

# CONFLICT · TIME · PHOTOGRAPHY



Conflict Time Photography. Tate Modern, London 24 November 2014-15 March 2015  
<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/conflict-time-photography>

## Timely Reflections: War Photography at Tate Modern

**W**hat is war photography? It is a question often asked, but not often answered. We are familiar with a plethora of studies and conferences asking what either photography or war are; exhibitions and studies on war photography are legion. But why does it seem impossible to define, and do we in fact need to be able to answer this question before embarking on a critical scrutiny of the subject? It seems quite clear what art photography and what documentary photography are: the boundaries and transgressions between these two genres are fairly well explored. War photography is special in that it is an inclusive term that covers artistic, documentary, journalistic, and vernacular practices. It can thus extend over boundaries of genre and time. Boiled down to its essence, war is a fairly simple affair. War photography, however, consists of disparate practices whose complexity is often reduced to an apparently unifying theme (war) that somehow does not capture its essence.

Most people would consider journalistic images depicting destruction and suffering while it is unfolding to be war photography in the traditional sense. Documentary photography depicting the aftermath of armed conflict is also war

photography although it might be decades removed from the action. Moreover, Jeff Wall's *Dead Troops Talk* (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986) (1992), is undoubtedly a war photograph despite the fact that it is an artistically staged product years after the event it evokes.

Warfare becomes more virtual when it becomes more technological, eventually resulting in the disappearance of what are traditionally seen as battlefields. War photography, if it wants to continue its role as social informant and to render visible what is at risk of becoming invisible through this process of virtualization, needs to adjust itself to the ever-changing face of warfare and cannot be allowed to be trapped in a strict definition. It should use everything at its disposal, including the fictional, to visualize what is considered real. This open-ended, non-exclusive nature of war photography is its strength allowing us to see the ubiquitous presence of war in peaceful scenes or to see human perseverance in a context of devastation. A restrictive definition is not necessary for a theme as constant throughout human history as war.

*Conflict, Time, Photography*, Tate Modern's high profile war photography exhibition (26 November 2014 to 15 March 2015), tried to connect these various practices. The exhibit did not focus on specific wars or styles (because it includes nearly all wars that have been photographed), but instead, it examined the importance of time. Tate shows that the importance of a war photograph cannot be reduced to its immediate connection to a certain conflict. War photography is and remains important even after a specific conflict has ended: photographs of World War II or Vietnam tell us as much about the horrors and realities of war as images from the recent battlefields in Syria. War Photography is unique amongst documentary practices that, often, lose their immediate importance *as documentary* once a social movement has been successful and a dismal practice (child labor, slum clearances, segregation, for example) has been eradicated. Its importance as historical source or work of art, of course, is left untouched despite this.

*Time. Conflict. Photography* was the latest (as of mid-2015) of many high-profile, impressive although at times too canonical exhibitions we have seen over the last half decade. The Maison européenne de la photographie in Paris hosted *L'ombre de la guerre* (2011) the FotoMuseum in Antwerp showed the impressive *Shooting Range* (2014) on World War I, while the Brooklyn Museum hosted the groundbreaking *War/Photography* (2013) exposition. In recent years there have also been uncountable expositions commemorating the centennial of the start of World War I in 2014 or the end of World War II 70 years ago in 2015. In the hustle and bustle of modern life, one often craves stability and the possibility to engage with fascinating cultural products. Every couple of years there is a new Madonna record to look forward to (or not), or a Tom Cruise blockbuster; if popular culture is not your cup of tea, institutions of so-called High-Culture offer 'new' and 'provocative' and 'curatorial' exhibitions of the same old old-masters of art, or newer but by now, same old Picasso's, Cezanne's, Van Gogh's, and Warhol's, nearly every year. To an already impressive list of not to be missed events we might by now safely add expositions on war photography.

War has never been out of fashion and has never been out of sight. But recently what at first seems to be surprising surge of institutional interest is visible. Are we witnessing unashamed appropriation of realms of High Art by a medium that, at best, takes an ambivalent position amongst the arts? Are cultural institutions strapped for contemporary material, because post-1960s art does not necessarily, yet, appeal to the hunger for significant experience of the famously hungry impatient crowds? Photographs, especially when they are of intense suffering, are an accessible way to

satisfy the desire for representation and reality, for documentary aesthetics, a conservative continuity with past events, even for ethics that are sometimes ignored in contemporary art. But these material answers to a simple question only go so far to explain curatorial interest.

