EXHIBITION REVIEW

Conflict, Time, Photography
TATE MODERN
LONDON
NOVEMBER 26, 2014–MARCH 15, 2015

Coinciding with the centenary of the outbreak of World War I, Tate Modern’s latest photographic blockbuster addresses the photography of conflict at an interesting moment. Opening amid the pain—taking removal of the 888,246 bright red ceramic poppies installed in the Tower of London’s moat as part of Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red (2014), by Paul Cummins and Tom Piper, in the lead up to the annual remembrance events of November 11, Conflict, Time, Photography appeared reserved in comparison.

Becoming a site of public remembrance, the installation of poppies numbered to represent each of the British lives lost in the conflict attracted huge crowds. With its mostly black-and-white images of depopulated scenes of war captured after the event rather than in the heat of the action, the Tate’s show couldn’t hope to compete. Depicting the aftermath of the conflicts that have ravaged the world since the earliest deployment of the camera as an instrument of war, the exhibition includes historical recordings alongside contemporary critical reflections on past events, combining documents and artistic projects to produce interesting relationships, as well as some uncomfortable juxtapositions. Arranged according to the temporal lapse between event and subsequent photographic recording, the curators disrupts any usual chronology. Starting with Toshio Fukada’s series The Mushroom Cloud—Less than twenty minutes after the explosion from 1945, hung next to Luc Delahaye’s US Bombing on Taliban Positions from 2001, in which a plume of smoke hanging in the air indexes the recent detonation, that durational distance extends through the show, culminating with the nearly one-hundred-year lapse between Haid Sarkissian’s photographs of Istanbul’s libraries and archives and his grandparents’ forced flight from Eastern Anatolia to Syria in 1915 in Istory (2011), and Agata Madejska’s recent photographs of the Canadian National Vimy Memorial in France, a monument to conflict at an interesting moment. Opening amid the pain-taking removal of the 888,246 bright red ceramic poppies installed in the Tower of London’s moat as part of Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red (2014), by Paul Cummins and Tom Piper, in the lead up to the annual remembrance events of November 11, Conflict, Time, Photography appeared reserved in comparison.

Writing on just this photographic approach—what he describes as “late” photography—David Campany has criticized the numbing effect of the type of static, slowed photography that lends itself to situations like this: museums and art galleries far removed from any contemporary war zone. Offering up a moment of reflection more focused on the medium than on past events, combining documents and artistic projects to produce interesting relationships, as well as some uncomfortable juxtapositions. Arranged according to the temporal lapse between event and subsequent photographic recording, the curators disrupts any usual chronology. Starting with Toshio Fukada’s series The Mushroom Cloud—Less than twenty minutes after the explosion from 1945, hung next to Luc Delahaye’s US Bombing on Taliban Positions from 2001, in which a plume of smoke hanging in the air indexes the recent detonation, that durational distance extends through the show, culminating with the nearly one-hundred-year lapse between Haid Sarkissian’s photographs of Istanbul’s libraries and archives and his grandparents’ forced flight from Eastern Anatolia to Syria in 1915 in Istory (2011), and Agata Madejska’s recent photographs of the Canadian National Vimy Memorial in France, a monument to the scale expected of the art gallery photograph the iconography of Paul Virilio’s Bunker Archéologie (1975). The emphasis on desolate spaces inhabited only by abandoned architectural ruins is repeated in Simon Norfolk’s series Afghanistan: Chronotopia (2001–02), in which conflict is traced as scars on the landscape and on the surface of buildings peppered by gunfire; and in Ursula Schulz-Dornburg’s Kurchatov—Architecture of a Nuclear Test Site from 2012, showing sites of detonations carried out between 1949 and the end of the Cold War, and the bleak irradiated land left behind.

It was difficult not to be reminded of Campany’s indictment that some of the late photography on which this exhibition depends cannot help but empty the image of its potential, its power to raise consciousness and provoke change. The repetition of this style of photography fosters “an indifference and political withdrawal that masquerades as concern” but that ultimately lacks affect, doing a disservice to those affected by the events remembered.

One juxtaposition raises the question of alternative approaches: in the room of images taken just “moments later,” Don McCullin’s infamous Shell Shocked US Marine, Vietnam, Huế (1968; printed 2013) finds itself across from The Press Conference, June 9, 2008 from the series The Day Nobody Died (2008), made by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin while they worked as photojournalists embedded with a British Army unit in Afghanistan. Rather than attempting to capture the details of military life, to create this camera-less print they gradually unraveled a ream of photographic paper, exposing it to the sun for just twenty seconds to produce its abstracted surface. It shows nothing. Deliberately denying us any of the voyeuristic interest or empathetic catharsis that the photographers see as problematic in the more traditional war photography that McCullin’s traumatized soldier represents, the traces of exposed light bear witness to the war rather than sentimentalizing its effects.

