

Reframing War

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In August 2009, Peter van Agtmael, a freelance photographer and photojournalist embedded in a group of American Marines in southern Afghanistan as part of President Obama’s troop surge. He produced a slideshow for *The New York Times Magazine* with audio narrating his experiences humping through Afghan landscapes in temperatures above 130 degrees. We see marines swimming in a quarry, curling up on the ground with their heads propped by their packs, holding automatic weapons in their hands at the ready, in full uniform and helmets as they walk down a sandy street lined with gaping storefronts. Van Agtmael’s voice tells of the soldiers’ daily lives and his existence alongside them. When the Marines ask villagers if they plan to vote in the upcoming election, they just laugh, he tells us. Van Agtmael reproduces for the viewer the languor and boredom, the heat, the frustration, and the stasis of life as a soldier in Afghanistan. At the end of the three-minute slideshow, a photograph shows an I.E.D. (improvised explosive device) exploding, shattering the plodding calm. A column of khaki-colored dust and smoke rises. Van Agtmael captures it on film; the frame is skewed and uneven. The Marines’ bodies, suddenly braced with tension as they spring to action, tilt to the left. There is a vague sense that the world is being turned upside down.

At first glance, van Agtmael’s photographs of Afghanistan fulfill our expectations of what photojournalism should achieve: a sense, by turns both general and granular, of what a foreign place or string of events looks like. We see the colors of the Afghan landscape, its aridness interrupted only by constant efforts to irrigate, its cornfields abutted by dusty land where sheep pick over rocks, its cities baking in oppressive sunlight. We get a feeling for the light, the color palette, the objects and street signs and textures that create the ineffable mood of a place. Photographs like those by van Agtmael provide the immediate satisfaction of perception fixed in time. Most of us cannot experience conflicts as a photojournalist does, so photojournalism aims to crystallize experience and transmit it to viewers—to educate them.

The photographers Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin eschew photography that delivers satisfaction in this way. In June 2008, they also embedded with a group of soldiers in Afghanistan; they arrived in Helmand Province on the deadliest day of the Afghan war to date. But they did not take a single figurative photograph. Instead, they recorded incidents both significant and mundane by exposing a scroll of photographic paper to the hot Afghan sun. Photographs are named after the occasion they mark—a suicide attack that killed nine Afghan soldiers, the death of a local BBC employee, a press conference—and no preference is granted to events more grave than others. The result is a group of photographic scrolls inscribed with light in undulating hues of black, blue, red and white. The colors streak into each other in patterns that remind us how the pa-



Peter van Agtmael/Magnum



Peter van Agtmael/Magnum

per was packaged: rolled up in a cardboard box, where light might leak in, gradually, at the sides. The materiality of the paper and the light takes center stage; we no longer look for images but instead turn our minds to the heat of the sun, the light that infiltrates the packaging, the moment a wrinkle in the paper formed as it was smashed in transport.

Of *The Day Nobody Died*, Broomberg and Chanarin write, “The results deny the viewer the cathartic effect offered up by the conventional language of photographic responses to conflict and suffering.”

But perhaps even in more conventional war photography catharsis is not always the point. In some ways, the mechanism at work in Broomberg and Chanarin’s work does not diverge entirely from van Agtmael’s. Photographed moments, whether representing figures or not, become necessary scaffolding for a viewer’s imagination, and fill in the gaps. Van Agtmael, who, in 2011, won the International Center of Photography’s Infinity Award for Young Photographer of the Year, aims to document, but he also exploits the gap left for the imagination and strikes an equivocal note. He writes in the prologue to his book of photographs, *2nd Tour, Hope I Don’t Die*, “I wanted to make pictures that reflected my complex and often contradictory experiences, where the line was continuously blurred between perpetrator and victim, between hero and villain.” In taking pictures that distill the contradictions of experience, van Agtmael produces images that allow the imagination to linger and tease out details that might either adhere to or disrupt a cumulative idea. Photographs tell us something, but as van Agtmael reminds us and Broomberg and Chanarin insist, they can’t tell us everything.

In contrast to van Agtmael’s approach, the washes of grainy color of *The Day Nobody Died* don’t claim to depict anything, but they do bear a one-to-one relationship to an event—they aim to represent what happens, just as van Agtmael’s photographs do. Broomberg and Chanarin document these moments in the captions of each image: *The Fixer’s Execution, June 7, 2008; The Brothers’ Suicide, June 7, 2008; The Day of One Hundred Dead, June 8; The Press Conference, June 9, 2008; The Duke of York, June 10, 2008; The Day Nobody Died, June 10, 2008; The Jail Break, June 12, 2008; The Repatriation, June 16, 2008*. These images and titles are points of reference. The viewer knows that these events happened but have no idea what they look like.

