

The Day Nobody Died, War Photography, and the Violence of the Image

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

En juin 2008, les photographes Adam Broomberg et Oliver Chanarin étaient « embarqués » (« *embedded* ») au sein de l'armée britannique dans la province de Helmand en Afghanistan et ont réalisé *The Day Nobody Died* en réponse aux événements et aux violents incidents qui ont eu lieu pendant leur engagement. Les images de cette série ressemblent à des abstractions colorées et non à des photographies conventionnelles : alors que le papier photographique a été exposé, rien de reconnaissable n'apparaît dans les oeuvres. *The Day Nobody Died* est le résultat d'une négociation entre l'imaginaire créatif des artistes sur les conflits armés et les images assainies de la guerre qui découlent souvent, d'une part, des programmes d'art militaire subventionnés par l'État et, de l'autre, du journalisme d'entreprise. Les questions qu'adresse *The Day Nobody Died* portent tant sur le médium de la photographie en lui-même que sur la façon dont celui-ci représente la guerre. Cet essai soutient qu'en ne montrant pas la violence de la guerre de la manière photographique traditionnelle, cette série d'images entreprend un examen autoréflexif sur la pratique plus large de la photographie de guerre. Ce refus de *The Day Nobody Died* est une résistance à ce que Jean-Luc Nancy appelle la tendance propre à la violence de faire image en soi. Cet essai aborde les questions de violence, de guerre et d'image par le biais des travaux de Judith Butler, Jean-Luc Nancy et Geoffrey Batchen, parmi d'autres. L'auteur place *The Day Nobody Died* dans la tradition d'une culture visuelle critique qui est concernée par ses propres opérations et par les relations qu'elle ouvre sur le monde.

The Day Nobody Died, War Photography, and the Violence of the Image

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Résumé

En juin 2008, les photographes Adam Broomberg et Oliver Chanarin étaient « embarqués » (« *embedded* ») au sein de l'armée britannique dans la province de Helmand en Afghanistan et ont réalisé *The Day Nobody Died* en réponse aux événements et aux violents incidents qui ont eu lieu pendant leur engagement. Les images de cette série ressemblent à des abstractions colorées et non à des photographies conventionnelles : alors que le papier photographique a été exposé, rien de reconnaissable n'apparaît dans les œuvres. *The Day Nobody Died* est le résultat d'une négociation entre l'imaginaire créatif des artistes sur les conflits armés et les images assainies de la guerre qui découlent souvent, d'une part, des programmes d'art militaire subventionnés par l'État et, de l'autre, du journalisme d'entreprise. Les questions qu'adresse *The Day Nobody Died* portent tant sur le médium de la photographie en lui-même que sur la façon dont celui-ci représente la guerre. Cet essai soutient qu'en ne montrant pas la violence de la guerre de la manière photographique traditionnelle, cette série d'images entreprend un examen autoréflexif sur la pratique plus large de la photographie de guerre. Ce refus de *The Day Nobody Died* est une résistance à ce que Jean-Luc Nancy appelle la tendance propre à la violence de faire image en soi. Cet essai aborde les questions de violence, de guerre et d'image par le biais des travaux de Judith Butler, Jean-Luc Nancy et Geoffrey Batchen, parmi d'autres. L'auteur place *The Day Nobody Died* dans la tradition d'une culture visuelle critique qui est concernée par ses propres opérations et par les relations qu'elle ouvre sur le monde.

Against the *ecstasy* of realism is set the *poverty* of photography, always disappointing, nothing but stains; against the *probity* of realism is set photographic *excess*, always indiscriminate, always open to chance at every stage of its process, always out of control in its reproductive drive.¹

John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame*

The image always promises more than the image, and it always keeps its promise by opening its imagination onto its own unimaginable.²

Jean-Luc Nancy, "Masked Imagination"

I — *The Day Nobody Died*: Photography as Stain

In June 2008, photographers Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin were embedded with the British Army in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Their objective was to investigate and question the role of photography in an active theatre of war and to construct a critique of the nature of embedded photojournalism and of images produced under monitored conditions. Their project *The Day Nobody Died* highlights the tensions between the creative imaginings of conflict by artists and the sanitized image of war that often results from state-sponsored war art programs and corporate journalism. It underlies a broader photographic collaboration between Broomberg and Chanarin who, since 2000, have explored military and colonial violence, suffering and oppression, and the ambiguities that arise at the intersections of different photographic practices.

Broomberg and Chanarin had taken with them to Afghanistan a lightproof box containing a roll of photographic paper fifty metres long by seventy-six centimetres wide. Using this paper, they made photographic objects that appear, at first, to

have very little to do with either photography or war. *The Day Nobody Died* is a series of six metre by seventy-six centimetre "images" that resemble colour-field abstractions. Each work was produced after an event that took place during their embedding.

In response to each of these events, and also to a series of more mundane moments, such as a visit by the Duke of York and a press conference to announce the 100th death, all events a photographer would ordinarily record, we removed a six-meter section of light sensitive paper from our box, in the back of an armored vehicle which we had converted into a mobile darkroom, and exposed it to the sun for 20 seconds.³

The resulting works are challenging if one approaches photography as an objective technical medium that records and reproduces what appears before a camera. Streaks of bright colours are contrasted with deep blacks and blown-out whites in varying rhythms and formations. These large objects, which Broomberg and Chanarin call "action photographs," are completely non-figurative: without a lens to condense and focus the sunlight emanating from outside the armoured vehicle, the light affects the surface as an unfocused wash, a stain impressed upon the paper. They seem to show nothing; they cannot easily be added to evidentiary, archival, or memorial inventories. They are, nevertheless, indicators or markers of a sort.

