Picture Files

Caiti Borruso

This is both a beautiful ear and a beautiful image (fig. 1). There's a graphic quality to this photograph: it has nice contrast, smooth shapes. It just looks like an ear. The shadows of the folds are deep. My mind immediately goes to a pair of ear photographs that have haunted me since undergrad: Anna Shteynshleger's Covered, 2003 - 2009, and an image Ian Lewandowski made after this picture. "Like getting fucked in the head," Ian told me during a studio visit years ago. Anna's photograph was connected to her experience in the Orthodox Jewish community, and Ian's an homage to Covered after he was diagnosed with lymphoma.

The open orifice of the ear, which ends in the sealed drum and small bones that clang against one another. I do not know what the inside of an ear looks like, nor how sound works, not in any way that I could write extensively about. My partner is beginning his final year of a PhD in audio technology; he understands sound in ways I never will. His work in grad school has focused on our psychological perception of sound. He has very sensitive ears that are prolific at growing small black hairs on the outside rim of the ear, and sometimes curly hairs that emerge from the darkness of his ear very suddenly. I pluck these small hairs for him, ostensibly to make him look more presentable, but mainly because I enjoy it, and he is kind to let me do so. I avoid the soft downy hairs and only pluck the wiry ones.

What does it mean to get fucked in the head? We listen through the ear, through small and concise bones. Other people enter our bodies in many ways — via touch, via sight, via taste — and they also enter us through the ear, via vibration. I am reading The Heart is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers, a book with a man who cannot hear at the center of it, the person who connects four others in a small Southern mill town. Whenever I think about communication at all, my mind goes to the final chapter of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men by James Agee (photographs by Walker Evans), who writes about sitting on the porch in the dark and listening to two foxes call for one another: "There was the frightening joy of hearing the world talk to itself, and the grief of incommunicability." The grief of incommunicability is often both overwhelming and undeniable.

In September, I went off Wellbutrin in a way that was poorly advised by my doctor. I began writing this on the same day the doctor told me to go off the medication over the course of a week, which is maybe why Anna and Ian's pictures of ears feel resonant; the hastened taper made me feel as though I would be permanently fucked in the head. I don't like writing about my medication, partly because it was stable for so long and partly because there was a period in the 2010s when it seemed that people, especially women, overly identified themselves by what psychiatric medication they took. This seemed dangerous to me. I did not want my citalopram to be anything other than what it was: a medication that regulated my anxiety. It was a tool. The Wellbutrin, which my primary care doctor insisted I take to "lower the depression numbers," felt like a blunt instrument psychiatrically. When I asked to taper off it, she told me that she was a family doctor who did not normally prescribe medication, and was better suited for treating sprained ankles.



Living in the United States empire means continually resisting being fucked in the head. For the past year, as the United States has sent virtually unrestricted bombs and weapons to Israel, the Biden administration has systemically lied about "working tirelessly to secure a ceasefire," with sources claiming that Biden is privately dismayed about the genocide being waged on the Palestinian people with the financial and material support that he provides. Here in California, the state's public university system is purchasing additional weapons, ammunition, and drones to use on its own students who protest against the use of their tuition dollars for genocide. Never mind that many institutions in San Diego are funded by,

