

Photographing the War in Afghanistan: An Interview with Louie Palu

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Volume 39, Number 2, 2014

Photography and War
La photographie et la guerre

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1027749ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1027749ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)
1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Fitzpatrick, B. (2014). Photographing the War in Afghanistan: An Interview with Louie Palu. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 39(2), 54-70. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1027749ar>

Article abstract

La représentation joue un grand rôle dans les conflits militaires. Elle participe à la façon dont le public prend connaissance de la guerre, et comment il y réagit. Le photographe canadien Louie Palu a contribué à la compréhension de la guerre par son travail à titre de photojournaliste « embarqué » (« *embedded* ») au coeur des troupes canadiennes, britanniques et américaines en Afghanistan et aussi comme photographe indépendant. Son travail se démarque pour avoir su combiner les approches journalistiques et artistiques de représentation du conflit et pour avoir fait des rapprochements entre l'idée de guerre comme expérience à multiples facettes, chaotique et fragmentaire, et les formes de représentation qui, proportionnellement, vont au-delà des systèmes singuliers de références. Dans cet entretien, Palu révèle les expériences d'un photographe dans une zone de combat et offre une perspective interne des pratiques de journalisme embarqué, et de l'éthique et des pratiques de la photographie de guerre. En discutant des limites de la photographie comme véhicule d'expérience multisensorielle d'un conflit, il insiste sur l'importance du pouvoir des images pour faire connaître à la société civile ce qui est accompli en son nom au travers de la guerre.

Photographing the War in Afghanistan: An Interview with Louie Palu¹

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Résumé

La représentation joue un grand rôle dans les conflits militaires. Elle participe à la façon dont le public prend connaissance de la guerre, et comment il y réagit. Le photographe canadien Louie Palu a contribué à la compréhension de la guerre par son travail à titre de photojournaliste « embarqué » (« *embedded* ») au cœur des troupes canadiennes, britanniques et américaines en Afghanistan et aussi comme photographe indépendant. Son travail se démarque pour avoir su combiner les approches journalistiques et artistiques de représentation du conflit et pour avoir fait des rapprochements entre l'idée de guerre comme expérience à multiples facettes, chaotique et fragmentaire, et les formes de représentation qui, proportionnellement, vont au-delà des systèmes singuliers de références. Dans cet entretien, Palu révèle les expériences d'un photographe dans une zone de combat et offre une perspective interne des pratiques de journalisme embarqué, et de l'éthique et des pratiques de la photographie de guerre. En discutant des limites de la photographie comme véhicule d'expérience multisensorielle d'un conflit, il insiste sur l'importance du pouvoir des images pour faire connaître à la société civile ce qui est accompli en son nom au travers de la guerre.

Representation matters greatly in military conduct and in a public's response to war. There is, as Judith Butler contends in *Frames of War*, "no way to separate the material reality of war from those representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalize its own operation."² In the following interview, Canadian photographer Louie Palu offers a powerful critique of photojournalism as one of those regimes.

Palu's perspective is drawn from his experience as an embedded photojournalist with Canadian, British, and American troops in Afghanistan and as an independent photographer. With a foot in both camps, he is one of a number of contemporary journalist/artists who contribute to what Stefan Jonsson refers to as an "alternative CNN,"³ supplying images for journalistic sources but also staging independent, alternative impressions of contemporary conflict.

In creating works that blur the distinctions between art and journalism, Palu has developed exhibition strategies that forge connections between war as a multifaceted, chaotic, and fragmentary experience and forms of representation that correspondingly exceed singular frames of reference. Palu's installation *Zhari-Panjwai: Dispatches from Afghanistan* (2007)⁴ is a good example of his juxtaposition of image and sound to produce a more complex and potentially authentic representation of conflict. The Zhari and Panjway districts are located west of Kandahar City and are regarded as the birthplace of the Taliban movement. Palu's "dispatches" from this region consist of a grid of colour photographs taken in 2007–08, when he was embedded with Afghan troops and the Canadian Army's Royal 22nd Regiment, known as the "Van Doos," from Quebec. The installation includes an audio recording of a battle between insurgents and Afghan, British, and Canadian troops in the Siah Choi area (fig. 1). This insurgent stronghold deep in the Zhari district is known to the troops as the "Coliseum," after the ferocious fighting that continuously occurred there. Palu's installation juxtaposes the arrested action of still photography with raw unscripted sound. The photographs provide evidence of a

regiment going on patrol, and on occasion, encountering the enemy, but the sound takes us to the heart of conflict itself, recorded by what would seem to be an open microphone in the middle of a battlefield. Displayed in a grid format, Palu's installation highlights the residual relationality of photographs that are dependent on other images, sounds, or, more typically in the journalistic context, layout and caption to complete their meaning. As single images, Palu's photographs are partial and incomplete fragments. The meaning of this work is therefore not to be discovered in a reading of individual photographs or in the recording of raw battle sounds so much as in the dialogic relation between them.

