The Power and Impotence of Images

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Air Force Staff Sgt. Jacob Bailey, August 22, 2006: Spc. Antoine Davis, from the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division patrols Tal Afar, as an Iraqi child walks alongside.

In 1942, Vasily Grossman, a journalist with the Red Army, wrote in his notebook as the Soviet troops advanced south of Kharkov:

> Severe frost. The snow is creaking. Icy air makes one catch one's breath. The insides of one's nostrils stick together, teeth ache from the cold. Germans, frozen to death, lie on the roads of our advance. Their bodies are absolutely intact. We didn't kill them, it was the cold. Practical jokers put the frozen Germans on their feet, or on their hands and knees, making intricate, fanciful sculptural groups. Frozen Germans stand with their fists raised, or with their fingers spread wide. Some them look as if they are running, their heads pulled into their shoulders. …

> At night the fields of snow seem blue under the bright moon, and the dark
> bodies of frozen German soldiers stand in the blue snow, placed there by jokers.[1]

As the curator of the 2008 Brighton Photo Biennial, which was devoted to the theme of images of war, I constantly had a dreadful sense that my task was comparable to that of Grossman's 'jokers'. It felt wrong to arrange photographs of corpses and the wounded in a way that makes cogent sense, or to judge how they could be best placed to produce a coherent formal ensemble.

To have any chance of being curatorially adequate to the subject, three realms had to be brought together: the theoretical, the actual circumstances of the making of war imagery, and the aesthetic. What were the theoretical innovations that had been brought about by the renewal of documentary practice in the art world and the long war on terror? How had politics, warfare, the military, the media and the technologies of image-making changed? What were the aesthetic, perceptual and ideological effects of bringing images of war into the gallery? In this essay, I will consider each in turn.

As the Biennial was being planned from 2006 onwards, a strange and novel conjunction of events seemed to demand curatorial exploration: the invention of a new method of producing military propaganda; the foundering of illusions about the swift and clean efficacy of US military power in the wrecking of Iraq, and its descent into something close to civil war; the apparent failure of photojournalism to describe the new circumstances of war and occupation; and the rapidly evolving field of citizen journalism and other amateur imagery which offered an alternative view to the standardised fare of the mainstream media.

This new scenario of warfare, media and technology had a swift and remarkable effect on the theoretical and historical writing about documentary photography and photojournalism. In the twilight of the liberal era, in which documentary served a humanist, ameliorative and reforming role, such photography had come in for harsh critique from those who highlighted its cruelty and bad faith, its concealment of the real causes of oppression, and its masking of dark ideologies under the cloak of a universal love for humanity.[2] Susan Sontag's views, in particular—of documentary photography as a drug for media addicts, dulling its users into political torpor—for a long time became the horizon of commonsense. Of a Leica advert that reads: '…Prague … Woodstock …Vietnam… Sapporo… Londonderry… LEICA', Sontag writes that sports, colonial wars and youth antics are all equalised in a 'chronic voyeuristic relation to the world

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[1] Vasily Grossman, *A Writer at War: Vasily Grosssman with the Red Army 1941-1945*, ed./ trans. Antony Beever/ Luba Vinogradova, The Harvill Press, London 2005, p. 86. Grossman went on to write one of the most remarkable novels of the Soviet era, drawing on his experiences of the war: *Life and Fate*, trans. Robert Chandler, The Harvill Press, London 1985.

[2] Respectively, Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin Books, London 1979; Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2004, especially her celebrated essay 'In, around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)'(1981); Allan Sekula, 'The Traffic in Photographs', *Art Journal*, vol. 41, no. 1, Spring 1981, pp. 15-25.

which levels the meaning of all events.'[3] The reawakening of documentary theory was caused by the over-reach of neoliberal power in the long and continuing 'war on terror'. In launching controversial wars, starkly dividing the globe into allies and enemies, and violating democratic principles, photojournalism and documentary were thrust into renewed prominence in the news media and beyond. This stimulated a substantial wave of theoretical re-evaluation of documentary for its new roles and its new social and political situation—by Ariella Azoulay, Judith Butler, Susie Linfield, Jacques Rancière and many others.[4]

Poster published to mark the 11th anniversary of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (Viet Cong) by the OCLAE (Latin American and Caribbean Students' Association). Designed by Félix Beltrán. 1971. International Council of Graphic Design Associations Archive, University of Brighton Design Archives

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[3] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin Books, London 1979, p. 11.

[4] For an indication of this considerable literature, see Ariella Azoulay, *Death's Showcase – The Power of Image in Contemporary Democracy*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2001, and *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books, New York 2008; Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Verso, London 2009; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008; Robert Hariman/ John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2007; Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2010; Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott, Verso, London 2009.

Yet, in an apparent irony, while the power and the empowering character of the image was being brought to light, the photojournalism that galvanised the anti-war movement around the world at the time of Vietnam seemed to have lost its power. The images that emerged from Iraq did little to revive the anti-war movement that had flourished so spectacularly before the invasion was launched. While in the Vietnam era, torture (small and large scale) was the secret of state policy, and was revealed in part through photography, in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, torture is the overt policy but its effects remain often unrepresented, or even when they are shown, they pass with insufficient comment or effect.

Abu Ghraib 10.47 pm Dec 12 2003. Two dog handlers have dogs watching detainee while Graner orders detainee to floor.

To begin with torture:

> On the rare occasion that I forget to take my medicine, I usually have nightmares. When that guy was screaming in the shower, I hear that in the middle of the night. It'll wake me up, freak me out. It's always going to be there. The way he was screaming, it was just a death scream. He was screaming at the top of his lungs constantly. And you're right in the next room. It's like it's vibrating your whole body, it's so loud. I don't think I'll ever get that out of my head.[5]

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[5] Lynndie England, as cited in Philip Gourevitch/ Errol Morris, *Standard Operating Procedure: A War Story*, Picador, London 2008, p. 276.

