

# Farocki's *In-Formation*: Silent Statistics and Stereotypes

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The question of silence is central to the politics of Harun Farocki's recent moving-image works. In contrast to his deployment of the full panoply of communicative devices in his multi-screen, surround-sound installations such as *Deep Play* (2007), a more pronounced investigation of sound, or lack of sound, has increasingly occupied the conceptual territory of Farocki's single-channel videos and films. *In-Formation* (*Aufstellung*, 2005), for example, is a soundless, one-channel video installation that montages fragments from German newspapers, official state publications, and school textbooks in order to highlight radically fluctuating migration and displacement patterns in twentieth-century Germany and Europe (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> *Respite* (*Aufschub*, 2007), also a silent film, edits footage taken by a prisoner at the Westerbork labor camp in the Netherlands in 1944, where thousands of prisoners were temporarily detained before being shipped off to concentration camps in the east, including Auschwitz, where the original cameraman himself perished (Figure 2). These two silent works are intimately connected, insofar as they pivot around the extraordinary mass displacement and the genocide of Jewish and minority peoples during WWII.

With respect to *Respite*, film historian Nora Alter correctly asserts that its "dead silence" raises the specters of the concentration camps with a "hard and flattening impact."<sup>2</sup> Yet the dead silence of *Respite* is not, as Alter suggests, an exception. Other recent works by Farocki that distinctly focus on sound include *Listening Stations* (*Hörstationen*, 2006) and *Dubbing* (*Synchronisation*, 2006); absolute silence is a new strategy of his, marking three other installations in the last decade as well: *In-Formation*, *Music-Video* (*Musik-Video*, 2000); and *On Construction of Griffith's Films* (*Zur Bauweise des Films bei Griffith*, 2006). This essay will investigate the silence of *In-Formation*, in particular, and what its own "dead silence" implies in terms of the artist's continued interest in processes of human objectification *vis-à-vis* the filmic apparatus.

*In-Formation* tackles a hefty narrative, ostensibly representing a history of migration in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, or former West Germany) following the end of WWII. Toward this apparent end, the video pedagogically displays a slide show of hundreds of archival drawings, pictographs, graphs, and maps culled from official national publications. The viewer is offered a generous amount of statistical information and imagery in the video's sixteen minutes — but quickly, with slides shown fleetingly, for only about three to four seconds each. The archived documents are also fragmented by Farocki, ordered against strict chronology, and highly abstracted, in that they depict essentialized categories of "foreigners" and "Germans" (Figure 3). By showing clearly inequitable statistical quantities, yet in an apparently "objective" manner, the video purports to reconstruct the immeasurably convoluted geopolitical narrative of demographic movement within former West Germany, while at the same time quite evidently failing to do so.

What might an investigation of these themes tell us about the cultural politics at the heart of Farocki's work? Throughout his oeuvre, Farocki has shown deep concern about the lack of voice among culturally marginalized groups within broader configurations of global capitalism, mass media, technologization, and warfare. In her book *The Threshold of the Visible*, film historian Kaja Silverman provides an insightful analysis of the artist's earlier essay film *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (*Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*, 1988) stressing its treatment of gendered and raced bodies.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Alter notes that the female voice-over in *Images of the World* is disembodied, and that representations of a Dior fashion model, Algerian Berber women, and a Jewish female prisoner at Auschwitz are just as politically "in/audible" as they are "im/perceptible."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in the film, Farocki's hand both frames and fragments photographs of colonized Algerian women from 1960 (Figure 4). The framing critiques

This essay constitutes part of a larger dissertation chapter concerning Harun Farocki's recent films and video installations; it reflects my broader interests concerning politically charged installation art and collective spectatorship in Europe today. I am grateful to my advisor Terry Smith for his invaluable support and helpful comments on this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Though *In-Formation* is a Farocki production, the idea for it came from his collaborator, Antje Ehmman.

<sup>2</sup> Nora Alter, "Dead Silence," in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmman and Kodwo Eshun (London: Koenig, 2009), 178.

<sup>3</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 139-40, 146-49, 152-54.

<sup>4</sup> Nora Alter, "The Political Im/perceptible: Farocki's *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*," in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sightlines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 215.

the violence done to these anonymous women by French soldiers when their veils were stripped from their faces for colonialist policing purposes. Objectified and archived on film, the women's eyes are shrouded, and then their mouths covered by Farocki's hand. Does his hand substitute for the veil, or does it figuratively muffle the women? Put another way, does *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* point to the deep problem laid out by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak — that is, can the sexed subaltern subject speak?

