderfolge*, Altona-Bahrenfeld: Cigaretten-Bilderdienst, 1933, 51 (photograph by the author)

The most radical revision of the photograph however, was in the 1933 photobook *Kampf um's Dritte Reich: Eine historische Bilderfolge* (The battle for the Third Reich: A historical sequence of images), released to mark Hitler becoming chancellor in January of that year. This meant its production was even more luxurious than usual, with the photographs hand colored. Halfway through the book there is a page of intimate shots of Hitler, standing in front of a lake and talking to men around his car. There, in the upper left-hand corner of the page, is a cropped and colored version of the sleeping Hitler, this time captioned "Across Germany".¹⁹ The Mercedes badge is hard to make out on the page, while only the red tint to the church's roof and tower makes its structure legible. The photograph is much reduced and cropped from being a square image to being a wide-angle photograph, as if taking its cue from the windscreen. Barthes argued that images of politicians create "a physical climate," a style of life that it is hoped the bourgeois viewer will identify with.²⁰ Hence, *Kampf um's Dritte Reich* shows Hitler communing with pastoral Germany, modelling a politics of the land without having to make explicit his ideological program. The photographic effigy of Hitler across this particular page is meant to be recognizable, his habits and pleasures intended to be familiar to middle-class Germans, showing, as Barthes put it, "the voter his own likeness, but clarified, exalted, superbly elevated into a type."²¹ Hitler, through Hoffmann's lens, is transformed into the archetypal German.

Hitler knew of the importance of visual imagery to his political profile, often selecting the photographs Hoffmann could publish.²² They were almost coeditors

19. The original caption reads: "Quer durch Deutschland". See Heinrich Hoffmann and Leopold von Schenkendorf, *Kampf um's Dritte Reich: Eine historische Bilderfolge* (Altona-Bahrenfeld: Cigaretten-Bilderdienst, 1933), 51.

20. Roland Barthes, "Photography and Electoral Appeal," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday, 1972), 91.

21. Ibid.

22. Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 83.

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of these photobooks, which means that they both found the photograph of him asleep in the automobile resonant in some way. Both captions to the photograph emphasize Hitler’s continued motion; he himself relished the experience of speed promised by the Mercedes, telling Albert Speer that

[SS officer Julius] Schreck was the best driver you can imagine, and our supercharger is good for over a hundred. We always drove very fast. . . . What fun we had teasing the big American cars. We kept right behind them until they tried to lose us. Those Americans are junk compared to a Mercedes. Their motor couldn’t take it; after a while it would overheat, and they’d have to pull over to the side of the road, looking glum.²³

Hitler’s delight in overtaking American-made cars becomes a crude analogy for the superiority of Nazi Germany’s technology over its global rivals. Hoffmann would sometimes act as his driver in lieu of Schreck (who died in 1936), while Hitler would always sit in the passenger seat, all the better to experience the thrill of the road.²⁴

The implied intimacy of the photograph is also part of the appeal: the reader of one of these photobooks—particularly *Hitler wie ihn keiner kennt*, where the image is printed on a large scale—is placed in Hoffmann’s position as friend and photographer, sitting just behind the dozing Hitler. He is presented, as Christina Irrgang has argued, in the tradition of the nineteenth-century “citizen king,” whose way of life was meant to be reflective of the people they ruled over.²⁵ If at the time this made the image legible to Hoffmann’s readers, then it would be in the postwar era where the photograph would be transformed by two interventions, one from Speer, and the other by Brauntuch.

Fascism in Pictures

The photograph of Hitler asleep in the Mercedes disappeared from view for decades. The photobooks could be tracked down in research libraries and the photograph was held by Heinrich Hoffmann Jr., but it did not belong to the carousel of Hitler imagery that circulated in books and on film and television in the 1950s and 1960s.

zSpeer’s presentation is essentially the same as Hoffmann’s, albeit more heavily cropped and printed in even higher-contrast black and white. The date given for the photograph—1934—is wrong, probably representing a mistake on the editor’s part, rather than Speer intentionally reframing the image to depict a newly-triumphant, sleeping führer.

