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)

Johnny Alam
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.” 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.”

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.

ROBERT GRAHAM, INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

Notes

2 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.
3 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.
4 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).
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.” 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.”

In the work Muses 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 eidos 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,” 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. 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.” 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.” 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 enthralment with select past conflicts is necessary for the process of building and reinforcing nationhood, such excitement carries with it the risk of desensitizing the public’s response to current and future conflicts. 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.

JOHNNY ALAM, CARLETON UNIVERSITY

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3 Berger, “Photographs of Agony,” 44.
5 From the author’s interview with Andrea Kunard. Alam, Photography, Memory, & War.
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.