

***Clash: Conflict and its Consequences.* Curated by Andrea Kunard; the National Gallery of Canada, 1 February to 21 April 2013 (extended until 1 August 2013)**

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is no longer a Euclidean topography of clearly drawn lines, but a topology of ambiguous boundaries and shifting definitions of interior/exterior space, not representable with single point-of-view vision. Thus, there is a correspondence between the manner of fighting and the manner of photographing. Looking askance or looking obliquely may be what is required. The conflict itself is not visually portrayable, for visibility only occurs afterwards and indirectly with the plain forensic evidence of damaged landscapes and victims' remains. The photographer Louie Palu, whose work is included in the exhibition, became exhausted by the inchoate demands of the fighting itself and now only photographs soldiers after they have left the battle, "debriefing" them through their appearances—frontal headshots of the expressions, dirt, sweat, wounds, and exhausted eyes peering back at the photographer.

The organizers of this exhibition and its catalogue have produced a work of synthetic curatorship that successfully straddles the domains of recent military history and photographic discourse. Having moiled the archive, the curators have selected materials which evidence the ways in which photography has historically been used in war by the military, by photojournalists, and by participants and bystanders caught in war's way.

And in some cases, art has been a byproduct. For both military and photographic history, the project serves as a graphic testament to war's organized destruction and administered death, and to the learned, mediated, and repetitive character of much past conflict.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Douglas W. Allen, *The Institutional Revolution* (Chicago, 2012).
- <sup>2</sup> Allen argues that it is the establishment of such methodical documentation that removes war from the feudal model based on honour and trust and transforms it into the modern institutional version reliant on oversight, measurement, and record keeping.
- <sup>3</sup> In 2003, pictures of the Iraqi government leadership were printed on playing cards (with Saddam Hussein as the ace of spades) and distributed to the soldiers to help identify them. *War/Photography*, 40.
- <sup>4</sup> Peter Sloterdijk calls this condition "atmoterrorism" in which the atmosphere is weaponized by the threat of toxins and the environment itself becomes feared. See *Terror from the Air* (Los Angeles, 2009).

*Clash: Conflict and its Consequences*. Curated by Andrea Kunard; the National Gallery of Canada, 1 February to 21 April 2013 (extended until 1 August 2013)<sup>1</sup>

In his 1972 essay entitled "Photographs of Agony," John Berger argues that photographs of atrocity are "arresting. We are seized by them.... As we look at them, the moment of the other's suffering engulfs us. We are filled with either despair or indignation. Despair takes on some of the other's suffering to no purpose. Indignation demands action."<sup>2</sup> However, Berger believes that we eventually concede the demanded "action" under the weight of the violence of such photographs that, in effect, depoliticize the wars they depict. "The picture becomes evidence of the general human condition. It accuses nobody and everybody."<sup>3</sup>

Andrea Kunard, the curator of *Clash: Conflict and its Consequences*, exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC), has diminished the risks of despair among visitors by including a wide variety of photographs and by adopting an installation scheme that accentuates the *tension* between artistic and photojournalistic representations of conflict in photography. Created between 1949 and 2008, the seventy photographs and one video selected by Kunard from the NGC's collection portray children in wartime, soldiers, militants, ruins, sites of memory,

state violence, armed revolutions, civil conflicts, and imagined wars. Eighteen of *Clash's* photographers are Canadian. The two exceptions are Guy Tillim, who is South African, and the Japanese photographer Hiromi Tsuchida. In the brochure published to accompany the exhibition, Kunard introduces *Clash* with the following words:

This exhibition presents a range of approaches photographers and artists have taken to the subject of war and conflict. The show includes direct reportage and staged reenactments, along with artists' reflections on what remains after conflicts end: memorials to the fallen, objects that survived atomic blasts, sites of concentration camps, etc. Central themes in the show are photography's connection to trauma and remembrance—at a personal, communal and national level—and the question of what constitutes history, for whom and why?<sup>4</sup>

*Clash* has many complex themes, and Kunard believes that this yields a better visitor experience:

I tried to avoid overwhelming people's emotions.... I would hope that people can engage with the artwork in different levels with a little bit of detachment; I mean, aesthetics does enter into this somewhat, there's some very beautiful images there.... If people can see that there's different ways of representing the subject at different levels of memory,

remembrance, documents, fantasy and construction, text and image then, hopefully, they don't go away thinking it's hopeless, or, I feel depressed.<sup>5</sup>

In short, *Clash* seeks to encourage aesthetic appreciation or rational contemplation rather than overwhelming emotion.

