

ZiF-Research Group *Communicating Disaster*

Closing Conference “Dealing with the Disasters of Others”

26-28 January 2012

Presentation Abstract:

Pictures of Pain

Photographs of Disasters

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Location: Center for Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld, Germany; Room 222 “Plenarsaal”

In her essay “Regarding the Pain of Others” Susan Sontag was primarily referring to war photography. However, one no less regards the pain of others in photographs of disaster. When concerned with the media's contribution to the communicative construction of a catastrophe, one must at length address the photographs of the disaster. The presentation will analyze the photographs produced and circulated during the March 2011 tsunami and earthquake disaster in Japan, which show destroyed buildings, flooded landscapes, desperate people. As its thesis, it will state that the disastrousness of disaster is (also) created through the pictures of the disasters disseminated by the media. Disaster destroys existing order. The photographs of disaster depict the dissolution of such order, however, in an ordered kind of way. Through the photographs, the disaster thus obtains an organizational structure which it does not by itself possess. Although disaster photographs attempt to portray the uniqueness of the tragedy, their way of achieving this goal is conventional. This places them in an ambivalent position.

For further questions on the conference or the research group,
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