

BEFORE THE EVENT/AFTER THE FACT: CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON WAR

Exhibition explores the representation of modern conflict in photography and digital media

July 21–December 31, 2017

July 21, 2017, New Haven, Conn.—The Yale University Art Gallery is pleased to announce the opening of *Before the Event/After the Fact: Contemporary Perspectives on War*, an exhibition that brings together a range of contemporary approaches to the visual representation of conflict. The works depict not only combat zones but also training sites, forensic reconstructions, and popular entertainment. Encompassing conceptual, documentary, and architectural imaging techniques, the exhibition investigates the visual relationships between staged images and real events, and between factual data and their digital representations. The works on view include photographs by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, An-My Lê, and Peter van Agtmael; a video installation by the filmmaker Harun Farocki; and a video and digital reconstruction created by the interdisciplinary design studio SITU Research.



Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *Tze'elim Military Base, Negev Desert (Chicago #2)*, from the series *Chicago*, 2006. Digital chromogenic print. © Broomberg & Chanarin, courtesy the artists

Lê (American, born Vietnam 1960, M.F.A. 1993) blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction and between the genres of war and landscape photography. In her series *Small Wars* (1999–2002), what appear to be images of combat are actually photographs of a group of Vietnam War reenactors in the Virginia countryside. The large-scale black-and-white photos—made with a 5 × 7-inch view camera—highlight the incongruity between the ostensible realism of photography and the constructed nature of the image. As part of her latest series, *The Silent General* (2017), Lê photographed the set of a Hollywood film about the American Civil War, pulling the camera back to reveal the staging, sets, and operators of this highly contrived composition.

A nuanced tension between reality and artifice can also be found in the work of artistic collaborators Broomberg (British, born South Africa 1970) and Chanarin (British, born 1971). In 2006 the duo photographed a mock Palestinian town, nicknamed “Chicago,” located on the Tze’elim military base in Israel’s Negev Desert. Built by the Israeli military in the early 1980s, the site is used to train soldiers in urban warfare and has since been expanded to include a marketplace, a refugee camp, and even a section of an Iraqi town. Broomberg and Chanarin’s series *Chicago* explores this counterfeit environment through photographs of its bizarre mix of the permanent and the temporary: cardboard walls and targets in the form of guerrilla combatants, concrete blast walls, and an array of shrewdly improvised explosives disguised as everyday objects.

Another perspective on military experience is taken up by Farocki (German, 1944–2014) in the two-channel video installations from his series *Serious Games*. Farocki directed more than 120 films over his long career, many of which combine filmed and appropriated footage to examine the effects of an increasingly image-saturated world. Here, Farocki considered how virtual-reality technologies



An-My Lê, *Film Set ("Free State of Jones"), Battle of Corinth, Bush, Louisiana, 2015*. Inkjet print. Courtesy STX Entertainment

are used both to train American soldiers and to treat veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Acclaimed Magnum photographer van Agtmael (American, born 1981, B.A. 2003) covered the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2006 to 2013 as a photojournalist embedded with the U.S. military. His photographs capture a diverse range of people and experiences, including new recruits, on-base life, military patrols, combat, wounded soldiers and medics, veterans reintegrating into life at home, and the family members left behind.

Drawn from his 2014 book *Disco Night Sept. 11*, the works in the exhibition are captioned by van Agtmael's close observations, providing insightful commentary on the lived realities of these conflicts from an American perspective.

The ethics and efficacy of documenting war zones have been questioned since the advent of photography. Today, photography and digital media continue to play an important evidentiary role as witnesses to war. SITU Research is an interdisciplinary studio based in Brooklyn, whose work in design, visualization, and spatial analysis addresses urgent contemporary issues, including politics, science, society, and the environment. SITU's *Euromaidan Event Reconstruction* (2017) was created specifically for the exhibition, adapting material assembled for a criminal trial centered on the death of 47 civilians during protests in Kiev, Ukraine, on February 20, 2014. Working with the Center for Human Rights Science at Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh, along with independent collaborators and a legal team in Kiev, SITU re-created the events of that day, using video footage, digital models, medical reports, and other relevant data to reconstruct the circumstances of the civilian deaths. Hundreds of fragmentary videos—made by protesters, “citizen journalists,” and CCTV cameras—were analyzed and used to assess whether the Ukrainian forces coordinated to fire on the unarmed protesters.

The photographs, videos, and digital animations in *Before the Event/After the Fact* demonstrate that in portrayals of war—as in war itself—truth is often elusive. They challenge viewers' knowledge and expectations of the military operations that they depict, including the ongoing American and British presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, the civil and political



Harun Farocki, still from *Serious Games I: Watson is Down*, 2009. 2-channel video, color and sound, 7 mins., 40 secs. © 2010 Harun Farocki

unrest in Ukraine, and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, as well as past events that persist in the American psyche, from the Civil War to the Vietnam War. Whether focusing on the preparations for war, the lingering effects of military intervention, the day-to-day experiences of deployed troops, or the constraints facing photojournalists, the works highlight the incongruities between the apparent clarity of documentary imagery and the ambiguities of reality itself. “The exhibition parses the hazy ground between particular events and the accumulation of facts—political, social, logistic, and historical—that come to surround them,” explains Judy Ditner, the Richard Benson Assistant Curator of Photography and Digital Media. “These works prompt difficult questions about the thorny relationship between an event and its representation, and the ways in which facts are given visual form.”

On View

July 21-December 31, 2017

Related Programs

Artist Talks

Thursday, October 12, 5:30 pm

Brad Samuels, SITU Research

Thursday, October 26, 5:30 pm

Oliver Chanarin

Thursday, November 2, 5:30 pm

An-My Lê and Peter van Agtmael

Exhibition Tours

Tuesdays, September 26 and November 14, 12:30 pm

Gallery Talks

Wednesday, October 11, 12:30 pm

Judy Ditner, the Richard Benson Assistant Curator of Photography and Digital Media

Wednesday, November 1, 12:30 pm

Peter van Agtmael

Thursday, November 2, 12:30 pm

An-My Lê

For programming information, visit artgallery.yale.edu/calendar. All programs are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted.

Exhibition Credits

Exhibition organized by Judy Ditner, the Richard Benson Assistant Curator of Photography and Digital Media. Made possible by the Art Gallery Exhibition and Publication Fund.

Yale University Art Gallery

The Yale University Art Gallery, the oldest college art museum in the United States, was founded in 1832 when the patriot-artist John Trumbull gave more than 100 of his paintings to Yale College. Since then its collections have grown to more than 200,000 objects ranging in date from ancient times to the present.

General Information

The Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut. Museum hours: Tuesday-Friday, 10 am-5 pm; Thursday until 8 pm (September-June); and Saturday-Sunday, 11 am-5 pm. The Gallery is closed Mondays and major holidays. Free and open to the public. For general information, please call 203.432.0600 or visit the website at artgallery.yale.edu.

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