So wrote one of Abu Ghraib torturers reflects on how she is haunted by what she did. There are many things that cannot be photographed, and many more that for all kinds of reasons are not photographed. But Lynndie England's statement, in which the trauma of another is buttressed between a description of her own, points to the silence and stillness of those notorious images, to all that they do not show, but which they gesture towards.

Torture and its depiction have become central to the very image of the neoliberal system. In Naomi Klein's account of the system in her book, *The Shock Doctrine*, torture is the keystone of the neoliberal edifice. This challenges head-on the right-wing association between democracy and free markets, which pretends that there is a perfect correlation between the two, so that communism and enslavement sit at one end of the spectrum, and the untrammelled free market and perfect personal freedom at the other. What Klein shows, remorselessly and in graphic detail, is a different association, long familiar in the 'developing' world: that the imposition of unrestrained markets is so unpopular and drives so many into penury that it can only be forced on people, and that its essential tools are torture and terror.[6]
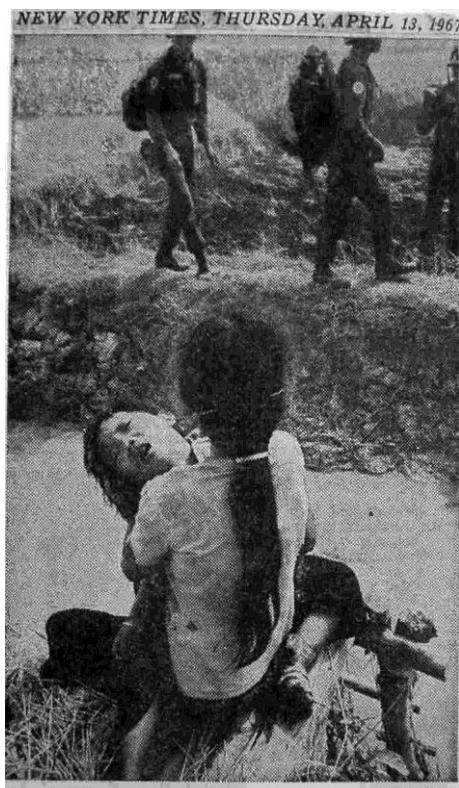
'Homeless Children', AP photo, *The New York Times*, April 1967.

This association is far from new, and has merely stepped out of hiding. Here is Noam Chomsky, writing many years ago about viewing a photograph of another war of occupation:

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[6] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Allen Lane, London 2007.

The things we have seen and read during these horrible years surpass belief. I have in front of me now an Associated Press photo from the *New York Times* with this caption:

> HOMELESS CHILDREN: Girl holds her wounded baby sister as South Vietnamese rangers move through their hamlet. Children had been rescued from a bunker under their house, burnt down when U.S. helicopters fired on the Vietcong. The scene is the Mekong Delta, south-west of Saigon.

I cannot describe the pathos of this scene, or the expression on the face of the wounded child. How many hundreds of such pictures must we see before we begin to care and to act?

> I suppose this is the first time in history that a nation has so openly and publicly exhibited its own war crimes. Perhaps this shows how well our free institutions function. Or does it simply show how immune we have become to suffering?[7]

Torture on a small scale, person-to-person in underground rooms, was writ large when applied to those nations or peoples that would not bow to the appropriate gods. The general destruction of the peasantry, land and environment of Vietnam was regulated by policy, and increased gradually as the US government strove to find the breaking point of those resisting the occupation. Daniel Ellsberg, in deciding to risk jail by leaking the Pentagon Papers about the prosecution of the war, gave some of the copied documents about the bombing policy to his wife, Patricia. She read such phrases as 'a need to reach their threshold of pain', 'one more turn of the screw', about the use of the water-drip technique of occasional raids that hit them with 'greater pain', 'squeezing them', 'painful surgical strikes', and so on. She recognised it as 'the language of torturers', and urged Ellsberg to expose the papers to the press.[8]

Ellsberg spent his savings to photocopy the massive number of documents that constituted the Pentagon Papers, and in leaking them, revealed many secrets.[9] The leaders of the US, under Bush, were open about their use of kidnap and torture; under Obama they are open about murder. They proudly proclaim that they have assassinated some Taliban or Al-Qaeda suspect by bomb, missile or hit-squad (and too bad about the bystanders).

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[7] Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1969, p. 12. The AP photograph was published on 13 April 1967.

[8] Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, Penguin Books, New York 2002, p. 364.

[9] Neil Sheehan/ Hedrick Smith/ E.W. Kenworthy/ Fox Butterfield, *The Pentagon Papers as Published by* The New York Times, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1971.

Frank Hurley, The Battle of the Menin Road, 1917/18. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

All this takes place within an image culture which is a dance of veiling and revealing, highly evolved by state and military media-managed bodies, and newly minted for an age of hyper-visibility. As the authors of *Afflicted Powers* asked: how is war waged in an age of spectacle?[10] In itself, media war is hardly new. The battlefields of the American Civil War were photographed after the fighting had finished for souvenir albums, and (as with Grossman's 'jokers') corpses were moved into pretty arrangements.[11] In the Mexican Revolution, Pancho Villa struck a deal with US film makers to document the struggle, and altered his battle plans to favour the cameras.[12] Nevertheless, the sheer scale of media engagement with war has changed profoundly. When in the First World War the British Army decided that they wanted to make official photographs to counter similar propaganda from the German side, they employed just two photographers, and freelancers were banned.[13] In Vietnam, by contrast, at the height of Western press interest, there were about 1000 journalists in the South, 700 of them with official accreditation.[14] For the Iraq War, there were over double this number, including 700

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[10] Retort (Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of Wa*r, Verso, London 2005.

[11] Harold Evans, *War Stories: Reporting in the Time of Conflict from the Crimea to Iraq*, Bunker Hill Publishing, Charlestown, MA 2003, p. 33.

[12] Michael S. Sweeney, *From the Front: The Story of War*, National Geographic, Washington, DC 2002, p. 123.

[13] They were Ernest Brooks and Warwick Brooke. See Paul Wombell, *Battle Passchendale 1917—Evidence of War's Reality*, Travelling Light Photography Ltd, London 1981, p. 11.

