

“Killing for Show”: A Conversation with Julian Stallabrass

MIGNON NIXON

Mignon Nixon: Would you start us off by explaining what you mean by “killing for show,” the title of your new book (*Killing for Show: Photography, War and the Media in Vietnam and Iraq*)?¹

Julian Stallabrass: It’s the move that those wielding weapons make to show their power publicly. The two wars that I examine were staged as global demonstrations of virtuous power—against communism and against tyranny—to show that democratic and liberal virtues will be victorious, and the devastating price paid for disobedience. In my opening example, of a very costly RAF mission to launch a smart missile to blow up a pickup truck in Iraq, the main point seems to be to generate images of the killing—in this case a snuff movie for domestic consumption.

Killing for Show raises the delicate matter of the balance between demonstrating military power, efficiency, and bravery, along with the clear moral purpose of their mission, without appearing to glory overmuch in slaughter and destruction. Corpses must be piled up for the cameras without besmirching the nobility of the cause.

Such public wars are the exception, especially in the last few decades. Yet even in wars from which the media are forcibly excluded, armed groups still regularly stage killing for show: It’s just that the audience is local, and the scene may not be recorded, or if it is, the images have a limited circulation. Like the state of exception, to which it is related, the scale can be large or small: a war, a single police shooting. I reproduce a powerful image taken in Vietnam by Steven Curtis, showing a group of ARVN soldiers standing over the partially naked corpse of a young woman. Her body had been dumped on the road as a public warning to the locals. Curtis was punished for taking the photograph, and even now its display elicits scandalized responses: The rule he violated was to attempt to transmit a local killing for show to a wider viewership.

1. *Killing for Show: Photography, War and the Media in Vietnam and Iraq* (Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, MD), 2020.



Viewfinder image of Royal Air Force airstrike on ISIS vehicle.

Throughout both wars, the two were in continual tension: In his remarkable book *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*, Nick Turse notes that Vietnamese peasants were perplexed by the weird inconsistency of US and Korean troops: Sometimes they would pass through villages handing out sweets, sometimes burning homes, and sometimes murdering anyone they could find.² This inconsistency reflected the double aspect of killing for show, directed at different audiences. Charity and the clean kill for the press; for the locals, something else entirely.

Nixon: In the book, you discuss the Curtis photograph as an atrocity image. You point out that the US armed forces used military photographers extensively to document the war, subject to strict censorship and control. Steven Curtis was a Marine photographer, and you tell us that he was removed from his photographic unit for taking that picture. You also reveal, from your own correspondence with Curtis, that the photograph survived and has since been exhibited in the US and online, but that it has also been re-censored. You observe that “overt disruptions to US collective memory do not go unpunished.” That’s manifestly true, but this photograph and its history raise other questions about atrocity images and war memory: about sexualized atrocity and the ethics of photographic representation, and about how photographers, artists working with photographic images, and we as viewers can counter the denial of atrocity—all of which you explore in depth in the book.

2. Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*, Metropolitan Books, New York 2013, pp. 132–3.

The photograph in question, titled *The Enemy*, shows the partially naked corpse of a young woman placed in the road. Her body is twisted and her arms outstretched, accentuating the violation. The obvious purpose is to humiliate and, as you point out, to terrorize. The five men loitering in the road near the body are smiling, leaning on their bicycles or striking relaxed poses, gazing toward something out of frame, perhaps the Marines who have arrived from Curtis's unit to search for land mines. You explain in the book that the woman lying dead in the road was a suspected National Liberation Front (NLF) activist and that it was common practice to display a naked corpse "as a warning to others and to mortify her loved ones." Curtis recalled to you that by the time his unit arrived, someone had covered the corpse with a plastic sheet, "but when they saw me with a camera, they pulled the plastic back partway," to facilitate a more graphic image. Stones have been placed to anchor the sheet covering the lower half of the body, but the torso has been exposed in an explicitly sexual manner. The shirt has been yanked up to the armpits, making it evident that this person has been killed, stripped, exhibited, and then re-desecrated for a picture. From the satisfied expressions and body language of the men standing over the body, it is apparent that sexualized killing and sexual-atrocity exhibitionism are practiced and routine, and that the perpetrators are eager to cooperate in making this technique more widely known.

The pervasiveness of rape and sexualized atrocity in the US war in Vietnam is still denied, and one important contribution of your book to scholarship on the war is to confront this history at the level of the image. In *Kill Anything That Moves*, Turse details the extent of rape, gang rape, and sexualized torture and torture-murder in the war, which was officially documented by the military and then of course buried. Yet there were voices, including returning veterans, calling out the culture of rape and sexualized torture and killing at the time. Women Strike for Peace (WSP) activists were also outspoken in drawing attention to the rampant sexual violence and sex-murder, and claimed this as one basis for solidarity with, and responsibility to, Vietnamese women. Like the photographs you discuss, the testimonies of WSP women, in dialogue with Vietnamese women, have disappeared from war memory and are rarely mentioned in scholarship. The firsthand reports of veterans, which you draw on in the book, are only slightly better remembered. But traces of this history of sexualized atrocity are visible in feminist artistic production of the time. I'm thinking in particular of the work of Nancy Spero, Martha Rosler, and Carolee Schneemann, who incorporate atrocity images, directly and indirectly, in drawings, collages, and film. Through their work, the war's sexual sadism does find a place in war memory, in forms that also take account of our psychic as well as political defenses against such images.

