

THE LENS OF WAR

QUESTIONING PHOTOGRAPHS, asking for the ethical as well as the technical and aesthetic ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ of their making, is now a dominant critical mode. It informs both the choice and arrangement of pictures in the exhibitions, spread across ten sites in southern England, that make up the 2008 Brighton Photo Biennial: *Memory of Fire*, *The War of Images and Images of War*. In an essay about the exhibitions (‘Rearranging Corpses, Curatorially’ in *Photoworks*) the curator Julian Stallabrass is clear about the problems that arise when evidence and art mix. He describes a discussion about the inclusion of a large print of a wounded child by Simon Norfolk in *The Sublime Image of Destruction*, a Biennial exhibition at Bexhill showing very large photographs of destroyed landscapes and smashed buildings:

Both Norfolk and I wanted to show the image because it frankly described the consequences of the war in a way that put viewers (particularly those whose governments are involved in military action) in a deeply disturbing place. Norfolk had been encouraged to take the picture by Iraqis at the scene, doubtless for similar reasons. Nevertheless, the proposed enlargement of the image to museum photography scale, and that it should be displayed under the concept of the sublime, troubled the artist and the curators at the De La Warr Pavilion . . . we eventually decided not to include the print. But our uncertainty about this image raised the difficulty of keeping both particularity and generality in mind: that the cruelties depicted are typical, and that they happen to individuals—to this child who should not be reduced to an icon of the general.

This sensitivity to the tangle of meanings, uses and negotiations that surround war photography marks all the exhibitions in the Biennial. Each has a distinct character—and it is good that they are not shown in one place. Going from Bexhill to Brighton, and from Brighton to Chichester, gives you time to think. The content is wide-ranging; there are old pictures and new ones, museum art and photojournalism, amateur

photographs and professional ones. These are didactic exhibitions that draw you into skirmishes on several fronts. Stallabrass is open-minded about the use the contrasts they offer might be put to:

In making that play of contrasts, there has been no conscious compositional effort on my part, but rather an attempt to reach for maximum clarity. This is not to say that one will not emerge or become apparent. Of the (inevitable) question: does your curating have an aesthetic, or, is there a beautiful way to rearrange corpses? On that, I must hold my silence.

The part of the Biennial that has the widest take on the current situation of war photography is *Iraq through the Lens of Vietnam* at the University of Brighton Gallery. Even when a war is over it is easy to forget there are two views to be looked at. It is a strength of the Brighton exhibition that it has images from the Vietnam and Iraq wars taken by both sides. The stories they offer—our people, good men fighting hard, suffering, dying—mirror one another. Within the period it covers—the sixties through to the present—still photography was losing its role as the dominant visual source of war news, a position it had occupied increasingly since Robert Fenton took pictures during the Crimean War and Mathew Brady during the American Civil War (Brady was in competition with draughtsmen of the calibre of Winslow Homer). The craft of photojournalism developed from those beginnings through two World Wars and the Korean War to reach its apotheosis in Vietnam. By then, though, the end of its dominance was in sight. The picture magazines were not yet dead—Larry Burrows’s work for *Life* included a famous spread of death and mayhem on a helicopter flight, and long picture essays made during excursions to the front. But they were losing out to the immediacy of television. Don McCullin’s pictures for the *Sunday Times* were most striking in reproductions in the colour magazine, not in a stand-alone publication. The pictures in the exhibition by Burrows and McCullin show the terror and pity of war, but the time when a photographer could take on a heroic role as chronicler of a nation’s bitter history was coming to a close.

Come Iraq and you are in a new technical environment. Endless images flow from both sides. Digital devices cover the scene so completely that no image is now inherently rare. Even the moment of death becomes a commonplace when armaments picture their own targets. The digital phone with its camera (still or moving) has brought the metaphorical ‘I am a camera’ as close as it could be to a plain truth. So although there are still combat photographers—whose status, when they are ‘embedded’,

makes explicit what was always an implied partisanship—their work is challenged by un-composed, un-artful pictures. There are many in these exhibitions taken from blogs, unofficial websites and, most significantly, from the cameras of American soldiers which seem to have a special claim to truth. The wall of pictures showing the humiliation and torture of men in Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad are artless, the quality of their flash-lit messiness is something we recognize from the pictures of last night's party or girls out on the town—the most disturbing images of the war are cousins to those that sit in our own digital cameras. Pictures in the photojournalistic tradition exemplified by the star photographers of the Vietnam War that seemed to offer unmediated truth are, one now sees, exercises in visual rhetoric, using compositional habits and telling gestures that can be tracked back through Goya or Delacroix. They are true in their own way, touching and wonderful, but not visually innocent.

