

## 2.23

# Uneasy Witnesses: Broomberg, Chanarin, and Photojournalism's Expanded Field

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In 2007, Tim Hetherington's photograph of a worn-out US soldier resting inside a bunker in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley was selected from more than 80,000 submissions as the World Press Photo of the Year. In terms of its initial circulation, the photograph was an unlikely candidate to win this award. Hetherington took this image while on assignment with Sebastian Junger for *Vanity Fair* magazine, as part of a year-long embed with the Second Platoon of Battle Company of the US 173rd Airborne Brigade in Afghanistan. Though Hetherington had hoped to use the photograph as the opening spread for Junger's January 2008 *Vanity Fair* article "Into the Valley of Death," a different photograph was ultimately chosen. Hetherington also did not submit this image separately to the World Press Photo contest. As a photojournalist who values storytelling above all else, he entered it instead as part of a twelve-image photoessay that went on to garner second place in the category of General News Stories.<sup>1</sup>

Given that Hetherington's photograph never circulated in the print media, how do we account for its selection as Photo of the Year and, more critically, what does this process say about the state of contemporary event-based news gathering? A keynote address given by former Jury Secretary for the World Press Photo contest, Stephen Mayes, two years after Hetherington's photograph won this coveted award, offers insight into this question. In his speech to the World Press Photo organization, Mayes characterized the nearly half a million photographs that he had encountered during his tenure as Jury Secretary as "a form of photojournalism that is now more romantic than functional." He further lamented that too much photojournalism "doesn't inform but merely repeats and affirms what we already know."<sup>2</sup> London-based artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, who served on the jury the year that Hetherington's photograph won Photo of the Year, reiterate Mayes's concerns. In an essay about their experience judging the contest, they describe Hetherington's photograph as "a predictable World Press Photo winner; an amalgam of all the images of war and death that we have embedded in our memory."<sup>3</sup> Like Mayes's impression that over the years he was seeing "the same picture again and again,"<sup>4</sup> the duo criticized Hetherington's use of the visual trope of the exhausted soldier as "casting the world in the same mold over and over again."<sup>5</sup>

Together these reflections on the World Press Photo contest highlight a crisis not only in the competition itself but also in the state of contemporary event-based news gathering more generally. Many critics have

identified this unrest as a product of the rapidly changing media environment. With the waning of traditional platforms of circulation and payment beginning with the folding of big picture magazines in the 1970s, along with the introduction of digital technologies in the 1980s and 1990s, it is widely held that photojournalism today has relinquished its traditional witnessing authority to other media. A 2009 *New York Times* headline that reads “Lament for a Dying Field: Photojournalism” echoes this contention. In the accompanying article, reporter David Jolly attributes widespread budgetary cutbacks in newspaper and magazine photography, the bankruptcy of international photo agencies, and the rise and speed of citizen journalism as bringing about traditional photojournalism’s demise.<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I consider several recent photographic responses to the so-called death, or at least decline, of traditional photojournalism’s witnessing potential. As part of this discussion, I examine what assumptions about photography’s documentary aspirations they make and how, rather than signal the end of the photojournalistic object, they might be used to expand the medium’s longstanding ability to visualize the world.<sup>7</sup>

Beginning in the late 1990s, one response to the mounting crisis within contemporary photojournalism was for photographers to forgo their reliance on instantaneity and immediacy for the more distanced and detached perspective of “after.” Many practitioners who opted for this approach also exchanged photojournalism’s lightweight, 35 mm or digital, hand-held cameras and their ostensible ability to quickly and immediately freeze events as they happen in time for medium- or large-format cameras, whose larger frames and cumbersome sizes require them to take slower and more detailed images. Identified variously as “post-reportage,” a photography of “after,” and “late photography,” many photography critics and historians lauded this approach for its potential to transform, even challenge, the fundamental tenets that have conventionally informed the traditional institutions and practices of photojournalism.<sup>8</sup>

In situating “late photography” as the inversion of photojournalism, however, these same critics and historians perpetuate a kind of oppositional thinking dependent on a series of medium specific clichés about the differences between news and art photography. According to this logic, since photojournalism is a form of reportage, its photographers necessarily and automatically “capture” the real without any self-reflexivity or critical detachment. Artists, conversely, consider the nature of representation and its depiction of reality in a more oblique and hence contemplative manner. Whereas photojournalists must adhere to the immediacy and instantaneity of the “facts,” then, artists, who can approach their works with slowness and detachment, produce more analytical and reflective forms of representation. “The photojournalist,” so this reasoning goes, “has a professional and ethical imperative to capture the immediate circumstances, while the artist has the license of luxury to turn his camera away from these events, even to question the photograph’s ability to accurately represent them.”<sup>9</sup>