This brings me finally to a question. One of the defining features of your book is that it works across many photographic registers, including photojournalism, amateur photographs, and art photography, for want of a better term. Could you talk about the heterogeneity of the images you analyze, and how this methodology informs your thinking about war memory and war resistance?

Stallabrass: You give a fine description and contextualization of Curtis's lacerating image. Such photographs that contain both the crime and the celebration of either the perpetrators or those who sympathize with them are very rare—partly because such circumstances are fleeting and partly because it is perilous to take them. This image has an affinity with a photograph taken in Beirut in 1976 by Don McCullin, "Young Christian Youth Celebrating the Death of a Young Palestinian Girl," in which one of the killers is playing a lute. The photographer claims that he was threatened with death for taking it.

As you say, rape and torture, very often followed by killing, were standard practice in the Vietnam War, and not just among US troops but among their allies, including the South Vietnamese Army. The deep problem that confronted photographers who wanted to show that was how to do so. Even if you were able to make such images, they would only capture a single event and were unlikely to reach publication. Some of the photographic books made at the time—such as Felix Greene's *Vietnam! Vietnam!* (1966)—that circulated among antiwar activists tried to do so by assembling numerous images of atrocities, which was the approach taken by the radical women artists you mention and, later, the war museums in Vietnam.³

Your question on method is linked to this very problem: Against the largely successful efforts of the political and media elites to create a tendentious culture of selective memory and to aggressively suppress anything that does not fit the narrative, how can we revivify these images and make them speak to the present? Part of what I try to do is to get at the specificity of each type of image through comparison: We may get a sense of photojournalism's place in the current array of war photography by comparing it with other types of images. Compared with the stately, reserved, severely composed "aftermath" images that dominate the depiction of war in museums, photojournalism embodies speed and intimacy, both of which are written into its style as well as its content. Compared with citizen journalism and the amateur productions of the troops, photojournalism embodies professional values; while its aesthetic often encompasses the apparently casual, it bears the sheen of photographic competence and the visual quality of high-definition digital cameras or fine film and sharp lenses. Compared with official military photography (which shares the same production values), it has too great a variety to be dismissed as mere propaganda and does not quite so readily fall

3. Felix Greene, *Vietnam! Vietnam! In Photographs and Text* (Palo Alto: Fulton, 1966).



Don McCullin. Young Christian Youth Celebrating the Death of a Young Palestinian Girl, Beirut, 1976. 1976. © Don McCullin. Courtesy of Hamiltons Gallery, London.

into generic categories. Compared with photographs of atrocity, of the bloodied corpses blasted by modern weaponry that circulate in certain magazines and websites, published photojournalism is often tempered and restrained, standing on its dignity. Taken together, as a variegated image culture created by and sometimes in the service of war, these different types of images comment on each other in a way that reinforces the general and systematic features of the whole. Yet they cannot stand alone, and require at the time of their viewing and even more in retrospect a great deal of elucidation about the circumstances in which they were taken and published, the political climate into which they issued, and the various uses to which they were put. In the case of the Vietnam War, we are helped a great deal in this, not just by Turse's book but by the detailed archival work of Bernd Greiner in *War Without Fronts* and by John Tirman's examination over a longer time period of the scale of US military killing in *The Deaths of Others*.⁴ It is more recent conflicts that have sparked such reexaminations, which follow and solidify the earlier efforts that you spoke to, as well as others such as the Winter Soldier investigations and Bertrand Russell's "war crimes" tribunal.⁵

Nixon: Your book considers the US wars in Vietnam and Iraq together, complicating the model of repetition that would see the war in Iraq as being, as is sometimes argued, another Vietnam. You demonstrate that a specific analysis of both image wars exposes the limitations of that analysis, even as you also acknowledge that there is something akin to a compulsion to repeat underpinning this history (though I appreciate that this is not how you would put it). You demonstrate that both wars were intrinsically photographic—that photographic strategy was embedded in them—and you explain how this strategy adapted and mutated over time as part of a general effort to integrate control of the media into the conduct of war, transferring into new wars and, in the case of Vietnam, crystallizing the war itself at the level of the image. It's not that photography documents or promotes or responds to war, as if it were somehow apart from war, but that photography and war are bound up together, as are photography and war resistance.

