

THE DAY NOBODY DIED by Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin
Presented at the Barbican Art Gallery, 4th December 2008

In June, 2008 we were embedded with the British army in Afghanistan. It turned out to be the deadliest week of the war since it began in 2001.

What you are watching is the journey of a sealed, lightproof box of photographic paper from our studio in London to the front-line in Helmand Province and back. The box contains a roll of paper 50 meters long and 76.2 cm wide and weighs 13.5 kilograms.

Before we set out we decided on an approximate distance between our film camera and the box, and imagining an invisible piece of elastic between the two, we tried to maintain this distance as diligently as we could as it made its way towards the “theatre of war”. As our project evolved we came to think of this act, of transporting a box of paper to Afghanistan, as a performance. The British Army, who helped us transport it, who loaded it into trucks, onto planes, onto helicopters and armoured vehicles, became unwitting actors in this event.

On the first day of our embed, a BBC fixer was dragged from his car and executed and nine Afghan soldiers were killed in a suicide attack. The following day, three British soldiers died, pushing the number of combat fatalities to 100. That was followed by a suicide attack on a group of Afghani soldiers killing all 8. On receiving the news of his brother’s death in that ambush, another Afghan National soldier turned his M16 to his chest and pulled the trigger. The title of the project refers to the 5th day of our embed, the only day in which nobody was reported to have been killed.

In response to each of these events, and also to a series of more mundane moments, such as a visit by the Duke of York and a press conference to announce the 100th death, all events a photographer would ordinarily record, we removed a six-meter section of light sensitive paper from our box, in the back of an armored vehicle which we had converted into a mobile darkroom, and exposed it to the sun for 20 seconds.

The results are the inverse of a traditional reportage image. The usual means to determine the value of the photojournalistic image - its composition, its proximity to danger, its value as evidence - are all undermined. Our role as author is almost entirely removed from the process. The composition of these images are accidental: created by the temperature of light on that day, at that moment, in that place. As abstract, non-figurative images, they are useless as evidence. When you look at these photographs and watch this film, it becomes impossible to forget that they were made during an embed; whereas a traditional photojournalistic image attempts to obscure this fact.

Being embedded is itself a contradictory experience. The army is responsible for your safety yet with each day they are transporting you closer and closer to the field of danger. They offer unprecedented access to the war, but in return they have unprecedented access to you. At the end of each day memory cards are scrutinized, and throughout the embed there is an agreement about what can and what cannot be represented. Injured soldiers, dead soldiers, the morgue, the results of enemy fire... the list goes on. The word collusion rather than journalism may better describe this kind of reporting.

There is something absurdist about all of this, a sort of Dadaesque stunt. But at times, during the journey, it felt far more serious, more subversive. This is a war zone after all, soldiers are engaging in life and death battles, which we were disrupting by having them carry a cardboard box from place to place, with no intention of documenting anything but the performance itself.

Our aim was exactly this: to resist or to interrupt the narrative they would have liked us to describe.

The main protagonist of this performance, The Box, became a sort of proxy, a mute witness, at times it even seemed to represent a coffin on its repatriation journey. A box is, after all, an enduring form that has its own authority. It is an absolute thing, solid with 6 sides, yet at the same time it is full of ambiguity. Utterly banal yet somehow mysterious. When Stanley Kubrick was making 2001 in the mid 60's he needed a form to symbolize a presence that was unknowable and he reached for the box form on a monolithic scale. His inspiration came directly from a sculpture made by the American minimalist artist John Mc Cracken two years earlier – a slab of steel that is on display at the entrance of LACMAⁱ.

Over the last few years we have investigated a number of contemporary conflict zones. Rwanda, Israel and Palestine, Lebanon, Darfur and Iraq. In each case we have struggled with the role of representation, with how to represent these events and how representation itself is complicit in their instigation and perpetuation.