The very title of this project—*The Day Nobody Died*—identifies and reinforces a further ambiguity. While the photographs were made in response to a series of concrete events, this title refers to the fifth day of their embed, when, during an especially deadly phase of the war, nobody was killed. The title haunts the project as a whole; it designates that which is normally of little interest to a war journalist or war photographer: an absence of events. Indeed, in order to be embedded with the army at all, Broomberg and Chanarin "signed a form effectively banning us

from taking any images that showed evidence of conflict (no dead bodies, no wounded bodies, no evidence of enemy fire... the list is endless)."⁴ That Broomberg and Chanarin had engaged in a "performative act of resistance" rather than photographing daily life in the barracks, for example, was not lost on their handlers: once the British army became aware that they were not doing "what war photographers usually do—take pictures of war," they were escorted out of Helmand Province.⁵

Each photograph in the series has been given a title that designates the moment that triggered its production: *The Day of One Hundred Dead, June 8, 2008*, *The Brothers' Suicide, June 7, 2008*, and so on. As a project that names specific events but that fails to depict them, *The Day Nobody Died* draws attention to the "media operations" that transform "events into headlines and into images that appear to distil the essence of conflict."⁶ The title assigned to each "image" declares in words what is redacted from view. This opens a route to a system of meaning production that is different in essence from conventional photographic practices. These are singular impressions, markings left on the surface of photographic paper, traces that place photographic representation and photography as such in question. The disconnection between the object and its name draws attention to the restrictions placed on the embedded photographer by their military supervisors, who, in effect, have unlimited access to the photographers and control over their activities: "At the end of each day memory cards are scrutinized, and throughout the embed there is an agreement about what can and what cannot be represented... The word collusion rather than journalism may better describe this kind of reporting."⁷

Although *The Day Nobody Died* is a series of abstract stains, it is irreducibly photo-graphic: at a specific time and place, particles of light have been directed toward, and have inscribed themselves on, a sensitized surface. The works are markers of events without any accompanying coded information about the events in question beyond their titles, and the fact that the photographic paper was present at the time of each event's occurrence. Measured against their individual titles, the photographs show themselves to be inadequate records, errant inscriptions with no clear information to convey. This series directs us toward thinking of photography's own conditions as a medium at the same time that it investigates the medium as a visual and evidentiary record. The disjunction that characterizes the project produces an excess: the event of photographic exposure overpowers photography's role as a transmitter of legible or coded information. Yet, these photographs remain tied to the sensible event of their production (their emergence through light), and "when you look at these photographs...it becomes impossible to forget that they were made during an embed; whereas a traditional photojournalistic image attempts to obscure this fact."⁸ The photo-graphic stain preserves the events as affective signals



Figure 1. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Day Nobody Died*, 2008, 23:07. Film Still.

only, suspending them and preserving them as incomplete within the photographic process. In this way, *The Day Nobody Died* declares itself an intervention into the communicative syntax of photography, and invites us to think of the mechanisms of photography—in its production and its reception—differently. Conventional photographic communication is interrupted, and this creates another kind of labour for the viewer.

Judith Butler proposes that "the question for war photography...concerns not only what it shows, but also how it shows what it shows."⁹ This imperative to consider the *how* of war photography has two important dimensions: at the same time that we have to investigate how photography visualizes, organizes, and communicates a certain idea of war, we have to consider how photography exhibits itself as a medium through certain critical treatments of war as a theme. For Butler this turns attention away from conditions of reception and authorial intent, and toward the photograph as a "structuring scene of interpretation—and one that may unsettle both maker and viewer in its turn."¹⁰

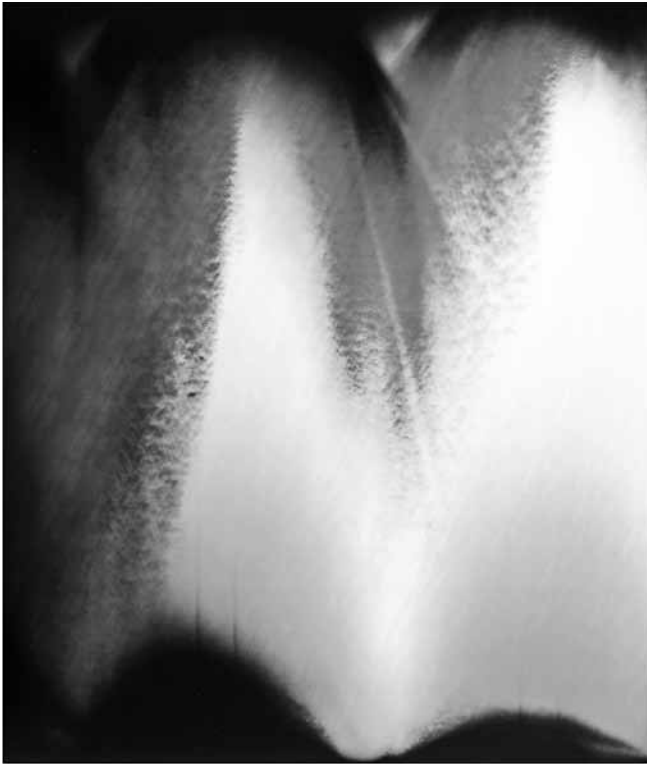


Figure 2. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Day Nobody Died: The Press Conference*, 9 June, 2008. C-41, 762 x 6000 mm. (detail)