The photograph is reproduced to satisfy what Roland Barthes called “those ‘details’ which constitute the very raw material of ethnological knowledge.”²⁶ Here the images answer questions the reader never knew they wanted answered: what does Hitler look like when he sleeps? How close could people get to him? What did he look like at home? Hitler had become so disembodied as a figure of spectacle that people turned to Speer’s book to remind themselves that Hitler was human, after all. This is “the return of the dead” referred to by Barthes, where Hitler’s body is resurrected in order to underline the authenticity of Speer’s memoir.²⁷ His book is all about placing the reader in the backseat besides Hoffmann. Yet images show the limits of the ability of

23. Ibid., 35–36.

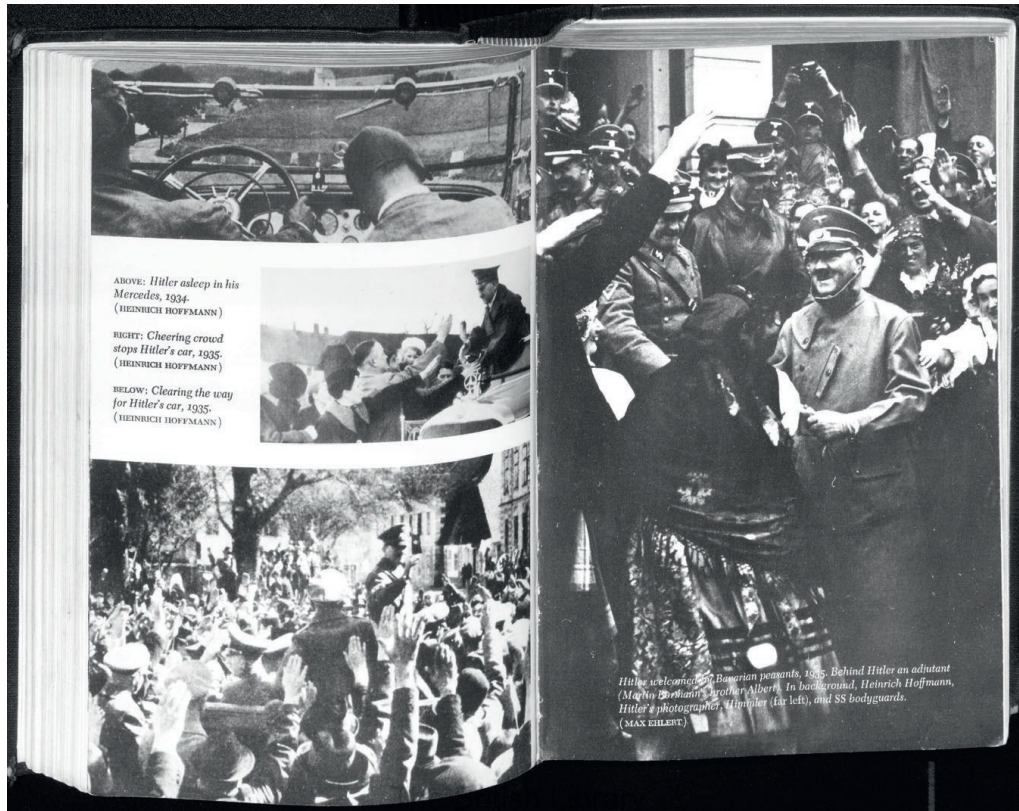
24. Ibid., 65–66.

25. Irrgang, *Hitlers Fotograf*, 65.

26. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Flamingo, 1984), 21, 28.

27. Ibid., 9.

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Heinrich Hoffmann, spread of photographs, as published in Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, New York: Macmillan, 1970, n.p. (photograph by the author)

photography to act as evidence. There are no images which definitively connect Hitler to the regime's crimes, no photograph of him at a concentration camp or with a gun in his hand.²⁸ Instead, he is photographed in his automobile or in airplanes, like a film star. Hitler keeps his distance, despite the near-constant repetition of his image.