Adam Broomberg’s and Oliver Chanarin’s evaluation of the process of judging the 2007 World Press Photo contest relies on this same binary of photojournalism and art. In lieu of Tim Hetherington’s more “predictable” photograph, Broomberg and Chanarin identify another submission, one that went on to receive honorable mention in the category of General News, as deserving of special recognition. Taken by photojournalist Christoph Bangert, the image depicts a shot-ridden German practice target sitting alone in a desolate Afghan landscape (Fig. 2.23a). What appeals to Broomberg and Chanarin about this image is the kind of reflection that it supposedly requires of viewers. Whereas the well-rehearsed visual trope of the exhausted soldier in Hetherington’s photograph essentially thinks for viewers, Broomberg and Chanarin argue that the formal discrepancy between the “lush, green landscape” in the hand-painted German target and the actual desolation of the barren Afghan landscape surrounding it encourages viewers to reflect more critically about the relationship between these two entities and, more pointedly, about “the nature of war” itself.



**Figure 2.23a** Christoph Bangert/laif. A target on firing range used by German NATO forces (Afghanistan 2007). Courtesy of Redux Pictures.

In both instances—Bangert’s photograph and in the notion of “late photography”—the “reflection” and “analysis” required of them (usually associated with art) is elevated above the seemingly blunt “immediacy” and “instantaneity” of reportage (photojournalism). How might this oppositional thinking be overcome? Broomberg’s and Chanarin’s installation, *The Day Nobody Died*, produced the year after they served as judges for the World Press Photo contest, offers one model. For this series, instead of arriving after the fact, the artists traveled under the guise of embedded photojournalists with the British army to the front-line of the war in Afghanistan. In spite of their closeness to the action, however, Broomberg and Chanarin refused both photojournalism’s traditional hand-held cameras and the large-format cameras of “late photography.” In place of these devices, they selected a sealed, lightproof box of photographic paper. During each of the eight days of their embed, they unrolled a seven-meter section of this paper and exposed it to the sun for 20 seconds in response to such war-time events as the execution of a BBC fixer as well more mundane ones, including a visit to the troops by the Duke of York. The series of photograms that resulted—consisting essentially of abstracted bands of color, which the artists paired with matter-of-fact titles that describe the event “witnessed” in the images—were then hung on the white walls of the Barbican Art Gallery (Fig. 2.23b).<sup>10</sup>

Through these non-figurative photograms, Broomberg and Chanarin question the tendency within traditional photojournalism to assume that its reportorial powers derive from the physical and emotional proximity of its photographers and their ability to, thereby, witness their subjects firsthand. At the same