Elsewhere, other methods bring home the lasting impact on civilian lives. Taryn Simon’s A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII, Chapter VII (2011) traces the blood lines of victims of mass killings in Bosnia, combining photographic portraits of people related by blood with tooth and bone samples, alongside text panels and press images of mass graves, in order to form pseudoscientific archives of loss that materialize the impact of genocide and war. Provoked by the mysterious death of her father, Indrė Šerpytė’s Former NKVD–MVD–MBG–KGB Buildings from the series (1944–1991) (2008) makes the

Evans, Time Unknown / 6.2.1915. Private George E. Collins, 07:30 / 15.2.1915. Six Farm, Loker, West-Vlaanderen (2013) from the series Shot at Dawn (2013) shows the site of the execution of military deserters in what is now an unmarked field. Its large-scale format and misty, atmospheric landscape is lovely to look at, but lacks the grit or purpose that its morbid title might suggest. Jane and Louise Wilson’s neutral shots of German defense structures in Azeville, Urville and Biville (2006) seem similarly blank when seen in this context, as if expanding to the scale expected of the art gallery photograph the iconography of Paul Virilio’s Bunker Archéologie (1975). The emphasis on desolate spaces inhabited only by abandoned architectural ruins is repeated in Simon Norfolk’s series Afghanistan: Chronotopia (2001–02), in which conflict is traced as scars on the landscape and on the surface of buildings peppered by gunfire; and in Ursula Schulz-Dornburg’s Kurchatov—Architecture of a Nuclear Test Site from 2012, showing sites of detonations carried out between 1949 and the end of the Cold War, and the bleak irradiated land left behind.

It was difficult not to be reminded of Campany’s indictment that some of the late photography on which this exhibition depends cannot help but empty the image of its potential, its power to raise consciousness and provoke change. The repetition of this style of photography fosters “an indifference and political withdrawal that masquerades as concern” but that ultimately lacks affect, doing a disservice to those affected by the events remembered.

One juxtaposition raises the question of alternative approaches: in the room of images taken just “moments later,” Don McCullin’s infamous Shell Shocked US Marine, Vietnam, Huế (1968; printed 2013) finds itself across from The Press Conference, June 9, 2008 from the series The Day Nobody Died (2008), made by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin while they worked as photojournalists embedded with a British Army unit in Afghanistan. Rather than attempting to capture the details of military life, to create this camera-less print they gradually unraveled a ream of photographic paper, exposing it to the sun for just twenty seconds to produce its abstracted surface. It shows nothing. Deliberately denying us any of the voyeuristic interest or empathetic catharsis that the photographers see as problematic in the more traditional war photography that McCullin’s traumatized soldier represents, the traces of exposed light bear witness to the war rather than sentimentalizing its effects.

Elsewhere, other methods bring home the lasting impact on civilian lives. Taryn Simon’s A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII, Chapter VII (2011) traces the blood lines of victims of mass killings in Bosnia, combining photographic portraits of people related by blood with tooth and bone samples, alongside text panels and press images of mass graves, in order to form pseudoscientific archives of loss that materialize the impact of genocide and war. Provoked by the mysterious death of her father, Indrė Šerpytė’s Former NKVD–MVD–MBG–KGB Buildings from the series (1944–1991) (2008) makes the
familiar unfamiliar. Drawing on archival records detailing the operations of the Soviet administration in her native Lithuania, she commissioned a traditional local woodcarver to create replicas of the nondescript domestic buildings she discovered had been used by the secret police as places of interrogation and torture, hidden behind closed curtains. Photographing the resulting models in bland grayscale to produce the images on display here, the miniatures are blown up and organized into an uncanny archive that combines the seemingly neutral language of documentary photography with the quirky, folksy style of the carvings, creating an altogether discomforting vernacular of secrecy and terror.

Too late to capture the violent energy of war and avoiding the sensationalizing exposure of its direct impact on human life and limb, the overall effect of the photographs is at times a little numbing. But there are moments of disruption—moments in which the bizarre incongruities of conflict’s everyday realities are revealed, and in which the photograph’s power is once again felt.

Walid Raad’s My Neck is Thinner than a Hair: Engines (2000–2003), a project attributed to the artist’s fictional collective, the Atlas Group, provides a fascinating glimpse into a city enduring the many years of the Lebanese conflict of 1975 to 1991. Focusing on just one aspect of warfare—the two hundred and forty-five car bombs detonated in Beirut during the war—Raad researched the bombings in the city’s archives to find hundreds of photographs that recorded the events. What emerged was that the only thing remaining intact after each attack was the car’s engine, battered and charred, and thrown far from the explosion site. The city’s photojournalists competed to find and photograph the deadly missiles as they were thrown into adjacent streets, bombing through domestic roofs or bursting through the canopies of balconies. The resulting archive of photographs of each disembodied mechanical corpse is arranged here in a grid, a typology of brutality in which the incongruous details of war combine the very ordinary with the utterly strange.

Although at times devoid of visceral affect and somewhat muted by the camera’s temporal distance from each event, these images of conflict do speak—just quietly. And in London, in the November of the centenary year, there was value in that. Given the exhibition’s juxtaposition with the ceramic poppies being carefully picked and packaged, ready to be shipped off to their new owners (the public were invited to “own a piece of history” for the sum of just £25; all 888,246 have subsequently sold out), its refusal to make a spectacle of war through the aestheticization (and commercialization) of its symbolic bloodshed seems timely. In contrast to fighting the crowds to see a sea of pretty poppies, the more private act of reflection engendered by the exhibition seems a more fitting tribute to the past.

And here is where the aftermath photograph’s relationship to conflict retains its power. Perhaps most effective in Kikuji Kawada’s durational installation of objects and images The Map (1959–65), the stilled calm of these photographs taken after the event slow down that act of remembrance. Combining a Japanese screen and a precisely, beautifully folded photographic book completed twenty years after Hiroshima, the installation cannot be viewed quickly, or all at once. It does not take us back to the heat of the moment or the violence of the action. Instead, suspended in contemplation directed by the photographic medium itself, we are not caught up in a collective outpouring of grief and remembrance—but find ourselves quietly and individually unable to forget.

HARRIET RICHES, PhD, is a writer and lecturer in London, UK.

NOTES
2. Ibid., 132.