



the viewfinder and the view



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What is the relationship between art and war? In the year 2000, critical theorist Paul Virilio argued that not only was war “in every way an art, a theatre of operations where stratagems are essential to deceive”, but also that contemporary warfare was in the midst of a major paradigm shift that brought its operations closer to those of art.¹ The move from ‘industrial’ to ‘informational’ was for Virilio, the defining characteristic of military conflict in what he called the ‘information age’—an era dominated by the image, the media and, most significantly, by technology. Art and war are linked by their shared investment in tactics of deception—camouflage, deflection, disguise and decoys. Within this matrix, the field of conflict is equivalent to the field of perception, and both are shaped by image-dominated systems of information.

Although Virilio was right about the primacy of the image in international politics (witness the effect of the satellite images of alleged “weapons of mass destruction” on recent world events), his assessment of art as a “deceptive theatre of operations” is harder to gauge. Virilio’s comparison presents ‘art’—and, by extension, ‘war’—as a finely tuned, skill-based praxis capable of achieving definitive and preconceived results (the ‘art of war’). This logic instantly discounts not only most of the interesting work being produced by contemporary artists, but is also unable to account for the increasingly open-ended, ambiguous structure of contemporary warfare, especially as pertains to the recent War in Iraq and the so-called “War on Terrorism” (infamously described by President George W. Bush as “conflict without end” and referred to elsewhere as a permanent “state of exception”). But there remains something undeniably intriguing about Virilio’s analogy, and so the question stands—how to account for the relation between contemporary art and contemporary war?

This text concentrates on one contemporary art project in a bid to manoeuvre through this tricky discursive terrain, the recent paintings and photographs by Charles Green and Lyndell Brown following their appointment as Official War Artists by the Australian War Memorial in 2007. As has been widely reported, the AWM commissioned Brown and Green to travel and work with the Australian Defence forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and The Gulf. The resulting body of work included several series of photographs and a number of paintings, exhibited most recently in *The Approaching Storm*, at ARC One Gallery in Melbourne, June 2009.² During their six week commission, Brown and Green lived and worked embedded in sprawling American and Allied military bases. They slept in huge army camps, visited massive foodcourts in the middle of barren straits of desert, were transported in armoured vehicles from one base to another and waited on tarmacs, sometimes for hours, for decisions to be made about where they would go next, or if it was safe enough even to move. For the most part, the artists were enclosed within ‘green belts’ and swathed in extraordinary blankets of surveillance.

What does the AWM hope to achieve by sending the artists into such zones? And what restrictions were placed on the artists during this project? Firstly, I should note that although Brown and Green were both suited up in body armour and constantly trailed by protective minders while in Iraq and Afghanistan, since their return they have not come up against censorship in the production of their works. At a pre-departure briefing, the artists were told by the AWM’s Deputy Director Nola Anderson that they should “feel complete freedom to do whatever you want for this commission. We do not wish to push you in any direction”.³ Given Brown and Green’s well publicised self-characterisation as pacifists (they are “implacably anti-war”), perhaps this kind of

reassurance seemed necessary.⁴ It was, however, in line with broader AWM policy on the role of the Official War Artist, as set in motion by the methodologies of John Treloar, the original director of the AWM from 1920 to 1952.⁵

Nonetheless, valid questions have been raised as to the possible freedom of artists contracted to the AWM. Australian artist George Gittoes, who has been pursuing and making critically engaged works at the front line of conflict zones for decades without the assistance of the AWM, argues that;

*Official war artists always have somebody looking over their shoulder, they are fed and protected, they don't have to think for themselves... If artists working for the War Memorial saw the equivalent of what I have seen, they would be restricted from doing anything about it.*⁶

It appears that many of the artists who have worked for the AWM would disagree with this characterisation. Wendy Sharpe, for example (who was in East Timor in December 1999) has insisted that “if I had come back with terrible, negative images—which I would have if that is what I saw—the AWM would have taken my work”.⁷ What is interesting about both Sharpe and Gittoes’ comments is that they indicate a desire to draw distinctions between ‘accurate’ versus ‘comprised’ imagery. The intensity of the discord rests upon a perceived breach of integrity—the integrity of the artists, the integrity of the State, and the integrity of the image. This is anxious discursive territory, bordered by issues of expectation and prohibition. It raises important questions as to the kinds of images that are ‘expected’ from coverage of these zones, and the lines that separate the desirable from the obscene.