I found your analysis helpful for thinking about, in particular, the persistence of extreme cruelty. The psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell refers to the "de-repression" of war, and the catalogue of horrors you lay out testifies to that and leads to the question of why: Why this magnitude of "violence perversity," as Mitchell calls it, in both of these wars, and how does concentrat-

4. Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts: The USA in Vietnam* (London: Bodley Head, 2009); John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

5. Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972); Bertrand Russell, *War Crimes in Vietnam* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967).

ing on photographic images help us to make some sense of this?⁶ An underlying claim of the book is that we need to confront the inventory of sadism in the photographic record, however partial it is, as a starting point. To the extent that atrocity in these wars is mistaken for aberration, the problem of blanket cruelty is missed.

There are ethical and psychical considerations in your project, of course. In her essay “Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag,” Judith Butler points to “the way in which suffering is presented to us, and how that presentation affects our responsiveness.”⁷ Butler addresses photographs of Vietnam, Iraq, and Guantánamo, but without the images themselves. She raises the problem of “our inability to see what we see,” which becomes a somewhat different problem when the photographs are present.⁸ You take an uncompromising approach, reproducing over two hundred photographs, most of them evidencing exceptional cruelty. This seems perhaps the most crucial decision for the book, and you address it partly in terms of fostering a “counterculture of the present” by helping equip your readers with the ability to interpret such images, to *see* them. So the book is a history but also a primer in a way. Is that how you view it?

Stallabrass: The differences between the two showcase wars are many and various. On the conscious level, if you like, the two wars against Iraq—the Gulf War (1991) and the Iraq War (2003–2011)—were concerted attempts *not* to repeat the defeat in Vietnam, either in military terms or in the media realm; and indeed, by the time of the Iraq War the two realms were seen as entirely integrated through the ambition to control all signals emanating from the region of conflict. From the point of view of the Pentagon, a war modeled on the Blitzkrieg would avoid the Vietnamese “quagmire.” So why did wars waged by such different means throw up images that were so similar?

Photographers were operating in a media environment in which there was significant pressure to supply a stream of rapidly readable and spectacular images that would stand out from the flow of photographs continually crossing the screens of picture editors. Some would leap out because they were recognizable, either because they used familiar formal arrangements or because they echoed a famous image of an earlier war. I look at some of the echoes that are also mutations—for instance, in comparing McCullin’s shell-shocked Marine at Hué to Luis Sinco’s briefly celebrated “Marlboro Marine” during the second assault on Fallujah. Some of that searching for cliché may have been a cynical opportunism encouraged by the photojournalism industry, but some was a poignant haunting of the supposed power of photojournalism at the time of the Vietnam War to change political opinion. For exam-

6. Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 36.

7. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 63.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

ple, a very courageous and accomplished photographer, Andrea Bruce, writes of her obsession to make the definitive image of the war, which would force people to pay attention to what went on in Iraq and caused her to risk her life by returning there again and again.⁹

The unconscious side of it—and it really is unconscious in many cases, as I have found when trying to raise the issue in print and in talks (even at the Imperial War Museum)—is colonial conquest and occupation, and the long continuities across their history. If Iraq began as Blitzkrieg, it ended in prolonged occupation, and then the parallels with Vietnam stepped to the fore, though as they did, the media largely turned away. In both, utter disregard for the history, culture, and society of the places to be occupied was apparent. In both, the invaders were widely reviled. And in both, racism was flagrant, leading at best to negligence towards civilian life and safety and at worst to atrocious attacks on those living under occupation. It is inconceivable that a drone would fire a missile into a school or church in Dublin because it was believed that the buildings might contain terrorists, but during the Obama regime equivalent strikes took place almost daily in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The divide is surely race (and access to social media).

So this brings us to the issue of systemic cruelty, which is very difficult to know how to deal with, in terms of images, words, and their combination. I don't think that most of the images in the book are overtly cruel: Many are banal, propagandistic images—portraits and generic scenes—but you are right that, within the frame of the book, all may be seen within the horizon of cruelty. In Vietnam, the aim of the war, which was sometimes stated openly, was the extermination of the peasantry, the basis of resistance, through forced relocation or murder. It is hardly surprising that the result was systematically cruel, or that crimes against civilians were standard, or that new soldiers were obliged by their troop units to commit them on pain of ostracism or even fragging. And those troops were merely those whose cruelty was up close, a sideshow to the overwhelming use of bombs, napalm, chemical weapons, and defoliants. Some troops plainly enjoyed committing cruel acts—and photographing them—and they found their photographic poet in Tim Page, as he documented a realm of exception in which no indulgence of intoxication, violence, or sexual predation was forbidden. I don't know whether their pleasure was necessary to the operation of the genocidal machine—it would be good to have your thoughts on that.

