
Johanna Mizgala

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Inconvenient Evidence
Irish Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib
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From its earliest days, photography has been used to bear witness to acts of violence and inhumanity. Its strength lies in the power to capture events as they transpire, to cast these events in a mantle of truth, and to circulate this evidence. At the heart of this activity lies the photographer’s desire to provoke a response from the viewer. Seeing is believing. This effect can result in a call to act and promote change – or the shock value of what is presented can create paralysis.

In the same way that photography has been used throughout its history to document tumultuous events, it has responded to the photographer’s desire to connect with the action. In times of war, the lines between soldier and photographer are distorted, or at least blended, depending upon the context. Soldiers have been tasked with documenting their surroundings and those they encounter, for the purpose of bringing home images of places and people that the larger public might never otherwise have a chance to see. There are official, sanctioned images, and there are others that are made for private consumption, as tokens for collection and exchange. Thus captured, such images do more than prove that an individual has been a participant in events in a specific and sometimes exotic place. They mark rites of passage and elicit shared memories. They build bonds.

Often, it is only through the distancing effect of time that some images can be made in any way palatable to those who did not participate in the events. A critical context requires that time elapse. If the images are presented too soon after the events, or even while they continue to unfold, the experience can be simply too close for comfort.

In the exhibition Inconvenient Evidence, the viewer is confronted by images that dwell somewhere within this sphere of circumstances. The installation features a selection of twenty digital photographs, taken in secret and smuggled out with the purpose of letting the world know about atrocities committed, by all indications with the knowledge of higher-ranking officers, although they do just that. Inconvenient Evidence, they may have been created for a purpose in complete contradiction with how they will be judged.

The desire to record, commemorate, and, ultimately, share participatory acts of violence is by no means new territory for photography. Likewise, the photograph as fetish object remains a key theme in popular culture. These images share some characteristics with pornography: they exploit the powerless and offer up proof that accepted modes of conduct have been transgressed. Both the content and the desire to explore the dissemination of such images evoke undeniable parallels with the recent presentation of historical postcard images at the New York Historical Society in the travelling exhibition Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America.

Inconvenient Evidence is presented in conjunction with two exhibitions of documentary photography: Looking at LIFE, selections from a gift to the International Center of Photography by the Time Inc. Picture Collection of over one thousand prints from the magazine’s archive, and JFK for President: Photographs by Cornell Capa, in memory of the ICP’s founding director. This juxtaposition is an interesting play of contrasts in terms of the time periods, the photographers’ intentions, the modes of dispersal for their photographs, and the reception by the public of what is presented.

The exhibition is troubling on a number of levels. First and foremost, the content of the images is extremely disturbing. In spite of the fact that the Abu Ghraib images are so pervasive in the mass media as to have become ubiquitous to a desensitized public, when each image is isolated in the context of an exhibition the museum effect takes over, rendering the photographs new and shocking once again. Viewers are asked to slow down and to look closely at something that they may be aware has happened, but that in all likelihood they rather consciously ignore. But evidence is inconvenient precisely because it gets in the way of complacency. We wonder what other caches of photographs are lurking beyond the borders of our daily lives. Like the photographs in Inconvenient Evidence, they may have been created for a purpose in complete contradiction with how they will be judged.

Johanna Mizgala

Johanna Mizgala is the Curator of exhibitions for the Portrait Gallery of Canada, opening in 2007.

Photographer Unknown; originally published by the New Yorker, May 10, 2004.


An Iraqi prisoner was made to stand on a box for about an hour. He was told that he would be electrocuted if he fell, November 4, 2003. Photographer Unknown, originally published by the New Yorker, May 10, 2004.