Banks, Eric, “William E. Jones: Punctured,” *TheParisReview.org*, October 4, 2010

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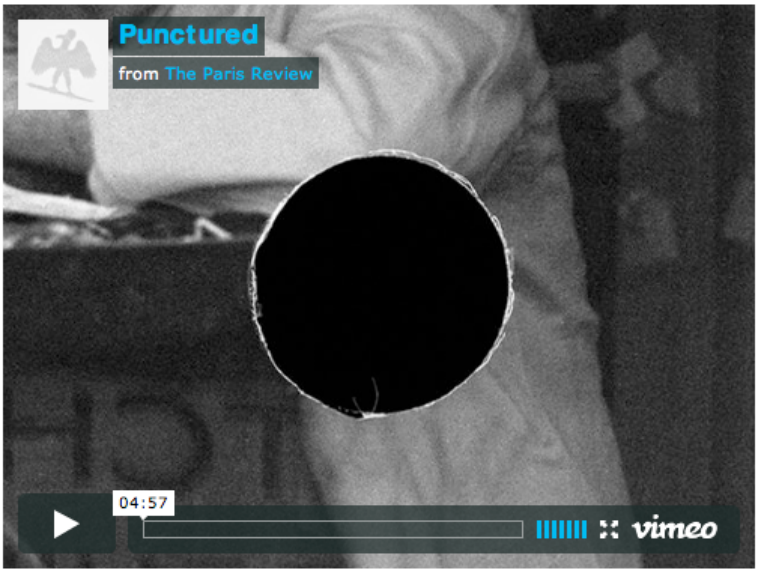

There might never be a more bountiful kingdom of photography than that established under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration and ruled by the former economist Roy Stryker, some 171,000 negatives made to document Depression America between 1935 and 1942. Though he was no photographer (Gordon Parks joked that he couldn’t even load a camera), Stryker pulled no punches during his reign. “I never took a picture,” he once wrote, “and yet I felt a part of every picture taken. I sat in my office in Washington and yet I went into every home in America. I was both the Stabilizer and the Exciter.”

He might have added the Excisor. Scattered among the Library of Congress’s FSA archive are curious reminders of Stryker’s autocratic touch: For the first three years of the project, he registered his disapproval of an image—whether to make an example out of those he thought had wasted valuable film or out of some darker fit of spite—by taking a hole puncher to the negative, ensuring that it wouldn’t be subsequently printed. It didn’t seem to matter who took the picture. Walker Evans got holes punched in a handful of negatives; so did John Vachon, a lowly FSA clerk at the time who was learning the trade on weekends. If Stryker’s one-man photographic death panel was democratic in judgment, it was sporadic in execution. In some negatives the holes are perfunctorily, even apologetically clipped along the borders of the negative; in others, Stryker seemed almost wrathful, going straight for the jugular by obliterating offending faces, necks, or buttocks.

In his video "Punctured," a reformatted version of his 2009 film "Killed," the LA-based artist William E. Jones has performed a sort of perverse resurrection of Stryker’s perforated negatives, a Lazurus act that’s doubly miraculous because it uses the powers of video animation to raise up the quite-dead world of documentary photography. (The video is currently featured in an

exhibition at Andrew Roth gallery in Manhattan.) From 100 perforated images he located in the Library of Congress archives, Jones has produced 4,500 digital files at different scales of enhancement and organized these into a hypnotically syncopated, nearly five-minute-long looped movie. The structural logic is provided by Stryker’s hole itself: each of the hundred images appears for a total of around three seconds, beginning with an enlarged, screen-filling close-up of the negative space of Stryker’s hole, a giant black spot that then smoothly and very rapidly appears to recede in size as the surrounding photograph comes into view. Then, bang, another Stryker reject appears, with the same fast zoom-out, from hole to whole.

Jones’s approach is ingenious—the traces of Stryker’s tiny acts of violence become the fleeting star of the show before receding into the chorus of photographic details glimpsed just for a second or two. And weirdly, seen in repetitious microscopic focus, those punch holes attain personalities all their own. Some of the punctures are as smooth and clean as the barrel of a rifle; others are as raggedly torn as a ripped fingernail, like the one Stryker jabbed in the middle of a miserable image Vachon took of three women gazing at a window display. The rapid-fire sequencing and graphic punch of the animation, combined with the representation of icons made unfamiliar, have the effect of grabbing you by your drowsy collar and making you pay attention to what’s in the offending photos—slouching fedoras and men with odd gazes, dime-store, double-entendre billboards, a raggedy kid with a beat-up doll—in a way that makes these pulp clichés seem completely fresh. Looking at the photographs in the elegant book published on the occasion of the show—which reproduces the images Jones used to make "Punctured" and IDs each of the photographers—you absorb the pictures as a whole and wonder about the logic of Stryker’s editorial dagger; seeing them fly by in Punctured, you take in the holes, you take in the pictures, but you wonder about a lot of other things, too: I kept comparing and contrasting in my head with Cady Noland’s hole-punched sculpture of Lee Harvey Oswald grimacing as Jack Ruby’s bullet entered his stomach. In animating these never-meant-to-be-seen images, Jones’s film is a clever act of ventriloquism. But even if you’re aware that he’s moving his lips, it doesn’t blow the routine.

Jones was looking for examples of gay life when he first plumbed the FSA archives (he figured he’d find them, somewhere, in the outtakes, and did) when he stumbled upon his money shot, Stryker’s signature perforations. Searching for one thing, serendipitously digging up another thing that’s somehow not quite what you were after but somehow exceeds it—this is a familiar experience anybody has when plunging into research. Plenty of artists have caught archive fever over the last decade, and it hasn’t always been a good bug—too often, what results is tautological tail-chasing, with the resulting work less interesting than the raw material the artist has unearthed. Punctured shows there’s a smart way for archive art to ward off some crippling side effects: in a word, holistically.