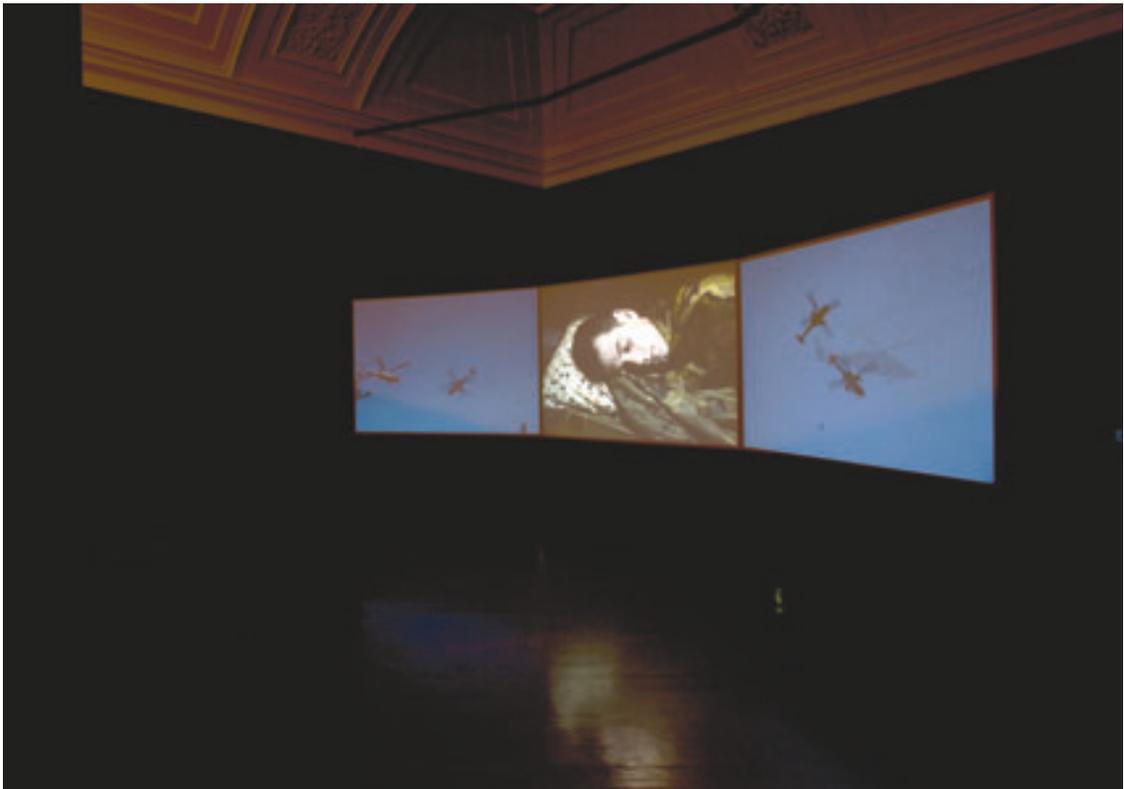


**Figure 2.23b** Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Day That Nobody Died*, 2008, installation view. Courtesy of the artists.

time, the artists circumvent the oppositional thinking inherent in “late photography” by denying viewers the opportunity to see actual representations of pain and suffering whether they were taken during the course of an event or after the fact. Whereas “late photography” replaces the visual tropes of “closeness” and “immediacy” with “distance” and “slowness,” the abstracted bands of colors in Broomberg’s and Chanarin’s photograms are the product of neither closeness nor distance. This is because, as the product of the light registered at the moment that these war time events occurred, the photograms, though literally as “close” as possible, render the visual codes usually associated with photography’s witnessing potential—upon which both photojournalism and “late photography” depend—strange.

Through their installation, Broomberg and Chanarin, then, not only demystify the formal conventions through which the representation of war is produced but, more importantly, question the set of aesthetic assumptions upon which documentary and press photography depend. At the same time, in turning away from lens-based images, their critique results in a kind of rejection of the photojournalistic object itself. Broomberg and Chanarin have acknowledged this “anti-naturalistic” tendency in their work and have made it clear that “while we have real problems with the role of the professional observer we do believe that suffering demands a witness.”<sup>11</sup> Just how the witnessing potential of the photojournalistic object might be opened up without rejecting its visualization outright is the approach of what many refer to today as “visual journalism.”

According to photography critic Fred Ritchin, visual journalism, which includes “not only photography, video, and digital imaging, but a host of other strategies such as hypermedia, geo-positioning, augmented reality, and simulations,” is a kind of image making that “allows for a wider-ranging approach in which the action photograph is only one component.”<sup>12</sup> This means that, unlike “late photography,” visual journalism does not stand in opposition to the instantaneity and immediacy of traditional photojournalism. Rather, its practitioners seek to combine its formal conventions with other forms of digital and multimedia content in innovative and engaging ways. David Campbell elaborates: visual journalism “is not a world in which one visual form has died, but a world in which multiple visual forms are alive and stronger than ever.”<sup>13</sup> Until his premature death in 2011, Tim Hetherington chiefly worked within this broader field of visual journalism or what he called the “post-photographic.”<sup>14</sup> His installation *Sleeping Soldiers*, first shown at the 2009 New York Photo Festival, exemplifies this expanded approach (Fig. 2.23c). For this work, Hetherington created a three-channel installation in which he layered video footage from his embed in Afghanistan’s Korengal Valley, that depicts the Second Platoon of Battle Company engaged in combat, on top of still photographs of soldiers from this same Platoon at rest. Through this superposition of still and moving, repose and action, dreams and reality, Hetherington considers the psychological impact of war and the ways in which the experience of conflict, in a manner similar to the immersive experience of watching and listening to the three channel installation, infiltrates one’s psyche such that the



**Figure 2.23c** Tim Hetherington, *Sleeping Soldiers*, 2009, installation image, three-screen video projection. Courtesy of Magnum Photos.

distinctions between what is real and imaginary as well as what is reportage and analysis are no longer decipherable.