The equivalence between ‘fields of conflict’ and ‘fields of perception’ gains additional currency here. Clearly, the pressure to acquire the ‘right kinds’ of images of war across all areas of operation is astoundingly high. So too are the prohibitions set on the export of classified or non-cleared images out of zones of conflict. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, there has also been increasing pressure upon both governments and media of all factions to strictly regulate the flows of images in and out of live combat areas.⁸ For American media outlets at least, such measures can in part be linked to the legacy of Vietnam and the enormous (from the USA Government’s perspective, disastrous) effect that the broadcast of graphic, horrifying footage of casualties and fatalities had upon mobilising resistance to the war as a whole. An increase in security around the movement of international journalists since 1991 (the same year the George HW Bush Administration prohibited the broadcast of images of coffins of American soldiers killed in combat) has also had significant effects on the kinds of images that are able to be captured and relayed, leading to a symptomatic invisibility of the ‘human cost’ of war in broadcasts from major global media networks.⁹

My point here is to acknowledge a perceived disparity between two different types of images of war, and to think about what separates them. The first encompasses the sorts of images referred to by Susan Sontag in her excellent book *Regarding the Pain of Others* as graphic, gruesome and utterly horrifying, the kind of representations that ‘viewers’ have either come to *expect from* or *associate with* so-called frontline coverage (and expectations are very important to this argument), but which are for the most part absent from the six o’clock news.¹⁰ The second type, and the one most easily accessed, includes images in which ‘nothing happens’, the kinds of images that led Jean Baudrillard to lambast the pretence of the First Gulf War as “bloodless” back in 1991; the kinds of images that art historian David Joselit has accused of replicating the blind eye of Empire in their dogged, paralysed attention to insignificant details, when the ‘action’ is clearly elsewhere.¹¹

The problem with this opposition is that it risks losing sight of what we are looking at when we look at images of war. Some of the most affective images of conflict are not necessarily ‘documents’, ‘records’ or ‘treatises’, but those that force us to ask, quite simply—how did it come to this? How the fuck did this happen? What makes it so? These are frequently images that refuse alignment with either particular camp—images that instead have the peculiar ability to demolish expectations and take in the conditions that surround their production. The photographs captured by Brown and Green while in Iraq and Afghanistan provide one example. On the one hand, these colour saturated, quasi-cinematic prints are decidedly not action shots. They depict no casualties, no deaths, no devastated civilian dwellings or wasted carnage. On the other, the images are extraordinary portraits of the *infrastructure*, the *capital* and the *resources* that directly determine and regulate the effects of contemporary warfare. As Brown and Green have acknowledged, the formalism of the works is designed to match the technical subject matter—“images of a calibrated but amorphous military machine imposed across vast and severe, hostile landscapes; a ruined world that is also a description of the conflict between globalised military force, frontier mythologies and geographic severity”.¹²







narrative—though seemingly everywhere in the title and formal composition of the work—appears as an alibi for something else. Death is literally below us—the morgue and the bodies interred below provide the foundation that enables this image to be read. Brown and Green have remarked that;

*[E]verywhere we went there had been or was about to be rocketing or shells or in Afghanistan, suicide bombing. So in zones like these you can never wander around free, even inside the bases... Anyone with the military is also a target. Either you are in the base or you are would-be hostages, the same as for the soldiers themselves.*¹⁴

The artists' lens, then, is constantly trained upon areas of potential blindness (ironic, given the level of surveillance that abounds). At the edges of the frame lies a liminal space of potential extinction; a zone in which the makers of the image would be "hostages, the same for the soldiers themselves".

It is little wonder that their body of work is dominated by wire fences (the title of one of their artists' talks was 'Both Sides of the Wire'), vast installations of crumbling concrete bunkers and countless, no doubt hugely expensive barriers of indeterminate military purpose.¹⁵ The desert-scapes seem to blend into one another, one scene simply replaced by the next. There is little visual attempt made to distinguish images shot in Iraq from those taken in Afghanistan, leaving the titles alone to articulate geographic contexts. And when figures do appear, they are either absorbed entirely in their work (preparing helicopters for take-off on the tarmac at night), have their backs to the camera (like the group of Afghan traders with soldiers pictured at a market inside Tarin Kowt Base), or are dwarfed by the environment.¹⁶

For some viewers, this seeming lack of narrative or 'action' appears to be the most perturbing element of the project as a whole. During the numerous talks and papers Brown and Green have given following the commission, there has been a palpable sense of discomfort within the audience towards the perceived 'affect-less' formal beauty of the photographs, a curious testiness seemingly borne out of a perceived link with 'affect-less' politics. As if the artists were 'irresponsible'. As if they were, perhaps, 'selling out' to Empire by taking on the commission in the first place. As if they were sacrificing their politics for aesthetics, or forgetting that these are two sides of the same coin. But the evidence for such claims just doesn't add up.