In Iraq, the war aim was ostensibly to make the place a regional beacon of liberal democracy—as I have said, with scant regard for the character of the nation. As the occupation ran into increased resistance, the US funded

9. Andrea Bruce, in Michael Kamber, *Photojournalists on War: The Untold Stories from Iraq* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), p. 37.

and armed rival sectarian groups so that alongside the sometimes extravagant cruelty of the occupiers was set a terrible process of ethnic cleansing. In dealing with that daunting subject, I drew on Mary Kaldor's work on the character of contemporary warfare in places where government has essentially collapsed.¹⁰ She examines the utility of overt cruelty to those who engage in it: to terrify people into compliance or more often drive them from their territory, which is then open to the plunder of its resources. This fits what was happening in Iraq quite closely: The occupying powers had dismantled the repressive and organizing powers of the state only to find that they could not reassemble them.

Is it necessary, then, to look at images of the resultant cruelty? The book is in many ways a response to a conformist and amnesiac culture, and to the difficulty of finding images that are inconvenient to power, even online. In curating an exhibition, *Iraq Through the Lens of Vietnam*, as part of the Brighton Photo Biennial in 2008, I was struck by how many people said that they simply had not seen anything other than innocuous images of the Iraq War, which showed that the various military and media mechanisms of censorship and self-censorship had worked effectively. Michael Kamber made a remarkable book of mostly unpublished images showing that photo-journalists, Iraqi and foreign, had made a remarkable record of the character of the war, but it had been kept from public view.¹¹

It is good that you use the word “primer”: The art photographers Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin asked me to write an essay about their alteration of Brecht's *War Primer*, in which they overlaid his press photo and poem couplings with a wide variety of “war on terror” photographs.¹² Brecht was famously suspicious of photography, which he thought could be used as an ideological tool for presenting oppressive realities as natural, but he also believed it could be made to serve radical ends when subjected to critical rereading so as to, as Ruth Berlau put it in the preface to the book, “decode the hieroglyphs.”¹³ I try to do the same through a clear exploration of the military, political, economic, ideological, and media-specific frames of the images. I think it is necessary that they be present: Many people don't know them, even those that are supposedly famous, such as the Abu Ghraib images, let alone those taken by the National Liberation Front and North Vietnamese Army photographers. It is an attempt, obviously, to turn “killing for show” against those who make it.

10. Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

11. Kamber, *Photojournalists on War*.

12. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *War Primer 2* (London: MACK, 2011); Julian Stallabrass, “A nova cartilha da guerra” [On Broomberg and Chanarin's *War Primer 2*], *Zum: Revista de Fotografia* (São Paulo) 5 (October 2013), pp. 166–81; available in English here: <https://julianstallabrass.wordpress.com/writing/>.

13. Ruth Berlau, “Preface,” in Bertolt Brecht, *Kriegsfiabel* (Berlin: Eulenspiegel, 1955).

Nixon: Your point that systemic cruelty is difficult to address at the level of the image is, for me, the core problem posed by the book. Psychoanalysis gives us our only theory of cruelty, Derrida observed.¹⁴ In her recent theorization of war subjectivity, Mitchell provides an account of the psychic foundations of systemic cruelty in war, in particular sexualized cruelty. Your suggestion that all the photographs in the book, including the most generic, might be viewed within a horizon of cruelty seems crucial. The category of atrocity images might in some way corroborate the notion that cruelty, including sexualized cruelty, is anomalous in war rather than intrinsic. Or at least that is how I read the book's argument, a reading admittedly grounded in a psychoanalytic perspective in which the absence of evidence is sometimes a kind of evidence.

To turn to another aspect of what you have just helpfully described as the unconscious of war, in her essay "From Hiroshima to the Gulf War and After," the British psychoanalyst and anti-nuclear activist Hanna Segal remarked that one factor driving the first Gulf War was the imperative "to wipe out the depression about Vietnam."¹⁵ From this point of view, the entire apparatus of the Gulf War, in its concerted effort not to repeat the humiliation in Vietnam, amounted to "a revival of megalomania."¹⁶ Writing in 1997, after the Gulf War was already, as Segal observed, long forgotten by the perpetrators, she made provision, in that phrase "and after," for future repetitions she regarded as inevitable, owing to unacknowledged guilt. For any group, let alone a world power with an exceptionalist self-image, to admit making "a mistake of vast proportions" and assume responsibility for the consequences would, she observed, go against "the predominance of psychotic processes" in groups.¹⁷

The proposition that groups are psychically ill-equipped to experience guilt is a bleak one, and your book provides a litany of such failure. To mention one instance, in your chapter entitled "Don't Show Me That," you point out that the massacre of My Lai elicited criticism from newspaper readers for the publication of the photographs as much as for the killing itself. This dramatizes the predicament any photographer would face in producing a definitive image of the war, as Andrea Bruce aspired to do, since "forcing people to pay attention" might have the paradoxical effect of hardening our defenses, a dynamic your book evidences again and again. Segal's suggestion is that if we grasp such "psychic facts," we stand some

14. Jacques Derrida, "Psychoanalysis Searches for Its Soul," in *Without Alibi* (Stanford University Press, 2002).

15. Hanna Segal, "From Hiroshima to the Gulf War and After: Socio-Political Expressions of Ambivalence," in *Psychoanalysis, Literature and War, Papers 1972-1995*, ed. John Steiner (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 165.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 167, 162.

chance of altering the dynamic and facing up to the self-deception and denial of reality that are defining unconscious features of these wars.¹⁸ While this might not be a language you would use, it strikes me that your book is aiming to confront the resistances we have toward the psychic fact of extreme cruelty. It is asking, in effect, What does it take to get ourselves to look at, to take on and take in, these images?