What follows is an effort to consider the “how” of photography. How does this series of photographs structure the scene of interpretation? Firstly, central to *The Day Nobody Died* is a concern with the violence of war, the violence of state apparatuses that act in our name and of corporate ones that do not, and the violence that inhabits visual, and especially photographic, representations of wars. The series raises questions regarding the intersection of that violence with its elisions from representations of war: it expresses a self-reflexivity concerning the ethics of representation in war photography. However *The Day Nobody Died* is also concerned with unsettling the operations that are invisible in all photography. As Broomberg and Chanarin observe, camera-made images usually “erase the marks of their making.” Photography’s violence then would seem to be embedded in, and monitored by, its very mechanisms. “Images” that are made of the marks of their making “and nothing else”¹¹ resist the erasure of the “how” of photography and present to us another view of the violence of photographic representation.

The Day Nobody Died also suggests a mode of investigating related photographic practices, from photojournalism and aftermath photography to avant-garde, conceptual, and activist art photography that involves violence: if photography risks re-

peating and circulating violence and suffering in distant places and times, it is nevertheless accompanied by an important sense of proximity to events. I want to consider how Broomberg and Chanarin reveal this proximity as a forceful and unresolved inscription. Following a discussion of the discursive field opened by *The Day Nobody Died*, I turn to contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s thinking on the image and violence, a thinking that is especially germane to this series of photographs.

II — Transitive Affectivity

The Day Nobody Died invites us to ask, once again, what is a photograph? This question needs revisiting in light of photography’s ongoing relationship with war and militarized conflict. Conflict photography and photojournalism, aftermath photography, and art photography that addresses war-related themes all introduce ethical and moral issues that have a direct bearing on our understanding of visual images and the mechanisms of visual and political representation. These different photographic practices, with their different strategies and limitations, provide fragmentary impressions of the effects of a militarized conflict. This situation alone invites scrutiny because, while photographs might be visually affective, they do not often communicate the complexities of the political and military contexts in which they are produced. *The Day Nobody Died* initiates a critique of the failure to address these contexts.

The series also directs attention toward the reception of photographs of war. The affective force that images of extreme and violent human activities exercise on our senses often takes precedence over any communicative function. The film historian Ludz Koepnick wonders whether the understanding and experience provided to us by war photography is not simply a repetition of the violence it depicts, separated from the specific context and understanding of a particular event:

How can we adequately distinguish between historical violence and the violence of photographic representation? If all history, as seen through the photographic viewfinder, indeed bears the mark of trauma and catastrophe, how can photographic images appropriately picture the specificity of certain traumatic events? And finally, can photographic images help their viewers to refract—“work through”—traumatic memories, or do they simply force us to reenact that which ruptured the narratives of the past?¹²

The Day Nobody Died presents us with photographs in which the traumas of the past remain invisible. These images resist a mode of witnessing and illustration that organizes knowledge and history around catastrophic events. But the catastrophe may in fact be rediscovered in the affective stain of the works themselves: enabling neither refraction nor reenactment, these



Figure 3. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Day Nobody Died: Seeing is Believing*, 2008. Installation shot, KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2011.

photographs seem to have failed: they reverse or invert our expectations and arrive at an abrupt conclusion. As a means of representation, photography itself seems to have failed, to have arrived at an end suddenly, without catharsis, without indicating something other, and before completing what is typically expected of it. Before referring to anything or anywhere else, these photographs refer to themselves. *The Day Nobody Died* highlights what John Tagg calls “the poverty of photography:”¹³ the operations of the medium have been separated from, or put in conflict with, procedures that normally add meaning to images.

By reducing photography to a series of impressions or stains and by addressing the ethics of war photography through an investigation of the mechanisms of photographic representation, this series interrupts the ecstasy and probity of photographic realism (Tagg), and thus avoids repeating the traumas and catastrophes of the past. This approach stands in particular contrast with that of contemporary war photographer James Nachtwey,

who creates photographs that, in preserving and presenting the traumas of conflict, elevate the role of witnessing to a moral imperative. Nachtwey has photographed many of the twentieth-century’s conflict zones, including the immediate aftermath of the 1993 Rwandan genocide, the ruins of the World Trade Centre, and the conflict in Kabul. His photographs are compellingly composed and formally striking, and their content is often graphic and violent. His professional website opens with one of the strongest moral injunctions that could accompany a collection of war photographs:

I have been a witness, and these pictures are my testimony. The events I have recorded should not be forgotten and must not be repeated.¹⁴

These words create a decisive framework for viewing the portfolios presented on the site, and firmly establish conditions for their reception. But the risk is that through his photography, Nachtwey will make visible, preserve, and repeat the violence



Figure 4. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Day Nobody Died: Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt*, 2008. Installation shot, FoMu, Antwerp, 2014.

of the past in the experiences and imagination of subsequent viewers. And indeed, this is precisely what many of Nachtwey's photographs do. In Koepnick's terms, these photographs lead us to relive past traumas without the specifics or the broader context of their occurrence.¹⁵ Nachtwey's photographs are dramatic and affective reproductions of the violence of war and militarized conflict, and their distinguishing trait is the sense of violence.