Distance and destruction

Other Biennial exhibitions show professional photojournalists and photographers finding modern ground not yet overwhelmed by the demotic, digital flood. The large prints in *The Sublime Image of Destruction* by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright achieve resolution of detail beyond that which can be absorbed on a screen or printed page—that justifies their size. Voluntary acceptance of the limitations on movement and subject matter that come with the big, clumsy cameras needed to produce them sets up a distance between gallery art—which is what they are—and day-to-day reportage. The problem of human relations does not arise or can be sidestepped (as Stallabrass's and Norfolk's decision about the photograph of the wounded boy shows). The results are stately, powerful, sometimes bleak and disengaged: that is the price of becoming art, of implying rather than depicting the human predicament, of demanding longer, slower looking from the audience.

Thomas Hirschhorn's response to the digital flood is the opposite. He draws on its deepest and murkiest waters. *The Incommensurable Banner* is art too, but art that is conceptual, drained of aesthetic pleasure. By taking images of destroyed bodies and body parts, culled from images that circulate online and in print, and in making an 18-metre-long banner of them, he shows the horrors which even news channels that

announce 'some viewers may find what follows disturbing' hold back from; squeamishness drives censorship.

The time scale of Philip Jones Griffiths's engagement with Vietnam was long—his condemnation of the war, *Vietnam, Inc.* was published in 1971, but he kept returning to the country and *Agent Orange*, his account of defoliant spraying and the effects of dioxin on the human population, came out in 2004. In the exhibition (also called *Agent Orange*, at the Pallant House Gallery in Chichester) black and white photographs—some of deformed fetuses in jars; others of variously disabled children, many beautiful, many showing amazing resilience—are on the walls. A colour video of a programme made about his trips back to the country and of the work of hospitals there is also being shown in the gallery. The photographs are art—powerful, sometimes strange, sometimes beautiful, often disturbing and horrible. Jones Griffiths's own words and the video give them a context. They become evidence. Turn from video to wall and an aesthetic response replaces a social one. They are not entirely separate. As iconic images of deformed babies give way to live children and talking heads, as photographs of war are followed by videos of those affected by its aftermath, response shifts from mode to mode, flickers on and off like a failing light bulb.

These exhibitions about war are inevitably also about image technology. The books teaching photography that say 'It is not the camera but the person using it that matters' are only telling part of the truth. In war new cameras, faster emulsions and better lenses abetted what Janet Malcolm calls 'the camera's profound misanthropy', its tendency 'to show things in their worst possible aspect', its 'willingness to go to unpleasant places where no one wants to venture.' During the American Civil War Brady and his photographers took portable darkrooms to the battlefields. Their record of the Union and Confederate dead showed the unmistakable rag-doll look of corpses in a way art had never managed, or wanted, to. They could not show a running man; but a few decades later, war photographers could have action, as well as bodies rotting in the trenches and shell holes of Flanders battlefields. However, the use of devices familiar to professional studio and landscape photographers—re-enactments, combined negatives and so on—now offered an early challenge to the notion that a photograph has special status as evidence. *Photographing the First World War* at Charleston, East Sussex, shows photographs by the Australian Frank Hurley. He was sent to the trenches to record the

Australian contribution to the First World War and (he was a successful professional photographer) combined negatives and set up scenes as he would have done if he had been shooting illustrations for a tourist brochure. As a photojournalist he produced some of the most telling images of the war—truthful, but not all, strictly speaking, evidential. In the Second World War and the years leading up to it, the miniature (35mm) camera—the Leica and its imitators; in Korea and Vietnam single-lens reflex cameras as well—took over. A large step had been taken towards the theoretical limit of a device as quick and sensitive as the eye itself. The camera could go anywhere if the photographer was up for it. The television camera, now almost as portable as any still camera, would eventually take over as the primary source of news pictures—even newspapers using screen grabs as illustrations.

Vocabularies of violence

You are warned as you go into some Biennial galleries that the images are shocking. They are; and you ask yourself if the revulsion, sadness and anger you feel can be put to some use. Could Hirschhorn's banner change a mind? History does not lead one to expect that descriptions of the horrors of war will impinge on policy. But that is no reason to keep them secret. It may be that human beings have a duty to know what human tribes do to each other. And if they have, what do you say about taking pleasure from it? Pictures of wars and executions, slavery and forced migration—pictures, that is, of planned and sanctioned inhumanity—can fill the viewer with powerless rage. If you are powerless and there is no pleasure in it, is the anger useful? If there is pleasure, are the photographs (taken by people who are not themselves wounded, homeless and starving) morally doubtful? If you are convinced of the imperviousness of those who decide that war must come to the evidence of its horrors, does the life of that evidence on the borderline between art and history in books and galleries raise questions? It won't do what many would like it to do to war-makers. What does it do, what should it do, to you?