In his book "A natural history of destruction", W.G Sebald expresses similar concerns. Whereas we have been examining how images can block any significant understanding of human trauma, he looks at the inadequacy of language. Specifically at the notoriously unreliable tendency of eye-witness accounts of the destruction of German cities by aerial bombardment during the second world war. Stock phrases such as "that fateful night", "all hell broke loose", "we were staring into the inferno," function to cover-up, and to neutralize experiences that are beyond our ability to comprehend.

Sebald writes, "The death by fire within a few hours of an entire city, with all its buildings and its trees, and its inhabitants, its domestic pets, its fixtures and fittings of every kind, must inevitably have lead to overload, to paralysis of the capacity to think and feel in those who succeeded in escaping."

Sitting in the media operations tent in Camp Bastion, in Helmand Province, we were able to observe at first hand the transformation of events into headlines and into images that appear to distil the essence

of conflict. To watch mutilated bodies being carried out of helicopters on stretchers, followed by the inevitable polite announcements; made explicit a process in which stock phrases, and stock images, are exploited in order to neutralize the horror of these events.

In a way Afghanistan seems to be the next logical step on our dark tour. But this project, in its choice of location, its timing, its non-figurative results and its performative nature is different.

Much of our past work, has been grouped together with image-makers producing, what has become known as “Aftermath Photography”. This is a loose term that describes projects that examine conflict by assessing the damage after the fact, or by avoiding the epicentre of the war and the inevitable pitfalls that come with operating in that terrain. It is work that allows, through these choices, for a slower, more critical analysis. It is work that engages with art history and its various aesthetic strategies.

This work avoids the media which demands images of The Now. Instead it has used the book form and museum and gallery walls as a host, taking advantage of them as sites of critical discourse and historical comparison.

And finally and most importantly for this discussion it is work that recognises that photojournalism, like any public art, cannot be transgressive or criticalⁱⁱ.

The Day Nobody Died takes a different approach. In this project we aimed for the frontline of a raging war without any conventional photographic instruments to record what we found.

A few recent experiences led us to this strategy.

The first was about a year ago when we got the opportunity to visit Headley Court, a military hospital where injured soldiers, amputees recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan are being treated and taught to use prosthetic limbs. We spoke to a number of these young men, some of whom were teenagers.

Many of these wounds were the result of roadside bombs, received during routine patrols in armoured vehicles known as Snatches. These are Land Rovers, originally designed for ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland. Their armour is a hopeless defense against the force of the insurgents roadside bombs.

When we later visited Afghanistan we went on some of these patrols. The journeys are up to 6 hours long. Stuck in the back of a vehicle, in 45 degree heat with just two apertures, each 10cm wide to look out of and all the time aware that at any point you could hit an IED: These are traumatic journeys.

To our horror we saw troops embarking on patrols with tourniquets already placed around all four limbs. The stress is reinforced by the sense of inertia or passiveness, reminiscent of how trench warfare undermined the notion of the soldierly self as an agent of aggressionⁱⁱⁱ.

We have always struggled with the problem of representing trauma. We have found images that are constructed to evoke compassion or concern, pathos or sympathy – often the measure of a successful image - increasingly problematic. The act of looking becomes cathartic, a celebration of the sublime, but nothing else. It is a passive and quite worthless act.

But while we have real problems with the role of the professional observer we do believe that suffering demands a witness^{iv}.

The second event that inspired this project was our experience of judging the World Press Photo awards in March of this year. The award has become a benchmark for professional photojournalism. An exhibition of the winning images are seen by over 2 million people in 50 different countries and 45,000 copies of the book circulates in six languages. Clearly this award has a profound effect on the way world events are represented by professional photojournalists.

Looking at the 81,000 images submitted we were struck by two things. Firstly that images from contemporary conflict zones showing the real effects of conflict on the human body were conspicuously absent and the few that were there had never been published in the media. This illustrates a tacit agreement that exists between photographers, editors and advertisers. An agreement which has led to a particularly sanitised depiction of war.

The second thing we noticed is that most of the images of conflict that were submitted were produced by embedded journalists, who as we have already described, have exchanged access to the battlefield for self-censorship and outside scrutiny. This new ambiguous role of the professional witness and the veracity of the evidence he is expected to bring back felt like something we wanted to explore.