We do not have all the sensory information we are used to in these works, and yet they do not entirely rob the viewer of knowledge. In Broomberg and Chanarin’s strategy, titles become essential to understanding images; their sequence tells a narrative, however arbitrary. Producing these non-figurative, singular photographs borne of action but not depicting it, they strip photojournalism to a certain essential: how a viewer constructs a story from a sequence of photographs. With Broomberg and Chanarin on the one hand and van Agtmael on the other, scraps of information are provided that form a narrative. With van Agtmael’s work, when we encounter an image (a landscape, a face), we connect it to an event (a battle, a death) as an abstract corollary in our imagination. In Broomberg and Chanarin’s work,



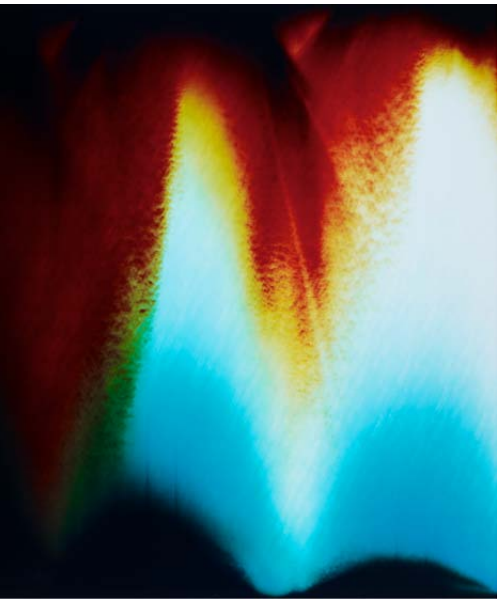
The Day That Nobody Died, Installation View, 2008



The Day Nobody Died IV, June 10 (Detail)



The Fixers Execution, June 7, 2008 (Detail)



The Press Conference, June 9, 2008 (Detail)

because we can't see every detail or perceive with our other senses, viewers project details to fill in the gaps. With *The Fixer's Execution, June 7, 2008*, an abstract blur of red, blue, black and white streaked across glossy, light-sensitive paper, we provide the image based on what we are told. We see it in our mind's eye: a man performing his job, suddenly desperate when he's pulled from his car. A similar mechanism is at work when we see Peter van Agtmael's photograph of an I.E.D. exploding the following summer. The photograph depicts a plume of dust and adrenaline-amped bodies springing to action, but it remains a sensory abstraction. We don't feel the heat or the fear; we don't hear the voices or know the consequences. To view an image of an I.E.D. explosion triggers empathy. This happens, too, when one reads of Broomberg and Chanarin's project and then connects a caption to a non-figurative image. By maintaining the one-to-one relationship between image and event, the pair highlights the aspect of the photograph that captures a moment and tells a story. Whereas van Agtmael provokes catharsis with mimesis, Broomberg and Chanarin's photographs elicit an empathic response through an indexical use of gesture and intimation.

Besides zooming into the conceptual underpinning of photojournalism and the empathetic response it provokes, *The Day Nobody Died* reveals the mechanisms by which such events are recorded—that is, via the strictures and structures of the military. Similar to how van Agtmael reveals the context for his photographs and tells the story of embedding with troops by overlaying a slideshow with audio, Broomberg and Chanarin lay bare their interactions with military bureaucracy with film and unique C-type prints that chronicle the transport of the box of photographic paper. The cardboard box, taped up to seal the paper from light leaks, acts as a stand-in for any object that a soldier might transport by personal necessity or by order. The video of *The Day Nobody Died* runs twenty-three minutes, and though the camera is trained exclusively on the box of photo paper, the footage documents the journey of the box, the photographers and the soldiers. We follow the box as it travels from the artists' studio in London to Afghanistan, where soldiers in the British Army must carry it with great care along with their packs, supplies, and ammunition. In contrast to van Agtmael's straightforward but sympathetic portrayal of how soldiers perform their duties—he details what they eat and the privations and discomforts they suffer as they perform their duties—here we see this out-of-place object transported, no questions asked.

In both instances, these images convey the quotidian—how soldiers pass their days, the responsibilities they bear, what they eat, wear, carry—but the video of *The Day Nobody Died* provides a critical angle. The viewer experiences not only the discipline and routine of a soldiers' day-to-day, but the checks on their free will. We likewise see what can and cannot be recorded or accessed by the journalists allowed to join them. Broomberg and Chanarin include moments where they are asked to turn off the camera. When they comply and we understand that something is inaccessible. Broomberg and Chanarin's work focuses particularly on these liminal images, which foreground occlusion as much as they convey information. For the pair, an image is an index, a placeholder that conjures a reality perceived only indirectly, more imagined than experienced. The viewer is denied the satisfaction—or catharsis—of experiencing the historical record as it is made, but awareness of the limits to our access produces another sort of knowledge. We see another veil, and that we can't lift it is its own curiosity.



Afghanistan, August 16, 2009. An I.E.D. detonates on a Marine patrol, Peter van Agtmael/Magnum