In her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag suggests that, "to photograph is to frame and to frame is to exclude."⁵ More than a question of composition or cropping, Sontag's observation implicates the political realm in the representation of war, particularly in the age of embedded reporting where what is absent may include what is not allowed to be seen by military authorities. For those of us who do not witness war directly, this raises the fundamental question about who is visible and who is invisible in war photographs.

On this question, the Canadian Forces Media Embedding Program has established a set of ground rules. Section 10 covers "information that shall not be visually recorded" and, in accordance with Article 13 of the Third Geneva Convention, states that,

All imagery of detainees will be reviewed by the Canadian Forces to ensure respect for detainees' rights.... No photograph or other graphic representation of a detained person's recognizable face, nametag or any other feature or item that may serve to identify a detainee may be created.⁶

The conventions of embedded reporting have changed the look of war photography. Palu's widely published photographs of detainees are often taken from vantage points that leave their faces unrecognizable. His photographs depicting the face of a

detainee covered by a blindfold or the view of a detainee with their back to the camera, hands bound at the wrist, kneeling with their face to a wall, have become part of the lexicon of contemporary war photography. While photographs depicting such treatment may adhere to the rules of embedded reporting in not identifying the detainee, they also reveal the operative tactics of the military in their use of, for example, stress positions and blindfolding to disorient and torture their captives. Conditioned by embedding rules, these photographs both add new signs to the visual vocabulary of war while documenting the treatment of detainees in the field.

Palu has commented that sound brings one closer to the experience of war because it is the dominant experience during a firefight. In the audio recording of the Battle of Siah Choi, the proximity of war is underscored by the sounds of Palu's running for cover and strained breathing in the midst of battle sounds. Over all this we hear the voices of Afghan fighters who are collaborators with the Western forces. These voices imbue the sonic environment with the specificity of language and cultural identity. Audio, in Palu's installation, does not function as a sound track for the photographs but instead creates a countervailing experience of war that is culturally specific, immediate, and disorienting. In the essay "Listening," Roland Barthes suggests that to listen is to adopt an attitude of decoding that "permits intercepting whatever might disturb the territorial system; it is a mode of defense against surprise."⁷ Attending to the audio component of the installation, we join Palu in listening for incoming threats, as the sounds of gunfire invade the stability of the photographic image from indeterminate locations off-frame. Christian Metz suggests that the experience of sound heard off-frame in film is never separate from our actual thinking of the sound's source,⁸ and in this case, to hear the sound of battle is to fill the spaces between the frames of the installation with the immersive sound of gunfire. Embedding practices for journalists may be said to control the narrative of war and support public assurances by the military that all is under control. The audio piece puts some of that control in check, however, by relaying the immediate fear and chaos of war unhinged from an organizing political narrative. Experiences of sensory overload, disorientation, and confusion in response to the audio track should not be considered a failure to add clarity to our understanding of war. Rather, these sounds from a much reported war zone should remind us again of war's threat to life and the chaotic, fragmentary, and fragmenting experience that war becomes for those who live within it. Such documentary images and sounds in a gallery may serve a civic function by undermining the assurances of official militarism that would have us respond to war in more predetermined ways.

An interview with Louie Palu and Blake Fitzpatrick

BF: How long have you been photographing the war in Afghanistan?

LP: In 2006, I went to Afghanistan for the *Globe and Mail* for a few months. I had been a staff photographer from 2001 to 2007. I quit in 2007 when I realized that I could not cover the war—and I'm going to be very careful about how I say this—as truthfully as possible without investing myself in a long-term independently driven project. I just felt that as a staff photographer, I wasn't able to say what I needed to say. So, I left the newspaper and I started going back on my own.

I started out by focusing on the areas west of Kandahar City, which is where the Canadian military was fighting. I thought of covering Helmand province and accessing it through the British military, but the UK Ministry of Defence—the London-based MOD as they call it—had, in my opinion, the most controlling of all the embedding programs. They would vet things that no one else would, so I passed on going out with them. The Royal Gurkha Rifles (from the UK) were attached to a Canadian unit as support, so by a lucky accident I was able to be with UK troops without falling under their embed system. I continually found loopholes in the embed system that allowed me to step around their rules. Additionally, in 2007, I made a short trip up to the Bagram Air base in Parwan Province and over to Khost just to see what was going on in the northeast and the main American areas of operation. During these periods, I always made time to leave my embed to go out into Kandahar City and Kabul on my own, independent of the military.

By 2008, I started working with more Americans. The US Marines were being sent back to Afghanistan and would be based in Helmand Province. What I want to make clear is that my priority was less on covering western countries' troops and more on creating a body of work on Kandahar and its historical relationship to conflict. I realize in retrospect that the resulting work is not so much about Afghanistan as it is about war and violence and the deeper layers of that dialogue. I followed up with multiple trips to Kandahar, photographing mostly Afghan soldiers and accessing very violent areas under the command of Canadian and American military units through 2009 and 2010. I worked extensively around Kandahar City both independently and within the embedding system of each country, using it as a way of accessing areas that were impossible to work in due to extreme violence.