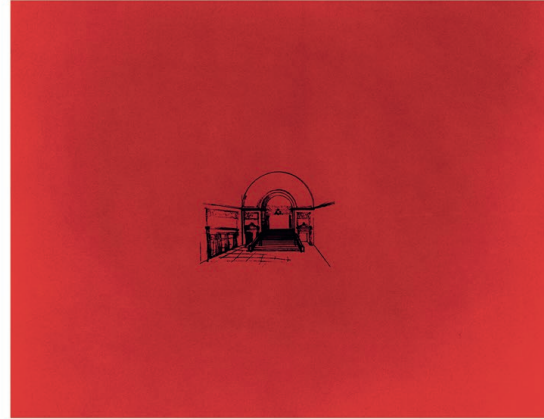
Inside the Third Reich appeared in the United States at the tail end of a decade where the Nazis had been a constant presence in books, comics, television shows and, most of all, in the cinema. Films such as *The Longest Day* (1962), *The Great Escape* (1963), and *Where Eagles Dare* (1968) represented the Allies' victory over Nazi Germany. The war was flattened into linear narratives of heroism, with individuals as the drivers of historical change.²⁹ Nazis became a straightforward shorthand for all antagonists. Stephen Farber, reviewing *The Dirty Dozen* in 1967, described the representation of German soldiers in the film as merely a "pallid, indifferent Enemy who must be exterminated,"³⁰ lacking any characterization. Instead, their insignia, uniforms, and paraphernalia symbolized their status as the nemesis, with Robert Brownjohn's title sequence for *The Night of the Generals* (1967), focusing exclusively on dislocated parts of a Nazi general's uniform, emerging out of the

28. Claudia Schmöders, "The Face That Said Nothing: Physiognomy in Hitlerism," in Berghahn and Hermand, *Unmasking Hitler*, 25.

29. Lawrence Baron, "The First Wave of American 'Holocaust' Films, 1945-1959," *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 1 (February 2010): 95.

30. Stephen Farber, review of *The Dirty Dozen*, directed by Robert Aldrich, *Film Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (Winter 1967-68): 40.

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Troy Brauntuch, 1 2 3 (Opera, Staircase, Tank), 1977, lithograph and silkscreen on paper, triptych, 47 x 37¼ x 1½ in. (119.4 x 94.6 x 3.8 cm), framed. Private collection (artwork © Troy Brauntuch, provided by Petzel Gallery, New York)

darkness. By removing the political specificity of Nazism and reducing it to a style—a German-accented English; black Schutzstaffel (SS) officer uniforms—Farber argued that cinematic Nazis became a generic invocation of an any American adversary, who could stand in for more contemporary conflicts: “the war being fought in [The Dirty Dozen] . . . , though it is called World War II, is really the Vietnam War.”³¹ Nazis were everywhere in American culture, but stripped of their historical actuality. Speer’s book promised to go “inside” the regime in its English-language title and restore the Nazis’ political specificity, but instead of revealing how Germany operated, the book presented readers with a stream of anecdotes centered on Hitler and other leading Nazis.

Troy Brauntuch grew up with these films, and was sixteen when *Inside the Third Reich* was published. He later told an interviewer that “cinema was just really amazing. So I think myself and others were sort of quite entrenched in film and image. Certainly more than art.”³² It was these second-order representations of fascist Germany which he was exposed to and which began shaping his artistic practice.

After graduating from the California Institute of the Arts in 1975, where Brauntuch was taught by the conceptual artist John Baldessari (1931–2020), he headed to New York. In 1977, he was selected by the art historian and curator Douglas Crimp to feature in the groundbreaking *Pictures* group show at Artists Space on 105 Hudson Street in Tribeca. Only twenty-three, his work was presented alongside art by Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith, who collectively established a new postmodern aesthetic, that Crimp argued showed “we only experience reality through the pictures we make of it.”³³ It was the new role of the artist to expose the structure of the image and to subvert its operation.

Brauntuch’s earliest exhibited work was obsessed with the imagery of fascist Germany. At *Pictures* he displayed 1 2 3 (Opera, Staircase, Tank) (1977), a triptych of silk-screens that showed, within an immense red field, fragments of drawings: a stage set, a vestibule, and a tank, each located in a different section of their rectangular frames, implying a larger perspectival construction.³⁴ The tank appears to be about

31. Ibid.

32. Hannah Mandel, “Troy Brauntuch’s Dark Matter,” *Interview*, May 10, 2013, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/troy-brauntuchs-dark-matter>.

33. Douglas Crimp, *Pictures: An Exhibition of the Work of Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Philip Smith*, exh. cat. (New York: Committee for the Visual Arts, 1977), 3.