Like *Images of the World, In-Formation* highlights specific episodes of human de-subjectification. Chronologically and thematically, the video is divided into two distinct halves. In the first half, it begins with a portrayal of immigration, work, and consumption in the FRG after WWII, focusing on Turkish immigrants in the 1960s and '70s in particular. It highlights, for example, concerns of integration, family life, and inter-marriages between "foreigners" and "Germans." At one point, six images of male, presumably Turkish, cartoon-like figures succeed each other in different slides. Each man dons a distinctive black mustache, one wears a fez or *taqiyah*, some have no facial features except for a mustache, and almost all are pixilated in some respect. A moment thereafter, five images of headscarfed, Turkish women are displayed. The penultimate is only a black shadow (Figure 5), and the last woman — like the Algerian colonized women with Farocki's hand over their mouths — is trapped by a large red circle and "X" across her face.

The video's repetition of these visages fails to complexify or corporealize its flat, gendered, and racialized categories. Rather, it depicts their formation. Stereotypes are constructed around something always known, a certain fixity, as well as an anxious repetition of that certainty. Official discursive spheres of government, reportage, and education are here imbued with derogatory, reiterated imagery of "outsiders" that reflects fears concerning national community and economic prosperity.

The second half of *In-Formation* steps back to begin with the end of WWI and the Versailles Treaty, then accelerates temporally to represent both displaced peoples after WWII as well as refugees from the Soviet zone and the former East Germany (GDR) into West Germany. Like the stereotyped Turkish figures, the video at one point features an image of the "Wandering Jew" with his cane, crooked nose, and *yarmulke* (Figure 6). With other Jews, the figure at the bottom right of the screen traverses a map of Eastern Europe into

Germany and Austria. Subsequent slides depict maps of, and statistical data from, retaliatory German military offensives in the East (apparently linked consequentially to the Jews' movement) as well as maps pinpointing the locations of concentration camps. "All must take part," a textbook eerily declares, accompanied by illustrations of uniformed school children and Nazi youth lining up.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt observes that "by forcing Jews to leave the Reich passportless and penniless, the legend of the Wandering Jew was realized."<sup>5</sup> As early as possible, the Nazis attempted to establish such conditions on a mass scale for the Jews and other undesired minorities — no passport, no money, no profession — that any sympathies would be rapidly transformed into negative popular opinion.<sup>6</sup> In her chapter, "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," Arendt traces the victimization of two specific groups in Europe after WWI — the stateless and minorities — who, increasingly, had no government to represent or protect them.<sup>7</sup> After the devastation of WWI, nation-states across Europe were crippled with extraordinary inflation and unemployment: migrations of groups were "welcomed nowhere and could be assimilated nowhere."<sup>8</sup> These two ostracized groups, the stateless and minorities, were worse off than any other impoverished, unemployed class or group. With the loss of political representation, they also lost those rights that were supposedly inalienable — the Rights of Man, or basic human rights, as established during the French Revolution.

For Arendt, belonging to a polity is paramount. Without the recognition and right to action and opinion by organized groups of humans — a tenet fundamental to Farocki's politically charged oeuvre — nothing is inalienable. The tradition of asylum, not officially written into any law, had been established for exceptional cases, not masses of people, and it was designated to help those who were persecuted for something that they had done or thought, not for those who were unchangeably themselves, "born into the wrong kind of race or the wrong kind of class."<sup>9</sup>

The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general — without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself — and different in general, representing nothing but his own absolute

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), 394.

<sup>6</sup> "The official SS newspaper, the *Schwarze Korps*, stated explicitly in 1938 that if the world was not yet convinced that the Jews were the scum of the earth, it would be soon when unidentifiable beggars, without nationality, without money, and without passports crossed their frontiers." *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>7</sup> Placed at the end of her section entitled "Imperialism," Arendt, not

surprisingly, links the victimization of these two groups to a type of "continental imperialism:" this "growing number of people and peoples suddenly appeared whose elementary rights were as little safeguarded by the ordinary functioning of nation-states in the middle of Europe as they would have been in the heart of Africa." *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

unique individuality which, deprived of expression within and action upon a common world, loses all significance.<sup>10</sup>

Without membership in and protection from a political community, humans are no longer active, thinking subjects, but merely members of a race or human species. One image in *In-Formation* — of a group of hollowed-out men with black mustaches and fezzes scattered throughout a crowd of blank human figures — uniquely captures this paradox of standing for both human beings in general, and difference in general (Figure 7). Above all, Farocki's work has emphasized the critical necessity of creating collectivizing spaces and structures that will produce active, thinking subjects, not dehumanized stand-ins.