Some of my most well known images are of Afghan soldiers and they are not covered by any embed system or rules. I think that my job as a photographer is to always find a way of getting access to things that you are not supposed to have access to or see. By the end of 2010, I had covered a US medevac unit so

much that I ran out of the emotional and psychological ability to continue covering the war. By then, I had covered over 150 medevac missions and the daily flow of casualties in the helicopter took its toll on me. I also was in four “IED” (improvised explosive devices) strikes that nearly made me a casualty so it was time to take a long break. Photojournalists Tim Hetherington and Chris Hondros being killed in Libya and Joao Silva losing his legs in Kandahar definitely made me take a longer break than I had planned.

BF: Were you going as an independent photographer at that point?

LP: Yes, from 2007 to 2010, I was an independent photographer. I had agency representation with ZUMA Press for distribution. The military wasn’t letting freelancers embed at that time so agency representation was a necessity. For me, the most important thing was that I needed to own my photographs and have full control of how my pictures were being disseminated and used. It is about authorship. I needed to have that ownership so that as an artist, I could take the work apart and put it together in any form, however experimental, and show it however I wanted.

On Art, Documentary, and Journalism

BF: Your work may be considered an example of what the writer Alfredo Cramerotti has called “aesthetic journalism.”⁹ The term refers to a blurring of the margins between artistic and information practices in the production of investigative works by contemporary artists. Do you consider yourself a photojournalist, documentary photographer, or an artist?

LP: I would just say that I’m a documentary photographer. I’ve realized recently that my interest in photojournalism is as a vehicle for disseminating or sharing photographs. Journalism seems more about collecting, editing, and then showing the work, without room for creating a personal point of view. Something happens, journalists react, they go to the scene, they take the pictures. There is creativity involved but they file the pictures and it’s in the newspaper the next day or a magazine the next month. I like to take a longer view and produce in-depth studies that explore deeper layers beyond what that newspaper will show. I found that the news photo had real limitations for me. Also, there are editors who change the meaning of your work by losing or cutting out some of the context, stripping the caption, replacing the caption, or simply using a single photo in an article as an illustration. I turned things around on the system in that I accepted few assignments while in Kandahar and none of the assignments I did accept made it into my independ-

ent bodies of work. I would create bodies of work over months or years, edit them on my own, and then contact an editor and say this is what I witnessed. That is a model that goes against the traditional photojournalism model.

BF: I first encountered your work in an art gallery and I’ve always thought that this was significant.

LP: The first images of war that influenced me or that I really saw that made an impact on me were paintings. Painters and war artists have time to think and not just react, which would describe how you work a camera. If something happens, you take a picture. Putting a photograph in the newspaper may do the job factually and this is important because people are being killed, human rights are being violated, and that needs to be shown, but I think that in terms of really grabbing people, I want to go beyond the standard conventions. Why do we have to keep looking at photojournalism in a newspaper or magazine? The first photographs many Americans saw of their war dead were in an exhibition—not in a publication—of Alexander Gardner’s photographs in New York of Civil War casualties from the Battle of Antietam.

BF: Isn’t it more about how you create a viewing context for the work than it is about a choice of media forms?

LP: Yes, for example, in my new work on Mexico, I worked with newsprint posters that are folded into a newspaper. I printed them myself. It can also be turned into an exhibition. But it’s really an anti-journalistic aesthetic because it highlights some of the failures of journalism: it shifts the newsprint image to a different form by stripping out all the attention-grabbing competing articles and ads from the newspaper. For me, it is always about challenging how you think about the world and how that challenge gives you something new to contribute.

BF: What does war sound like?

LP: I love being a photographer but photography is not as good as audio in capturing the essence of a battle because it’s not as true to the experience. It’s not real. When I was in the middle of combat, what really made an impact on me was the audio. Hearing the sound of battle after-the-fact returns me to the moment, whereas the photographs are not as raw or immediate.

BF: Looking at your well-composed photographs of Afghanistan makes you think that the photographer is well composed or has composure in the field. Yet, the raw sound of battle reminds viewers of the unpredictable and precarious experience of being in a war. Those are the two sensory inputs that you are

bringing to the viewer when you combine the photographs with the sound of battle. Is there a discrepancy between the professionally produced photographic image of war and the chaotic unresolved immediacy of war as conveyed by audio recording?