[14] Michael S. Sweeney, *From the Front: The Story of War*, National Geographic, , Washington D.C. 2002, p. 253.

'slots' created for embedded journalists.[15] It would be the most intensively reported war in history.[16]

Yet it is curious that, out of such a plethora of reporting, a vast cascade of images that minute-by-minute filled television screens, websites and the pages of newspapers and magazines, few seemed to stick in the mind. Arguably, none of the professionally made images have come to define the war and the issues around it, as a number of photographs had done for the Vietnam War—notably, Eddie Adams' 1968 photograph of the summary execution of a guerrilla suspect, Ron Haeberle's hideous photographs of the massacre at My Lai, and Nick Ut's 1971 photograph of a girl in agony from napalm burns running down a road. Even Sontag acknowledged the power of the latter.[17]

Abu Ghraib: 11.51 pm Nov 7 2003. Cpl Graner and Pfc England posed for the picture, which was taken by Spc Harman.

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[15] Philip Seib, *Beyond the Front Lines: How the News Media Cover a World Shaped by War*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2004, p. 51.

[16] Christopher Paul/ James J. Kim, *Reporters on the Battlefield: The Embedded Press System in Historical Context*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica 2004, p. 55.

[17] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin Books, London 1979, p. 18.

The amateur images taken at Abu Ghraib did threaten for a time to become the signal images of the war, and they still stand as such (along with a vast number of other images of the routine destruction and humiliation that the occupying forces dispensed) in the Arabic media. They have no difficulty deciphering such images. Why do we?

The Military

The major military innovation of the Iraq War regarding the media was, of course, the embedding of journalists. Under this system, writers, TV crews and photographers gained relatively unrestricted access to the war at the price of being tied to a particular troop unit. One of the lessons that the US military drew from their defeat in Vietnam was to place very heavy restrictions on media coverage of combat. The embedding system was a response to dissatisfaction at the lack of access to US military adventures in Panama and Grenada from which the media had been excluded. Even in the Gulf War, while the press were invited, they were pooled, usually kept far from the battlefield, and closely censored and instructed about what they should show. CBS Cameraman Mario deCarvalho complained that it was like being with the Soviet Army.[18]

Ashley Gilbertson, The captured fighter claimed to be a student in Fallujah. The marines responded, "Yeah, right, University of Jihad, motherfucker." 2004

[18] Bill Katovsky/ Timothy Carlson, *Embedded: The Media War in Iraq*, The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut 2003, p. 382.

Embedding was the system devised to grant journalists largely uncensored access to military operations while strongly encouraging them to take a positive view of what they saw. Since many embedded journalists were placed in dangerous circumstances under the protection of the troops, and lived with them for extended periods, this usually fostered a strong identification with their new comrades. They were generally grateful for the access to spectacular stories, admiring of their protectors, and appreciative of the troops' various travails.[19] The Pentagon had come to see the media as an opportunity to exploit, and even as a weapon, rather than a dangerous hindrance to be kept at a distance.[20]

Yet many in the media were also aware of the disadvantages to this privileged view of the war, which tied them to particular troops units, and cut them off from information about the wider circumstances of the war. David Zucchino summarised his seven-week series of embeds for the *LA Times*, praising the access that the embed system had granted him, but continuing:

> Yet that same access could be suffocating and blinding. Often I was too close or confined to comprehend the war's broad sweep. I could not interview survivors of Iraqi civilians killed by US soldiers or speak to Iraqi fighters trying to kill Americans. I was not present when Americans died at the hands of fellow soldiers in what the military calls 'frat', for fratricide. I had no idea what ordinary Iraqis were experiencing. I was ignorant of Iraqi government decisions and US command strategy.[21]

It was a common complaint. A survey of the system by the Project for Excellence in Journalism concluded:

> The embedded coverage … is largely anecdotal. It's both exciting and dull, combat focused, and mostly live and unedited. Much of it lacks context but it is usually rich in detail. It has all the virtues and vices of reporting only what you can see.[22]

Embedding produced a narrow view of the war, then, and one focused on the experiences of Coalition troops. This was a part of the story, but a very limited one. Despite frequent laments about its deficiencies, it continued to dominate coverage of the Iraq conflict, and still does so in Afghanistan. This was in part, as we shall see, because of the attitude of the Iraqis and other forces resisting the occupation, but also because it

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[19] Many accounts of the war by embedded journalists are gathered in the interviews in Bill Katovsky/ Timothy Carlson, *Embedded: The Media War in Iraq*, The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut 2003.
[20] See Christopher Paul/ James J. Kim, *Reporters on the Battlefield: The Embedded Press System in Historical Context*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica 2004, pp. 23, 25.
[21] *L.A. Times*, May 2, 2003, cited in Bill Katovsky/ Timothy Carlson, *Embedded: The Media War in Iraq*, The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut 2003, p. 142.
[22] Project for Excellence in Journalism, *Embedded Reporters*, p. 1; cited in Christopher Paul/ James J. Kim, *Reporters on the Battlefield: The Embedded Press System in Historical Context*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica 2004, p. 87.

fitted the demands of the news organisations in the US and the UK, for spectacular, live or at least up-to-the-minute reports, high on emotion and low on analysis, and likely to stiffen patriotic sentiment.

Benjamin Lowy, l Kufa, Iraq - 4/5/3 - Soldiers with the 3rd Battalion of the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Assault Division puruse some gentlemen's entertainment while at their makeshift barracks in Al Kufa, a suburb of An Najaf.