As you point out, the Gulf War laid the groundwork for the Iraq War both in its use of bombardment to produce spectacles of destruction, which you describe as “photogenic operations,” and in its tightening of censorship to prevent journalists from reporting the effects of that destruction on civilians. That part was not for show. To start with what you call the Blitzkrieg model of war, this arouses triumphalist fantasies of domination from above without visible casualties below, a scenario that, for Segal, harks back to the primal scene of nuclear war, the atomic bombings of Japan by US forces in 1945, which was also accompanied by strict prohibitions against the publication of photographs taken on the ground. Segal uses the term “nuclear-mentality culture” to describe the mania and paranoia that arose from the dropping of those bombs, as Rosalyn Deutsche has discussed in her

18. Hanna Segal, “Silence Is the Real Crime,” in *Psychoanalysis, Literature and War*, p. 155.



Andrea Bruce. *Widows March*. 2004.
© Andrea Bruce / NOOR.



You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.

Silvia Kolbowski. After Hiroshima Mon Amour. 2005–08.

book *Hiroshima After Iraq*, pointing out that the official rationale for both the Gulf War and the Iraq War was the supposed evidence that Iraq had acquired a nuclear capability.¹⁹ It was by stoking anxieties of nuclear annihilation and projecting destructiveness onto the enemy that aerial bombardment on the scale of the Blitzkrieg could be rationalized, and a number of artists—Deutsche’s book considers Silvia Kolbowski’s *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* (2008), Leslie Thornton’s *Let Me Count the Ways* (2004–2008), and Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *The Hiroshima Projection* (1997)—tuned into that echo, which is to say into the way in which the Gulf War and the Iraq War were bound up with a nuclear imaginary.

But as the artist Mary Kelly remarked, there was something hollow about “the façade of American militarism” on display in the Gulf War, to which she attributed a “curious flatness,” an insight that led her to produce one of the relatively few ambitious artistic responses to that war, *Gloria Patri*.²⁰ The catalogue of atrocity you compile attests to both of these trends, to fantasies of omnipotence and to the curious flatness of a display culture that, in many of the images you analyze, has an almost pathetic character to its sadism.

19. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Hiroshima After Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

20. Mary Kelly, “On Display: Not Enough Gees and Gollies to Describe It,” in *Imaging Desire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 182–183.



Thomas Hirschhorn. *The Incommensurable Banner*. 2008.

Calculated or improvised, the cruelties to which the photographs bear witness—whether in triumph or in critique—appear, as Kelly puts it, “botched.”²¹ I wonder if this sense of something botched partly accounts for the occlusion of the images, for the fact that, as you say, “many people don’t know them.” In art, perhaps the images of Abu Ghraib, among others, remain most visible through their appropriations, as in Martha Rosler’s second series of *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, for example. That series seems to anticipate the repression you describe, using appropriation as a provocation to consider how we consume and disavow images of war, and as a mnemonic strategy, a logic Thomas Hirschhorn also adopts in his *Ur-Collages*. Just now you mentioned the 2008 Brighton Photo Biennial, during which you presented Hirschhorn’s *The Incommensurable Banner*, which incorporates trophy photographs of the war in Iraq.²² There, a photographic subculture of pathologies of “violence perversity” was in some sense claimed as a subject. In *Killing for Show* you concentrate on photographs per se, and on older genres and formats such as the photographic book that rely on modes of attention that, as you also argue, are in decline. You suggest that these are genres and formats we lose at

21. Ibid., p. 183.

22. This exhibition was staged at Fabrica, Brighton.

a cost, in part because they offer context and demand patient reading, but also because they attest to sustained modes of witnessing.

This leads me to a key question you raise in the book, which is whether something has fundamentally changed at the level of technology and social relations that might account for the peculiar amnesiac condition of our time of continual war. You observe that the photographic archive of war seems no longer to yield iconic images capable of condensing “wider collective frames of understanding.” This process, you remark, “seems to have faltered or even stalled,” a situation you attribute to a combination of factors, including saturation, acceleration, and immediacy (“the unceasing flow of news and media feeds”). You also ask what explanatory models we might turn to in preference to “well-worn” psychic theories of trauma and repression. Here I would like to interject a note of theoretical hope. I share your view that our inherited theories of group subjectivity need to be reinvigorated to attend more closely to the group unconscious in thinking about the psychic sources of war, about the pervasiveness of war rape, systematic torture, and “killing for show.” My note of hope is that our desperate situation has prompted, or at least coincided with, some radical theoretical work. I’m thinking, for example, about Juliet Mitchell’s theorization of the lateral axis, which is fundamentally a theory of how we are psychically wired for war and even for atrocity.²³ For me, your book has synergies with this research because it makes the case so systematically—partly through sheer critical mass but also through witnessing and attention—that atrocity is not aberrant.