Another point made by Butler is important here: she argues that the affective nature of war photography, its ability to shock and instill horror, is transitive. There is no guarantee that a photograph's affective force will be accompanied by the communication of any supplementary information about the conditions of the image's production or the nature of the event and people photographed. In its drive to act on viewers in a way that will "have a direct bearing on the kinds of judgments...viewers will formulate about the world," photography risks overwhelming viewers and limiting critical thought.¹⁶ The

implication is that, in their appearance of spatial and temporal immediacy, photographs may in fact require these supplementary facts in order to effectively illuminate the complex conditions of a conflict. Concern with this separation of affect from information, together with concerns about photography's affective force, were primary motivating forces behind *The Day Nobody Died*:

We have always struggled with the problem of representing trauma. We have found images that are constructed to evoke compassion or concern, pathos or sympathy—often the measure of a successful image—increasingly problematic. The act of looking becomes cathartic, a celebration of the sublime, but nothing else. It is a passive and quite worthless act.¹⁷

The Day Nobody Died gives us the opportunity to ask how or indeed whether photography should be representing trauma at all.

The encyclopedic exhibition *War/Photography* curated by Anne Wilkes Tucker for the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston in 2013 takes another approach to this issue of affectivity by applying a historicizing framework to an expansive archive of war photographs. In *War/Photography* Tucker uses photography not only to impress viewers with the horrors of war but also, and primarily, to illustrate the logic of its unfolding. A brief survey of the encyclopedic catalogue demonstrates this historicizing strategy: thematic divisions follow the logic of a military conflict from start to finish.¹⁸ The catalogue is organized according to chapter headings such as “Recruitment and Embarkation,” “The Fight,” “Faith,” “Refugees,” and “Remembrance” that chart the course, themes, and operational logic of war as autonomous and naturally occurring.¹⁹ *War/Photography* includes a variety of photographic formats and styles that reflect the state of the medium at different moments in history. While photography is subordinated to the logic of the conflicts that it documents, there is a sense that a parallel historiography of photography haunts this project. Tucker states that,

The title of the exhibition is WAR/PHOTOGRAPHY, not War Photography, to emphasize that it is important to understand both the diverse and ever-changing nature of war and the nature of photography as well as the historical details of documented conflicts when evaluating and interpreting conflict photographs.²⁰

Photographs function here primarily as supporting documents for an archival, encyclopedic, and universalizing visual historiography of war.²¹ There is little consideration of *how* photography constructs particular ways of knowing and evoking war. *War/Photography* takes on a humanist quality reminiscent of Edward Steichen’s 1955 exhibition *The Family of Man*, which narrated and mythologized the concept of a unified global human experience through an exhibition of photographs selected and displayed according to their affective force and formal continuity. For Roland Barthes, the critical failure of *The Family of Man* occurs when the facts and contexts that adhere to photographs are obscured in favour of a unity in the formal exhibition strategy. The photographs are then experienced as affective signals that help construct a universalizing “essence.” Barthes’s concern regarding the visual rhetoric of *The Family of Man* may be recalled in the context of *War/Photography*:

The final justification of all this Adamism is to give to the immobility of the world the alibi of a “wisdom” and a “lyricism” which only make the gestures of man look eternal the better to diffuse them.²²

Like *The Family of Man*, and in the spirit of the historiographical impulse that informs the discipline of art history and curatorial practice, *War/Photography* transforms its subject into

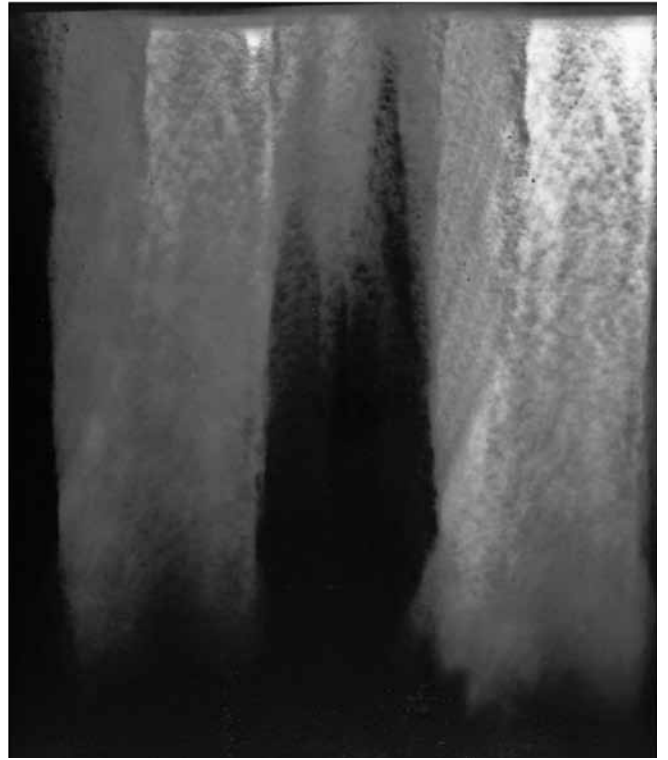


Figure 5. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Day Nobody Died: The Fixers' Execution*, 7 June 2008. C-41, 762 x 6000 mm. (detail)

a lyrical tale that diffuses the epistemological and communicative challenges that accompany photographs of war. More importantly, in light of photography’s technico-depictive nature, the violence of humanity risks appearing not only in a diffused light, but as a naturalized, pleasurable, and unchanging continuum. This is precisely the kind of risk that Broomberg and Chanarin refuse to take.