LP: Definitely. This relates to my work in Afghanistan and my explorations of audio and video. I had to go to listen to audio and watch video to understand what, for me, was documentary photography, the essence of what photography really is—what it meant, what it was, and how to define it. The whole purity of the self-contained image needed to be destroyed. I had to destroy it for myself before I could understand where to go next with my work. Actually, I came to recording the audio by accident, but it became a pinnacle moment. As a photographer, I'm showing photographs from the battle scene but the audio actually changes the way you understand the reality in which I was taking the pictures. I like that experimentation and it really is about what I call a sketchbook concept where you write down and draw out ideas and personal thoughts. Journalism doesn't allow for that exploration. If I would have told my editors at a newspaper that I had to do this installation in a gallery or public space and I have to play this audio piece, they would have said, "what planet are you from?" There is no space for that experimentation in journalism.

BF: The audio includes sounds that highlight your presence on the battlefield. We hear your footsteps and your breathing at the same time that we hear shelling and the voices of Afghan fighters on your side of the line. While the photos show us what is in front of the lens, the audio records the sounds of a reacting subject behind the camera. It is very intense!

LP: My heart rate is over three times the normal rate and I am running for my life. It's intensely personal.

On Photographing Battle

BF: Has the traditional image of war within humanistic terms lost its hold? Have photographs lost their power to affect public opinion or effect change?

LP: I am not sure humanistic photography has lost its hold on anything, because I don't think it ever was more than a way of trying to understand the world. Ultimately, this idea that "we photojournalists" change anything is very naïve. Politicians and the voting public change things. We (hopefully) try to make people think and that is a noble cause to work toward. Photojournalists are here to monitor power, for me that can be a part of making people think.

BF: Direct frontline photography may be open to the criticism of a battle too many or a mode of photography often so close to the action that it runs the risk of losing a larger context. Is there an overemphasis on the face of conflict in war representation? What are the strategies still open to photographers who want to make a statement about war? How are your personal projects an answer to this question?

LP: The frontline can be many things and places, especially in a guerilla war. I think I am a little different in my approach as I am not preoccupied with getting my work published the next day in a newspaper or the next month in a magazine. It's about challenging the Robert Capa syndrome and finding something that I can contribute that's new, while still recording something for history.

When you are in a war zone things can be very confusing and chaotic, basically you are always looking for a safe spot to take pictures from in the middle of insanity. Sometimes the things going on in front of you are totally unbelievable and horrific. Somewhere in all that chaos I am trying to find a visual puzzle to bring back to you to think about. Now remember while I am trying to work something out visually every other sense is being bombarded at extreme levels. Smell and sound are very difficult to deal with when you have someone screaming with their legs blown off or there is a human body in pieces and all you smell is burned flesh. I make some of my pictures in that very intense space.

On *The Fighting Season* and Journal Entries

BF: In your exhibition, *The Fighting Season*, you are also exhibiting excerpts from your own journals. These seem a risky addition to the exhibition because of the way that you are exposing yourself. On the other hand, maybe this is a way for you to speak about the limitations of the photograph. Can you tell us about your decision to include the journals?

LP: The journals were made in 2009 and 2010, which are the last two years I was in Afghanistan. They became more personal the longer I stayed in Afghanistan. They weren't captions so much as they were personal reflections. I liked the form because, when you're reading the journals, the voice that the viewer is hearing is their own. In my case, I hear my own voice. I exhibit the journal entries at the beginning of the exhibition. Viewers read the journals first and then they see the photographs. This creates a situation that is a little different than a regular "here are my best pictures" exhibition. I wanted to use the diaries to provide the viewer with a sense of the person that was making the pictures. It's about providing an experience. The main reason I kept those diaries is two-fold. One is to add to the overall body

of work from Kandahar. And second, it was therapeutic to write and get many horrors off my chest; it was a way of making sure that I was not going to lose my sanity.

BF: Do the journals say something about your subjectivity in that space?

LP: I think the journals also give the body of work a sense of authorship and not a general feel of news coverage done by some anonymous journalist turning out stories day after day to feed the appetite of the news cycle.

BF: Finally, in the journals, you talk about the smell of the body and of blood baking on the hot metal of the helicopter. These experiences are very physical and beyond what can be seen in a photograph. Do you need words to fill in the invisible details?

LP: No photograph can smell like burned flesh on a dead body. I did feel like the journals provided me with a way to challenge another of the conventions of photographic journalism in remembering that there is a person behind the camera. Again, I've been fed the photojournalism "snake oil" for years in which you are supposed to be "a fly on the wall" and pretend that the subject doesn't notice you. I'm six foot two and two hundred pounds. When I'm pressing the shutter it makes loud clicking noises. It's a little hard to avoid knowing that the photographer is present and I've had soldiers apologize to me because they bumped into me in the middle of combat. You're there, the photographer is there, and generally the subject knows it.

On the Image of the Dead

BF: One of the most contentious and unavoidable subjects in war photography is the dead body. Given your years of experience photographing war in Afghanistan, how do you approach the dead?

LP: Well, I can tell you it's very intimidating because what you are dealing with is a subject that is the holy of holies. You cannot abuse this subject matter. The ethics around this subject involves every belief that we have as a society. It has shaped the laws that make up our identities as human beings, with human rights and law and order.

