

This essay accompanies the exhibition *War at a Distance* featuring Stephen Andrews, Richard Johnson, Allyson Mitchell, Suzanne Opton, Louie Palu, Francesco Simeti, and Graeme Smith
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War at a Distance: Visual Culture and the Framing of Public Conversations about Canadian Forces in Afghanistan

by Blake Fitzpatrick, Karyn Sandlos, and Roger I. Simon

When the government of a nation makes the decision to send its Armed Forces into combat it is no small matter for that nation's civic culture. Understandably, we expect there to be extensive discussion and debate as to what national purpose would justify the human sacrifice that inevitably defines the experience of war. This is certainly true in Canada today. As of the date of this writing, the war in Afghanistan, the first combat mission for the Canadian Forces since the 1950-53 Korean War, has resulted in 127 Canadian soldiers dead and over three times as many wounded. And if one wants to dwell on such counts, we would be shamed not to include the thousands of combatants killed on all sides of the Afghan insurgency, as well as the violent deaths of many thousands of Afghan civilians. Thus it is important to register that for the first half of 2009, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan recorded 1,013 Afghan civilian deaths for the six months from January 1st to June 30th. This represents an increase of 24% over the same period in 2008, when 818 civilians were killed.

The terms for public discussion of a nation's participation in war will always include the realpolitik of the agendas of international coalitions, the promotion of and resistance to various ideologies, and judgments concerning

the practical realities facing all parties to a conflict. However, this public discussion is also significantly affected by encounters with representations of the experiences of soldiers and civilians in zones of war. For example, in newspapers, on television, radio, and the Internet, we are offered a variety of accounts that try to provide a glimpse of what soldiers in the field must face and how such realities become interwoven in their thoughts and feelings. For Canadians living far from the landscape of Afghanistan, with little knowledge



Suzanne Opton, photographs from the *Citizen + Soldier Series*, 2009
Soldier: Wright - 366 Days in Iraq
Citizen: Yada Barazanji - Writer, Mother of Three.

of Afghan histories and the diverse and changing cultures of the region, these images and narratives are the forms through which many of us endeavor to enter into relations of proximity to those living and fighting in that country. Engaging with these representations can only offer an illusive sense of coming closer to the realities of what, for most of us, is inevitably to be experienced as war at a distance. Yet we do form fragmentary impressions and partial insights from such representations, impressions and insights that become part of the way one makes sense (or not) of arguments about the war and Canada's participation in it.

While such representations attempt to bring us closer to distant actualities, they inevitably embody their own circumscriptions, setting into play the relation between what can be known and considered and what remains both unknown and unthought. While this familiar theme of the limits of representation is central to the exhibition *War at a Distance*, our main concern is not simply a conventional critique of representation. Rather, the emphasis here is placed on the circumstances that might provoke the productive possibilities of actually being at a distance from the realities of war. In this respect, we have gathered a quite diverse set of images and sounds emerging from the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan. We have assembled these visual and audio representations in order to explore whether and how their encounter might offer a reflexive consideration that generates new questions and modes of thought.

Thus *War at a Distance* is an interdisciplinary exhibition that aims to open a wider discussion of visual culture's contribution to the public deliberations of Canada's responsibilities in the world beyond our borders. In relation to this aim we have chosen to undo the conventional segmentation often enforced between art and journalism, documentary practice and aesthetics, art galleries and

broadcast media, war artists and video combatant-diarists. This is not to say that these representational and institutional forms are indistinguishable. No doubt each form carries its own specific conventions that are often intertwined with dependencies on particular modes of distribution. Each of these forms enacts a particular way of inviting us to grapple with the complexities of knowing war at distance. It is precisely because of the specificity of these forms that their juxtaposition provides a locus within which to ask not only how these modes of representation work and within what limitations, but also how their relation to each other might help us begin to think about the Afghan war beyond the sedimented positions of unreserved support or single minded opposition. The exhibition and its related programming offer the possibility of contemplating the connections and contradictions that emerge across various practices of visual and audio representation that provide differing perspectives on the realities of war. But more than this, by combining artistic and journalistic forms, and thus bringing together images not normally seen in relation to each other, we have attempted to create a context with the potential to shift our perceptible reality and forge more complex ways of making connections across the unbridgeable actualities of vastly differing experiences, experiences that may become implicated in the positions we hold about the war.