34. Eklund, “Troy Brauntuch,” 56.

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to launch itself across the screen, while the arched hallway occupies the center of its composition, meaning the viewer can try to imaginatively fill in the rest of the image. There was no indication in the exhibition that these drawings were by Hitler; one had to read Crimp's catalog essay to discover their origins.³⁵ Here Brauntuch was appropriating imagery created by Hitler to create a before-and-after moment: the drawings stay the same, but the contextual knowledge transforms the viewer's experience once the original artist becomes known.

Brauntuch would have known, via Crimp, of Walter Benjamin's claim made in 1932 that in the future, "the caption [will] become the most important component of the shot."³⁶ With 1 2 3, he was testing this idea by selecting the most provocative example possible. Crimp argued that "captioning is nothing but an insistent attempt to force upon the picture a relation to the signified that it does not intrinsically have," so Brauntuch showed that even illustrations by Hitler could not be deciphered without supporting information.³⁷ They are rendered mute, the red ground overwhelming them and setting the tone of obscure violence. Peter Frank, in a contemporary review in *Artweek*, called it a demonstration of "the absolute amorality of imagery."³⁸ Yet rather than investigating the morality of fascist imagery, Brauntuch was drawn to the past as a locus of feeling and to how images could both grant and deny access to what had come before.

The aesthetics of fascism was a live question in late seventies New York, due to the resurgence of films restaging the seductive pull of fascist architecture and fashion, like *The Conformist* (1970) and *The Night Porter* (1974). This was joined by the critical rehabilitation of Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler's favored filmmaker, and the violent campaign of the Red Army Faction (RAF) in West Germany against what it claimed was a continuing corporate fascist regime. In Susan Sontag's 1975 essay for the *New Review of Books*, "Fascinating Fascism," she argued that fascist aesthetics are defined by "a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, and extravagant effort; they exalt two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude."³⁹ As such, these strategies were not constrained to art made in Germany or Italy during the interwar and war years, but could be found in more recent works. Sontag cited 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) as continuing fascist pro-

35. Peter Frank, "Pictures and Meaning," *Artweek*, April 29, 1978, 4-5.

36. Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," trans. Stanley Mitchell, *Screen* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 25. This quote was used by Crimp in his original catalog essay in *Pictures*, 5.

37. Crimp, *Pictures*, 5.

38. Frank, "Pictures and Meaning," 5.

39. Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," *New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975.

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cedures, while Pauline Kael had called *Straw Dogs* (1971) a "fascist classic."⁴⁰ These were followed by the success of both *Marathon Man* (1976) and *The Boys from Brazil* (1978), two films based on best-selling novels, each dramatizing the idea that there were still underground networks of Nazis at large. Sontag saw that the recycling of fascist aesthetic strategies, particularly in the instance of Robert Morris's poster for his 1974 Castelli Gallery solo show, *Labyrinths—Voice—Blind Time*, which showed the artist dressed in a Wehrmacht helmet and a spiked collar, succeeded only in making Nazi imagery part of art's repertoire.⁴¹ Brauntuch was following in Morris's steps, at the same moment that the legacies of Nazism were being intensely contested in West Germany.

Pictures opened in the autumn of 1977; about three weeks prior, the RAF kidnapped and kidnapped Hanns Martin Schleyer, president of both the Federation of German Industries and of the Employers' Association of the Federal Republic.⁴² Schleyer had been a member of the Nazi Party, an SS officer, and worked as an advisor to industry in German-occupied Czechoslovakia, before becoming a powerful business figure in West Germany, sitting on the board of Daimler-Benz. On October 17–18, the RAF shot him dead on the French-German border, claiming Schleyer symbolized the fascist continuity that showed denazification to have been a lie.⁴³ Schleyer's state funeral was front page news in the *New York Times* on October 26, with the paper reporting on President Walter Scheel's speech at the service, where he argued that "the weeks following the kidnapping 'were the worst our republic has gone through since the war.'"⁴⁴ Brauntuch's appropriation of Nazi imagery was occurring at a moment when the question of fascism's survival was widespread, both culturally and politically.

After *Pictures*, in 1979 Brauntuch had his first solo show at The Kitchen, facilitated by Longo and the curator RoseLee Goldberg.⁴⁵ Douglas Eklund has described how Brauntuch was influenced by the avant-garde theatre of Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman, alongside Matt Mullican's 1976 installation at Artists Space, all of which deployed the idea of the proceedings "represent[ing] what was going on in the head of an unspecified character."⁴⁶ These strains intersected with the reproductions of the Nuremberg rallies which Brauntuch found in the picture spreads in Speer's memoir, with their dramatic use of lighting and concentration on the body of Hitler as avatar of the Reich. Through these influences, his exhibition would become a kind of stage set.