Most of the graphs in *In-Formation* either include culturally stereotyped figures or incorporate ghostly bodies into their structural components: arms, faces, or suitcases become the measuring tools of these immigrants' own abstraction. A man is smaller or larger in a bar chart, for example, depending on how much money he earns. The larger the immigration total, likewise, the more zeroes after a number can be filled with cartoonish smiley faces. Literally graph-ed, the bodies of these figures are simultaneously included and excluded, homogenized and differentiated, in the slide show's narrative. As the video proceeds, Farocki underscores the "inclusionary exclusion" of the iconic, headscarfed Turkish woman just as much as the Wandering Jew. In the aftermath of WWII race politics, the fact that these images were all generated in official West German state publications or newspapers, for governmental, pedagogical, or informational purposes, is especially disquieting.

Moreover, the video is silent. The numerous, inscribed bodies have no voice, so to speak, in their own representation. Their "alien" faces and bodies are mute, equipped with only mustaches rather than mouths, or trapped like criminals behind the bars of a chart. All of this "information" originates in secondary sources, in official documents or other public sphere materials, and arrives to the viewer via multiple avenues of mediation. In contrast, the dead silence of *Respite* is arguably more pronounced through witnessing firsthand camera footage of labor-camp subjects singing and speaking with no sound. In *In-Formation*, there is no documentary lens, only shuffled and bureaucratized paperwork. Moreover, *Respite* is edited as a film, to be viewed as a complete, narrative form for a full forty minutes, whereas *In-Formation* (sixteen minutes) allows the viewer to step in and out of its installation

space, to catch only random fragments of its material, and to choose how long to stand amidst the silence.

The possibility of these subjects speaking for themselves is, in these circumstances, disallowed. In her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak criticizes leftist intellectuals in Europe who, situated in a privileged position of socialized capital without recognizing it — without acknowledging the epistemic violence of imperialism or its contemporary mirroring in an unbalanced international division of labor — make the claim that the subaltern, if given the chance, can speak for him/herself and know his/her conditions.<sup>11</sup> She discloses a complicity between "Western intellectual production" and "Western international economic interests."<sup>12</sup> The fact that Farocki, as a leftist European intellectual, has, without a doubt, critiqued his own position within a globally inequitable capitalist system, is widely acknowledged; but his work's attention to the reverberating forces of decolonization and its effects on contemporary cultural politics in Europe today has received little attention.<sup>13</sup>

In her essay, Spivak describes a unique historical case in India when *sati*, or the self-immolation by widows on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands, was criminalized by the British colonial system.<sup>14</sup> She clearly does not condone the killing of widows, but rather, in a complicated analysis of Hindu laws, tradition, and language, as well as British colonial records, describes the constrained space of the sexed subaltern subject — the widow herself — that makes it impossible for her to speak:

One never encounters the testimony of the women's voice-consciousness. Such a testimony would not be ideology-transcendent or 'fully' subjective, of course, but it would have constituted the ingredients for producing a countersentence. As one goes down the grotesquely mistranscribed names of these women, the sacrificed widows, in the police reports included in the records of the East India Company, one cannot put together a "voice." The most one can sense is the immense heterogeneity breaking through even such a skeletal and ignorant account.<sup>15</sup>

*In-Formation* cannot possibly offer enough of its reductive material to present a full picture of immigration in the FRG. Instead of "speaking for" these abstracted, staticized, and stereotyped minorities, immigrants, refugees, guest work-

via a *Third*, which focus on brick production in Germany, India, and Burkina Faso. For more on this issue, see Thomas Elsaesser, "Political Filmmaking After Brecht: Harun Farocki, For Example," in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sightlines* (see note 4); and Harun Farocki, "Workers Leaving the Factory," in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sightlines* (see note 4).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 297-98.

