

Dora Apel, *War Culture and the Contest of Images*, Newark, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2012, 272 pp., 45 black-and-white illustrations, \$29.95, ISBN-13: 97808135539487

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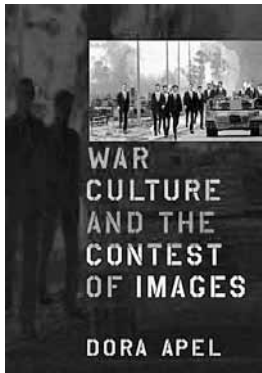
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Reviews Recensions

Dora Apel, *War Culture and the Contest of Images*, Newark, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2012, 272 pp., 45 black-and-white illustrations, \$29.95, ISBN-13: 97808135539487.



When, in 1977, Susan Sontag argued provocatively that “a camera is a sublimation of the gun,” she launched a conversation regarding the relationship between photography and violence that continues to resonate today.¹ In her own recent study of the ways in which contemporary documentary images intersect with the cultures and practices of war, art historian Dora Apel continues the conversation

that Sontag began almost forty years ago, offering a set of case studies that confirm the inextricable nature of photography’s association with war and violence while challenging the assumption that images of war invariably perpetuate war culture. Acknowledging, with Judith Butler,² that contemporary warring states inevitably attempt to control and frame their visual messages, Apel argues that the images that get produced are also inevitably susceptible to oppositional appropriation. In the process, and often against their intended effect, these images have the capacity to “call into place a counterhegemonic public sphere based on a shared way of seeing that explicitly recognizes the political conditions that lead to a loss of rights and a need for dissent” (8). In other words, documentary imagery (a term that the author leaves intentionally open-ended to include photography, film, video, and even performance practices that claim an indexical status vis-à-vis the sociopolitical realm) can be critically deployed to mobilize a community of witnesses that crosses national boundaries to oppose the violence of war and lobby for human rights. Apel’s overriding claim, that contemporary artists are uniquely positioned to activate this process, is a timely, compelling, even necessary intervention into both the study of contemporary images of war *and* the war of images in contemporary scholarship.

War Culture and the Contest of Images is composed of six chapters divided into three thematic sections—The Romance of War, The Body of War, and The Landscape of War—all of which examine the richly varied ways in which art, vernacular culture, and documentary images conspire to produce counter-narratives of war and militarized society. Indeed, while the thesis is relatively taut, the scope of the study is broadly expansive. Apel concentrates on the United States, Iraq, and Afghanistan (especially the American military presence in the Middle East and how the contest of images is imbricated in the waging of

these conflicts), with one chapter focused on the occupation of Palestine, but a wide range of documentary practices (and their afterlives) are studied. These include photojournalist Nina Berman’s *Homeland* series (2001–08), documenting the often obscured imprint of war on the American landscape; the ever-growing industry of war games whose strategies are adopted by the US military both for recruitment and in actual war contexts; and American artist Martha Rosler’s *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful, New Series* (2004–08) photomontage series (an updated version of her famous 1974–79 work) that juxtaposes fashion photography with images of war and military occupation. In each of these otherwise diverse contexts, what emerges is a forceful insistence that, as Apel puts it,

We must attend to the multiple forms of documentary practices so that we may hold the perpetrators of war and violence responsible for their deeds, acknowledge the grievances of their victims, expose the material conditions and political circumstances that are the underlying causes of their claims, and consider how the visual culture of war may help us to shape the future. (11)

As the author of studies on the subversive use of documentary images of the Holocaust by subsequent generations (*Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*, 2002) and the appropriation of lynching photographs in contemporary art and activism (*Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob*, 2004, and, with Shawn Michelle Smith, *Lynching Photographs*, 2008), it is not surprising that Apel’s latest book argues urgently for the power of documentary images to help reshape the global public sphere. Apel sets the stage for this argument in the first chapter, a lengthy analysis of the recent work of US-based Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko. Challenging the post-9/11 culture of war in American society, Wodiczko’s multi-channel video installation, *If You See Something...* (2005), employs surveillance technology to interrogate the ongoing harassment of targeted immigrant populations in US society’s deployment of the war on terror. In Wodiczko’s practice, Apel claims convincingly, documentary culture is employed (if loosely—for this work is actually a series of scripted dramatizations) to ask, “If we are not to be the eyes and ears of the state’s repressive apparatus, what is our relation to its hapless victims? Are we passive bystanders or active witnesses?” (30) Wodiczko’s response, suggests Apel, is to imagine a space in which oral testimonies both counteract officially sanctioned narratives and call upon a community of listeners that will, as Apel puts it, “create a radically democratic public sphere... with a shared way of looking that is critical of the state and the perpetual militarization of society” (30). This notion of a collective space of dissent generated by documentary practices is a