The embedded journalists' coverage were at first largely uncensored—they were understandably not allowed to report troop locations and other sensitive information that might have been of use to the Iraqi armed forces, and they were not allowed to show US casualties until their families had been informed.[23] As the system developed, however, it turned out that soldiers at various levels evolved their own set of rules, which, in concert with the sensibilities of the mass media, produced a censored and sanitised view of the war. This can be seen clearly in the contrast between the work of the embedded photojournalists and those working independently among the Iraqis. In the latter, unsurprisingly, the experience of Iraqi civilians and resistance fighters is reflected, and the picture of the war is darker, bloodier, and more desperate. In their work, something can be glimpsed of the systematic destruction of a society already deeply damaged by sanctions. The US armed forces were not fond of these 'unilaterals'. Troops often stopped independent journalists from reporting and were sometimes responsible for their deaths: Terry Lloyd of ITN was assassinated by them, and the

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[23] The rules for embedding are reproduced in Bill Katovsky/ Timothy Carlson, *Embedded: The Media War in Iraq*, The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut 2003, pp. 401-17.

Baghdad office of Al-Jazeera was attacked by missiles in April 2003, killing Tareq Ayyoub, their correspondent in the city.[24]

WISSAM AL-OKAILI, Baghdad: Iraqi youth gather around a pool of blood left behind following a bomb blast in the Shiite neighbourhood of Sadr City, 30 October 2006. A deadly bomb attack ripped through a crowd of Shiite labourers in Sadr City today, scattering 29 bodies through the restive Baghdad suburb, one day after unidentified gunmen slaughtered 17 police instructors. AFP PHOTO/

As the occupation continued, photography became more and more constrained, partly because Iraq became extremely dangerous for anyone thought to have any link to the occupation, or even anyone thought to have any money or professional status, and partly because of an evolving system of censorship. In an audio blog, photojournalist Michael Kamber described the situation:

> Today in Iraq there's so many things we can't photograph any more. Car bombings and suicide bombings are now off limits, it's actually illegal to photograph those scenes. We can't photography wounded soldiers without their consent. We can't photograph dead soldiers, coffins of dead soldiers. A few years ago the Army used to invite us to photograph the memorials. Every time a

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[24] Terry Lloyd was shot in the head by US forces in Basra in 2003; in October 2006, an Oxfordshire coroner's court ruled that he had been unlawfully killed.

soldier was killed, there'd be a memorial… Now those are off limits... We can't photograph battle-damaged vehicles, we can't photograph hospitals, morgues are off limits now. So pretty much everything that gives evidence that there's a war going on is almost impossible to photograph.[25]

There was in any case little desire among the US public (at least as it was imagined by the mainstream media organisations) to see such things, little motive for the media to show them (since they are poison to advertisers), and so the photographic view of the war became bloodless and anodyne.

One consequence of this debility of the press was that the Coalition's opponents were easily and casually characterised as unthinking religious fanatics, with whom Western readers and viewers can have little sympathy or understanding. Some of them, particularly the foreign Al Qaeda fighters, were that, and have amply proved that they have as little regard for the lives of Iraqis as they have for those of the invaders. Their actions were viewed with horror by many in the Arab world, and weakened the movement in all those places where people had experience of their brutalities.[26] Most of the resistance, as Jonathan Steele argues, were far from unthinking, and their opposition to the occupation of their country came out of a deep historical awareness of the imperial roles that the US and the UK have long played in the region, along with a natural reaction to the savagery of the invasion and the occupation.[27]

Of course, this was not how the resistance was generally seen in the Western media. Sectarianism, which had been fostered by Saddam Hussein as a method of control, and was similarly seized on by the Coalition in a typical imperial divide-and-rule policy, was presented as though it was a deep, ancient hatred, dyed into the very identity of what it meant to be Iraqi.[28] As Ahdaf Soueif puts it:

> The old language of colonialism surfaces once again. Politicians and pundits insist on describing Iraqis in ethnic and religious terms, although Iraqis describe themselves (in the Arabic media) in political and economic terms.[29]

When the war could be used to tell a clean and straightforward story of noble Western troops overthrowing a foul dictator and bringing democracy to the Arab world, this was easy to illustrate, especially since the US military laid on many photo-ops. The complex struggle that followed, that the campaign did not go as planned, and that Iraq was pitched into anarchy, with violent struggles between those battling for political position and the control of resources, was uncongenial—except when it was turned to reinforce the view of the Arab as fundamentally irrational, violent and cruel. Western media

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[25] Podcast on Battlespace project: http://www.daylightmagazine.org/podcast/june2008 See also: http://www.battlespaceonline.org/ Accessed 10 August 2008.
[26] This is one of the main themes of Jason Burke, *The 9/11 Wars*, Allen Lane, London 2011.
[27] Jonathan Steele, *Defeat: Why They Lost Iraq*, I.B. Tauris, London 2008, ch. II.
[28] On this issue, see Jonathan Steele, *Defeat: Why They Lost Iraq*, I.B. Tauris, London 2008, ch. VIII.
[29] Adhaf Soueif, 'Mezzaterra', in Joe Sacco et al, *War With No End*, Verso, London 2007, p. 113.

interest in the conflict swiftly declined, not least because after the drama of the invasion, the heavily censored war was no longer photogenic. IEDs and car bombs do not lend themselves to the heroic scenes that play well with the media.

Sam Kilpatrick, January 27, 2005: Sgt. Robert Hufford, from Company C, 82nd Engineer Battalion, Engineer Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, searches for suspects near a farm after a roadside bomb attack on his convoy in Baquba, Iraq.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly in terms of the military management of photojournalism, much of the war was staged for the cameras. It opened with the infamous 'shock and awe' assault on the Iraqi infrastructure in Baghdad, a bloody firework display intended to terrify the Iraqi Army into surrender, and as a demonstration over the global media of overwhelming US military power. Reporters, photographers and TV crews in the Palestine Hotel had a ringside view of the bombardment taking place across the river. In this, and in similar staged photo-ops, the media were co-opted as part of the military force:

> …one of the objectives of Operation Iraqi Freedom was to scare the enemy into submission. What better way to achieve this objective than to give Iraqis a televised view (courtesy of ABC) of the lines of 3rd Infantry Division tanks stretching beyond the horizon as they crossed into Iraq?[30]

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[30] Christopher Paul/ James J. Kim, *Reporters on the Battlefield: The Embedded Press System in Historical Context*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica 2004, p. 54.