At the entrance to the show was *Untitled (Sleeping)* (1978), showing the back of Hitler's head. At first, the viewer might think this C-print is a blown-up and cropped version of Hoffmann's photograph. However, a comparison between the two shows that this image has been heavily manipulated: there's a streak of white light on the right, the cap has been exaggerated to look like a helmet, and the bare expanse of the neck has shrunk. It takes a while to realize that this is, in fact, a drawing based on the photograph, which has then been photographed and enlarged by Brauntuch.

At the far end of the gallery space was *Untitled (Mercedes)* (1978), which was flanked by a triptych of Hitler's architectural designs and two large reproductions of his drawings. Eklund has compared *Untitled (Mercedes)* to an altarpiece; the wings of light on black cueing the audience to regard the installation as the summation of the show.⁴⁷ The small repetition of the church tower on the right-hand side of *Untitled (Mercedes)* emphasizes the ritualistic mode of approach, both a reference to

40. Pauline Kael, "Straw Dogs: Peckinpah's Obsession," in *For Keeps: 30 Years at the Movies* (New York: Plume, 1996), 426.

41. Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism".

42. Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 197.

43. *Ibid.*, 245.

44. "Bonn President Appeals to World to Stop Terrorism," *New York Times*, October 26, 1977.

45. "Reflections by Troy Brauntuch," in *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia*, ed. Richard Hertz (Ojai, CA: Minneola, 2003), 136.

46. Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 173.

47. *Ibid.*, 174.

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the quasi-religious spectacle of the Nuremberg rallies and to the sacralizing space of the white-walled gallery itself. The installation, with the dry intensity of the red field, created a climax for the show. Viewers, however, had merely returned to where they had started, with Hitler's head, the image now smaller and even harder to make out, as though the picture was zooming away from the audience. That is perhaps why Brauntuch included the car's manufacturer in the parenthesis of the non-title: it is the Mercedes badge which was the most legible of all the signs in *The Kitchen*.

The Mercedes badge is a piece of history which can finally be deciphered. Founded as Daimler-Benz in 1926, the company owes its present-day survival and success to an active collaboration with the Nazis, even before they came to power. Jakob Werlin, director of the Munich office, was friends with Hitler, and had Mercedes automobiles provided for free or at vastly reduced cost to party members.⁴⁸ It was Werlin who apparently picked Hitler up from Landsberg Prison in December 1924 in his own Mercedes, after Hitler's failed putsch.⁴⁹ Two-thirds of the management were Nazi Party members, and their company became enormously wealthy from tax breaks granted to automobile manufacturers and from Germany's rearmament program.⁵⁰ The construction of the autobahn was the Nazis' flagship infrastructure project, designed for an open-top Mercedes to cruise along the smoothly curving roads which united the German nation.⁵¹ The "Mercedes Reich," to use Bernard P. Bellon's coinage, utilized Jewish slave labor throughout the war to replace workers who had been called up, using concentration camp inmates from Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück.⁵² The Mercedes badge and the swastika were inextricably intertwined. Here was the link between Hitler in 1932 and Schleyer in 1977.

For critics at the time, Brauntuch's maneuvers at *The Kitchen* only served to symbolize the distance of his historical subjects "like celebrities in the back seat of a limousine, sit[ting] behind a shielding layer of smoke-dark glass."⁵³ Crimp went further in his revised "Pictures" essay published in the journal *October*, where he claimed "that distance is all that these pictures signify."⁵⁴ Yet Crimp analyzed Brauntuch's works in isolation, without taking into consideration their carefully curated interrelationships.