I think the first serious photographs I ever made of the dead were in 2006 when I went to Afghanistan. I was working for the *Globe and Mail* and there was a suicide bombing in Kandahar City. I was nearby and had gotten to the scene quickly and there was a dead man, half clothed, lying in the cemetery where insurgents had been hiding weapons in the graves. There were also body parts from the suicide bomber who had accidentally

detonated his suicide vest and blown himself up. Right away, I just thought, "You're in a war zone—safety. Can I stay here or are they going to attack us again? Are they going to ambush us? Are there soldiers around? Are we going to get kidnapped?" So right off the bat safety is on your mind. The trauma that you may be experiencing always hits you later on.

I do follow the basic ethics of photojournalism. I do not influence the scene. I'm not going to be moving the body around or tell anyone to do something. I treat the dead with respect, like any other human being, for they are still human beings. If there are family members or mourners on the scene, I give them space.

In that situation, it's pretty straightforward. It's like a checklist. Safety is first, then, I go with the basics and shoot straight documentary photographs. I just stay programmed to get some basic shots and not get too caught up in trying to make something very sophisticated because it already might be. If the situation allows, I'll look away and give my mind a break because the mind is a sponge. As a photographer, you are doing everything that you are not supposed to do as a human being, which would be running away from the scene of violence unless you are an ambulance driver, doctor, or police officer. By staying there on the scene, you are fighting a physiological instinct that tells you to get away from the danger. Your mind is saying, "Hey, I smell something, I see something. This is bad, I want to survive, get out of here." But you push that back, saying to yourself, "No, I have to stay. I've been looking for this situation to talk about in this story." There is no simple answer and in these instances, I deal with everything on a case-by-case basis.

Dead bodies come in so many different forms and places. In my recent Mexico portfolio, which examines the drug war in Mexico, I think the shocking part about the dead bodies is that a lot of them have their hands bound, and that just adds such a disturbing element to the photographs. It all depends on the situation and conditions that the body is in as well. I don't want to sound dire or mechanical but it does come down to basic safety, because where there are dead bodies, there are people who are responsible for the dead bodies and you may be the next dead body. So first, it's the safety aspect and then the ethics aspect. Those two issues go hand in hand and then everything else is just pretty much basic photography.

On Embedded Journalism

BF: Embedded photojournalism is controversial, and you have embedded with Canadian, American, and British forces in Afghanistan. What is your position on embedded reporting and the critique of a government-controlled image? What is and is not allowed when embedded as a photojournalist?

LP: Let's be clear on a few things, some of the most iconic photographs from the Second World War by some of the most respected names in photojournalism were first submitted to the "censors"—and that is actually what they were called, "the censors." I am not defending the embed system, because it should be challenged. In Afghanistan, I did not submit my work to any censor for vetting. The only time I submitted a photograph was to identify a casualty by name and to time the release of my photographs with the next-of-kin notification. This was so that families of the dead or wounded could be notified by the military before I released my photographs. The next point is for us to understand message control. You don't have to go to a war zone or be embedded for the government or a corporation to try to control what the media covers. Press conferences are used to manipulate the media and control access and message all the time.

When I talk about embedded photojournalism, I'm going to speak specifically on my time in Afghanistan because I think embedded photojournalists in Iraq or in the Gulf War were subject to very different forms of control, but even then, journalists broke rules and got photographs out. When you agree with the embed rules, it doesn't mean that you actually have to follow them. Plenty of journalists have broken the rules even though you are asked as an embedded journalist to sign a document that binds you to a set of rules. I've broken the rules. I would say the military's overall concern in working with journalists is that you won't report information that's going to get people killed. The next one is that you will bring your own equipment and that you are in good physical shape to survive what's going to be pretty grueling patrols and combat operations. Another concern is that if you get hurt or killed, they're not responsible. You won't sue them. And if you do get killed, you've made arrangements for people to pick you up, take your body to the hospital or wherever once you get out of their area of operations. Then there's language about basic conduct like for example, you won't harass people. Those conditions will take up to approximately eighty percent of the agreement between a journalist and the military. The final twenty percent of the document is the most controversial because it involves issues related to photographing detainees, the wounded, and the dead, specifically, dead NATO troops, which includes American, British, and Canadian forces.

For example, photographing the ramp ceremony and showing coffins being loaded into airplanes in Kandahar or the repatriation ceremony back in the home country is allowed in Canada but the British will not allow it and the Americans allow it now at home but not at the base in Afghanistan. Several people broke those rules and the work was published. For years, the Americans would not allow this to be seen but President Obama recently changed this rule. Right away that makes embeds very different. The British, to this day (last I heard), look

at everything you shoot and they will delete files right off your camera. I've never had to show anyone my photographs in war, unless I needed assistance to identify someone by name for a caption. I think that the problem with embedding comes where certain contacts or public affairs officers in the field have their own personal ideas of what they want to come out in print or broadcast. Whenever I run into people like that, I try to avoid them or change my embed to another unit. But here's the thing: I may have signed an embed document with Canadians but I can photograph Afghans however I want because my embed document is not about Afghans, and a lot of my photographs are of Afghans.