In *War at a Distance*, the depiction of war through a diverse range of images and sounds is thus a rhetorical strategy that refuses to settle on a singular representation of conflict but instead, constructs a multidimensional public experience of a war that is itself multidimensional, fragmentary and distanced. The point however is not to create an exhibition of contradictions. Rather, it is to explore ways to open thought about the war to new perspectives and questions that have remained closed off in discussions about Canadian



Louie Palu, from the series *Zhari-Panjwai: Dispatches from Afghanistan*, 2007, detail.



Allyson Mitchell, *Afghanimation*, 2008, video still.

involvement in Afghanistan. The nine works presented in *War at a Distance* are intended to open encounters with the subject of contemporary war through the juxtaposition of different themes and modes of exposition. The portraiture of American photographer Suzanne Opton and the frontline coverage of Canadian troops on the ground by Louie Palu offer viewers two different encounters with the impact of war on those who live with its effects daily and directly. Drawn from her *Citizen/Soldier* series, Opton's work brings viewers to a proximal relation with the faces of those who have seen war. Photographed consistently in close-up, her images invite viewers to search the faces and the eyes of civilians and soldiers alike and to discern an intimate experience of war. At first regard, such strategies might recall a faith in the unique referential character of the photographic portrait, and a belief that when we look closely at another, our increased proximity to that person yields a corresponding increase in understanding and empathy. However, the project's diptychs also reveal moments of mutual vulnerability. This is a form of vulnerability that reaches beyond the assurances provided through identity categories such as citizen and soldier, aggressor and victim, self and other. In contrast to the belated poignancy of Opton's portraits, Louie Palu's dispatches from Afghanistan present the immediacy of combat images and sounds. Palu, a Canadian photojournalist, has commented that the truest experience of battle is encountered via audio. In Palu's project, photographs of soldiers on the battlefield are juxtaposed with the sounds of war itself to create a multidimensional representation of soldier experience that is close-by, immediate and disorienting.

In contrast with the modes of representation offered by Opton and Palu, the exhibition includes selected tracks from the award winning CBC radio drama *Afghanada*, conceived by Andrew Moodie, Greg Nelson, Adam Pettle and Jason Sherman and directed by Gregory Sinclair. As of this writing, the *Afghanada* series has spanned three years and currently is comprised of fifty-six episodes, each presenting an assortment of the sound-images of combat and the social and psychological stress that accompanies it. The episodes selected for *War at a Distance* provide yet another picture of the realities of war, one that embroils the listener in the deadly ambiguities that make up a good deal of any "insurgency" wherein it is not possible to identify who is your enemy nor determine what counts as a successful field operation.

Marked departures from these photographic and sound impressions are two sets of images that first made their appearance in the context of news journalism. Commissioned by the National Post to record his impressions of Canadian Forces in the field, Richard Johnson provides a wide range

of sketches of everyday life at the Kandahar Air Force Base and at infantry outposts "beyond the wire." In Johnson's illustrations, the drama of frontline journalism is mediated through field notes and meticulous drawings. His journal entries slow time down to reveal pauses in the conduct of war – moments of encounter shared between Canadian soldiers, and with the Afghani environment and citizens. These moments are punctuated by the unnerving possibility of encountering the enemy and the sudden turn of events



Graeme Smith, *Talking to the Taliban, Zabul province, southern Afghanistan, 2007*. Image by anonymous researcher for The Globe and Mail.