The Day Nobody Died offers a challenge to these approaches to photography: its visual disposition borrows from the tactics of avant-garde and modernist photo art by advancing and exploring the materiality of the medium and by reducing its products to a display of photographic effects and procedures. Mark Reinhardt suggests that the objective of many avant-garde photo-art practices is to invite doubt, anxiety, and concern about the operations of the artwork and labours of the photographic image.²³ Dadaism, for instance, used photographs to make references to contemporary culture and visual media while at the same time interrupting and confusing previously established meanings. Similarly, *The Day Nobody Died*, itself “a sort of Dadaesque stunt” according to its creators,²⁴ turns away from visual depiction and thus draws attention to the mechanisms of photographic representation and to the labours



Figure 6. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Day Nobody Died*, 2008, 23:07. Film Still.

of interpreting photographic reproduction and circulation. Koepnick argues that photographs that subvert expectations in this way invite us “to explore why and how we have come to encounter photographs as authenticating media of history and memory—as prostheses of perception and recollection—in the first place.”²⁵

The Day Nobody Died effects a further disruption of photographic representation by turning to a particular photographic technique: it is in fact a series of photograms, unique image-objects that are made by exposing prepared, sensitive surface with light, without the aid of lens technologies. Photograms are unique, “positive” photo-based objects that draw attention to dimensions of photography that usually remain out of sight and out of mind. Broomberg and Chanarin note that photograms are, among other things,

an effort to transform, conceptually as well as literally, a technology of multiples into one of originals. While camera-made images erase the marks of their making these images are made of these marks and nothing else.²⁶

This strategy challenges our understanding of the production and reproduction of photographs in a visual and consumer culture, interrupting the communication and sense of reproducibility associated with the medium. The two photographers believe their critical strategies “are particularly important right now when, more than ever before, the act of war coincides with its representation.”²⁷ As a series of photograms, *The Day Nobody Died* prevents, or at least complicates, the coincidence of war and its representation. It offers a critique of photography that carries the violence of war into the time of reception by a viewer. While the impressions or marks of the events remain, they appear without an interpretive code and require another kind of labour to be understood.

The Day Nobody Died is a photographic and conceptual exploration of the boundaries between evidence and art, between communicability and aesthetic and affective experience, and between the past of the event and the present of its apprehension.²⁸ Indeed this series is engaged in investigating not only photographic communicability but photography’s relationship to art as well. Jean-Luc Nancy proposes that the work of art is “a transgression and a being carried away beyond signs.” Art “gives a sign,” “but it is not the sign of something and does not signify anything else.”²⁹ Art is a technique, a “calculated procedure” that “produces something not with a view to another thing or use, but with a view to its very production, that is, its exposition.”³⁰ *The Day Nobody Died* conjures a specific relation of place and event by engaging with the techniques of art, and by using the materials of photography in a manner that resists photographic resemblance and reproducibility. As Ann McCauley has suggested, whether this photographic relation is one of coincidence or identity has been a question for photographers since the invention of the medium.³¹ In this sense, then, photography may be aligned with some of the characteristics of the critical path of art in modernity, a path that, as Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe propose, will bear with it “the necessity of presenting, with the object, the conditions of possibility of the object’s production.”³² *The Day Nobody Died* is a critical reflection on the conditions of possibility of photographic presentation in a context that has been subject to significant measures of control.

By turning toward modernist visual strategies Broomberg and Chanarin provide a different vantage point for looking back at photography and at past events. *The Day Nobody Died* keeps the medium of photography open, incomplete, and ambiguous. These images carry the time of conflict within the conditions of their production and the names they bear, but they suspend the conventional photographic reproduction and communication of these past events. Photographic “reenactment” of the past (Koepnick) is interrupted, and instead of receiving the past again through the immediacy of photographic representation, *The Day Nobody Died* raises questions about photographic communica-

tion as such. Broomberg and Chanarin actively resist authentication, memorialization, and narrative closure, and indeed say that their “aim was exactly this: to resist or to interrupt the narrative [that the military] would have liked us to describe.”³³

Mark Reinhardt argues that we are misguided if we expect visual art to intervene in horrific events on our behalf.³⁴ Such expectations raise further moral and ethical questions surrounding an artist’s possible complicity with violence. *The Day Nobody Died* refuses such an intervention and instead advances a critique of a photography that would attempt to intervene by evoking pathos or triggering a sense of catharsis. The affective force exercised here is one of failure, of an absurd rupture in the operations of photography. This allows Broomberg and Chanarin to consider “how representation itself is complicit in [the events’] instigation and perpetuation.”³⁵

III — A Prodigious Sign: Showing Photography

As a photographic project concerned with the violence of war and the conditions of its representation and reception, *The Day Nobody Died* raises a series of questions about war and the practice of conflict photography. This series bears witness to war: the images are the result of a presence in the face of conflict and are organized around a series of violent incidents that resulted in death. We never see death as such, however. *The Day Nobody Died* can be associated with a photographic strategy that, in Geoffrey Batchen’s terms, “bear[s] witness to particular traumas while refusing to show them to us.”³⁶ These images are large, vibrant refusals to show. Even the title of the series is a refusal, a negative conjuring of the violence of war. However in order to accept *The Day Nobody Died* as a refusal to show the violence of war, we have to address assumptions regarding the “how” of photographic showing in the first place. The refusal is not only a moral gesture that emerges from certain views on war. It is also a critical gesture that forces us to consider how we might expect war to appear through photography, and how we have framed the appearance of photography as such. The refusal of *The Day Nobody Died* is a refusal of, or resistance to, what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the tendency violence has to make an image of itself.³⁷