Through this melding of states of consciousness as well as visual strategies, Hetherington's installation at once documents the brutalities of war from the position of closeness while at the same time more distantly reflects upon its emotional complexities. In so doing, *Sleeping Soldiers* offers an important model for thinking beyond the photojournalism/art binary in a way that does not necessitate forgoing photojournalism's witnessing potential or art's assumed reflexivity. Yet, although the visual language of the photojournalistic object is greatly expanded within this installation, the circumstances, including political consequences, of its making are largely taken for granted. This means that, even though Hetherington's *Sleeping Soldiers* enlarges the visual scope of photojournalism beyond the formal tropes of instantaneity and immediacy as well as distance and reflection, in the end, the installation does nothing to disrupt the combined effects that these representations of conflict have had on our visual understanding of the war in Afghanistan, including, most importantly, the collusion of the US military with them. This is because, like Hetherington's World Press Photo of the Year, *Sleeping Soldiers* is the product of an embedding system that has likewise gone unchecked by the mainstream press. Rather than reflect the complex set of political and personal issues that make up the war in Afghanistan, the images disseminated about this conflict, including *Sleeping Soldiers*, have remained, as Campbell explains, "remarkably similar in both content and approach. US forces are the locus of the narrative and combat scenes are repeatedly pictured." These kind of one-sided pictures, as Campbell elaborates, "badly limit our understanding of the strategic dilemma that is Afghanistan" and "effectively structure the visibility of the war in a way that foregrounds competing American military interests."<sup>15</sup>

For Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, unmasking the political effects bound up within representations of war is crucial. It is for this reason that, in addition to non-figurative photograms, *The Day Nobody Died* also consists of a film matter-of-factly documenting the British army's transportation of the box of photographic paper from the artists' studio in London to the front-line in the Helmand Province in Afghanistan and back. In making this absurd, even "dadaesque," film about a sealed, lightproof box of photographic paper a central component of their installation, Broomberg and Chanarin challenge not just what the representation of war looks like but also the mechanisms through which these representations are produced and have come to have meaning in the world. By turning the act of photography into a kind of performance, or "theater of war," in which the British army becomes an unsuspecting participant, *The Day Nobody Died* inextricably links the act of witnessing with the war itself. "Like a barium test," the artists explain, "the journey of the box reveal[s] the dynamics of the machine in its quotidian details, from the logistics of war to the collusion between the media and the military."<sup>16</sup>

The problem that remains is Broomberg's and Chanarin's treatment of the photojournalistic object within this performance. Whereas the meaning of Hetherington's *Sleeping Soldiers* may be confined to, as photography critic Jörg Colberg writes, "our military and the job they do,"<sup>17</sup> one can argue that what makes this installation distinctive nonetheless is its use of photojournalism's traditional witnessing potential. Whereas Broomberg's and Chanarin's *The Day Nobody Died* largely negates this documentary ambition, Hetherington's *Sleeping Soldiers* explores what it might mean to expand photojournalism's field of operation so that photography's witnessing potential still persists but in a different form. Still, as the categories between photojournalism and art, professional and amateur, and the real and manipulated become increasingly distorted in today's rapidly changing media economy, in broadening the visual language of the photojournalistic object, we cannot at the same time forgo the importance of questioning the political impact that it also makes in the world. The key here is to figure out how to incorporate an

awareness of the effects of visualization (or picturing) without foreclosing the documentary aspirations of the form. It would seem that this kind of expanded thinking about photojournalism's witnessing potential is necessary now more than ever.