BF: Isn't it one of the rules that you aren't allowed to show the faces of detainees, including Afghan detainees?

LP: Yes, but there are grey areas and ways around the rules and I'm not trying to fit in with the rules. There are ways of making pictures where you are and you are not showing a detainee's face, perhaps there is a blindfold on the detainee or you are shooting from the back where the photo works just as well. Because I agree to a set of terms in a document doesn't mean that I'm not going to publish it later on once the war is over or after I leave my embed. That action in history happened and you have a document of it even if it happens to come out later.

BF: When I look at a lot of contemporary war photography, I notice the prevalence of photographs, taken from behind the detainee. Embedding rules have changed the look of war photography. I'm not suggesting that this leads to bad photographs, it is just that the repertoire is different.

LP: I like the photographs of the backs of detainees. But, I'll be honest, I have the photos of the fronts too. I have these photos, almost everyone does. If I really felt like there was a strong photo in there, I wouldn't give a shit about the embedding rules. I'd publish the one with the front of the face.

BF: You have to be careful though because if you do publish the face, you may be putting someone at risk or compromising your access to the front line.

LP: That's true and there are legitimate times when putting a detainee's face in print could get them killed.

As far as access is concerned, I have covered tons of front line fighting. It's not like in World War Two where there are massive armies moving around and you could follow a little behind an advancing army and they wouldn't care if a photojournalist was there. Now it's these smaller guerrilla wars and it's for reasons of safety that you need to embed with a small unit, just

to be able to take the pictures and get out alive. You can't just walk around fields west of Kandahar City without embedding, hoping to be neutral and to cover both sides of the fighting. It doesn't work like that. If you want to see front line fighting and get to villages that are very dangerous like I did, at least there is a vehicle in which to get there. That access doesn't mean you are going to make the military look good or photograph the soldiers taking you there, but I think that there's some value in showing that as well. I always have on my mind that anyone with a gun can commit a crime in a war zone. Even though there can be some friendly moments, I am there as a photographer tasked with documenting the war. I also want to reinforce that I did do a lot of work outside the embed system on my own which is very dangerous.

BF: Are you done with war photography? What's next?

LP: This is the million-dollar question many people ask me. I had so much success working in Afghanistan. It taught me who I was as a photographer and, even more so, who I was as a human being. But it was also physically and mentally exhausting—jumping out of helicopters, patrolling every day with fifty pounds on your back, and walking around for days in the heat. That alone exhausts you mentally and you're so bored all the time. As a photographer, I could go for a month and not get a single good picture. Then there are the other pressures of don't get killed, don't get kidnapped, and don't get robbed because people see your cameras and they want to steal them.

But really, I have never considered myself a war photographer. I am a photographer who for a period of time wanted to examine conflict. When I think of the photographers who first inspired me, it had nothing to do with war and was more about sharing ideas and instigating a dialogue using pictures. It was about monitoring power.

Notes

All photographs courtesy and copyright, Louie Palu.

- ¹ The interview with Louie Palu was conducted by Blake Fitzpatrick in Toronto in 2013. Edits to the transcript of the interview were approved by Palu.
- ² Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York, 2009), 29.
- ³ Stefan Jonsson, "Facts of Aesthetics and Fictions of Journalism: The Logic of the Media in the Age of Globalization," *Nordicom Review* 25, 112 (2004): 57–68 (available as of April 2013 at <http://www.nordicom.gu.se>).
- ⁴ Louie Palu's photographic and audio installation, *Zhari-Panjwai: Dispatches from Afghanistan* was exhibited at the Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Halifax (2008) and as part of the *War at a Distance* group exhibition, co-curated by Blake Fitzpatrick, Karyn Sandlos, and Roger I. Simon for Gallery TPW, Toronto (2009).
- ⁵ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, 2003), 46.
- ⁶ Canadian Forces Media Embedding Program, Ground Rules, available as of April 2013 at http://www.docstoc.com/docs/74729337/Canadian-Forces-Media-Embedding-Program-Guidelines_Ground-Rules.
- ⁷ Roland Barthes, "Listening," in *The Responsibility of Forms* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985), 248.
- ⁸ Christian Metz, "Aural Objects," in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, eds. Elisabeth Weiss and John Belton (New York, 1985), 158.
- ⁹ Alfredo Cramerotti, *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform without Informing* (Bristol and Chicago, 2009).



Figure 1. Installation view of the exhibition *Zhari-Panjwai: Dispatches from Afghanistan*, Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia (2008) (Photo courtesy of the Dalhousie University Art Gallery).