Nancy’s approach to the image in general and to the photographic image in particular focuses on the relationship between force and violence. His understanding of force and violence as they relate to the image and photography answer Butler’s call to attend to the “how” of war photography, and also help to clarify Batchen’s call for a war photography that incorporates questions about the nature of the image by refusing, or arresting, certain characteristics of photography. Ultimately, recalling Reinhardt, *The Day Nobody Died* is concerned with photography’s complicity with the instigation and perpetuation of militarized violence and with the ways in which photography has allowed the



Figure 7. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Day Nobody Died*, 2008, 23:07. Film Still.

war in Afghanistan as a totality to be imaged and imagined as a totality. It comments on how we view and come to accept violence as a necessary dimension of war as a total project.³⁸

The image, for Nancy, is characterized by forces that impact the being of things in the world (people, objects, events). It introduces an alterity into things and creates a sense of plurality or difference.

The image disputes the presence of the thing. In the image, the thing is not content simply to be; the image shows *that* the thing is and *how* it is. The image is what takes the thing out of its simple presence and brings it to pres-ence, to *praes-entia*, to being-out-in-front-of-itself, turned toward the outside.... In the image, or as image, and only in this way, the thing—whether it is an inert thing or a person—is posited as subject. The thing *presents itself*.³⁹

This turning toward the outside is not a mimetic preservation or repetition of what comes before the image. Rather, the image causes the thing, in its ontological being and self-same identity,

to establish a relation with its outside. The image itself emerges from this opening toward the outside and remains in relation to it. The image function here is one of excess rather than identity: the image causes the thing to be more than what it is by creating an opening toward the outside. The image in turn is excessive, more than what it appears to be because of the relations it opens with the thing, but it is at the same time groundless in itself. The image opens relations with the thing at the same time that it ungrounds identity: “The same is altered in its image, and it is thus that it makes itself the same as itself—visible, imaginable, and presentable.”⁴⁰ Roland Barthes experienced just such an ungrounding and “altering of the same in the image” when he came face to face with a publicity portrait photograph of himself. He had—he says—become a “Total-Image,” a “disinternalized countenance,” a function of the photographic portrait-of-the-author genre. The violence of the photograph and its reproduction effect an end, a completion, that fixes the author as subject of the image and as different from himself. For Barthes the subjection generated by the photographic portrait threatens a political freedom that precedes his apparition as image:

What I see is that I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person; others...do not dispossess me of myself, they turn me, ferociously, into an object, they put me at their mercy, at their disposal, classified in a file, ready for the subtlest deceptions.⁴¹

This recalls Nancy’s characterization of the photograph as a grasping, a becoming, and a subjection. Death here is the name of a political transformation, of a set of material and figurative operations that divide the self and that subject the self to the experience of alterity and to a becoming-for-others.

The disposition of an image, then, is characterized in part by its disposition *as* force that is exercised in, or as, a network of relations (similarly, Barthes identifies the intersection of four “image repertoires”⁴² in the portrait photograph) that have been established with some thing and its presentation for others. Force, Nancy argues, “is nothing other than the unity woven from a sensory diversity...it lies in the unity that joins (parts of a figure) together in order to bring them to light.”⁴³ Nancy distinguishes between a force that emerges through a network of relations and a force that is concerned with producing results and leaving an impression. This results in two different notions of violence. In the first instance the event of the image forces the thing toward the outside and to present itself. The violence of this force seeks to open a network of relations, to make the thing visible as such. The image-function in turn opens toward an “unimaginable,” another forcefulness that is other than the thing but open to its presence, and that seeks to ground itself and its meanings. “The violent person wants to see the mark

he makes on the thing or being he assaults.” Rather than weaving a “sensory diversity” between thing and image, the exercise of force as such becomes the image. Divorced from the thing, violence “consists in imprinting its image by force in its effect and as its effect.”⁴⁴ Photographs of the trauma of war zones risk appearing as forceful impressions of the violence of war in general, where images of violence transmit the effect of blows at the same time that they become blows in themselves, to be repeated time and again in media, in propaganda, and, perhaps with less conscious intent, in multiple digital iterations.

Rather than leaving behind evidence of force (evidence of an anterior act given in the affective present of the image-as-violence), the image resists the turn toward its own identity. Rather than showing itself, the image is concerned with showing *that it is* showing, with ostention (the gesture of pointing and indication as a distinct step in the production of meaning). The image exhibits itself before (or without?) showing *what* it is showing. The image is more than that to which it refers, but it is not other than this thing. The image, Nancy proposes, is “on the order of the monster: the monstrum is a prodigious sign.”

The German word for the image, *Bild*—which designates the image in its form or fabrication—comes from a root (*bil-*) that designates a prodigious force or a miraculous sign. It is in this sense that there is a monstrosity in the image. The image is outside the common sphere or presence because it is the display of presence. It is the manifestation of presence, not as appearance, but as exhibiting, as bringing to light and setting forth.⁴⁵

The being of the image comes to be defined by the way it exhibits its becoming. The image is indicative but it is also demonstrative and rhetorical: it shows that it is showing, it displays its indices, before and independently of any thing. The violence of the image arises here, in the exhibition of presence as force that opens toward the presence of the other. In so doing the image introduces a rupture between the thing-in-itself (an essence that closes in on itself) and a forceful apparition of presence that is tied to the prodigious disposition of the image.