theme that recurs throughout the book. To that end, Apel draws on photographic theorist Ariella Azoulay's idea that the documentary image is the grounds for a set of relations between the photographer, the photographed subject, and the photograph's spectator that amount to a "civil contract" and that, when activated, produces what Apel calls a "citizenry without borders" (9). Apel's own substantial contribution to this emerging discourse regarding the public sphere of photography is to locate a diverse group of sites at which art practices converge with the documentary genre to activate just such a shared sense of radical democracy.

For Apel, a key element of the public sphere constituted by photography is its capacity to produce collective counter-memory. A particularly engaging section in this regard is an early chapter on historical re-enactment in contemporary Western culture (think Civil War re-enactments in the American South, or the practice of "playing Indian" in Europe and North America). While Apel makes a convincing (if somewhat worn) argument that the recent popularity of re-enactment must be attributed to nostalgic yearnings for an imaginary heroic past (what she calls "romantic amnesia"), she also, importantly, draws attention to a number of historical re-enactments that look to the past not nostalgically, but rather with a critical, even hostile lens. These practices, which Apel suggests produce powerful instances of counter-memory that "re-create the past in the present in order to reframe that past from the perspective of those who were silenced or obscured" (63), include British artist Jeremy Deller's now iconic *The Battle of Orgreave* of 2001 (a filmed re-enactment of a violent confrontation in 1984 between striking miners and riot police) and protest performances by Iraq Veterans against the War (IVAW) that momentarily transform American city streets into chaotic and frightening scenes of military occupation and arbitrary detainment.

A less familiar, but equally compelling example (and one of several instances in which Apel, refreshingly, turns to the analysis of vernacular culture rather than conventional art practices) is the annual commemoration of a quadruple lynching that took place in Moore's Ford, Georgia, in 1946. Every year since 2005, African-American community organizers have enlisted volunteers to re-enact the shooting of two men and two women by a local Klan-led mob—a crime that has, to date, gone unprosecuted. In a thoughtful and moving reading of the event that compels her readers to rethink stereotypical ideas about re-enactment cultures, this chapter, perhaps more than any other, forcefully conveys Apel's principal thesis: documentary images, while powerful tools for the perpetuation of war and violence, can also bring attention to "those who might otherwise remain invisible were it not for the public sphere that is called into place and constituted by these documentary practices" (232).

Readers familiar with the author's previous scholarship will recognize both the subject matter—the visual culture of lynching—and Apel's position vis-à-vis the difficult images that have been produced and circulated, first by perpetrators and now by survivors of that disturbing legacy. In both of her previous texts on lynching photography, Apel argues strongly—and not without controversy—that, as she puts it in the present text, "images of the tortured body...help to keep alive a public sense of shame and moral outrage" (111). As an intervention into the visual culture of war in the twenty-first century, then, Apel's new book is also, perhaps inevitably, an intervention into the war over images that permeates any discussion regarding the visualization of "difficult knowledge."³ In the seemingly interminable debate between opponents of documentary photography's presumed spectacularization of suffering and proponents of documentary photography as a viable medium for bearing witness to suffering and atrocity, Dora Apel comes out strongly on the side of those who defend photography's "civil contract," and what she describes evocatively as photography's promise to "people eager to make their humanity visible" (159). It is a constant refrain in the book, from the chapter focused on Krzysztof Wodiczko in which Apel insists that "the excess production and circulation of images beyond government control is crucial in revealing atrocities such as the tortures at Abu Ghraib" (19), to a chapter that concentrates entirely on the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and the ways in which the now familiar photographs of prisoner torture reveal the politics of spectacularized abuse that have come to define the US war on terror.

