

The Incomplete Illusion: Photographing the Training Ground

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Consider this scene: Terrorists have planted a bomb in an American suburb. A SWAT team propels down from a helicopter and clears the neighborhood (Figure 1). The bomb squad pulls up in a Humvee and deploys a robot. In another scene, set in a remote Iraqi village, civilians are caught in the cross fire between religious factions. People scream and run for shelter in empty buildings that, from the outside, look like adobe shops and houses. It all has the feel of a movie studio, but more reductionist. The scenography only loosely references reality. A cinder block building, sparsely furnished with a few bare mattresses, a bookshelf with no books, a stove, and a table, becomes a home, a hostage entrapment, or a Taliban hideout. Often sited in the remote regions of the desert Southwest, this is the modern training ground.¹

In response to the wars of this century, perhaps guided by a collective conscience, a number of photographers have turned their lenses away from the battlefield and toward the constructs of defense. They have gravitated to the training grounds, where the narratives of terror surface in denuded simulacra; narratives lying in the desert, like fish out of water to a photographer, providing a swift catch loaded with critical

elucidations. Whether they pull back the curtain of institutional identity, or express its entangled presence in our own identity, these artists have photographically recoded these strange classrooms of conflict to reflect cultural change in the age of terror.

The training ground is an ordered composite of crises everywhere. It is an institutionally contrived landscape in which players act out an official rendition of daily life disrupted by disaster. Sometimes it is a real town where residents are hired to work as caretakers or to play extras in the drama. The script is insurgency, earthquake, car bomb, or any number of terrifying events that happen during the average workday. The directors are commanders in the U.S. military or the ATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives) or the Department of Homeland Security, and the actors are soldiers or civilian first responders readying for the real thing. Staging is orchestrated around learning objectives: How does one approach an insecure structure? What steps are taken to diffuse a bomb or take down a sniper?

The artists who have documented these places come by different roads, and they have produced very different reflections. British photographer Jason Oddy focuses on the architectural details around the periphery of the practice theater. Collecting bits and samples, he isolates evidence of an institutional worldview, including what he calls an “institutional fallacy, a belief held by institutions that they possess some totalizing system, one that has all the answers.”²

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Figure 1 Steven Rowell, Playas townsite, New Mexico, 2008 (copyright 2004–13 Steven Rowell)



Figure 2 Jason Oddy, Playas, New Mexico, 2008 (courtesy of the artist and the Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York)

He wanders into mission control rooms, business offices, and domestic interiors (Figure 2). He has photographed the hallways and meeting rooms inside the Pentagon and the buildings in and around the Guantánamo Bay detention camp. His pictures are simple, yet highly observant, and powerful when you realize the conditions that surrounded their making.

Gaining access to these sites is an art in itself. In “The Outsiders Guide to Access,” Oddy comments, “Institutions have a sense of vanity and pride about what they do and they wish to make their activities visible on some level.”³ He also

admits that there is a fine line between seducing the institution and being seduced by it, “in order for the artist to make themselves invisible (within an institution), they are obliged to insinuate themselves into their way of thinking.”⁴

How does this quandary affect the work of these artists as they enter the institutions of defense? And in what ways do their photographs help us deconstruct worldviews in the post-9/11 era?

Immediately following the terrorist attacks in 2001, homeland defense acquired a new definition and a new flood of federal funding. In Southern California, an artist collective



Figure 3 Section of the Practical Combat Range at the LAPD's Police Academy, 2004 (Center for Land Use Interpretation photo archive)

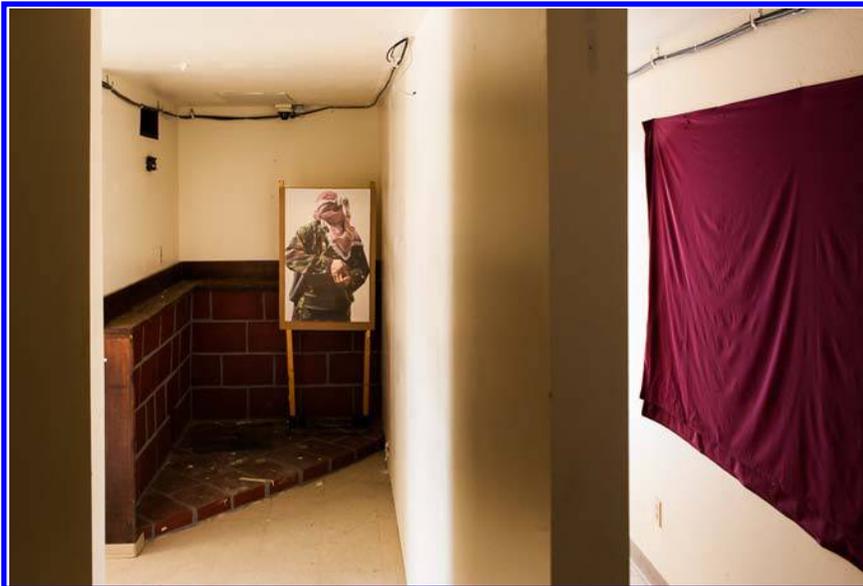


Figure 4 Steven Rowell, hallway at La Playas house, Playas, New Mexico, 2008 (copyright 2004–13 Steven Rowell)