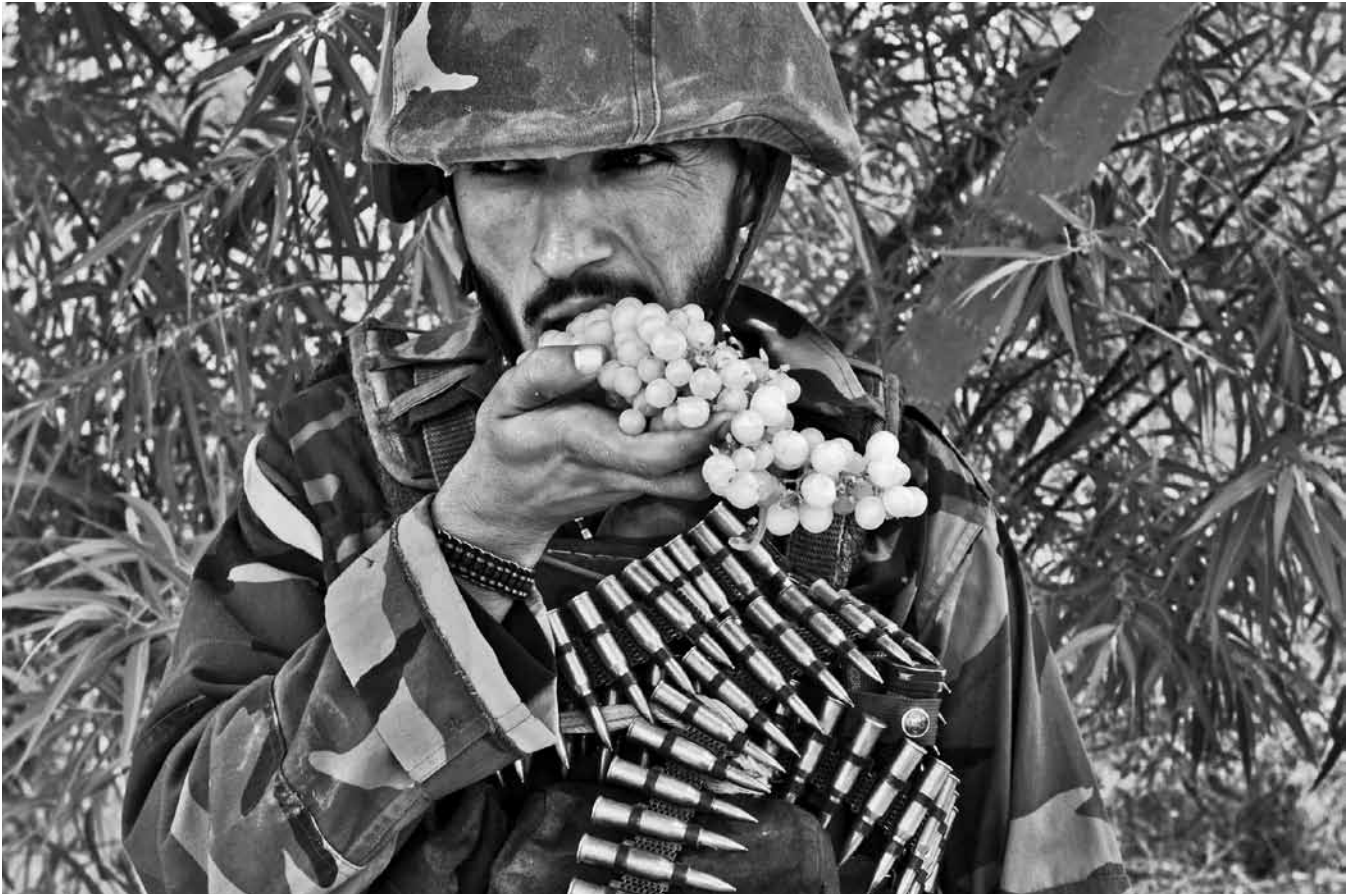


Figure 2. Louie Palu, An Afghan soldier eats grapes during a patrol in Pashmul in Zhari District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 2008. Archival digital print (Photo: © Louie Palu).



Figure 3. Louie Palu, Searching civilians while looking for insurgent rocket launching sites in Pashmul, Zhari District, Afghanistan, 2007. Archival digital print (Photo: © Louie Palu).



Figure 4. Louie Palu, Afghan National Army soldiers seen on the front lines in Zhari District, Afghanistan, 2007. Archival digital print (Photo: © Louie Palu).



Figure 5. Louie Palu, Standing in dust from improvised explosive device blast, Nakhonay, Panjwai District, Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2010. Archival digital print (Photo: © Louie Palu).



Figure 6. Louie Palu, Canadian medics at a Canadian Forward Operating Base are seen standing on a blood-stained floor while treating four Afghan civilians, one of whom later died from his wounds after they suffered injuries from an apparent improvised explosive device (IED) in Zhari District Afghanistan, 2007. Archival digital print (Photo: © Louie Palu).