So the second impetus was to create a kind of post-mortem of photojournalistic representation of conflict.

One image that was submitted, and one that won a prize, was particularly significant for us. It was taken during the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December of last year and captures the essence of the photojournalistic image as it was originally conceived by early pioneers like Robert Capa. Taken an instant after the bomb detonated, at a distance of just 10 meters from it's epicenter, it is not really a photograph at all, but a blur, a piece of smudged evidence that testifies to the fact that our journalist was there, as close as he could possibly be to the lethal action, when the shutter opened and closed. In fact this image was obsolete as evidence – when Scotland yard was investigating Bhutto's assassination they used video footage and images from the mobile phones made by civilians rather than any images

made by professionals.

Studying this image led us to the idea of the photogram, which dispenses entirely with the lens-based image. One simple truth: the single, indisputable truth about any photograph, including this one, is not its meaning but its register of time.^v

Photograms are also an effort to transform, conceptually as well as literally, a technology of multiples into one of originals. While camera-made images erase the marks of their making these images are made of these marks and nothing else^{vi}.

These strategies are particularly important right now: when, more than ever before, the act of war coincides with its representation, with the act of image-making. The San Francisco based collective Retort, Boris Groys, and Christopher Bedford have all described, in recent papers, how 9/11 constituted an “image defeat” for the US^{vii}.

This spectacle was then used to justify a genocidal search for images of military retaliation, iconic enough to counter this “image wound”. A kind of image production arms race has ensued with both sides of the War on Terror engaging with this vocabulary of the spectacle: Consciously and, you might say, artistically staged images vie for attention: the toppling of Saddam’s statue, George Bush announcing victory on the USS Abraham Lincoln, Nick Berg’s beheading, The broadcast confessions of numerous terrorists.

It is difficult to compete with these images. These images arrest us and they aim to offer the truth of violence. It is difficult to argue with them, to defy their authenticity. But images of conflict are just images (even if they depict someone losing their life) and they need to be critiqued like we would any other form of representation^{viii}.

Many of you will be familiar with John Cage’s 1960’s composition 4 minutes 33 seconds of silence, in which a pianist comes on stage, opens the piano sits there for that length of time, before closing the piano and walking off stage.

All that is heard is the ambient noise of people shuffling their programs, rain hitting the roof ... Cage was asking us to listen, to attend.

For Cage, and going back to the Minimalists again, the emptiness of a steel slab sculpture, or the silence during a musical performance, is not simply a negation or deprivation, but an invitation to contemplate. To look harder.

ⁱ “Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock” by Kirk Varnedoe, (Princeton, 2006) p. 93

ⁱⁱ “No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy”. By Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites. (The University of Chicago Press, 2007). P.29

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- ⁱⁱⁱ “No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I” By Eric J. Leed (Cambridge, England, 1979). pp 105-114 quoted in “The Culture of Space and Time (1880-1918)” By Stephen Kern. (Harvard University Press, 2003). P.25
- ^{iv} “The Pain of Images” by Mieke Bal, P.111 in “Beautiful Sufering. Photography and the Traffic in Pain”. Edited by Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards and Erina Duganne. (University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- ^v “Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma” by Ulrich Baer. P.7 (MIT Press, 2005)
- ^{vi} “Under The Sun” Christpher Bucklow and Susan Derges. Fraenkel Gallery.
- ^{vii} See “Art at War” pp.121-128 in “Art Power” by Boris Groys. MIT Press, 2008. “Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War” by Retort. Iain Boal, T.J.Clark, Joseph Matthews, Michael Watts. (Verso, 2006). Christopher Bedord in October, Winter 2008, No. 123: pp 20-24. (MIT Press, 2008). “Terrorism Inc.” by Loren Glass in “Historical Materialism” pp.217-229. Volume 16 Issue 2. 2008 and “Spectacle and Terror” by Julian Stallabrass in New left Review 37. Jan 2006. Pp 87- 106.
- ^{viii} “Under Fire” by Jordan Crandall. P.12 (Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, 2004.)