The 'shock and awe' display was only the most obvious example of a military action designed for lenses. The combination of censorship, both military and civilian, of embedding and military photo-ops led to a predominant view of the war that was about the experiences, courage, resilience, technological prowess and competence of the troops. The appalling consequences that the invasion and occupation caused for ordinary Iraqis—the collapse in basic services (power, clean water, medicine), the destruction of the environment and above all the encouragement of sectarian violence that brought death, abduction, rape and torture to almost every family in the country—all that, the greater story, went under-reported and under-represented.

The Media

Looking at the technology alone, this should be the golden age of photojournalism. Pictures of photojournalists in Vietnam show them festooned with cameras, each equipped with different lenses and film (zooms were then clumsy, heavy and of poor optical quality). Digital cameras today can automatically adjust the film speed setting to the available light, are much better than film in very low light, have rapid autofocus, and can be used with zooms that give good optical quality across a large range. With a laptop and a satellite phone, pictures can be adjusted and sent to the publisher in minutes.

Yet the profession has been in long decline since the fall of the great illustrated magazines such as *Vu*, *Time* and *Picture Post* that had made their best photographers stars, and had lavished resources upon them. While the decline is old, and was caused by the rise of TV news, it has been exacerbated by other, newer features, not least the extraordinarily wide ownership of digital cameras (often integrated in phones), and the ease of sending such photographs which produced the rise of usually unpaid 'citizen-journalists'. Economically pressed news organisations often prefer to provide cameras (but little training) to willing locals rather than fly out professionals to a scene of conflict. Rates paid for the publication of newspaper photographs have been in steep decline. Foreign news—and indeed all hard news—has been squeezed for resources and space by cheaper and more advertising-friendly features on lifestyle, products and celebrities.

The news media have long been conservative. Towards the end of the Vietnam War they faithfully reflected the split in elite opinion about the conduct and utility of the war, permitting at least in print (much less on TV), limited dissent and the publication of brutal scenes of warfare. The appearance of such images would be quite unimaginable now. The media have since, following the neoliberal turn, become much more conservative as they have become concentrated in gigantic conglomerates, which look to their media arms to reinforce their commercial interests through cross-branding exercises.[31]

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[31] This is the main argument of Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, The New Press, New York 2000.

Nick Davies, in his book *Flat Earth News*, argues that the news industries, and particularly the newspapers, have been remade as purely commercial concerns.[32] While the old press barons ran them for their influence over public opinion and state policy, and so took the quality of news seriously, profit is now the prime motive. As a result stories are covered with remarkable rapidity and there is little time or money to check or research. Papers tend to relay the material handed down from the international press agencies (which are themselves subject to the same pressures) and PR agencies, including of course the military. The extension of the news media into the online realm and into 24-hour news intensifies these pressures. As a result, aside from the sheer quantity of PR fabrication that sails into publication, received opinions are the quickest and easiest to convey, and cliché reigns. These pressures affect the context in which photojournalism is seen, its captions and accompanying stories. The photographs take their place in a press that has become degraded in public opinion as unreliable, gullible and venal—not so much a guardian as a polluter of public life.

Davies rightly argues that the fate of the news media under this set of priorities is disastrous for readers and for society itself.[33] Once again, this is an area in which the operation of unrestrained capitalism works against democracy. With our current wars, it allows the exercise of brutal and totalitarian methods against those unfortunate enough to live in areas of strategic importance under inconvenient dictators. The US has engaged in the kidnapping, torture and murder of those it has chosen as its opponents. Gulags, secret and in the public eye, have been set up across the globe. Children have been seized and held to extort information from their parents.[34] These are tactics worthy of the Nazis, yet they pass with little comment through the democratic press, at least in the nations of the combatants, and (as we have seen) with little published photographic representation.

As against this scenario of the failing power of critical images within the mainstream media, the image world is being changed by the increasing circulation of amateur photographs and video. The camera has long been a weapon of war in the hands of amateurs, not least through propaganda, and also of humiliation and trophy-taking. Here is one episode from Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire*, his five-hundred-year account of colonial oppression and resistance in Latin America:

> 1923: Buenos Aires
> Snapshot of a Worker Hunter
> He peruses the firearms catalogues lasciviously, as if they were pornography. For him the uniform of the Argentine army is as beautiful as the smoothest of human skin. He likes skinning alive the foxes that fall into his traps, but prefers making target practice of fleeing workers, the more so if they are reds, and more yet if they are foreign reds.

[32] Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News*, Chatto & Windus, London 2008.
[33] Davies, *Flat Earth News*, pp. 396-7.
[34] Morris & Gourevitch, *Standard Operating Procedure*, p. 115.

Jorge Ernesto Pérez Millán Temperley enlisted as a volunteer in the troop of Lieutenant Colonel Varela, and last year marched to Patagonia for the sport of liquidating any strikers who came within range. Later, when the German anarchist Kurt Wilckens threw the bomb that blew up Lieutenant Colonel Varela, this hunter of workers swore loudly to avenge his superior.

And avenge him he does. In the name of the Argentine Patriotic League, Jorge Ernesto Pérez Millán Temperley fires a Mauser bullet into the chest of Wilckens as he sleeps in his cell, then has himself immediately photographed for posterity, gun in hand, striking a martial pose of duty done.[35]

Ashley Gilbertson, American soldiers rarely get a chance to study a dead Mahdi Army fighter. The insurgents usually duck in and out of soldiers lines of sight. The soldiers are curious to see the human face of their enemy, especially when they're dead. In accordance with army policy, dead are left on the street for Iraqi's to recover and bury, "They clean up their own." said one soldier.

