CONFLICT-TIME-PHOTOGRAPHY



Tate Modern, London – I have just been to the exhibition **Conflict – Time – Photography** [Link]



The topic is how photographs connect with traumatic events and experiences, how they document such events.

Here’s the review in Time Out by Freire Barnes – [Link]

As we look back over 100 years since the end of the First World War, the Tate examines the – often uneasy – relationship between photography and conflict. Conflict has an immeasurable impact on civilisations, landscapes, countries, cities, towns, loved ones and our memories. So a photographic exhibition about war might not strike you as an engagingly rewarding blockbuster show. But this enlightening and thoughtful survey is exactly that. Through images taken moments, days, weeks, months and years after the event, the effect and trauma of war is re-evaluated from the reflective viewpoint of artists and photojournalists without relying on explicit imagery.

In the first gallery, four grainy black-and-white photographic prints of pillowy cloud formations are displayed opposite a peaceful landscape devoid of activity, but for a few puffs of grey smoke. If you didn’t read the wall text, you’d be unaware of the importance of these seemingly incidental moments. The fluffy mass is in fact the mushroom cloud from the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and the photo was taken by Toshio Fukada some twenty

minutes after the event. Similarly the dusty vista by Luc Delahaye captures the moment after intensive bombing by the US of the Taliban in Afghanistan. These images are an abstract way to open a show about war, and successfully set it up to build a lasting impression.

There are haunting works such as Don McCullin’s photograph of a shell-shocked Marine taken post-combat in Vietnam. Clenching his rifle, he seems to stare right through you in an utterly distressed trance. Extraordinary pieces include Matsumoto Eiichi’s photograph in which the silhouette of a guard has been etched onto the side of a building, a result of the Nagasaki atomic explosion three weeks earlier. There are surprising exhibits like postcards of battlefields, produced for the glut of post-World War I tourists on ‘pilgrimages’ to see the battlefields and destruction first-hand. The ruins of war reverberate throughout the entire show, from Pierre Antony-Thouret’s images of Reims, a city reduced to rubble, to Simon Norfolk’s series ‘Afghanistan: Chronotopia’, 2001-02 which focuses on towns scarred by ongoing warfare.

Other artists have sought to reconnect the human,

individual aspect often lost in the reporting of unimaginable genocides the world over. Diana Matar's 'Evidence' series gives a voice to the victims who died under Gaddafi's regime in Libya. Rather bleak, unpopulated locations are paired with harrowing facts about human-rights atrocities. Taryn Simon's documentation of the 1995 Srebrencia massacre charts the effect on a family's bloodline through portraits of surviving members and images of personal possessions recovered from mass graves.

aftermath – return – "it happened here" – witness – evidence

… these are all key components of the archaeological imagination [Link] [Link] (See the discussion I wrote with Connie Svabo on the connections between archaeology and photography – [Link])

… archive, trace, actuality (the return of the past), the challenges of document and description as process and performance, the role of narrative, the role of instrumentation (the camera and process of photography), articulations of local and global, the quotidian and the (over)dramatized, ways of gathering, connecting, arranging, categorizing, the detail of evidence and its relationship to event, and architecture as arrangement, spatiality, setting, stage, frame, with matters of 3 to 2 dimensional translation (ichnography) …

This could be a checklist for much of contemporary art.

Particularly evident in this exhibition is the radical disjunction we might experience in the trauma of war and conflict – the radical displacement (at the heart of an archaeological sensibility), as we gather, capture, take from the site of traumatic experience, and ponder on the disconnection that is aftermath, the

confrontation with what happened and what becomes of what was

This aspect of certain kinds of experience refers us to the aesthetic – [Link] – how we perceive, experience and re-present.

I was taken particularly by the completely archaeological exhibit by Archive of Modern Conflict – A Guide for the Protection of the Public in Peacetime – [Link]