Stallabrass: You make a rich and complex series of remarks: Let me see if I can do them any justice. First, on the idea that wars can be collective psychic responses to past insults: There is a sense, of course, in which the Gulf War was an explicit riposte to the defeat in Vietnam, to allow the superpower once again to project military power without restraint. Neoconservatives made no secret of that, or of their dissatisfaction with the result (which gets at the hollow character of the display of power). They complained that the Gulf War had not been enough to eradicate “Vietnam syndrome” because that conflict was not a war of choice but had been forced on the US by the invasion of Kuwait and because it had been left unfinished, with the offending tyrant remaining in charge.²⁴ Similarly, I took a good deal from Retort’s remarkable book *Afflicted Powers*, particularly the idea that a large-scale demonstration war was needed to counter the attacks of September 11, the grand spectacle of US defeat and vulnerability: One media spectacle was set against the other, as the ancient armor of the Iraqi Army provided one target and the office blocks, palaces, and monuments of the regime another.²⁵

23. Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence*.

24. See Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 30.

25. Retort (Iain Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso, 2005).

The hollow character of the results issues from a variety of sources, I think: There is neoliberalism as a cancer of the state, progressively draining it of resources and power until it can no longer perform even its basic functions. Unlike the US state in 1945, which imposed reconstruction and transformation of the defeated nations after World War II, the neoliberal state had no such capacity, and its efforts foundered in incompetence, ignorance, and rampant corruption. The ideological expression of that frail but vainglorious state was found in the neoconservative faith that history and society could be ignored and reality manufactured out of thin air. In the British case, it led to the remarkable delusion that the old imperial connection with the region would be an asset: It turned out that the histories of British theft, massacre, and bombing of civilians from the air had not been forgotten.

Overlaying and dialectically interacting with this condition of the state was that of the media and its visual products: Like the state, it had been constitutionally weakened by neoliberal profit-taking and corruption. This media was vulnerable to the military PR opportunities served up to them: Either they were gullible or simply cynically accepted the commercially valuable images on offer. Expertise in the Middle East was, with a few exceptions, in short supply; time to make reports and images was continually squeezed; digital technology was used to introduce further time constraints. Often the resulting spectacle bore the marks of preexisting mindsets, political and aesthetic, rather than discovery and change. Much of it fed into a rapid cycling and recycling of familiar imagery through photojournalism, movies, TV shows, and computer games, all of which exhibited the pervasive air of *déjà vu* with which capitalist mass culture as a whole is plagued. It was indeed hollow: The photo ops concealed a reality that was eluding the control of those powers that sought to fabricate it, and they were made by a media that usually acted as the dull servant of those powers.

I wonder about the collective “we” and “our” in your remarks. It is rare for a state, except in total defeat, to recast its history and accept responsibility for its actions. But states do not have complete control over collective memory, and my book draws extensively upon a long tradition of dissidence and counter-memory in which consciousness of the hideous character of past crimes, and especially the suppression of radical change by massacre, has been thoroughly internalized. The elites and the comfortable professional classes are least likely to hold such views, which are unevenly distributed along class and racial lines. Those who are more often on the hard receiving end of power (at work, at the hands of the police, and in dealing with social services) are the most skeptical of its exercise. They are not necessarily in a minority, as long-term polling about the ethics of the Vietnam War has shown: They were those who could look at the My Lai images and understand how they occupied a position in a long history of oppression.

On the grounds for hope, I think that it goes beyond the writing of new theoretical resources, important as that is, and which has also transformed photographic theory. What the integration of the digital realm into military strategy—the so-called revolution in military affairs—took from the Blitzkrieg was the value of propaganda and terror (think of the sirens built into Stuka dive bombers that served to induce panic in their targets) and the idea of using small, mobile shock troops to continually destabilize an enemy. It was supposed to be a move away from the massing of vast armies, the long preparation of the attack by bombardment, and the flattening of an enemy and everything in the vicinity with carpet bombing. Sometimes recourse was had to those older tactics in Iraq, particularly in Fallujah, but the idea that you could simply bomb your way to victory was ruled out, partly on grounds of cost (Rumsfeld believed that cheap wars would open the way to more frequent global discipline) and partly on the grounds of “optics.” It had become much easier for the victims to speak back, and the US public was less likely to dismiss the humanity of the victims on racial grounds.

There is a lot of evidence to show that the number and severity of wars are in long-term decline, and the reluctance to accept casualties, even among professional soldiers, is a matter of deep concern for states that want to project military power. Régis Debray recently pointed to the extraordinary phenomenon, when taken in a long historical view, that in France “the death of two soldiers on maneuvers is a national trauma, meriting an emotional ceremony and a presidential address.”²⁶ The life of those in target nations is certainly cheaper, but even so there is a certain dreadful sense in which the smart missile, the drone, and the JSOC death squad are an advance on carpet bombing: My book argues in part that there is an opportunity to push to another stage, one in which the state’s right to kill, at home or abroad, is constrained to very limited and extreme circumstances.