<sup>11</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988), 283.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>13</sup> Farocki's '68er, leftist interest in labor/class/economic concerns has been extensively analyzed, and his recent video work has broadened to a globalized outlook in such pieces as *In Comparison* and *Comparison*

<sup>14</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 297.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

ers, asylum seekers, and the stateless, Farocki includes no voiceover or intertitles, a noticeable shift from his signature essay film. Its heterogeneous subjects, a vast number of displaced persons and refugees throughout Europe in the twentieth century, will never be able to testify through this archival material to the complexity or turbulence of their past conditions.

In its last section, *In-Formation* depicts abstracted bodies of immigrants, and, particularly, asylum seekers from all over the world arriving to Germany and Europe up until the end of the century. Due to the country's traumatic past, Germany's Basic Law offered the most liberal asylum policy on the continent for fifty years, offering any politically persecuted person the right to refuge in the country; but with almost half a million asylum seekers by the end of 1992, significant post-1989 economic troubles with reunification, and increasing anti-Semitic, anti-Roma, and anti-foreigner sentiment and violence as a result, Germany dramatically restricted its asylum law in 1993, which, notably, has come to serve as the model for the European Union's policy as well. *In-Formation*, unable to represent the tremendous debate and controversy concerning this historical shift in asylum policy after the transformation of German statehood, instead offers an image of one vacuous stick figure shooting another stick figure with a label below, "17 million politically persecuted," or rather, "politically haunted" [*politisch Verfolgte*]. In this case, the multilayered translatability of the German offers far more semantic nuance to the asylum seeker than the flat figural signs.

Most critically, the video's silence reflects not only what is unspoken, but also a programmed unspeakability. Indeed, its very structure works to display the failure of a certain modern visual language to provide global, cross-cultural representation. Most of the slides employ graphic illustration in the style of the ISOTYPE, or International System of Typographic Picture Education, conceived of by early twentieth-century Austrian urban theorist Otto Neurath (Figure 8). Originally termed the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics, the ISOTYPE (as of 1935) was conceived as a standardized system of icons and signs that would be able to deliver the greatest amount of information with the greatest efficiency to the greatest number of people. It would utilize two-dimensional, non-perspectival, simplified images — recontextualized from everyday, mass communicative forms such as popular films or newspaper cartoons — in order to facilitate an understanding of the world in terms of patterns and systems.<sup>16</sup>

Neurath intended his system to democratize knowledge and to promote greater international understanding. He aspired to forge a sense of community (*Gemeinschaft*) within an increasingly alienated, urban society (*Gesellschaft*). ISOTYPE, through its "universal" sign system, was meant to both teach and empower members of the workers' movement (designated as its primary, original audience), as well as contribute to the creation of a "multiethnic urban citizenry," an international solidarity between workers unimpeded by the difficulties of translating between languages.<sup>17</sup> In the early 1920s, in response to the situation of mass homelessness wrought by WWI, Neurath developed a model of modern city planning centered around the ideal figure of the "Gypsy-Settler," who would take advantage of both industrial and non-market forces to "self-help."<sup>18</sup> In the later 1920s, Neurath translated these utopian aims from the practical sphere of urban development to the realm of museum education and exhibition design.

Similar systems of icons and signs continue to interest artists today. In his project, *Book from the Ground* (2003 to the present) Xu Bing employs the same type of symbols to create a utopian, global language (Figure 9).<sup>19</sup> His language system also takes its inspiration from mass communication forms — such as airport and cell phone signs — in order to reach a larger audience; in fact, it only draws from publicly extant signs and logos and does not invent new ones. Viewers may utilize the Internet at home or on computers installed physically at exhibition sites, in order to type English, soon Chinese, and theoretically in the future, any other vernacular, into standardized pictograms. Farocki's video, by contrast, uses fragmentation, montage, and anachronism to highlight the often non-ecumenical, non-progressive historical weight of this type of simplified visual language.