called the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) set out to record the institutionally defined landscape. CLUI members found and photographed ten newly renovated training centers for civilian first responders. The resulting 2004 exhibition, *Emergency States*, featured images and audio taken at these state-of-the-art facilities (Figure 3). Trainees could douse a towering inferno, pursue an assailant in a high-speed car chase, ambush a meth lab, buy coffee and doughnuts, subdue a pawnshop robber, evacuate the neighborhood, play laser tag, swim a few laps, and relax in a rock garden. Some tactical training centers featured full-scale street scenes constructed by professional movie-industry set designers. The exhibition statement described the practice

as “increasing in its sophistication and occurrence across the country as this era of preparedness progresses.”⁵

CLUI photographer Steve Rowell extended his research into the military realm. During a teaching stint at Texas A&M, he assimilated with the ranks of research engineers to document the unveiling of a new large-scale training site in Playas, New Mexico (Figure 4). The narrative was compelling. Originally a company town built by the Phelps Dodge Corporation in the 1970s, Playas was designed to accommodate employees at a copper smelting operation. It was a fully realized remote desert suburb with sidewalks and colonial adobe homes laid like jewels around cul-de-sac necklaces. After copper prices plummeted in the 1990s, the smelting

facility shut down in 1999 and the town was abandoned. Five years later, using a \$5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the Energetic Materials Research and Testing Center (EMRTC), a division of the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, purchased the entire town. The EMRTC is a mining school that blows stuff up. Repurposing its technology, it was now revamped and poised to profit from the new boom economy of security, counterterrorism, and surveillance.

Rowell was there to document the ribbon-cutting ceremony (the ribbon was actually exploded for greater effect). He watched the former ghost town come alive in a torrent of SWAT drills and helicopter maneuvers. Some of the Phelps Dodge employees had been rehired to work as caretakers and actors, portraying victims of chemical attacks and bombings. He photographed them as they pondered their new livelihood, an industry anchored at the precipice of death. "It has all been re-appropriated," says Rowell. "It's a town that has been purposefully constructed to exist in a zombie state."⁶

Photographer Paul Shambroom visited Playas that same year. He was on a self-directed tour of explosive research testing sites and anti-terror tactical facilities in Alabama, Texas, Nevada, and New Mexico. Shambroom's reputation in the arts had been established by an ambitious body of work documenting power in all its manifestations, from nuclear missile silos to city council meetings.

Gazing through his lens at a posse of men in Hazmat suits trolling around a fake suburb, he saw the opportunity to comment on the absurdity of fear growing in the public conscience. Rather than framing broadly to reveal the stagecraft, he cropped in. He wanted his pictures to reference the illusion being acted out in the imaginations of the trainees, because that was strange enough: "I tried to photograph it in a way where it looks like something bad is really going down."⁷ The actors' wardrobes soon took center stage. Leaded anti-radiation outfits, padded IED (improvised explosive device) diffusion suits, SWAT team apparatuses, harnesses and tackles, appendages, and other such encumbrances provided the visual commentary. At the nucleus of homeland defense, on call for active duty, were men in clumsy clothes. The new armor of warfare reflected the nature of the new weapons—the tools of terror—and our helplessness against them (Figure 5).

Simulation training is nothing new. Mock villages were a common component of U.S. military training by the start of World War II, but examples in the United States can be found as early as 1917. They were fashioned to mimic the terrain of the anticipated enemy (Figure 6). A scaled German village was used to practice scenarios during European conflicts. As the political map changed, so did the replicas. Using authentic materials whenever possible, the military constructed mock settlements representing Japan, Korea, Russia, Vietnam, and the homeland. As stated in a recent



Figure 5 Paul Shambroom, radiation check, National Center for Combating Terrorism, Nevada Test Site, 2005 (courtesy of the artist)



Figure 6 An M-26 tank of the 1st Tank Battalion is shown softening up the “enemy” in the mock town at Camp Pendleton, California, 3 February 1950 (National Archives photo no. A25737)

historic survey, “Their primary purpose was to train personnel in the use of organic weapons in a combat environment, with a secondary purpose of mental conditioning.”⁸ Mental conditioning consisted of subjecting troops to continual fire overhead and at their flanks (Figure 7). The central logic is that it is better for soldiers to “die” in training, where they can learn something from the experience.