The interest in war photography can more easily be explained by the fact that for well over a generation the West has continuously been engaged in war without having experienced war on its own territory. The list of armed conflicts after 1990 in which the West, often led by the United States, has been involved is impressive, to say the least. Now, throughout human history peace is a dear exception in ever continuing outbursts of organized violence and hatred, and representations of war have always been an important aspect of art. What makes our epoch stand out is the over-saturation of images of war in our daily lives while since the end of conscription in major western countries and the success of peace keeping inside the West since World War II, there is no shadow of a possibility that we ourselves will be obliged to become warlike even in the distant conflicts where our professional volunteers and surrogates have almost continuously undertaken wars. Belligerent violence has become a distant fiction for most of us, solely mediated by fictional or documentary images. Born in the 1980s, I have been bred on a healthy dose of disaster: Sesame street was followed by "The News for Children," showing lots of horrible scenes from Iraq and the Balkans. The 1990s with their green-hued images of smart bombings and increasingly violent images have been a preparation for the apotheosis of spectacular violence that 9/11 turned out to be. But the acceptance by media of more war, more violence, and more horror has not faltered since. Recently we have seen the beginning of a new chapter in the Book of Human Suffering: ISIS produces and distributes its own professionally staged, HD-videos of the beheading, stoning, and burning alive of Christians and other perceived enemies of true Islam. Do we need these images? Fact is, that these images are out there and that we cannot pretend they do not exist just as we cannot pretend that war does not exist because we, in the West, have lived in relative peace for over 70 years. These images are present in our lives even as the acts are distant. The executions by ISIS can be even performed by citizens of western countries, from among us, but converted to an uncanny and dangerous extremism removing them from state systems of force recognizable to us as war. These gruesome acts have little impact on the war itself, yet by their images they are transformed into powerful weapons of war on a battlefield that is becoming virtual, namely that of the image.

One of the core tasks of art museums is to reflect on and try to explain shifts taking place in society in general and in visual culture specifically. We should be glad that museums take this role seriously by hosting exhibitions on war photography. Tate Modern's *Time. Conflict. Photography* is a wonderful example of how to exhibit war photography: not chronologically (in a historical sense), not according to author, and not even thematically which was the approach of the Brooklyn Museum's critically acclaimed *War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and its Aftermath* (November 8, 2013-February 2, 2014). In Tate, the photos were grouped according to the time that had lapsed since the event with which they engaged. This could be several seconds in the case of the explosion of the atomic bomb, or 90 years in the case of some First World War images. We were confronted with a technical chronology that studies the effects of time on our life. *Time. Conflict. Photography* brought the audience up-to-date on the state of the art of (academic) insights in the functioning and role of photography. The exposition showed that photography is nearly always too late to depict what actually happened. At most, it provides fragments of an already broken reality; the power of photography does not just lie in

the fact that it might witness chunks of reality but that it draws attention to the passage of time without being a medium of time such as film and music. A photograph is not a window through which we can reach the past or in which suffering of the past is sublimated and forgiven simply by the act of looking and recognizing former victims as human after all or other such notions of the power of photography. It simply points to the fact that time passes: that we have a past, that we are buoyed to it as to our own body, and that letting go of it might mean we drown in the tumultuous now that constantly tries to engulf us in the new, in what is cut loose of tradition.

Matsumoto Eiichi's photo of a human shadow transfixed on a wall by the thermal radiation of the atomic bomb in 1945 shows this after-event aspect brilliantly: rather than attempting to take a photograph that would represent the entire event that destroyed a city, the photographer captured a side effect, itself a photographic event, that exactly corresponded to the explosion. Matsumoto Eiichi's photograph is a meta-reference to the pre-history of photography as the art of fixing shadows as well as evidence of the nuclear blast. The intertwining of history and technology work on multiple levels in this picture, confronting the viewer with the unexpectedly quotidian in an extraordinary situation. The absence of the atomic bomb renders it present, while the photograph sublimates and transcends the event.