Many of the troops in Vietnam (exterminating a people they often termed 'Indians'), carried cameras and regularly took photographs of the atrocities that they had committed. A US nurse recounts wounded GIs regularly showing her pictures:

This usually happened at night, because then everybody was asleep or at least quiet. I'd go over and sit at the side of some guy's bed and he'd pull out a cardboard box full of pictures. I knew from the start that we would get around to

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[35] Eduardo Galeano, *Memory of Fire*, trans. Cedric Belfrage, Quartet Books, London 1995, p. 674.

the atrocity photos. It happened every time. They took pictures of the things they did.[36]

These pictures were a form of souvenir taking, alongside looting and the collecting of body parts. The soldiers' albums all seemed to contain the same shots, wrote Michael Herr, the 'obligatory Zippo lighter shot' of Marines burning homes, the severed head shot, or lines of heads in a row with a burning cigarette in each of the mouths, the NLF suspect being tortured, the very young dead with weapons in hands, Marines holding ears, dead Viet Cong women with pyjamas stripped off and 'legs raised stiffly in the air'. 'Half the combat troops in Vietnam had these things in their packs [...]'.[37]

Those photographs, physical prints, stayed in their packs, and were passed around between trusted comrades, secret and eventually secreted or destroyed. When the same habits were pursued with digital media, most notoriously at the jail at Abu Ghraib, control over the circulation of this imagery was lost. As a result, torture was unveiled along with the act of photographing as torture.

The Field of Images

Julian Germain, *War Memorial*, Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth, 2008. Photo Julian Stallabrass

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[36] As quoted in Mark Baker, *Nam*, London 1982, p. 151.
[37] Michael Herr, *Dispatches*, Picador, London 1978, p. 161.

Paul Seawright's work as shown at *The Sublime Image of Destruction*, De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, 2008. Photo Julian Stallabrass

Iraq Through the Lens of Vietnam, University of Brighton Gallery, 2008. Photo Julian Stallabrass.

Harriet Logan, A woman shows her face on the street in Kabul during a food distribution. Only months earlier in Taliban rule, she would never have dared to do such a thing so openly, 2001.

This was the field into which the Biennial was launched, and its main aim was to offer through a series of diverse exhibitions a view of the differentiated scope of war photography, both historically and in its current diversity. Historically, the Biennial took in the First World War photographs of Frank Hurley, including his notorious montages, which sought to convey the simultaneity of events on the battlefield that were beyond the capabilities of the camera and film technology of his day. Julian Germain, working in Portsmouth with military families, showed a display of photographs taken by soldiers and other military personnel that spanned the British intervention in the Russian Civil War, through the various world and colonial wars of the twentieth century and beyond. Amateur imagery, including the Abu Ghraib images and photographs relayed by the Iraqi resistance, featured in the exhibition that compared the image wars of Vietnam and Iraq. Geert Van Kesteren selected and presented photographs that Iraqis took on phone cameras. Photojournalism was shown against museum photography and artists' installations. Campaigning humanist documentary (Philip Jones Griffiths' Agent Orange series and Harriet Logan's work on women in Afghanistan) was seen against the work of committed Latin American revolutionaries and Cuban poster-makers. Above all, causal links between these contrasts were suggested: that the images made out of the embedding system in Iraq were the product of a military effort to make a war and an abiding set of pictures that would forever banish the memory of Vietnam and the

restraints it set on the exercise of US power; that museum photographs took on structurally opposed characteristics to those usually found in photojournalism; that amateur images, similarly, had a force and a distinct aesthetic that reverberated in and affected the image world as a whole.

Frank Hurley, An episode after the Battle of Zonnebeke, 1918.

Contemporary photojournalism exceeded, as it always has, the bounds of the main outlines of its publication in the mass media, and some photographers (including some of those embedded) evolved sensitive and intelligent responses to the terrible situation in Iraq. We may get some sense of its place in the current variety of war photography by comparing photojournalism with these other types; against the stately, reserved, severely composed 'aftermath' images that dominate the depiction of war in the museum, photojournalism obviously embodies speed and intimacy, both of which are written into its style as well as its content. In photojournalism, the focus falls above all on the face, and on readable emotion. Against citizen journalism and the ghastly amateur productions of the troops, photojournalism embodies professional values; while its aesthetic often encompasses the apparently casual, its bears the sheen of photographic competence, and the visual quality of high-definition digital cameras or fine film and sharp lenses. As against official military photography (which shares the same production values) it has too great a variety to be dismissed as mere propaganda, and does not so readily fall into generic categories. When on occasion an openly propagandistic image is made by a photojournalist (as with Luis Sinco's famous portrait of a Marine smoking after fighting in Fallujah), it is the subject of controversy as well as celebration. As against the photographs of atrocity, of the bloodied corpses of those blasted by modern weaponry

that circulate in certain magazines and websites, published photojournalism is tempered and restrained, standing on its dignity.

If there is a governing aesthetic here, it is modelled on the notorious work of James Nachtwey, and is the shallow assemblage of visually striking elements into arresting combinations before the lens, and the sublime spectacle of the remarkable ability to do this under very dangerous conditions. It is clear from the presentation of Nachtwey's photographs in exhibitions and in his book *Inferno* that the pictures are considered to first Nachtwey's and only secondarily images of the specific events that they depict.[38] When photojournalism goes beyond this play with form and shadow, it is because the photographer has matched a deeper political intelligence about the subject with an evolving aesthetic, and this, perhaps because of the pressure to produce daily spectacle, is relatively rare.

It is unsurprising, then, that widespread suspicion surrounds such products. News management by the state and the military has made people sceptical of the manufactured images that they see in newspapers and on TV. The ease and speed with which digital photography can be altered (along with a few well-publicised examples of photojournalists doing just that), and increased awareness of the extent to which meaning can be manipulated by selective framing, produces deep scepticism about war photography. In blogs, the meanings of imagery are debated passionately and often furiously, with political partisans of all persuasions finding reasons to dismiss any photographic evidence laid before them which challenges their views. Here, at least, photojournalism is thought to matter.

The most fundamental divide separating our Western media world from that of the Vietnam era is the lack of a strong opposition with a cogent world view, that could assemble the evidence, words, pictures and video (of which there are a multitude) into a condemnation of the war that could not be ignored, that would gnaw at us and torture us as it did Chomsky and so many others. The war in Iraq has not so much ended as been privatised, with troops being replaced by mercenaries, and the nation is still bloodied by sectarian violence; in Afghanistan a deeply corrupt and unpopular regime is propped up by foreign troops with predictably dire consequences. Yet the sheer intensity of commercial competition to ans symbiosis with war imagery (from celebrity culture to YouTube to the fictional renderings of the 'war on terror' such as *24* and *Zero Dark Thirty*), the speed of gossip and self-fashioning through trivia, all of this makes it too easy to forget that bloody subterranean murmur that should stain our whole experience.