Yet a properly functioning democracy and mass media are central to advancing this cause. Wars are generally fought for limited national gain, and while in the process state powers seek to induce a national derangement through the demonization of the enemy and the summoning of partial patriotic histories, these lies also often seem hollow. If they are reasonably well informed (a big “if,” though, given the state of the media, especially in the US), few people are willing to sacrifice their lives to give their government a minor advantage in international affairs.

Nixon: I hope you won’t mind if we talk a little more about hope. You make the vital point that dissent instigates and sustains counter-memory, which plays a crucial part in the prevention of future war as well as in ending war in the present. To the essential question of what photographs offer in a situation of

26. Régis Debray, “Macron’s Wars,” *Sidecar*, March 2021, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/macrons-wars>.

war, your book evidences the significant part images play in enabling the work of counter-memory to evolve. Photographs helped raise consciousness about the systems of killing, as you aptly put it, in Vietnam and Iraq, but the effects of images are not necessarily punctual, or direct, and one aspect of your book I found revelatory were the relays and palimpsests it produced, underscoring that memory is a mutative and dynamic process. We've touched on the importance for you of working with an expansive archive—a strategy that reveals how distilled the photographic memory of the war in Vietnam is, and how diffuse the photographic record of the war in Iraq is—but for me the book also summons the archival turn that coincided with the invasion of Iraq. I'm thinking of Hal Foster's "An Archival Impulse," which was published in 2004. The article concerns "archival art," but I found resonances in your project with the argument he makes about archival practices as both registering failures of cultural memory in a time of war and marking an attempted "shift away from a melancholic culture that views the historical as little more than the traumatic."²⁷ Do you see your book as intervening in a melancholic/traumatic view of history?

I also want to pick up on another observation you just made about counter-memory, which is that difference is pivotal in responses to war. In her reply to the *October* questionnaire on the US-led invasion of Iraq—to which you also contributed—Rosalynde Deutsche raised the concern that not only pro-war constituencies but also certain sectors of the Left were in danger of regressing to "masculinist political analysis" that "re-grounds politics in the authority of a solid foundation—economic antagonism."²⁸ Deutsche's argument that psychic and subjective transformation, informed by feminist and psychoanalytic interrogations of the political, has to accompany material transformation is perhaps something we are trying to negotiate in this conversation. Many years have passed since you and Deutsche wrote those short, compelling pieces, but in them I see the kernel of the essential work on war that you have both gone on to do. Indeed, I am struck by a shared aim, that art (and perhaps art history, too) might cultivate "the democratic capacity for being in public and responding to the suffering of others."

Stallabrass: It is perceptive of you to ask about melancholy and trauma. I've long been interested in the melancholic dimensions of photography, especially of the various actions of the photographer in gathering, titling, cataloguing, and archiving their images. Some of these activities may find affinities with Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, his capacious catalogue of mental maladies and their occasions—and of course melancholy pervades much of the theoretical writing about photography, at least from Walter Benjamin

27. Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall 2004), p. 22.

28. Rosalynde Deutsche, *October* 123 (Winter 2008), pp. 38–40.

onwards.²⁹ The (now distant) origin of this book project was fixed on images and icons of Left defeat, and it was to take in the Vietnam War and its cultural legacy. That project was overtaken by immediate political events, especially the war on Iraq, which demanded a response that was more focused, specific, and in a sense practical: to provide curatorial and written resources for those opposing that particular war and neocolonial domination more broadly.

So much of melancholic photography, however—a register of loss, disaffection, and alienation—is the result of colonialism and of a colonizing commercial “modernization.” It pervades the work of, say, Luigi Ghirri, as he tries to photographically decipher what he calls (like Brecht) the “hieroglyph” of arbitrary spaces. One example of this would be degraded environments and advertising images in postwar Italy, which had been subject to much bombing and then rapid reconstruction. Another example would be a swath of photographic work from South Korea, which had been subject to a rapid and brutal initiation into urban modernity—again, at first by US bombs.

It is there in the postures and glances of passersby in Seoul in the late 1950s and early 1960s, who stalk the strange, new urban scene in the photographs of Han Youngsoo; and more recently in the intensely seen and felt photographs of pine forests, taken by Bae Bien-u, implicitly set against the pervasive environment of motorways and tower blocks from which viewers would generally see his work. It is there in Vietnam too, of course, for example in Dinh Q Lê’s huge collection of old family portraits found in flea markets—often of people who had been forced to flee the country—which he scatters in installations across gallery floors.