In 2009, Charles Green noted that "if the media assumes the role of witnessing, we would argue that art explores the nature of an event's perception: the realisation, rather than the representation, of an event, especially such a vast panorama as 'The War on Terror'".¹⁷ This is a crucial and telling statement. The sheer scale or "vast panorama" of contemporary warfare is linked to a lack of representation, or an inability to re-present. It is no accident that all of their photographs in this series appear poised in anticipation of events that constantly elude representation. Green's comment also makes an important distinction between infrastructure (the "realisation", or the way in which something is brought into being) and effects (the "representation", or the aftermath, of events). Under these terms, the role of the artist is not primarily to either witness or represent what has come about, but to unpick the realisation of the representation itself.

This process has been a key element of Brown and Green's collaborative practice since 1989. For two decades, their paintings, installations and photographs have been carefully interrupting and diverting flows between events, images, memories and histories. At the centre of their practice lies a vast archive of images, documents, texts and diagrams, a huge personal collection gleaned from numerous sources including art history, journalism, television, literature, cinema and also from the artists' own photographs. Their by now well-known process of production usually involves floating multiple images within new frames (the frame of the canvas, the frame of the lens) in order to produce intricate visual atlases that are assembled, in Green's words, "into something like complex flow charts or maps".¹⁸

Whereas an archive is primarily directed towards naming (cataloguing, indexing, classifying) the atlas in contrast foregrounds the interstices of relationships.¹⁹ In Brown and Green's painting *Styx* (2005), Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* is overlaid with image-fragments of Joseph Beuys and Johnny Depp; in their duraclear print *Island* (2002), a page from an eighteenth-century manuscript on gardening and a Godard film still are juxtaposed against the backdrop of an astronaut on the moon (the astronaut is a recurrent motif for Brown and Green, who have also described themselves as "artist-astronauts"). Forging relationships between these fragments is at the discretion of the viewer. Meaning shifts depending on context, memory and levels of image-saturation. As Blair French has so beautifully written of these works: "[I]n these small theatres of suspended reality, hallucinations and dreams are not conditions of escape but urgent performative undertakings through which history, society and the self fleetingly come into focus".²⁰ These are images about how the past figures in the present, and how it might be accessed and remembered. They are about the realisation and reconstitution of events. As such, they constitute a deeply political project.

Helicopter landing, view from roof of morgue, Southern Iraq (2007-09), was one in a bank of sixty digital prints arranged grid-like on the wall of their exhibition *The Approaching Storm* in June 2009. The photograph was captured at dusk. The horizon is pushed high to the edge of the frame and below that the scene is crowded with military vehicles, storage supplies and piles of gravel that fan out in cluttered, random patterns towards the edges of the desert. In the foreground, a grid of roof-tiles betrays the photographers' elevated position. The only sign of movement is a tiny helicopter hovering above the horizon line to the right of the frame.

This image was taken while standing on the roof of an American morgue looking out towards the desert in a military base in Iraq. It is of interest to me firstly because of the quality of the light. Brown and Green's decision to shoot almost all of their images exclusively at dawn and at dusk was highly deliberate, this tactical use of half-light gestures towards the moments before and after the shutter is released. The elongated shadows are the visual signifiers of time passing. This conscious attempt to register time as movement is found not only throughout the artists' recent images of Iraq and Afghanistan, but also throughout their practice as a whole, and it functions as a signpost towards entropy. I might also add that the appearance of entropy in these works also works *against* classical conventions of documentary photography. We could recall, for example, Bernd and Hiller Becher's insistence that images should be captured at midday, so as not to cast shadows that might distract from the objects in front of the lens, or Andreas Gursky's confession that he prefers to shoot on grey days, so as to keep the light on an even keel.¹³

Secondly, *Helicopter Landing* epitomises the paradoxical relationship between narrative and aesthetics that marks Brown and Green's approach toward their subject. To put it plainly, there is not a lot happening in this image. The helicopter referred to in the title is a mere speck in the sky, pictured far off in the distance. There are no figures in the frame, and so the composition instead foregrounds the machinations and objects of a situation. The roof of the morgue is used as a vantage point for a scene in which

The same imperatives reappear in their works following the AWM commission: “We were assembling atlas pages of contemporary history unfolding, but collapsing into the archive or memory at the same time. At the moment that we realised we had to gather our own high quality photographs of contemporary history, the AWM appeared coincidentally and mysteriously to offer us the fieldwork in Iraq and Afghanistan.”²¹ Clearly, the methodological drive from the earlier works to the most recent remains intact. Visually, however, their practice has taken another turn. The photographs produced during the fieldwork in The Gulf are more emphatically ‘straight’: these are not collages or palimpsests but are rather singular images of near-documentary quality. However, and this is critical, we must also remember that these works are presented (i) as a series and (ii) in grid formation.