So it seemed necessary to rearrange corpses. Such acts violate the implicit edicts against curatorial tinkering with images of trauma (aesthetic tinkering is permitted, and indeed encouraged, if you bear the label 'artist'); and also against displaying in galleries images which may be complicit with violence, or were made as a part of dealing out violence.

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[38] James Nachtwey, *Inferno*, Phaidon, London 1999.

The point of those objections can be grasped in the many unattractive statements made by journalists, crowing over some scoop that had involved tragedy for its subjects. To take a single example, Evan Wright of *Rolling Stone* magazine, was embedded with US Marines, and had witnessed a young, trigger-happy troop-member firing at civilians. He later came across the bloodied victims:

> Again, being a reporter, I'm thinking in the back of my mind, 'This is gruesome. This is awesome. This is perfect. I've got everything now. This is the honest truth. I was there when the shooting happened, and everyone knew that Trombley was the one who shot them'.[39]

The 'gruesome'/ 'awesome' combination is telling about the journalist's yearning for blood, but is it right to judge the 'awesome' as merely the voice of journalistic ambition? After all, Wright's delight at getting the story was a feeling that comes from fitting events together to establish cause and effect, as well as to seize upon a narrative that has the force of recognisability: the consequences of putting young men, raised on bloodthirsty war movies and games, brutalised by Marine training and the very ethos of the Corps, into a battleground which is the home of civilians. So while the triumphalism of Wright's statement may be ugly, there is something about his activity which is valuable: making sense of a situation which goes beyond the immediate, one-thing-after-another accounts that characterised much embedded reporting.

So there is, first, the 'rearrangement of corpses' to makes sense of their deaths—and to do so politically, militarily, socially and ideologically. This is surely an essential task of any curation that dares to broach such topics. But what of aesthetic ordering? What does it mean to make such images look good, either individually or when seen alongside others? One model of a response is seen clearly in the work of Thomas Hirschhorn, not least in *The Incommensurable Banner*, which was exhibited at Fabrica. This is a protestor's banner writ large, which (like Brian Haw's display in Parliament Square, before its destruction by the police) contains a collage of corpses torn apart by modern weaponry. Such weaponry has been developed, not merely to kill, but to destroy the body, and the horrific remains are left as a lesson for those tempted to resist further. The underground circulation of these images, online and in disreputable magazines, has a similar function to the publication of what took place at Guantanamo Bay, or the placement of torture chambers by the Latin American dictatorships in the centre of cities: that the consequences of opposition should be known by all without being officially broadcast.

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[39] Bill Katovsky/ Timothy Carlson, eds., *Embedded: The Media War in Iraq*, The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut 2003, p. 336.

Anonymous photograph of Brian Haw's protest installation, Parliament Square, London
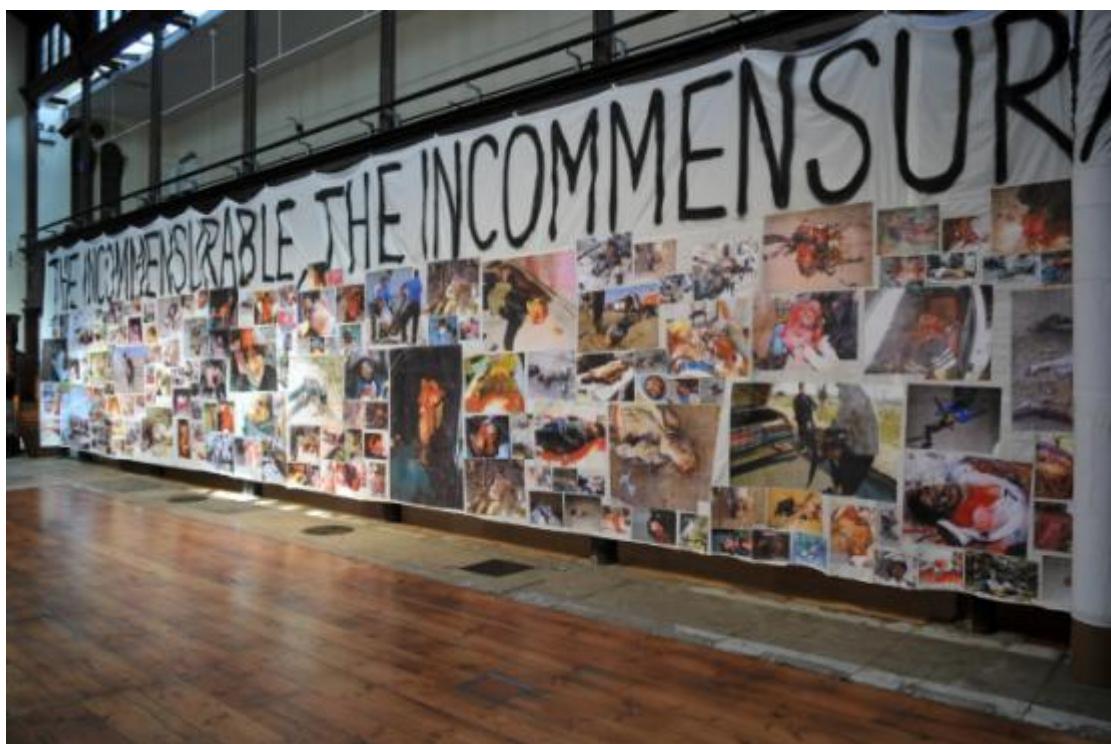
Thomas Hirschhorn, *The Incommensurable Banner* (2007) as shown at Fabrica, 2008. Photo Julian Stallabrass