They key to the success of Kunard's strategy, in my opinion, is variety. In contrast to the Don McCullin retrospective held concurrently at the photography galleries of the NGC, marked by the uniformity of McCullin's monochromatic candid photography, *Clash* offers a space where colour-saturated works by artist-photographers meet black and white photojournalistic images to portray different aspects of war and its aftermath. While the photojournalists in *Clash* seek to document events in the most objective way possible, the artists take liberties in undermining the truth-value commonly attributed to photographs in order to represent more abstract ideas about conflict. For instance, Dave Heath's straight documentary photographs and Jin Me Yoon's art photographs successfully represent the same war, yet they are worlds apart. Heath captures instances of the Korean War as it unfolds, documenting the presence of soldiers on the Korean battlefield in black and white portraits, while Yoon explores its residual intergenerational trauma within the Korean diaspora decades later, interpreting her absence from that war in her images of Canada-based re-enactments of Korean warfare situations. Her choice not to use archival images of that war in her work *Fugitive* (2004) reflects her sense of Korean refugees' practices of silence. Yoon draws on her imagination to produce colour photographs depicting a fugitive's affliction, whereas Heath depends on film chemistry to generate testimonial evidence of warfare.

Nancy Davenport's *Bombardment* (2001) features a Photoshopped rocket attack on a New York City building. The artist "intended to downplay the sensationalistic quality of mass media and reflect the dilemma of desiring social and political change in a culture where only totalizing ideologies hold sway."<sup>6</sup> This work was first exhibited in New York City five days before 9/11. Shortly after this tragedy, Davenport's seemingly prophetic photograph was taken down, probably because the imagined representation was too graphic to accept once it seemed to reflect a geographically, temporally, and emotionally close reality. This incident reminds us that regarding the pain of others is tolerable, but regarding our own is not, as Susan Sontag has argued.

Yoon's and Davenport's imaginative interpretations contrast with Larry Towell's conventional photojournalistic images. In one example, Towell portrays a young girl sitting by a creek in El Salvador with her eyes looking up toward two armed men. Her presence in that spot and Towell's reason for taking her picture are vague. The viewer is left to wonder whether Towell

is documenting the child's relief at seeing the soldiers or implying that the girl, given her posture, is a victim of sex trafficking. Towell captured a moment of a child's reality; yet, in the absence of further interpretation, we are left to speculate about its significance and circumstances.

Hanging beside Towell's photo is Tsuchida's 1979 image of a scorched lunchbox found in the post-1945 ruins of Hiroshima. The lunchbox stands in for a child who does not appear in the image; it is the only trace of this young girl, who was annihilated by the nuclear bomb that targeted Hiroshima. Tsuchida's photo is a trace of that trace; it invokes a historical narrative that testifies to the child's horrific fate and sustains her memory. In this regard, Kunard contends that, "photographs of these objects are thus doubly memorial; both subject matter and image preserve the past as trauma and loss."<sup>7</sup>

In the work *Misuse of Youth* (2007), the brothers Carlos and Jason Sanchez criticize the policy of sending young soldiers to die in dubious distant wars. Reflecting upon their indirect experience of war through television and cinema, they produced a highly dramatic photograph of a soldier holding his brother-in-arms at the moment of the latter's death in a Saharan war zone. This photograph was meticulously staged in their Montreal studio, and resembles a film still from the climax of a Hollywood drama. It contrasts with Towell's 1989 documentary photograph on the opposite wall, in which a soldier in El Salvador looks down apathetically at a militant's corpse lying across small streams of blood. The indifferent soldier may be the one who pulled the trigger. This juxtaposition reveals great differences in photographic approaches: personal vision versus detached observation, staged scene versus apparently crude reality; colour versus black and white; low-angle versus high-angle shot; inkjet versus gelatin print; colossal versus ordinary size; desert versus urban war; and sublime versus abject death. In spite of these differences, both images succeed in portraying death as a common outcome of war, highlighting the fragility and materiality of our shared existence. If death is the *eidōs* of any photograph, as Roland Barthes has argued in *Camera Lucida*, then it is doubly materialized in such photographs.