Richard Johnson, *Postings from Afghanistan, 2007*. Courtesy of the National Post.

whereby everyday life means living with an experience of daily threat and potential loss. Additionally, Globe and Mail reporter Graeme Smith has made available the raw video footage of his interviews with members of the Taliban, image-texts that offer encounters with those whom Canadian troops regard as the enemy. Utilizing the direct address of video interviews, *Talking to the Taliban* is a work that attempts to demystify the shadowy outline of the Taliban, and is notable for the degree to which it refuses participation in the now common practice of embedded journalism. However, as much as the series provides a more complete – or complex – picture, when viewing the tapes, we realize how little we know about the Taliban. Paradoxically, they remain the ultimately distanced subject. As if to underscore this point, Canadian multimedia artist Allyson Mitchell's, video work, *Afghanimation* poses sharp questions about the obfuscations of nationalistic propaganda in our perceptions of the Afghan conflict. Paying tribute to Canadian artist-filmmaker Joyce Wieland, Mitchell layers domestic textiles—traditional Persian war rugs and her own knitted blanket — with newspaper clippings that reference global political unrest.

Glimpses of combat and mundane existence make their appearance in a selection of videos of Canadian forces in action captured by soldiers with hand held cameras and subsequently posted to YouTube. Certainly one can find on YouTube a large number of videos made by combat camera units of the Canadian Forces as well as “tribute videos” that edit various combat images into constructions that celebrate the courage and determination of soldiers serving in Afghanistan. However, also available are a considerable number of unofficial short video sequences made by soldiers in the field. While these amateur videos, often captured ‘on the fly,’ attempt to bring the war closer through an

informative picture of the actualities of army life, they also effectively convey an imminent sense of danger, chaos and confusion. The ten YouTube disseminated videos selected for *War at a Distance* all convey perspectives on the war not emphasized in professional journalist accounts or official Armed Forces productions. As a form of counterpoint to these more “realist” perspectives, Italian-American artist Francesco Simeti's installation, *Watching the War*, provides a re-contextualization of media images of the Afghan conflict in a repetitive, and strikingly beautiful, wallpaper motif. A tension arises when we realize how easily these singular images of combat dissolve into backdrop or decoration. Through hand-drawn, crayon images rubbed over a window screen on mylar, Canadian artist Stephen Andrews' film *The Quick and the Dead* and his selection of associated animation cells re-iterates our armchair distance from the horror present in television images of war. Andrews' technique mimics the CYMK dot-matrix of a newspaper image, thus offering a perspective on the visual spectacle of war that demands we revisit what it is we are able to see and on what terms, when we view war at a distance.

The fact that the various visual works presented in *War at a Distance* offer partial impressions and not fully worked through analyses of the current conflict in Afghanistan, does not relegate this collection to political insignificance. These are works that act on us and become implicated in the judgments we form about the world. Rather than merely portraying and hence offering a knowledgeable picture of the realities of war, these works demand an apprehension that affectively relays and registers experiences well beyond what most of us face in our everyday lives. This is not the relay of emotional sentiment that forestalls thinking. Rather this is a provoked affective physical reverberation which gives



Francesco Simeti, *Watching the War*, 2004, detail of wallpaper installation.

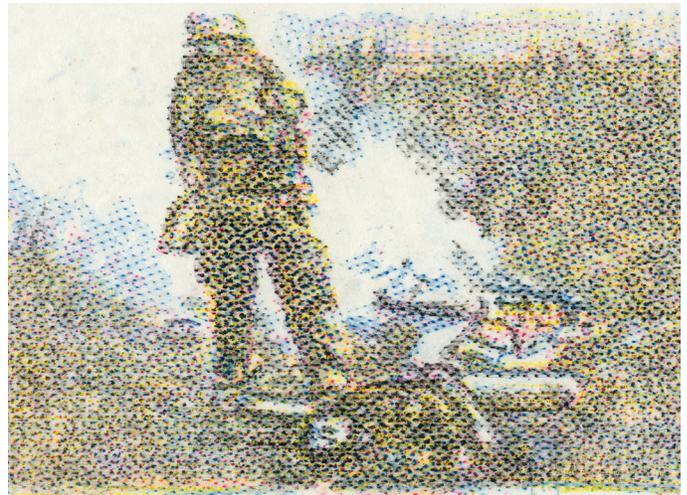
renewed force to familiar arguments about the Afghan war. Subject to the gaze of these images, it is impossible to consider the issues at stake in Canada's involvement in Afghanistan independent of feelings provoked in our encounter with them, feelings perhaps as diverse and confusing as a mix of sadness, fear, pride, revulsion, hatred, shame, anxiety, and ambivalence.