The roughness of Hirschhorn's work—its lack of finish, its overtly cheap materials and spatchcocked construction, which always reveals its own methods—would seem to blunt the aesthetic. These elements set his work and its politics apart from the carefully made

and polished art objects that are sold out of galleries flanked by other shops purveying jewellery, antique furniture, tailored clothes and other domestic accoutrements of the rich. With Hirschhorn's exploration of the worst images of warfare, this rough and open method of working matches the vulgarity of its photographic sources, which in many other pieces are juxtaposed with commercial imagery, including pornography. Whether these pieces are exactly composed is open to question: Hirschhorn has said that he wants to 'give form' but not to 'make forms', a formulation that implies a privileging of meaning over beauty, and is backed up by the artist's frequent references to protest culture.[40]

Yet the aesthetic cannot be banished quite so easily. As the first photographic formalists discovered, there is a large overlap between photographic qualities which may be taken as aesthetic and the functional characteristics of the medium. The strictures of the f64 manifesto, for example, produced a particular aesthetic result, but also one—in the insistence on contact printing, sharp focus, maximum depth of field and full tonal range—that yielded a level of descriptive detail never before seen. In attempting to fix on the essential characteristics of photography, these avant-gardists could not but make finer-grained descriptions of the world. Fine printing for the gallery prints shown in the Biennial aided the clarity and visibility of the subjects depicted, while simultaneously ensnaring an aesthetic outlook with its own history and ideology. There was a danger that some of the objects on show in the gallery setting may be taken as works of art, recommended by some intellectual and aesthetic authority. So the aesthetic is both unavoidable and perilous, and it is best to be conscious of it, to highlight it and declare it openly.

[40] From an interview with Hirschhorn by Craig Garrett, 'Thomas Hirschhorn: Philosophical Battery', *Flash Art*, no. 238, October 2004.

Design of internal walls to show US Army images and Abu Ghraib images, Brighton Photo Biennial, 2008

There is, however, a deeper objection to any rearrangement, and it is particularly pertinent to photography: these images are not merely generic products of the war machine but they are also depictions of particular people suffering a particular act of violence or humiliation. A photograph of a boot stamping on a head is not just an invocation of Orwell, but shows a perpetrator with a name, a victim with a name, and a specific time, place and circumstance, from which a portion of light has reflected into a lens. Is it right to handle these representations for instrumental purposes, rather than present them as what they are in themselves, and with as full an elaboration of their particularities as possible? In a less bloody and dramatic key, this problem infects the whole of curating, for are not art works themselves (on one view) delicate and particular emanations of a unique sensibility, best set down tenderly and at a distance from contamination by other works or interference by extraneous thoughts?

The model on which this Biennial was based is in explicit opposition to that view: as against art events which dare not throw a cage of cogency about their contents, this Biennial set out to be about something, and to have something definite to say. Its title ('Memory of Fire: Images of War and the War of Images') is plainly descriptive, as against those many curatorial 'concepts' that have only the virtue that they do not exclude anything (a couple of recent examples: 'Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind' and 'Tales of Time and Space').[41] The corollary of this position, to take a

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[41] These were the titles respectively of the Venice Biennale of 2007 and the Folkestone Triennial of 2008. Two recent books about curating offer principled defences of the events and exhibitions that resist cogent

standpoint, is that viewers had the opportunity to respond publicly to what they see on the Biennial website and comments books, and many did so.

I am also not convinced of the need to treat all objects with equal consideration and gentleness. Alongside museum photography, the Biennial showed photojournalism that has achieved some status in the art world (by figures such as Larry Burrows and Don McCullin), along with current photojournalism that has not, and some that perhaps never will be; and photographs taken by members of the armed forces, both those serving as professional photographers and the many amateurs, including the Abu Ghraib pictures; and photographs built into many contexts in magazines, newspapers and on the Web. Obviously, not all of this material is recommended aesthetically or otherwise, except to say that it is worthy of critical attention. Much of the material is overtly generic—this becomes apparent, for example, in a trawl through the thousands of images of the Iraq War on the US Army site, in which a definite series of genres emerges, from ball games played with Iraqi children to the heroic soldier shot from below, to displays of military competence, to technophile lingering over high-tech equipment, to soldiers silhouetted against the setting sun. A large number of these images were printed in a grid to highlight their generic character, so that they would be seen as particular examples of a type, and not (as the art work is habitually, if wrongly, seen) as unclassifiably unique.

In displaying such a variety of images, I hoped that an interplay of particularity and generality would emerge. Some of the difficulties of doing this were raised in discussions about the inclusion in an exhibition, 'The Sublime Image of Destruction', of an image of a wounded child by Simon Norfolk. Both Norfolk and I wanted to show the image because it frankly described the consequences of the war. 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. How did the image, with its focus on the face of an individual, fit with the more general scenes of ruination in the exhibition? What did the inflation of size do to its meaning as the depiction of an individual? Had the child survived (viewers would want to know)? We eventually decided not to include the print. But our uncertainty about this image raised the difficulty of keeping both particularity and generality in the 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.

concepts: Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2012; Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, Independent Curators International, New York 2012.

Simon Norfolk, *18 month-old Zainab Tharmar*

So the question is how to balance this interplay curatorially, and whether doing so necessarily involves aesthetics. Clarity of depiction is an aid to grasping particularity, and also unavoidably an aesthetic quality. Photojournalism, which is at the heart of the Biennial, has its own strongly generic characteristics, for example in its fixation on the event, the gesture, and especially the expressive face. Again, this is a descriptive and aesthetic matter. Through juxtaposition across exhibitions and the website, the Biennial attempted to bring into view a larger structural picture, one which allowed comparison and contrast, and encouraged critical examination of different generic forms of image production.

A biennial of a few exhibitions and events was, of course, powerless to alter the large forces it described and analysed. It set out to provide some resources for thinking about the range of war imagery, and the role that photojournalism plays in the media and democratic politics. For if, through the actions of our troops and allies abroad, we act like Nazis, and if that cannot be grasped conceptually or in pictures, and if it does not cause a fundamental questioning of our political system, then something somewhere about our democracy is broken.