A war picture can, in its lifetimes, run the gamut from straight reporting through legal evidence and propaganda to art. At each step along the road the caption changes until, in some collection of one man's great photographs, it may dwindle down to an endnote saying when and where it was taken. Images strong enough to be seen as art tell

their stories insistently. Words seem a distraction from the visual statement. Over the decades war photographs by Brady, Capa, McCullin, Burrows, Jones Griffiths and the rest have all followed that path. It is as though, once they become photographic art, a different response is called for. The job of reporting, politics or propaganda having been done, aesthetics can take over.

Yet recurrent arguments about famous war photographs show that even when seen coolly displayed in books and galleries, away from the magazines and newspapers where they were first exposed, a challenge to their status as evidence is effective. Was the flag really first raised on Iwo Jima in the way the photograph suggests? It wasn't. To know that the sense the picture gives of a thing done in the thick of battle is false leaves one disappointed. Was Capa's picture of a Spanish soldier really taken at the moment a bullet felled him? It seems that it almost certainly was, and that removes a doubt that affected its status, even as art. Photographs are in that regard different from other graphic art. To find that Goya's 'I saw this', engraved under one of his etchings in *The Disasters of War*, was not strictly true would not diminish its force in the same way.

It is not just their status as evidence that makes photographs different. They touch particular moral nerves: the violence implied by the vocabulary of picture-taking ('shoot', 'grab') suggests that the camera is a weapon and that the photographer may have a duty to protect a subject from the hurt it can inflict. The hand that reaches forward during a television confrontation to mask the lens challenges its right to take and interpret. It may be an attempt to hide something bad, but may also be a defence of privacy. Underlying the disquiet that photographs breed—and often it is memorable and beautiful photographs that make the audience most uneasy: Diane Arbus's pictures of people who are odd, marginal, mad or dysfunctional; Sally Mann's pictures of her own children, naked, bruised or crying—is a sense that someone is being used, being made to say something, without the possibility of the comeback—'but I didn't say that'—that you have if words are put in your mouth. Even when the subject wants the evidence shown—as the friends of the boy Norfolk photographed did—responsibility attaches to its use.

The vocabulary of taking and shooting may suggest violence, but framing a picture can do something that is almost the opposite—disengage the photographer from the action being recorded. There are descriptions by war photographers of being in great danger but somehow cut off from it by the very act of having to compose things in a viewfinder. To be cut off from the pain of others—isn't that a moral failing? To make your living from it, at the very least from making representative icons out of individuals having a bad time, can be both a kind of aggression and an act of abandonment. It sits uneasily with attitudes both to privacy and to the rights of the individual that are increasingly recognized and legislated for. War photographers have written about their craft in a way that suggests that the stress of seeing bad things and not being able to do much about them eventually tells. Those who record combat close-to and face the same dangers as the men and women they photograph are less likely to be accused of voyeurism than those who, with full stomachs, take pictures of starving children or coolly photograph the bereaved. But while no one is going to ask for model releases in the midst of a military skirmish, to point cameras at the dead and dying is always a transgression that must be justified.

Photography is much more of a performance art than the end product's resemblance to drawings and paintings might suggest. The roles are twisted about—the photographer who looks at the subject is the audience, but also, by controlling the moment the picture is taken, the actor. The subject may perform willingly, but a tussle of wills driven by two ideas of how the picture should look nearly always takes place. In the photographer's pursuit of his or her subject—it may be a human being, an effect of light, an animal or just some uncommon conjunction of ordinary things—the vocabulary of violence is joined with that of the chase.

Because photography so often puts the onus of interpretation on the audience it is, of all the arts, the one that has the greatest power to make them uneasy. Quotations picked up while reading Susan Sontag and Janet Malcolm on photography emphasize this. Wallace Stevens gives one angle on it: 'Most modern reproducers of life, even including the camera, really repudiate it. We gulp down evil, choke at good.' Walter Benjamin said that photography had 'succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment.'

Robert Frank, whose bleakly wonderful photographs of America gave the lie to the hopeful, sentimental humanism of *The Family of Man*, said that 'to produce an authentic contemporary document, the visual impact should be such as will nullify explanation.' What the Brighton exhibitions reveal is that explanation is always necessary, that no photograph can speak for itself if it is to tell the truth about the thing it shows.