Today, all troops scheduled for deployment are required to practice scenarios in a full-scale simulation environment, often their last stop on home soil. Theater works its magic. Once the costumes are on and play begins, the mind takes over. Hearts race with excitement, voices rise as the moment draws near—the decisive moment, the coordinated move, the rescue, the race against time, time to kill or be killed. Staying in character throughout their entire training period, the actors have room to contemplate their new roles as agents of an evolving global history. Then suddenly one day, they are no longer acting.

Modern military training facilities employ some of the same simulation and control technologies used in video gaming. These virtual environments appear to extend seamlessly into the theater of war through remotely controlled tactical networks and distancing technologies, such as satellite surveillance and drone warfare.

In photographing military training grounds, these artists have positioned themselves at the gateway between virtual reality and the shock of battle. They use the media in documentary form to ponder the physical manifestations of “virtual” realities. In a sense, they are practicing the opposite of Photoshop. Instead of building composite pictures from multiple real-world sources, they make “straight” pictures of constructed realities. Dipping their cameras in and out of illusion, they bob between layers of perception and allow us to contemplate them all in one take.

In 2008, filmmakers Tony Gerber and Jesse Moss documented a billion-dollar urban warfare simulation site in the Mojave Desert in their award-winning feature *Full Battle Rattle*. The fictional Iraqi village of Medina Wasl was constructed at Fort Irwin, California, out of stacked cargo containers skinned with adobe veneer. Plywood domes added a scaled silhouette good enough to fool the peripheral vision. Among the simulation staff were 1,600 role players, of whom 250 were Arabic-speaking U.S. citizens (recent immigrants).

The opening sequence of the film has the look and feel of frontline documentation (Figure 8). A veil of sand blows across a minaret at sunset while sectarian violence erupts in the streets. Then the bubble bursts as blood-drenched



Figure 7 Army UH-1 "Iroquois" helicopters descend into the training village at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, 7 March 1963 (National Archives photo no. SC601653)



Figure 8 Tony Gerber and Jesse Moss, still from opening sequence in the film *Full Battle Rattle*, 2008 (Fullbattlerattlemovie.com)

soldiers chuckle and stand up for lunch. Irony is rich. This blurred boundary between play and war is central to the film.

Among the many lessons a soldier in training must learn is, know your enemy. Before deployment to Iraq, all soldiers had to spend three weeks at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin. There, they built a resistance to shell shock and learned how to communicate with Iraqi civilians as representatives of a peaceful nation. The film follows one army battalion through the process of learning the official

procedures pertaining to occupation, insurgency, counter-insurgency, collateral damage, civil war, reconstruction, and withdrawal.

Institutional fallacy surfaces in the movie during the filming of one exercise. In the scenario script, insurgent forces are to ambush Medina Wasl during sensitive negotiations between the village mayor and a U.S. Army commander. A street battle ensues between U.S. soldiers and the insurgents. The negotiating army commander (who is also in training for deployment) reels off his textbook lines with the



Figure 9 Claire Beckett, Medina Jabal Town, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California, 2009 (courtesy of the artist and Carroll & Sons Art Gallery, Boston)

sincerity of a GI Joe doll: “We must work together to stop criminals from hunting us”; and “this is too bad but we must do this to destroy the enemy. ... My soldiers will protect us here. ... We will kill or capture them all.”⁹

Fine-art photographer Claire Beckett arrived at Fort Irwin the following year. Using a large-format still camera, she made landscapes and portraits that curators compare to European oils. Her work includes splendid architectural orientation views (Figure 9), but focuses mainly on portraits. Her subjects, including blue-eyed Americans costumed as Iraqi insurgents, meet her camera with a stunned gaze as if caught in the act of impersonating the enemy (Figure 10). Through these large stills, we can stare back and contemplate the cultural layers stacked before us. In all her images, she sustains a careful distance, leaving the viewer with one foot in and one foot out of the illusion. To Beckett, an anthropology major and artist, the story is about cultural assimilation, with role-playing as the conceptual departure. Through political conquest, we grow familiar with the culture

of our exotic enemy, and eventually it fuses permanently with our own.