In an important essay published in 1999, Wendy Brown warned of the dangers of the “left melancholy” that had attracted me: She argues on Freudian lines that it may become a self-destructive and repetitious wallowing in defeat and a displacement of the political activity that should have been taking place, albeit in daunting political circumstances.³⁰ This argument, however, has recently received a learned and eloquent revision in Enzo Traverso’s remarkable book *Left-Wing Melancholia*. It excavates various histories of melancholia across theory, painting, photography, film, and literature to argue that the great and violent defeat, not of victims but of those who resisted, must be internalized and mourned. It also argues that dwelling on defeat and loss, and on cultural responses to them, does not necessarily mean disempowerment. Melancholia may be a necessary and escapable phase that can lead to the combination of “mourning *and* militancy,” Traverso writes, quoting Douglas Crimp on ACT UP.³¹

One photographic model here is surely Susan Meiselas, who documented the Nicaraguan revolution and later went back to the country repeatedly.

29. Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001).

30. Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1999), pp. 19–27.

31. Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 21.



Dinh Q Lê. Erasure. 2011.

She wanted to show her images again to those whom she had photographed, keeping the memory of the revolution alive. She also wanted to say something about its fate, as it found itself in the midst of a deep regional recession, its social advances brutally assaulted by US-funded terrorists, finally settling into an accommodation with neoliberalism.³² This work registers defeat, and many of the responses that she gathers are full of despair, yet she refuses to stop there: In registering the past, she allows for different futures to potentially come into view. In writing about Meiselas's later work on Kurdistan, Allan Sekula contrasts false and often dangerous national myths with photography's "incapacity for abstraction," which can act as a guard against ideological generalization.³³ I attempted to learn something from Meiselas's long commitment and her insistence on the particular.

On the important question of masculinist political analysis, I hope that I do not stray into it, either in the book or in my answers here. The book contains some materialist analysis, along with accounts that draw upon political theory, media theory, military strategy, and other fields. At the same time,

32. Aside from exhibitions of this work, Meiselas made the films *Pictures from a Revolution* (1991) and *Reframing History* (2004).

33. Allan Sekula, "Photography and the Limits of National Identity," in *Susan Meiselas: In History*, ed. Kristen Lubben (New York: International Center of Photography, 2008), pp. 343–44.

it is about how images are used to wage and oppose war, which is necessarily a matter of perception, psychology, emotion, memory, and, as you say, trauma. I cannot pretend to have dealt with all these equally or adequately, and the emphases in the book are determined by what I felt equipped to do—and by the knowledge that you, among others, were working on aspects of this subject in ways that I could not.

It seems to me that the materialist aspects of Marxist theory do not need to be in contention with gendered accounts of the world, and I have made use in other work of writers who integrate them in novel and productive ways. Nancy Fraser, for example, has much to say about the interplay of “lean in” feminism, identity politics, class, and neoliberalism across her work, particularly in her recent short book, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born*.³⁴ And, in a very different register, Sianne Ngai has provided a striking analysis of “minor” aesthetic categories in a book that unites gender and materialist analysis.³⁵ I have used her account of the zany in my recent writing about street art.

Your last point—about “being in public and responding to the suffering of others”—seems a very apt description of much political protest, including Black Lives Matter, and this bears on the issue of hope. In helping to stage some demonstrations in my locality—a suburban, diversifying, but still conservative corner of London—I could easily see that the young often brought in the old, the children their parents and grandparents. For most of the young, racism is rightly seen as a central issue, one pervading society, and personally racist behavior (for instance, voting for a racist politician) is a red line that must never be crossed. Art and art history have an important role to play in this, given the ever-greater integration of protest, politics, and a fast-evolving and rapidly changing image culture. In light of the history that I examine in *Killing for Show*, in which violence was so often grounded in a dehumanizing conception of racial difference, this is a cause for hope.

On the other hand, we have recently had an object lesson in the growth of reaction: A nascent fascism threatens as soon as the ghost of equality so much as raises its head. It is an old reaction, of course. Marx noted in his remarkable analysis of authoritarian political populism, which has some striking parallels with the present, that the conservatives understood the threat of even minor socialist reform much better than the socialists themselves, who could not comprehend why anyone would oppose common sense and brotherly love.³⁶ In the UK, BLM proved to be very divi-

34. Nancy Fraser, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond* (London: Verso, 2019).

35. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

36. Karl Marx, “The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), n. 189.

sive, and many people feared where it would lead—in a sense, with reason. To taint the country house, for example—that engine of false nostalgia, noblesse oblige, and aristocratic grandeur—with the histories of exploitation and slavery was no small matter. Once you pull on one thread, the rest of the hegemony may unravel.

Thus our home secretary, Priti Patel, believes that there is political capital to be seized in describing the BLM protests as “dreadful.” And the Johnson government realizes that such capital can also be found in cultivating imperial nostalgia, defending the public display of statues of slave traders and projecting hollow military power—sending a leaky aircraft carrier to the South China Sea, for example, in an echo of gunboat diplomacy, and stirring up low-level conflict with the EU. Since this has so far been met with sweeping electoral success, at least among the English (who are a special case, admittedly), my hope is tempered.