No doubt we have taken a considerable ethical risk with this exhibition. This risk is not located in the display of the spectacle of death but rather in its minimal and oblique inclusion in the exhibition. As Judith Butler suggests "there is no way to separate the material reality of war from those representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalize its own operation." It is certainly reasonable to ask whether by constructing an encounter with the fragmentary impressions of soldiers' experiences, impressions that for the most part exclude explicit images of wide spread death and destruction, we have curated an image-event complicit with the technology of war itself. Representations of war and its destructive effects sustain the practice of war by acting on our senses, crafting them to apprehend the world selectively, deadening affect in response to certain images and sounds, and enlivening affective responses to others. Butler makes the point that this is why war works to undermine a sensate democracy, restricting what we can feel, disposing us to feel shock and outrage in the face of one expression of violence and righteous coldness in the face of another.

We know this all too well, but we have wagered differently. Our wager is that old ways of seeing will be challenged and new possibilities begun in the context of *War at a Distance*. This bet presumes that the constellation of images operates at two levels. On the one hand, the images are given discursive qualification by the pre-existing interpretive frames we (perhaps differently) already hold about the war. That is, informed by media reports, by conversations with friends and family, and perhaps by the desires which shape the idealizations we have about ourselves, we "read" the images through our existing presuppositions, fixing their meanings as illustrative of the frames of interpretation we have come to be invested in. On the other hand, these images relay an affective intensity, something felt but not immediately nameable or understandable. Affect then is not to be taken as an equivalent term for emotion. Rather we refer to affect as a non-specific and immediate sensation that is not pre-coded by a representational system that contains or settles its substance within specific linguistic markers that offer an understanding of just what it is that one is feeling (e.g. the emotions of sadness, anger, etc.). Such affect is felt as a force that incites and compels thought, not only as to

the range of emotions one is feeling, but as well, as to what in an encounter has provoked these feelings and has become significant to one's framework for acting in the world. If affect is rendered too quickly into the interpretable emotions of say pride on the one hand, or shame on the other, this experience will simply confirm what we already think or feel. But if the affective experience is not so easily rendered, if we sense the need for some delay in settling how to name what it is we are feeling during and subsequent to our encounter with these images, then something significant is afoot. For it is this not so easily settled affect that complicates our response to these images and opens out onto thought. As we consider the works in the *War at a Distance* exhibition in relation to each other, it is possible they will work to unsettle the terms on which they register in our memories and thoughts, calling into question the representational regimes in place that predispose us to respond to war in particular ways.

To win the bet made by *War at a Distance*, the exhibition will need to sustain the possibility of provoking new thought without a guarantee in advance as to the substance and movement of such thought. It is our hope that the juxtapositions that define the visual field of *War at a Distance* will provoke a mixed and complex set of feelings that will begin to subvert the too easy binaries that characterize much of the discussion of the Afghan war, and, as a consequence, deepen the terms on which such conversations are held. How we have these conversations matters a great deal as people struggle to come to terms with difficult questions regarding Canada's responsibilities to those living beyond its borders. That there are such serious issues of public concern is reason enough to explore new ways of bringing art and documentary media together to fashion forms of engagement that might enliven the contribution of visual culture to Canadian civic life.



Stephen Andrews, *The Quick and the Dead*, 2004, video still.

End Notes:

1. UNAMA Human Rights - Afghanistan - Mid-Year Bulletin on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, July 31, 2009
2. For a further discussion of these themes in the work of Suzanne Opton, see, Andrea D. Fitzpatrick, "Citizens of Iraq, Portraits of Exile," in One Hour Empire, Issue 1, 2008, p.53
3. Butler, Judith The Frames of War: When is Life Grievable? New York: Verso 2009, p.29
4. Butler, Ibid, p.51.
5. This framework is adapted from Brian Massumi's discussion of how images operate. A useful elaboration of these ideas can be found in Justus Nieland , Feeling Modern The Eccentricities of Public Life, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008, p.94.
6. Bennett, Jill Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art, Stanford: Stanford Unversity Press, 2005.

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