Recent MacArthur Fellow An-My Lê was once our exotic enemy. Born in Saigon in 1960, she harbors vivid memories of her family enduring attacks by U.S. forces on her home in Vietnam. Her family immigrated to the United States in 1975, and she sought closure in the 1990s by revisiting her homeland. “I guess you could call me fatalistic because I believe it was my destiny to be born in a country of war,” Lê stated in a recent interview, and added: “I always try to look at the positive effects [of war] as well . . . and if you read the literature we talk about civilization being built up with the help of war.”¹⁰ She went on to describe how war created the opportunity for her family to immigrate and for her to become the artist she is today.

Lê uses great depth of field, rendering features near and far in extreme detail. Most of her compositions emphasize the landscape, providing a solid sense of orientation to the figures and activities within the frame. She says she seeks a



Figure 10 Claire Beckett, marine jihadi, Fort Irwin, California, 2009 (courtesy of the artist and Carroll & Sons Art Gallery, Boston)

more rational view of the military: “This work is born out of a frustration by the constant mythologizing of the military as a subject as much as it is born out of the desire to see what things really look like.”¹¹

Lê’s photographs reveal two distinct perspectives over the course of her career: the first looking at the military from the outside, the second looking at the world from inside the military. Both demonstrate a life of reckoning, a pursuit of empathy, a settling of accounts between a frightened Vietnamese child and the monster that terrorized her. She has personal reasons for adopting the military’s worldview, even though it does sometimes seem that the Pentagon has hired a talented artist to work in public relations (Figure 11). Her recent years have been spent with generous access to non-combat operations, documenting the U.S. military’s presence at sites around the world, in training missions, patrolling international waterways, and offering humanitarian aid.

The work in Lê’s first book, *Small Wars* (2005), was created during a discovery phase.¹² She began photographing a group of Vietnam War reenactors playing scenario games in the forests of Virginia. Is the training ground everywhere? Is her life story merely the rules of a paintball game? Departing from these reflections, she sought a broader narrative. She photographed troops rehearsing for deployment to Afghanistan at the Twentynine Palms training site in the Southern California desert.



Figure 11 An-My Lê, *Manning the Rail*, USS *Tortuga*, Java Sea, 2010 (courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy Gallery, New York)



Figure 12 An-My Lê, *29 Palms: Mechanized Assault*, 2003–4 (courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy Gallery, New York)

In *Small Wars*, we see black-and-white landscapes depicted on a cinematic scale. The activities of battle are somewhat camouflaged in shadow and texture. The results are uncanny, and we cannot believe our eyes. The military is everywhere yet invisible within the landscape, literally and metaphorically omnipresent. In these pictures, we can choose to see the military or we can choose to see the landscape; it is our decision (Figure 12). Tanks crawling across a desert floor could be in Afghanistan or near Las Vegas. Mountains here look like mountains there. We reflexively assume it is Afghanistan, because that place is most present in our minds. We saw it on the news today.

Notes

1. This article was derived from discussions following a recent panel the author chaired at the national conference of the College Art Association (2013) titled “Military and the Landscape: Revealing and Reflecting.”
2. Jason Oddy, “An Outsider’s Guide to Getting Inside Places Only Insiders Normally Get to Go,” *Art on Paper*, May/June 2009, 70.
3. *Ibid.*, 62.
4. *Ibid.*, 60.

5. Center for Land Use Interpretation, “First Responder Training Sites Thematic Exhibit on Emergency Architecture,” *Lay of the Land*, Summer 2004, <http://clui.org/newsletter/summer-2004/first-responder-training-sites> (accessed 15 Mar. 2013).
6. Steve Rowell, “Omniscience and Contingency: Landscapes of Military Intelligence and Terror Simulation.” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Art Association, New York, N.Y., February 2013.
7. Paul Shambroom, “Here among Us: The Military on Main Street in Photographs.” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Art Association, New York, N.Y., February 2013.
8. Dan Archibald, Adam Smith, Sunny Adams, and Manroop Chawla, *Military Training Lands Historic Context: Training Village, Mock Sites, and Large Scale Operations Areas* (Champaign, Ill.: Construction Engineering Research Laboratory, prepared for the Legacy Resource Management Program, 2010), 31.
9. Tony Gerber and Jesse Moss, dialogue from the film *Full Battle Rattle* (New York: Market Road & Mile End Films, 2008).
10. Jakob Schiller, “War Training Camp Photographer Pulls Down a MacArthur Genius Grant,” *Wired*, 3 Oct. 2012, <http://www.wired.com/rawfile/2012/10/an-my-le/?pid=3814> (accessed 15 Mar. 2013).
11. Aimee Walleston, “Battles for War Photography: An-My Le,” *Art in America*, Sept. 2010, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/news/2010-09-15/an-my-le> (accessed 22 Mar. 2013).
12. An-My Lê, *Small Wars* (New York: Aperture, 2005).