The last slides of *In-Formation* project data concerning the "Krankheit des Westens," or "illness of the West," implied to be unemployment caused by too many foreigners. The viewer is left with an image of footprints crossing a closed border gate, and a stick figure "leaving" instead of "coming," framing the entire issue of immigration, again, in terms of unwanted, stateless, and ghost-like peoples. Such graphic imagery is popularly utilized throughout Europe today in order to negatively politicize immigration by non-Europeans, for instance, in poster campaigns by the right-wing, xenophobic Swiss People's Party. In 2009, by referendum, the party successfully mobilized citizens in Switzerland to ban the construction of minarets, or Muslim prayer towers. Its particu-

<sup>16</sup> Nader Vossoughian, *Otto Neurath: The Language of the Global Polis* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2008), 65.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>18</sup> In Neurath's proposed *Gemeinwirtschaft*, a portmanteau that translates to a "communal" or "cooperative economy," displaced "gypsy-settlers" would spontaneously and communally self-organize; they would barter through subsistence farming but also capitalize on the infrastructure

of the modern metropolis. *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Xu Bing states about his project, "Regardless of your cultural background or mother tongue, you will be able to read this book as long as you have experience of contemporary life. The educated and illiterate should be able to enjoy equally the pleasure of what it means to read." Xu Bing, "Regarding *Book from the Ground*," accessed 4 January 2011, [http://www.bookfromtheground.com/home\\_english.htm](http://www.bookfromtheground.com/home_english.htm).

larly effective poster campaign included imagery of sinister-looking, cloaked Muslim women appearing quite similar to the Turkish women found in *In-Formation* (Figure 10).

Despite Neurath's modernist, utopian aims at community-building, his "all-inclusive" visual system created a language that certain peoples were unable to speak. Within its visual economy, Roma and Sinti (Gypsy-settlers), Turkish guest-workers, Jews, and asylum seekers were at once included and excluded, represented and silenced. As Farocki has repeatedly shown us, the visualization of information is a key area of contestation. At a time when numerous

European radical right-wing parties are increasingly vocal in mass media channels about their xenophobic, populist programs — and where biological life has become ever more frequently placed at the center of state politics — it is crucial that present-day minority or stateless groups such as the refugee, guest worker, and others are institutionally guaranteed a political voice in their own representation. Otherwise, the stereotypes of the Wandering Jew, the stateless Roma, or the radical Muslim, become lived realities for millions.

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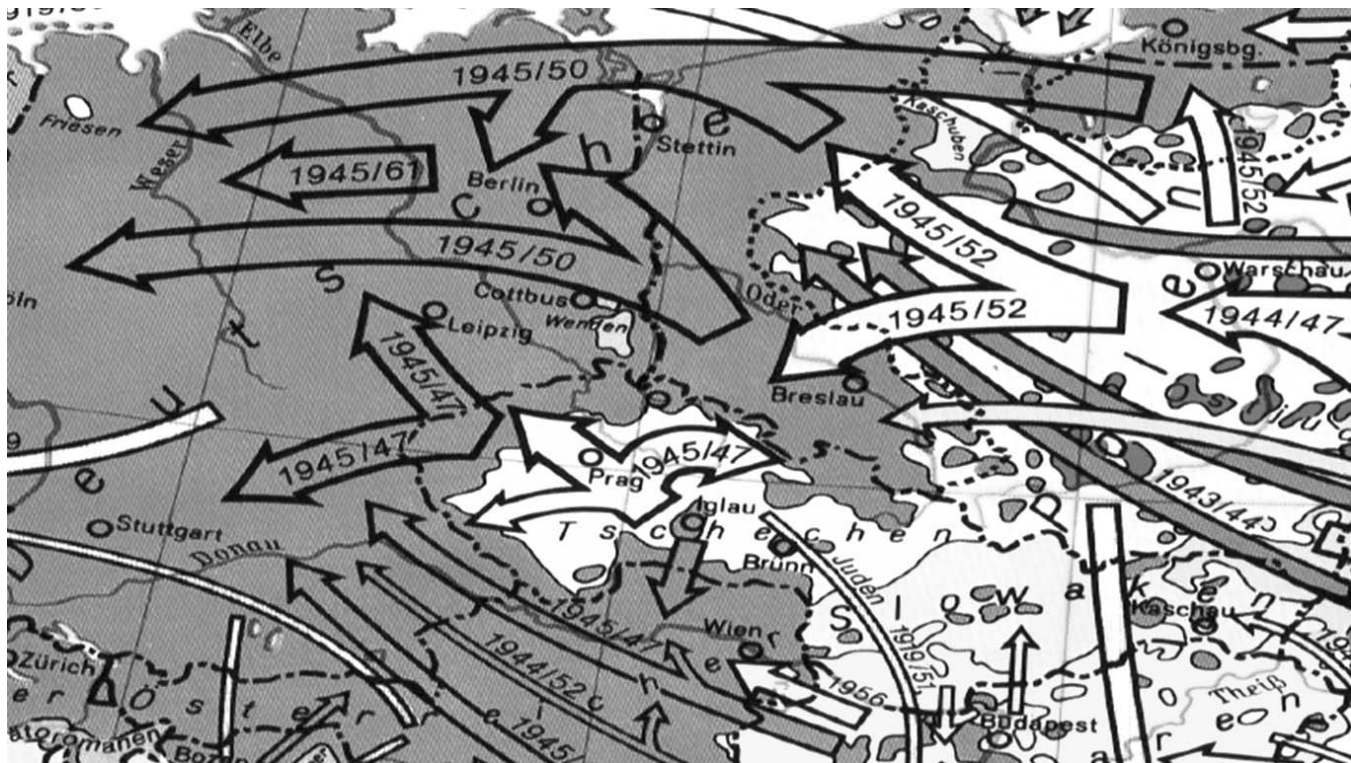