The Day Nobody Died operates precisely in this way. By resisting or refusing to represent and directly communicate the impression of an anterior act, this series opens a network of forces that include anterior events (the events and effects of war). This network of forces also leads to an inquiry into the how of photographic presentation, a critical question when considering the conditions of war photography and our assumptions about the medium itself. For Nancy the artwork is exemplary in its opening toward alterity and its turning away from blows: “The violence of art differs from that of blows, not because art is semblance, but, on the contrary, because art touches the real—which is groundless and bottomless—while the blow is in itself



Figure 8. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Day Nobody Died*, 2008. Installation shot, Galerie Karsten Greve, Paris, 2009.

and in the moment its own ground.”⁴⁶ By refusing semblance and opening instead toward the groundlessness of imagination, *The Day Nobody Died* draws attention to the mechanisms and procedures through which the real is constructed and subsequently experienced.

Indeed a consideration of the medium of photography helps to illuminate Nancy’s thinking on the image and violence. The photographic image itself is the result of a mechanical and photo-chemical putting-into-relation. The opening and closing of a shutter and the impression of light (emanations from a referent, to recall Barthes⁴⁷) combine at a particular place and time to produce material results. In this sense the being of the photograph resides not in its legibility or illegibility, but in the event of its becoming in a network of forces. “Each photograph is an irrefutable and luminous I am, whose proper being is neither the photographed subject nor the photographing subject, but the slivery or digital evidence of a grasping,” Nancy writes.⁴⁸ The event of the photograph is, for Nancy, first of all a “grasping.” Photographic technique is defined through the “knot of signification”⁴⁹ in which photography remains suspended, grasping back toward what once was, and forward in the direction of what is still to come. The evidentiary nature of a photograph, then, before bearing witness to something else,

and before presenting again a set of already coded meanings, is first of all a grasping or a putting into relation. The being of photography is thus always ambiguous, a condition that Barthes also noted. We might say that the “authentication(s)” of photography authenticate the being of photography and nothing more.⁵⁰ That the photograph may preserve a recognizable or legible impression of the world does not confirm photography as indexical or evidentiary, it only obscures the differential nature of photographic presence.

The photograph, Nancy writes, multiplies and “metamorphos(es) everything into an alterity all the more altered in that it is close to us.”⁵¹ The grasping, the putting into relation of a photograph is, in Nancy’s view, always plural, despite the certainty of resemblance or identification that may accompany one’s encounter with it: “The sameness of this image is permeated with the alterity of its two concomitant subjects,”⁵² photographer and photographed, and, we might add, the photographic image-object itself. This pervasive alterity leads Nancy to propose that essential to photography is an opening toward a plurality, a *nous autres*, “we-other” that is always in the process of being formed: “Between the subject of the click and the subject grasped, there is a coexistence without coincidence, or there is a coincidence without contact, or a contact without union.”⁵³

The Day Nobody Died is a calculated operation that presents the disposition of the photographic image as elusive, if the image is understood in this case as both mimetic and invisible. The resolution and identity that usually accompany the photographic image are interrupted, yet as a grasping, as a coincidence without contact, as a touching without identity, *The Day Nobody Died* does put a set of very specific events and concerns in relation with one another. Rather than reproducing the violence of blows that have already been executed (and that are designated in the names of most of the works in the series), *The Day Nobody Died* creates a disjunction and interruption between appearance and understanding: it touches on specific subjects without making them appear to us in a traditional photographic manner, and arrests us in a network of interrupted photographic indication and reference.

IV — *Katastrophe*

“To expose,” Nancy contends, “is to depart from a simple position...a relinquishing of the contingency of a passing moment, a circumstance, a point of view.”⁵⁴ Photography is in fact a double exposure, or an exposure that multiplies: it leads its subject to differ from itself, and it presents it for others. There is a further difference and absence of identity between the time of photographic capture and the event, and between the disposition of the photographic image and its role in the construction and communication of meaning. The idea of the photographic image as an interruption of continuity and identity and an opening to alterity recalls Nancy’s notion of photography as a “flight into the strange in the very midst of the familiar.”⁵⁵ By dwelling in the multiplicity of photography, by presenting photography as a set of forces and as a grasping, *The Day Nobody Died* draws attention to photography as both indication and exposure: as both a trace or remnant of the world, and an exposure to the world as a visually affective conjuring of photography. The stains and interruptions that characterize this series gesture toward both the multiple dispositions of photography, and the multiple, uncertain, and vulnerable conditions of photographic exposure. By turning away from the witness function and from narrative visual depiction, and by putting photographic communicability in question, *The Day Nobody Died* bears witness to John Tagg’s claim that in photography “there are only differences and no positive terms, only differences and the kind of violence that insists that they can be held in place.”⁵⁶ The force of the photographic image occurs in this grasping at, and sustaining of, differences.

Critical photographic practices that address war and militarized violence have demonstrated, in Geoffrey Batchen’s view, that “a productive engagement with atrocity is possible only if one looks at it askance.”⁵⁷ Looking askance does not mean look-

ing away, or not looking. Rather, it suggests looking otherwise, obliquely, *a scancio*. *The Day Nobody Died* leads us to look to the margins of photography and to the meanings that we, as viewers, add to photography. Given to us as a set of questions or uncertainties requiring investigation rather than as fact, *The Day Nobody Died* places us in the position of becoming “critical interlocutors rather than passive observers.”⁵⁸ It is a productive end in itself: a photographic turning away from, a *katastrophe*, an arrest of affective expectation, an abrupt refusal.⁵⁹

Broomberg and Chanarin expose photography’s limits in the construction and communication of meaning. The poverty of these stains directs us toward the need to pursue other lines of inquiry if we are to advance our understanding of war. At the same time *The Day Nobody Died* is a photographic *katastrophe* that shows us something essential about photography as such.