Brauntuch wanted to create an environment informed by Hitler while not allowing the audience to recognize him. He is everywhere in the show—his head, his drawings, the lights from the Nuremberg rallies—without ever being identified. Instead, Brauntuch recreated the fascist aura around him, but avoided the overpowering connotations of Hitler's identity. He treats the Hoffmann photograph as a found object (as indeed it was, found in a book), which can disrupt the remoteness of the past by being situated in a ritualized environment.⁵⁵

In 1970, Barthes wrote an essay on what he dubbed the "third meaning," that which lies beyond subject and symbolism. He designated this as the obtuse meaning. He demonstrated what he meant with an act of image-based appropriation of his own. Barthes took a film still from Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (Part I, 1944) and pointed to the obvious fakery of Ivan's beard that proclaims its artifice while maintaining a narrative coherence. As he put it, this is "a multi-layering of meanings which . . . lets the previous meaning continue, as in a geological formation, saying the opposite without giving up the contrary."⁵⁶ The ostensible meaning carries on, while another force within the image, beyond language, operates in the

48. Bernard P. Bellon, *Mercedes in Peace and War: German Automobile Workers, 1903–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 221.

49. *Ibid.*, 220.

50. *Ibid.*, 237; and Neil Gregor, *Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 37.

51. Edward Dimendberg, "The Will to Motorization: Cinema, Highways, and Modernity; For Wolf Donner, in Memoriam," *October* 73 (Summer 1995): 100.

52. Bellon, *Mercedes*, 218, 241.

53. Douglas Blau, "Troy Brauntuch: Metro Pictures," *Flash Art*, no. 104 (October–November 1981): 53.

54. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 85.

55. Brauntuch began appropriating photographs around 1975, often trawling secondhand bookshops to find images. See "Troy Brauntuch with Allie Biswas," *Brooklyn Rail*, December–January 2017, <https://brooklynrail.org/2016/12/art/troy-brauntuch-with-allie-biswas>.

56. Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 58.

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viewer's eye. It jerks one from the complacency of looking at images, which viewers are so used to and so good at, that it becomes an automatic talent. The obtuseness of a picture dissolves the false reality so convincingly created under normal conditions by the photograph, in favor of something stranger and more frustrating.

Barthes's concept helps to identify more clearly how Hoffmann's photograph operates. The obtuse value is the back of the dictator's sleeping head. Brauntuch clearly felt the same, highlighting it in both *Untitled (Sleeping)* and *Untitled (Mercedes)*, the only image in his body of work which he has returned to twice. The blankness of the driving cap and the expanse of the neck do not say anything. Worse than staying silent, they work against the audience: denying them even a basic recognition of Hitler.

Roberta Smith, writing on Brauntuch in 1981, understood that "like the past itself, his images are hard to get at."⁵⁷ This difficulty represents the past's constant refusal to be contained within retrospective narratives, constantly throwing up confusing memories, utterances, and objects which cannot be assimilated into the stories of what came before. Hitler's biographers do not dwell upon this image, for how would they use it? Mercedes-Benz would certainly rather people did not remember that Hitler toured Germany in its cars, or that the company helped build the V-2 rocket.⁵⁸ Brauntuch took the image from Speer's memoir and, instead of exposing these multiple histories, focused in on its obtuse value in order for the image to protrude into the present. Barthes talks of obtuseness as a fold, a crease, or a gash that rises above the conventional networks of meaning.⁵⁹ I think the metaphor that Barthes approaches but does not quite arrive at is that the obtuse meaning is a scab, with the congealed blood of the past hardened and textured—something which hurts the more that it is picked at; a bump that disrupts the smoothness of the body. A scab is a crust which forms over a wound. It is absolutely necessary and yet, like so much of what the body produces, horrifies and reminds a person of their own fragility. This is matched in the photograph by the lack of control Hitler had in that moment as he slept, exposed while the automobile sped along. This photograph is the scab of history. *Untitled (Mercedes)* shows how the unresolved tensions of the past intervene in the present, their very obscurity serving as a Barthesian "counter-narrative," whereby history is no longer a clash of individuals (as seen, for example, in Hollywood cinema) but a site of continuing vexation which refuses to be resolved.⁶⁰

Untitled (Mercedes) is the consummate Barthesian artwork, which shows how during the 1960s and seventies—the great era of rediscovery in photography (from E. J. Bellocq to Jacques Henri Lartigue)—the excavation of a submerged past became central to photography's aesthetics. Brauntuch's cropping away of the image focused in on the detail that he was drawn to, just as for Barthes, it is the detail, the "punctum," which overwhelms him.⁶¹ Photographs could be art, even when their makers were not artists. It was their appropriation which showed these images could be dense objects of meaning. This exposure of previously obscure photographers was paralleled by the reemergence of Walter Benjamin's writing (with Harry Zohn's 1968 edited collection *Illuminations* particularly crucial in establishing Benjamin in America) and Barthes's translation into English, with Susan Sontag as the English-language mediator of this new kind of critical writing on photography. This photographic archaeology made Brauntuch's work a metacommentary on how photographs were constantly being reframed to communicate new ideas.