Figure 1. Harun Farocki, *In-Formation* (Aufstellung), 2005, video installation © Harun Farocki.



Figure 2. Harun Farocki, *Respite (Aufschub)*, 2007, film © Harun Farocki.



[above, center] Figure 3. Harun Farocki, *In-Formation (Aufstellung)*, 2005, video installation © Harun Farocki.

[right] Figure 4. Harun Farocki. *Images of the World and the Inscription of War (Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges)*, 1988, film © Harun Farocki.



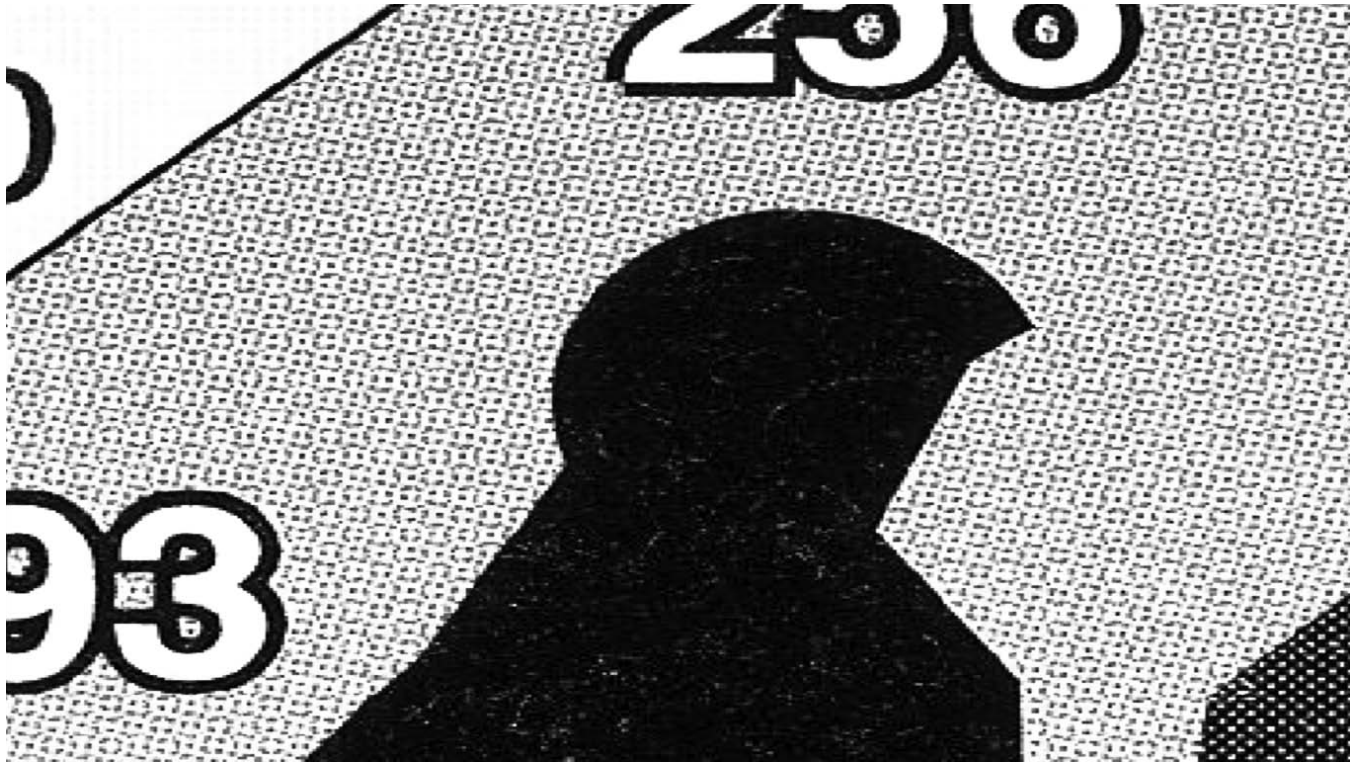


Figure 5. Harun Farocki, *In-Formation (Aufstellung)*, 2005, video installation © Harun Farocki.



Figure 6. Harun Farocki, *In-Formation (Aufstellung)*, 2005, video installation © Harun Farocki.

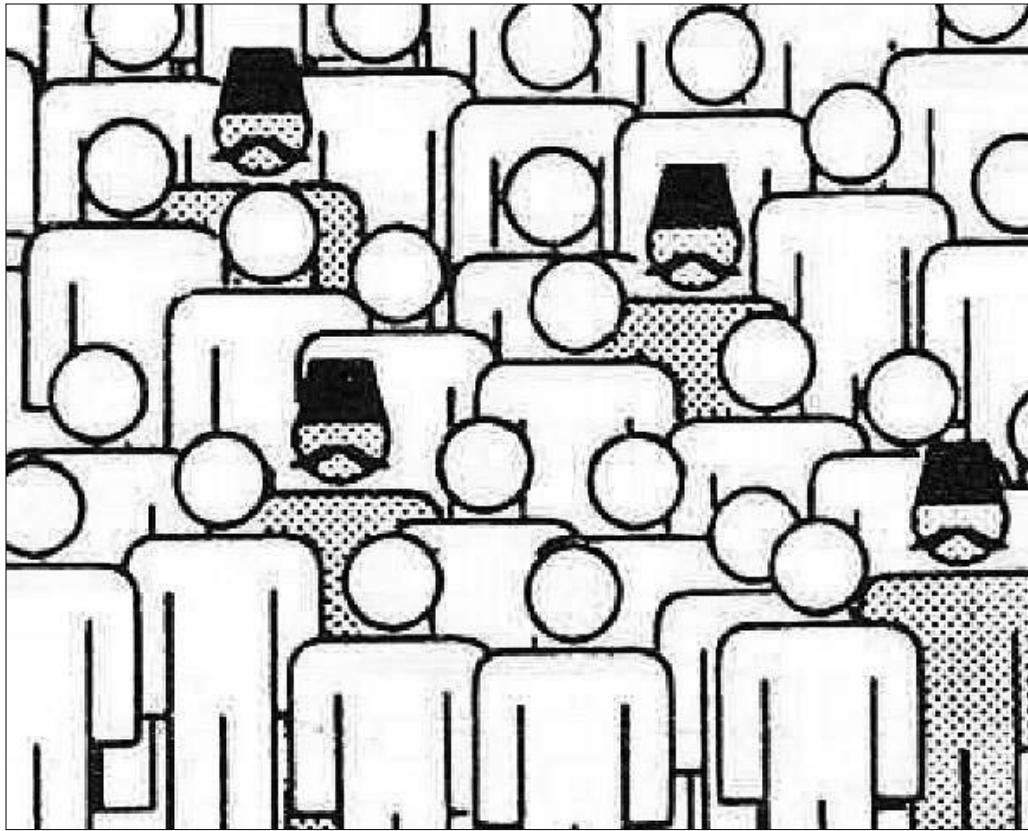


Figure 7. Harun Farocki, *In-Formation (Aufstellung)*, 2005, video installation © Harun Farocki.