The grid of photographs in *The Approaching Storm* (and also in their earlier exhibition *War* at GRANTPIRRIE Gallery, 2008) can be equated to the image banks generated by the artists’ earlier works. Although there are numerous reference points for the appearance of the grid in Brown and Green’s practice, I want to mention two here. The first is the photography of the Bechers, and their long-term typological study of pre-war industrial architecture in Germany and America from the 1960s onwards. Brown and Green are keenly aware of the Bechers’ project and its attempt to both memorialise and neutralise forms across time and space. The second reference, also familiar to the artists, is Rosalind Krauss’ 1978 essay on the grid.

In this essay, Krauss described the grid as an irritant to historical (by which Krauss meant developmental) time.²² She regarded it as a myth form, remarking that “like all myths, [the grid] deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction but by covering them over so that they seem (but only so they seem) to go away”. She continued: “The grid’s mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction).”²³ The grid’s anti-developmental structure refigured the kinds of connections that would later reappear in Deleuze and Guattari’s writings on the rhizome. The logic of categorisation suggested by the grid is a decoy that leads straight into the construction of fiction. What emerges is a dialectical relationship between materialism and mysticism, objects and beliefs.

The description resonates with the operation of Brown and Green’s works. In their photographs of military encampments and desert landscapes, we are presented both with a timeless, horizontal vista of unending war (landscapes blend into each other, the same codes of infrastructure appear again and again at different locations in time and space) and at the same time an *entropic* vision of specific fields of conflict—visible in the ruins of industrial decay, the elongated shadows, the signals of time passing. History unfolds but it is, at the same time, arrested. It is then particularly pertinent that for Brown and Green the grid, as a primary structural mechanism, appears at times interchangeable with the atlas. The realignment reveals a fundamental difference between Krauss’ thinking and Brown and Green’s perspective on what constitutes history. In Krauss’ reading, the form of history was construed as developmental, meaning that one thing leads to the next and so on, enabling a visible trail of causes and effects in the progression from past, present to future. Although this seems to be an intuitive approach, to my mind it appears reductive. It needs to be updated in order to address what happens when we begin to picture contemporary history.

Pause for a moment to review the story so far. Brown and Green accept an invitation to travel to war zones in which “contemporary history is unfolding” and out of this experience they produce a body of work in which history as a developmental concept is nullified, broken into fragments and positioned against a timeless landscape in which, seemingly (but only seemingly), nothing happens. We are presented with the realisation, not the representation, of events—images of resources, capital and infrastructure. This approach is in stark contrast to dominant media-based (and more conservative art historical) doctrines that would have us believe that history can only ever be constituted by the access and circulation of *representations* alone. With this in mind we can return briefly to Virilio, and his idea that both art and war are linked by a shared investment in decoys, distractions, deflection and disguise. These tactics are certainly at work in Brown and Green’s project, but they are also tempered, I think, with a strange and weird honesty that comes from the photographs’ inscrutable lucidity. We see everything and know nothing. The tactics of disguise and decoy seem to point inwards, back towards themselves. Politics and aesthetics are indeed one and the same.

There is an addendum to this narrative, or perhaps another beginning—a final image, also taken from Brown and Green’s exhibition *The Approaching Storm*. In the small alcove to the left of the main gallery in ARC One, four paintings were hung facing each other on each wall as both a coda to the main event and a parallel tale. Opposite the door was *Hare Krishna, Hare Rama* (2008). At the centre of this large composition is a precisely rendered scene of two women, absorbed in an ecstatic dance. Images spin like shrapnel around this extraordinary focal point—a field of opium poppies in Afghanistan (based on photos taken from a military helicopter by Brown and Green in 2007), travellers on a bridge crossing an abyss in the Himalayas, an ashram in Northern India, an almost unrecognisable newspaper clipping of Dr Mohammed Haneef and finally, as if it to somehow hold this volatile constellation together, painted renditions of ripped

and torn paper, immediately evocative of the ruined shards in David Caspar Friedrich’s *The Wreck of Hope* (1824). Not only is the content of each image-fragment primarily related to shifts in being (physical and mental border-crossings, drugged states, trances) but the edges between the fragments are also totally fluid.