This chapter, "Abu Ghraib, Gender, and the Military," which is best understood as the central axis around which the entire book pivots, begins with a lengthy discussion of the ways in which female soldiers both participate in, and are themselves victims of, military cultures of violence and abuse. To that extent, this chapter underscores the book's commitment to foregrounding the (often marginalized) gendered aspects and implications of war and its cultures. For instance, Apel's discussion, early in the book, of the trauma suffered by British army veterans (and Krzysztof Wodiczko's efforts to construct a collective space for the airing of these wounds) is supplemented by a feminist reading of the impact of war on soldiers' wives, described by Apel as "the most common targets of [veterans'] aggression...and yet another invisible group whose voices rarely reach the public sphere" (37). In the Abu Ghraib chapter, Apel draws on the recent work of American performance artist Coco Fusco, whose performance-lecture series, *Bare Life Study #1* (2005), *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America* (2005), and *Operation Atrapos* (2006), bears witness to what Apel calls the "systematic and highly sexualized deployment of women" (95) in the war on terror. Like Fusco, Apel is interested in drawing attention to the participation and

visibility of female soldiers in the Abu Ghraib torture photos, which, she argues, “contributed to the acceptance and normalization of torture within American culture” (96).

For Apel, the Abu Ghraib photographs nevertheless serve an important function. Drawing on her own earlier insights into the public circulation of lynching photographs, Apel argues that the presentation of such difficult images, whether from the American south or Abu Ghraib, provides a venue for the collective acknowledgement of atrocity. Going even further, Apel concludes that the circulation and viewing of these photographs is not simply a right but a duty. As global citizens, Apel insists, we must be prepared to enter into photography’s civil contract and to look, “even when looking is all we can do, because not to look is to collude with the state” (156). Here, Apel’s argument evokes a series of recent analyses that defend difficult imagery against charges of spectacularization, including not only those by Ariella Azoulay but also those by philosopher Jacques Rancière and, notably, by art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, whose 2009 examination of four controversial photographs that survived the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz asks us to re-evaluate the terms according to which we invite or prohibit images of suffering into our lives, reminding us insistently that these images, and the events to which they refer, exist *malgré tout*—in spite of everything.⁴ Even Susan Sontag, who in 1977 believed photography to be so deeply embedded in modern cultures of violence that the act of looking could only ever be a desensitizing experience, would eventually acknowledge that in the post-9/11 global media landscape, photography can be a powerful catalyst for bearing witness to the suffering of others.⁵ Dora Apel’s own contribution to this emerging discussion is significant, making a convincing case that the merging of art and documentary culture in the twenty-first century has mobilized a public sphere of opposition to war culture in which images of war themselves have become contested terrain.

War Culture and the Contest of Images concludes with a brief polemic on the politics of human rights and radical critique in the post-9/11 world. Aligning herself with political theor-

ists like Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek, Apel argues that because the capitalist state is obdurately indifferent to human rights, radical politics must be waged as a war against capitalism itself. A crucial front in this war must be at the level of the image, for, she concludes, “in a global culture where everyone can produce as well as consume public imagery in a contest of images, the mastery of images and their polemical power is crucial to any emancipatory and transformative program of social and political struggle” (238). Here and throughout the book, Apel’s quiet sense of urgency and art historian’s attention to detail, combined with a confident and relaxed writing style that is neither jargon-laden nor overly concerned with pleasing a non-scholarly audience, render *War Culture and the Contest of Images* both a fascinating introduction to some of the documentary practices that are reshaping art and journalism, and an important intervention into our understanding of the complex relationships between documentary, war, and democracy. This book, in other words, is essential reading for anyone interested in thinking through the transformative potential of image culture today.

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Notes

- 1 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977).
- 2 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2010).
- 3 See Roger I. Simon, “A Shock to Thought: Curatorial Judgment and the Public Exhibition of ‘Difficult Knowledge,’” *Memory Studies* 4, 4 (October 2011): 432–49.
- 4 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008); Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (New York: Verso, 2009); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
- 5 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).