Torn between "wanting to describe and tell a story, and wanting to make beautiful pictures,"<sup>8</sup> Michael Mitchell annotates his 1984 pictures of Nicaragua's conflict with extended captions that describe their context. On the wall facing Mitchell's pictures, Jayce Salloum also uses a photograph-text combination to represent Beirut after the 1975–90 wars in Lebanon. In Salloum's case, however, the text undermines the image depicted rather than elaborating on its visual content. The artist seeks to make viewers aware of their prejudices and their lack of knowledge of other cultures. Both photographers educate us about distant conflicts, yet they use contrasting approaches that call attention to the ways in which a photograph's paratext

anchors its meaning, as theorists such as Barthes, Sontag, and W.J.T. Mitchell have elaborately argued.

It remains true, however, that some photographs carry visual codes that conjure strong feelings and judgments that short-circuit potential identification or empathy for others. In such cases, the negative disposition toward otherness is deeply entrenched to the point of bypassing any rhetorical attempt on the part of the photographer or editor to anchor a specific meaning for a given photograph.<sup>9</sup> It would be naïve not to admit that some individuals enjoy watching the pain of others; enemies in particular.

Friends or foes, all humans presumably share a common conscious or unconscious reaction towards pictures of atrocity: I am glad it is not me or my loved ones depicted in this picture. This, of course, is a passive statement. An active version of this sentence could be: I do not want this to ever happen to me or to my loved ones. If we believe that people can make such active statements, follow them up with necessary actions toward guaranteeing their safety, and extend the thought beyond their own circles, then we can understand how photographs of agony can lead to a discussion of universal human rights.

Recent photography theorists including Robin Kelsey, Ariella Azoulay, and Sharon Sliwinski have highlighted such humanitarian ethics and have, therefore, challenged Berger's notion that difficult photographs *arrest* us from pursuing political action. Sliwinski contends that photographs of atrocity play a key role in advocating human rights, arguing that "the circulation of representations of distant events creates a virtual community between spectators" and that the "notion of universal human rights was born and is carried, in part, in the minds of distant spectators."<sup>10</sup> In this respect, *Clash*, an exhibition circulating instances of human suffering from different corners of the world, may play an active political role in promoting universal human rights.

To me, *Clash* sends an anti-war message that contrasts with the recent official campaign by the Government of Canada imbuing its War of 1812 "commemoration" with national zeal through controversial statements such as: "Canada would not exist had the American invasion of 1812–15 been successful."<sup>11</sup> Such statements fall under the rubric of linear history and raise war to sublime levels in the imagined national consciousness. While it is true, as Ernest Renan has argued, that enthrallment with select past conflicts is necessary for the process of build-

ing and reinforcing nationhood,<sup>12</sup> such excitement carries with it the risk of desensitizing the public's response to current and future conflicts.<sup>13</sup> Exhibitions such as *Clash* help audiences temper a collective fascination with war by reminding us of its materiality and abjection. We are also reminded of wars' lingering legacies that traverse the boundaries of place and time.

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## Notes

- 1 A series of installation shots from *Clash* can be found in the following video: Johnny Alam, *Photography, Memory, & War: An Interview with Andrea Kunard*. Video. Ottawa, 2013. <http://vimeo.com/70956797>.
- 2 John Berger, "Photographs of Agony," *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 42.
- 3 Berger, "Photographs of Agony," 44.
- 4 Andrea Kunard, "Photography and Conflict: Witness, Remembrance, History, Testimony," Exhibition Brochure (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2013), 1.
- 5 From the author's interview with Andrea Kunard. Alam, *Photography, Memory, & War*.
- 6 Nancy Davenport quoted in Bernard Yenelouis, "Interview with Nancy Davenport," <http://carlosmotta.com/artwurl/interviews/INT015.html>, 2003 (accessed 4 September 2014).
- 7 Kunard, "Photography and Conflict," 4.
- 8 Michael Mitchell, exhibition label, *Clash: Conflict and its Consequences* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2013).
- 9 See Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 26–27.
- 10 Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 5.
- 11 The statement is found on the homepage of the Government of Canada's official War of 1812 website (<http://1812.gc.ca>) which reflects the broad level of governmental investment in this campaign.
- 12 Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" in *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 41–55.
- 13 See Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 13.