## Notes

- 1 See "Picture Power: Tim Hetherington," last modified 14 February 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/7240590.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7240590.stm). The photograph subsequently appeared as the concluding image for an online photo essay on *Vanity Fair's* website entitled "The Fight for the Korengal." See [http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/01/afghanistan\\_slideshow200801](http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/01/afghanistan_slideshow200801).
- 2 Stephen Mayes, "470,214 Pictures Later," Vimeo video, 49:34, 2 May 2009, <http://vimeo.com/67511685>.
- 3 Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, "Indifferent But Not Unconcerned," *Foto8 Blog*, 5 May 2008, <http://www.foto8.com/live/unconcerned-but-not-indifferent/#.UkBttbyxOwk>.
- 4 Mayes, "470,214 Pictures Later." Vimeo video, 49:34, 2 May 2009, <http://vimeo.com/67511685>.
- 5 Broomberg and Chanarin, "Indifferent But Not Unconcerned," *Foto8 Blog*, 5 May 2008, <http://www.foto8.com/live/unconcerned-but-not-indifferent/#.UkBttbyxOwk>.
- 6 See David Jolly, "Lament for a Dying Field: Photojournalism," *New York Times*, 9 August 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/10/business/media/10photo.html?pagewanted=all>.
- 7 My thinking about the possibility of an expanded model of the photojournalistic object owes much to the ideas in George Baker's influential essay, "Photography's Expanded Field," *October* 114 (Fall 2005): 120–40.
- 8 See Ian Walker, "Desert Stories or Faith in Facts?" in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, ed. Martin Lister (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 236–52; David Company, *Art and Photography* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2003); and David Company, "Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on Problem of 'Late Photography,'" in *Where is the Photograph?* ed. David Green (Manchester: Photoworks/PhotoForum, 2003): 123–32.
- 9 Christy Lange, "Shooting Gallery," *Frieze* 132 (June–August 2010), [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/shooting\\_gallery/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/shooting_gallery/).
- 10 Additional installation shots and documentation about the project can be found on the artists' website: <http://www.choppedliver.info/>.
- 11 Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, "The Day Nobody Died," *FMR: White Edition* 8 (June–July 2009): 102. For a larger discussion of "anti-naturalism" in the work of Broomberg and Chanarin, see David Evans, "Occupying Brecht: Broomberg and Chanarin's War Primer 2," *The Photographers' Gallery Blog*, 15 June 2013, <http://thephotographersgalleryblog.org.uk/2013/06/15/occupying-brecht-broomberg-and-chanarins-war-primer-2-david-evans/>.
- 12 Fred Ritchin, *Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen* (New York: Aperture, 2013): 57.
- 13 David Campbell, "'Multimedia,' Photojournalism and Visual Storytelling," *David Campbell's Visual Storytelling: Creative Practice and Criticism Blog*, 29 April 2013, <http://www.david-campbell.org/2013/04/29/multimedia-photojournalism-and-visual-storytelling/>.
- 14 See Tim Hetherington, "'Restrepo' and the Imagery of War," interview with Michael Kamber, *Lens: Photography, Video and Visual Journalism Blog*, 22 June 2010, [http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/22/behind-44/?\\_r=0](http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/22/behind-44/?_r=0). Hetherington along with photojournalist Chris Hondros were killed in April 2011 covering the war in Libya.
- 15 David Campbell, "Embedded in Afghanistan," *David Campbell's Visual Storytelling: Creative Practice and Criticism Blog*, 22 May 1999, <http://www.david-campbell.org/2009/05/22/embedded-in-afghanistan/>. For additional discussion of the embedding system in Afghanistan, see also, David Campbell, "The Elusive Enemy:

Looking Back at the 'War on Terror's' Visual Culture," *David Campbell's Visual Storytelling: Creative Practice and Criticism Blog*, 10 November 2011, <http://www.david-campbell.org/2011/11/10/the-elusive-enemy-war-on-terror-visual-culture/> and David Campbell, "How Has Photojournalism Framed the War in Afghanistan?" *Burke + Norfolk: Photographs From the War in Afghanistan by John Burke and Simon Norfolk* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2011): 153–5.

**16** Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, "The Day Nobody Died," *Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin*, <http://www.broombergchanarin.com/the-day-nobody-died/> (accessed 1 October 2013).

**17** Jörg Colberg, "Meditations on Photographs: Sleeping Soldier (Steve Kim, Korengal Valley, Afghanistan) by Tim Hetherington," *Conscientious Extended*, 7 March 2012, [http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/meditations\\_on\\_photographs\\_sleeping\\_soldier\\_steve\\_kim\\_korengal\\_valley\\_afghanistan\\_by\\_tim\\_hetherington/](http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/meditations_on_photographs_sleeping_soldier_steve_kim_korengal_valley_afghanistan_by_tim_hetherington/).