57. Roberta Smith, "Separation Anxieties," *Village Voice*, March 18–28, 1981, 78.

58. Bellon, *Mercedes*, 232.

59. Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 62.

60. *Ibid.*, 63.

61. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 49.

62. Eklund, "Troy Brauntuch," 60.

63. Benjamin, "Short History of Photography," 20.

64. *Ibid.*; and Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 95.

65. Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 103.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Hal Foster, "Wild Signs: The Breakup of the Sign in Seventies' Art," in "Universal Abandon?

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Brauntuch was picking at the scab of the past to expose how the aesthetics and material culture of German fascism continued to operate in the late seventies America. He created a gallery environment where the arrangement of imagery served to make present forces long thought to have been dispelled. Sontag's criteria for fascist art was extravagantly fulfilled: the outsized effort and sophistication of the artmaking itself (making a drawing of a photograph look indistinguishable from a photograph), alongside Brauntuch forcing the audience to submit to his complete control of the gallery space.

This effort is directed towards recreating what Eklund dubbed Hitler's "toxic aura," created by Hoffmann's photography, Riefenstahl's films, and the iconography of Nazi Party posters.⁶² Walter Benjamin, living in Berlin at the same time as Hitler, defined aura as "a peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be."⁶³ Aura—be it the outline of a mountain range or the trace of an artist's hand upon a painting—is the unique, contingent presence of another person or object.⁶⁴ That was not the aura of Hitler; instead, his was formed through the repetition of carefully stage-managed imagery and public appearances, with their emphasis on "the grandiose, the monumental, the hypnotically seductive, and the coldly inhuman," designed to elevate Hitler to the level of charismatic leader.⁶⁵ As a consequence, the representational strategies of Nazi Germany, with its emphasis on image-based media, seemed like a "test run," in Eklund's words, for the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America of 1979.⁶⁶ No wonder postmodern artists were drawn to fascist photographs.

By making Hitler powerfully present in the gallery space precisely through the absence of possible recognition, his aura was all the more spellbinding; the nodding man in his leather cap both bewitching in his mystery and spectacular in the works' coolly polished staging.⁶⁷ Crimp saw that the postmodernism of the Pictures artists represented a break with modernism. What he did not realize was that it created a space for the reclamation of fascist aesthetics, which had long been seen (ahistorically) as antithetical to modernism.⁶⁸ Instead, Brauntuch undertook "an uncanny return" to "those ghostly, mediatized images that haunt our unconscious," with Hoffmann's photographs the most haunting of all, precisely because at their heart is their own form of absence: the inability to represent Hitler's moral culpability.⁶⁹ Here is the scab of history once again—the frustrating bump covering the wound; the interior of The Kitchen made over so that it became an arena where fascism could be experienced, with no labels necessary.

If 1 2 3 (*Opera, Staircase, Tank*) at the Pictures show showed the necessity of the caption, then Brauntuch in The Kitchen reversed course and finally found a way to refute Benjamin's dictum that all pictures would need an inscription. Indeed, Benjamin argued that the caption would create a revolutionary value for the photograph, preventing it from being a mere spectacle.⁷⁰ Brauntuch, though, by abandoning captions, reconstructed the aura generated by Hoffmann's photography, congealed in its most intense form in the back of Hitler's head. Here the distance of the past was, briefly, elided and became frighteningly present. Barthes's obtuseness was made visible, where the refusal of the image of a sleeping man to give up his identity becomes an affirmation of fascism's power.

Altair Brandon-Salmon is a lecturer in Civic, Liberal, and Global Education at Stanford University. His writing has appeared in *Art History* and the *Oxford Art Journal*. [Stanford Introductory Studies, Stanford University, Sweet Hall, 590 Escondido Mall, CA 94305, absalmon@stanford.edu]

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68. Steven Kasher, "The Art of Hitler," *October* 59 (Winter, 1992): 81.
69. Iversen, "Pictures without Theory": 129.
70. "The Author as Producer," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, vol. 2, bk. 2, 1931–1934 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 775.