Unsurprisingly, the rooms of Tate are filled with photographs of craters, shadows, and other imprints on material surfaces: side events to the strategy or tactics of war, yet physical evidence of its happening, of which *The Day Nobody Died* is the most radical example. This work by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin (whose *Holy Bible* [2012] deservedly won several important prizes) shows the result of a trip pair undertook to Afghanistan in 2008 carrying a scroll of photographic paper. Following events that they were not necessarily witness to, ranging from the killing of journalists and soldiers to a visit of the Duke of York, they unrolled and exposed part of this scroll. In earlier times, this would be called sun painting. The resultant image is the most nonfigurative of the entire exhibition. However, it makes visible the tangible relation to a reality that craves to be represented, but that has exhausted the possibilities to engage in a sincere representation of violence. *The Day Nobody Died* is an experiment in distance and engagement, it shows the opacity of attempts to engage.

The outstanding publisher Archive of Modern Conflict has been given carte blanche to curate a room in Tate. One of the biggest challenges of the present age is the archive. AMC publishes and exposes works that reflect the practical difficulties of an archive and show which creative archival roads have not yet been traveled. Archives have always distorted and falsified history by presenting an order that never existed in reality. In Tate, visual, textual, and material sources are placed side by side to at once create an openly meta-commentary on archival and museum practices and to show a way out of the irony that usually renders meta-anything fatiguing. The Archive of Modern Conflict shows that one might engage with history without being naïve. It shows that exposing and archiving are, indeed, an awfully subjective affair but that by staring at the constructions of history full in the face we might be able to discover niches, connections, and material that before would have escaped our notion. An example of this can be found in recent publications such as *Holy Bible* or *82*, edited by David Thomson. Both works include unexpected or unknown images that, through juxtaposition with other material, creates a valuable auto-critique on the construction and uses of the ever expanding archive of modern conflict.

In fact, the abundant presence of books was a high-point of *Conflict. Time. Photography*. Especially enlightening on the contemporary discourses around

dealing with conflict were the many Japanese books engaging with the aftermath of the atomic bombs and the numerous European travel guides to the battlefields of World War I. In the first case we see a meditative approach at work: photography is used to face and deal with trauma while documenting the lives of those we are affected. The second example, the *Guides Michelin* from northern France and Belgium, show an interest in the spectacular destruction visited upon cities such as Reims. These guidebooks were meant for the well-off who followed the paths of loved ones who had been killed. They felt the need to be close to the aftermath of the action: they provided itineraries through destroyed centers, indicating important places and beautiful ruins, and hotels along the way. Both connections to the images of war, emotional engagement and the desire for spectacular evidence, exist until this day. As visitors, we position ourselves vis-à-vis the material in these two ways. We are not impervious to the spectacular, to the desire to be close to what happened, to be, in short, tourists in someone else's horror. However, war photography par excellence is the medium through which we engage ethically with the world, with trauma, and with the frailty of human life. Both stances exist side by side.

*Conflict. Time. Photography* tries to position itself critically towards a myth that often plagues photographic exhibitions, namely the notion that a photograph offers a privileged gateway into a past reality, being pure trace of what has been. These ontological wonderings might liven up any party but often limit our view on the functions of photography. Depending on temperament and philosophical inclinations, you might not be willing to limit photography to a medium solely concerned with the past. Instead it can also be seen as a medium that departs from the now and traces the destructive or healing workings of time.

And things have truly been destructive. The impression I got while walking through the rooms at Tate was that the representation of conflict and violence was taken seriously for what it is, a visual reality that demands attention and reflection but that is one remove from suffering. The theme of the exposition, *Time*, facilitates the reflective mood of the exposition. Tate distances itself from spectacular media realities without forgetting the journalistic impulse of many of these mostly artistic images. Tate avoids the pitfall of choosing between separating the ethical and the aesthetical. The more violent our visual media culture becomes, the more important it is for museums to take a step back and show what is visually possible without repeating messages from the propaganda departments of belligerent parties. *Conflict. Time. Photography*, which traveled around Germany through late 2015, intervened by showing the passing of time in a visual culture in an epoch for which the 'now' seems over-present. The exhibition made clear that war photography does not need to be academically defined in order to be given a practical and revealing method of understanding. The strength of this exposition was that it was reflective, factual, and, indeed, timely.

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