Hare Krishna, Hare Rama is a psychedelic history painting, a blur of events in which time and space are collapsed and yet anchored to determinate contexts. Surprisingly, it performs exactly the balance of a-temporality and social contingency evident throughout Brown and Green’s photographs of war. What is highlighted through these mechanisms is the profound resonance between war, entropy and history. The controlled violence of warfare is out of control; borders, territories and subjectivities are liquidised as images spread virally across surfaces. History too, is unhinged from ‘moment-making’ trajectories. The effect is humbling. We may be no closer to picturing the relation between art and war, but these images do teach us something about how we get to where we are and what is at stake in locating oneself in history. As Brown and Green have noted, “the so-called natural thing to do is to forget the viewfinder and just see the view; we want to make art where we see both at once”.²⁴ We are left with double vision, a mirror trail through the “calibrated but amorphous” remainders of a ruined world.

Notes

¹ Paul Virilio, ‘Virilio Looks Back and Sees the Future: Interview by James Der Derian (2000)’ reprinted in *Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light*, trans. Michael Degener, London and New York: Continuum, 2002: 135

² See Andrew Stephens, ‘Once Were Witnesses’, *The Age*, 29 November 2008: A2 16-17 and Warwick Heywood, ‘Obscure Dimensions of Conflict: Lyndell Brown and Charles Green’, *Artlink* 28.1, 2008: 52-55

³ Nola Anderson in Ashley Crawford, ‘Interview: Lyndell Brown and Charles Green in the war zone’, *Photofile* 83, 2008: 20-25

⁴ Green and Brown, conversation with the author, June 2009

⁵ Anne-Marie Condé, ‘John Treloar, Official War Art and the Australian War Memorial’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 53.3, 2007: 451-646

⁶ George Gittoes as cited in Stephen Matchett, ‘The Art of War’, *The Weekend Australian Review*, 25 April, 2009: <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25365423-22242,00.html>

⁷ Wendy Sharpe, as cited in *ibid.*

⁸ This has been most explicit since the circulation of images of torture taken in Abu Ghraib prison. See Jane Gaines, ‘The Production of Outrage: The Iraq War and the Radical Documentary Tradition’, *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 48.2, 2007: 36-55

⁹ On alternate media outlets, see Jehane Noujim, *Control Room*, US, 2004: 84 mins. On the prohibition of images of coffins, see Amanda Ripley, ‘An Image of Grief Returns’, *Time Magazine*, 3 May, 2004

¹⁰ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London: Hamish Hamilton and Penguin, 2003

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. For David Joselit’s perspective see ‘Commanding View’, *Artforum* 42.7, 2004: 45 and ‘Terror and Form’, *Artforum* 43.5, 2005: 45-6

¹² Charles Green, email to the author, June 2009

¹³ Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, ‘The Bechers’ Industrial Lexicon’, *Art in America* 90.6, 2002: 92-105

¹⁴ Brown and Green in Ashley Crawford, ‘Interview: Lyndell Brown and Charles Green in the war zone’, *Photofile*, op cit: 22

¹⁵ See Warwick Heywood, ‘Lyndell Brown and Charles Green’, *War* (catalogue), GRANTPIRRIE Gallery, Sydney, 2008

¹⁶ Although not possible here, it would be fascinating to read these images against the recent theories of absorption presented in Michael Fried’s book *Why Photography Matters as Art As Never Before*, New Haven CT: Yale Uni Press, 2008

¹⁷ Charles Green, ‘Contemporary Art and Contemporary War’, unpublished paper, Harn Distinguished Scholar Lecture, University of Florida, March 2009

¹⁸ Conversation with the author, June 2009

¹⁹ The most compelling reading of Brown and Green’s investment in the atlas can be found in Anthony Gardner, ‘Politically Unbecoming: Critiques of “Democracy” and Postsocialist Art from Europe’, unpublished PhD Thesis, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2009: 353-356. <http://unsworks.unsw.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository/unsworks:4399>

²⁰ Blair French, *Tranquility*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2005: 4

²¹ Charles Green, ‘Contemporary Art and Contemporary War’, unpublished paper, op cit.

²² Rosalind Krauss, ‘Grids, [1978]’, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1986: 9-22

²³ Rosalind Krauss, *ibid.*: 12

²⁴ Green and Brown in Ashley Crawford, ‘Interview: Lyndell Brown and Charles Green in the war zone’, *Photofile*, op cit: 25