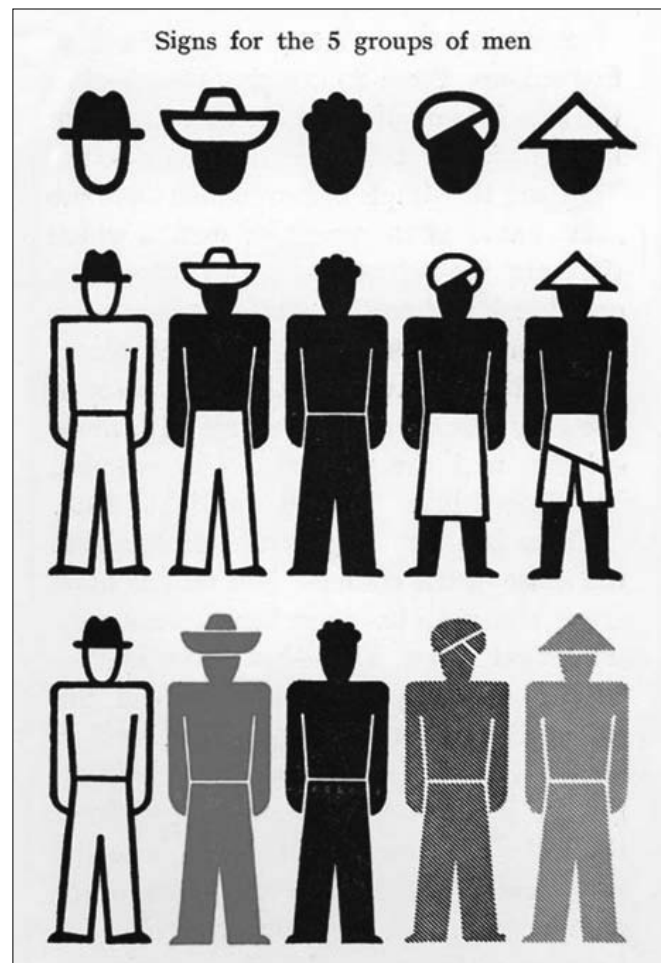


Figure 8. Otto Neurath, ISOTYPE image, 1936, graphic print © MAK - Artisan Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art, Vienna.





Figure 9. Xu Bing, *Book from the Ground*, 2008, two computer stations and posters, Prospect 1 in New Orleans. Author's photo. Courtesy of Xu Bing.

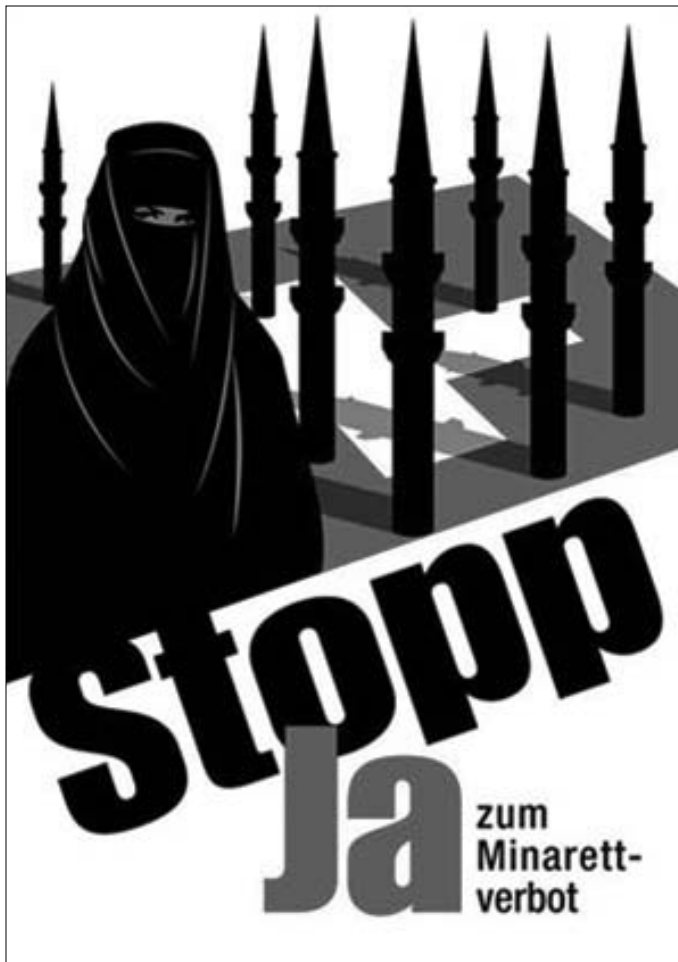


Figure 10. Swiss People Party's poster, 2009.