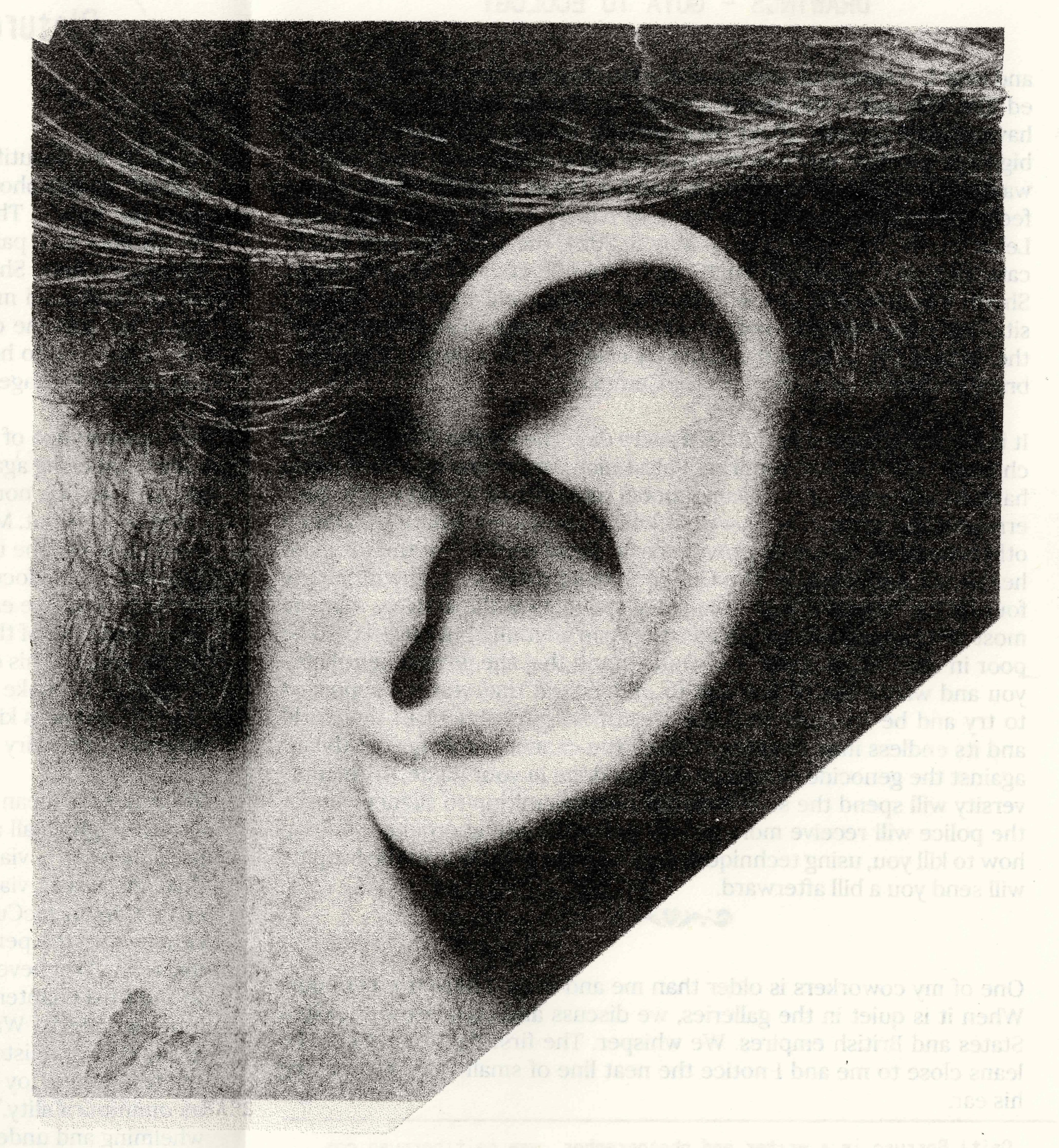


fig. 1

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and bear the names of, Irwin and the late Joan Jacobs, who also founded The Joan and Irwin Jacobs Center for Shared Society in Israel and have spoken proudly about their passion for the ethnostate. "Israel's biggest contributions to mobile technology is its ability to design better ways of controlling things," Irwin told the Times of Israel in 2014, which feels particularly cruel in the wake of Israel's recent pager attacks in Lebanon. (Joan Jacobs died on May 6, 2024, the same day that UCSD campus police, California Highway Patrol officers, and the San Diego Sheriff's Department cleared the pro-Palestine encampment and positioned snipers on the roofs overlooking the camp.) The library where the Picture File is housed is officially called the San Diego Central Library at the Joan and Irwin Jacobs Common.

It is like being fucked in the head every day. The United States is killing children overseas and ignoring Palestinian Americans who have been harmed as a result of the Islamophobia running unchecked by the government and the media, as well as killing constituents here by, among other methods, failing to provide basic social services in the forms of healthcare and housing. The United States provides Israel with nearly four billion dollars a year in military spending while actively denying most of its population the chance to live in anything but poverty. To be poor in the United States is to understand that the government hates you and wants you to die, and to understand that you are supposed to try and be stronger than the wealthiest government in the world and its endless impediments to care. You cannot speak against this or against the genocide or against what is done in your name, or the university will spend the state's money on ammunition to silence you, or the police will receive more money to build training grounds to learn how to kill you, using techniques derived from the IDF; and the hospital will send you a bill afterward.



One of my coworkers is older than me and moved here from London. When it is quiet in the galleries, we discuss and compare the United States and British empires. We whisper. The first day I meet him, he leans close to me and I notice the neat line of small black hairs along his ear.