Figure 7. Louie Palu, An Afghan police officer (ANP) with machine gun rounds wrapped around his neck prepares to go on patrol in the village of Adamzai in Panjwai District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 2009. Archival digital print (Photo: © Louie Palu).



Figure 8. Louie Palu, A blood- and mud-stained Afghan soldier seriously injured by an IED during a patrol at night is illuminated by the medevac helicopter's cabin lights as he is evacuated out of the Taliban stronghold of Zhari District during a combat operation in Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2010. Archival digital print (Photo: © Louie Palu).

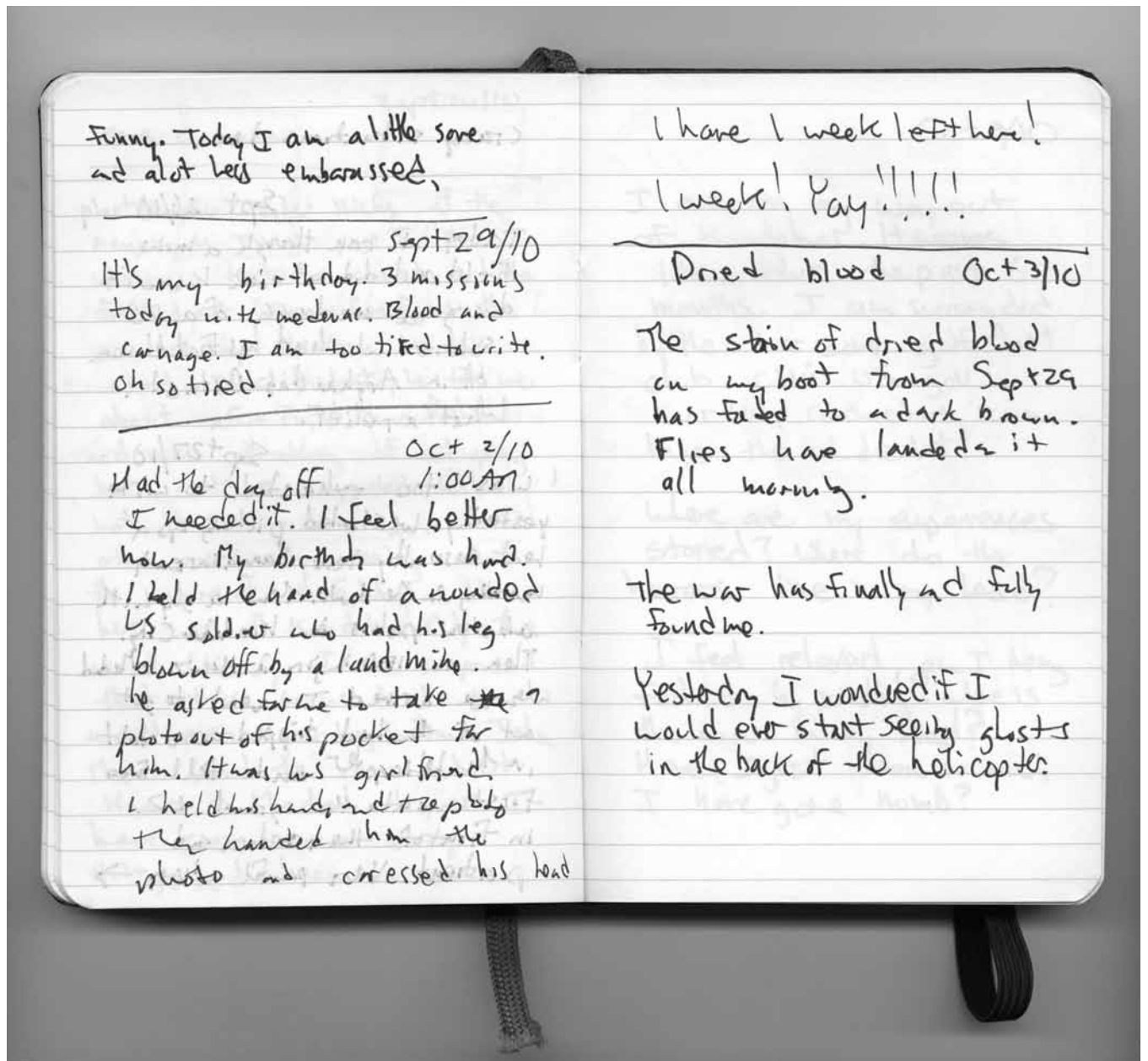


Figure 9. Louie Palu, Daily journal kept by Louie Palu on frontlines in Kandahar, Afghanistan 2010. Archival digital print (Photo: © Louie Palu).



Figure 10. Louie Palu, A man with hands bound behind his back and killed execution style, dumped on the banks of a river in Culiacan, Sinaloa, Mexico, 2012. Archival digital print (Photo: © Louie Palu).