Notes

- 1 John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truth and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxxvi.
- 2 Jean-Luc Nancy, “Masked Imagination,” in *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 97.
- 3 Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin in Barbican Gallery Presentation, “The Day Nobody Died,” 4 December 2008, www.broombergchanarin.com/files/theday.pdf (accessed 27 January 2014), 1.
- 4 Broomberg and Chanarin, in *Conscientious Photo Magazine*, “A Conversation with Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin,” 22 July 2013, <http://cphmag.com/convo-broomberg-chanarin> (accessed 17 July 2014).
- 5 Robin Dixon, “Oliver Chanarin and Adam Broomberg look at a bigger picture,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 February 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/06/entertainment/la-ca-cultural-exchange-20110206> (accessed 27 January 2014).
- 6 Broomberg and Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died,” 2.
- 7 Broomberg and Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died,” 2.
- 8 Broomberg and Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died,” 1.
- 9 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009), 71.
- 10 Butler, *Frames of War*, 67.
- 11 Broomberg and Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died,” 5.
- 12 Ludz Koepnick, “Photographs and Memories,” *South Central Review* 21, 1 (2004): 106.
- 13 Tagg, *Disciplinary Frame*, xxxvi.
- 14 James Natchwey, “Photographs by James Natchwey,” <http://www.jamesnatchwey.com/> (accessed 27 January 2014).
- 15 Koepnick, “Photographs and Memories.”
- 16 Butler, *Frames of War*, 68. Butler’s approach unfolds through a

- consideration of Susan Sontag's writings on photography, and especially of the changes in Sontag's views on photography and conflict following 9/11.
- 17 Broomberg and Chanarin, "The Day Nobody Died," 4.
 - 18 Anne Wilkes Tucker, *War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and its Aftermath* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts; New Haven: Distributed by Yale University Press, 2012).
 - 19 On photography's role in the development of cultural historiography in the nineteenth century, see Randy Innes, "Jérusalem Revisited: On Auguste Salzmann's Photo-Topography," *Religion and the Arts*, 15 (2011): 306–37.
 - 20 Tucker, *War/Photography*, 175.
 - 21 Susie Linfield expresses a similar criticism in her recent review of *War/Photography*, emphasizing the problems that accompany the exhibition's reduction of difference and lack of attention to the specific details of war. Linfield, "Pictures Without an Exhibition," *The Nation*, 14 January 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/article/177929/pictures-without-exhibition#> (accessed 27 January 2014).
 - 22 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973), 110.
 - 23 Mark Reinhardt, "Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique," in *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, ed. Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, and Erina Duganne (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 21.
 - 24 Broomberg and Chanarin, "The Day Nobody Died," 2.
 - 25 Koepnick, "Photographs and Memories," 97.
 - 26 Broomberg and Chanarin, "The Day Nobody Died," 5.
 - 27 Broomberg and Chanarin, "The Day Nobody Died," 5.
 - 28 I consider the exhibition of war in greater detail in Randy Innes, "Contemporary Presents: The Canadian War Museum's Afghanistan—A Glimpse of War and the Unfinished Business of Representation," *TOPIA* 20 (2008): 93–107.
 - 29 Jean-Luc Nancy, "Image and Violence," in *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 26.
 - 30 Nancy, "Technique of the Present," *Tympanum: Journal of Comparative Literary Studies* 4 (15 July 2000), n.p., <http://www.usc.edu/dept/comp-lit/tympanum/4/nancy.html> (accessed 27 January 2014).
 - 31 Anne McCauley, "Talbot's Rouen Window: Romanticism, *Naturphilosophie* and the Invention of Photography," *History of Photography* 26, 2 (Summer 2002), 127.
 - 32 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY University Press, 1988), 106.
 - 33 Broomberg and Chanarin, "The Day Nobody Died," 2.
 - 34 Reinhardt, "Picturing Violence," 26.
 - 35 Broomberg and Chanarin, "The Day Nobody Died," 2.
 - 36 Geoffrey Batchen, "Looking Askance," in Batchen et. al., *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 227.
 - 37 Nancy, "Image and Violence," 21.
 - 38 Nancy, "Image and Violence," 21.
 - 39 Nancy, "Image and Violence," 21.
 - 40 Nancy, "Masked Imagination," 97.
 - 41 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 14.
 - 42 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 13.
 - 43 Nancy, "Image and Violence," 22.
 - 44 Nancy, "Image and Violence," 20.
 - 45 Nancy, "Image and Violence," 22.
 - 46 Nancy, "Image and Violence," 25.
 - 47 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 80.
 - 48 Jean-Luc Nancy, "Nous Autres," in *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 105.
 - 49 Nancy, "Nous Autres," 105.
 - 50 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 87.
 - 51 Nancy, "Nous Autres," 106.
 - 52 Nancy, "Nous Autres," 104.
 - 53 Nancy, "Nous Autres," 106.
 - 54 Nancy, "Technique of the Present," n.p.
 - 55 Nancy, "Nous Autres," 106.
 - 56 Tagg, *Disciplinary Frame*, 15.
 - 57 Batchen, "Looking Askance," 227.
 - 58 Batchen, "Looking Askance," 239.
 - 59 See Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Équivalence des catastrophes (Après Fukushima)*, (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2012), 20.