Some of the reproaches made against images of atrocity are not different from characterizations of sight itself. Sight is effortless; sight requires spatial distance; sight can be turned off (we have lids on our eyes, we do not have doors on our ears). The very qualities that made the ancient Greek philosophers consider sight the most excellent, the noblest of the senses are now associated with a deficit.

It is felt that there is something morally wrong with the abstract of reality offered by photography; that one has no right to experience the suffering of others at a distance, denuded of its raw power; that we pay too high a human (or moral) price for those hitherto admired qualities of vision—the standing back from the aggressiveness of the world which frees us for observation and for elective attention. But this is only to describe the function of the mind itself.

There's nothing wrong with standing back and thinking. To paraphrase several sages: “Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time.”

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Certain photographs—emblems of suffering, such as the snapshot of the little boy in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, his hands raised, being herded to the transport to a death camp—can be used like memento mori, as objects of contemplation to deepen one’s sense of reality; as secular icons, if you will. But that would seem to demand the equivalent of a sacred or meditative space in which to look at them. Space reserved for being serious is hard to come by in a modern society, whose chief model of a public space is the mega-store (which may also be an airport or a museum).

It seems exploitative to look at harrowing photographs of other people’s pain in an art gallery. Even those ultimate images whose gravity, whose emotional power, seems fixed for all time, the concentration camp photo-
graphs from 1945, weigh differently when seen in a photography museum (the Hôtel Sully in Paris, the International Center of Photography in New York); in a gallery of contemporary art; in a museum catalogue; on television; in the pages of *The New York Times*; in the pages of *Rolling Stone*; in a book. A photograph seen in a photo album or printed on rough newsprint (like the Spanish Civil War photographs) means something different when displayed in an Agnès B. boutique. Every picture is seen in some setting. And the settings have multiplied. A notorious advertising campaign for Benetton, the Italian manufacturer of casual clothing, used a photograph of the blood-stained shirt of a dead Croatian soldier. Advertising photographs are often just as ambitious, artful, slyly casual, transgressive, ironic, and solemn as art photography. When Capa’s falling soldier appeared in *Life* opposite the Vitalis ad, there was a huge, unbridgeable difference in look between the two kinds of photographs, “editorial” and “advertising.” Now there is not.

Much of the current skepticism about the work of certain photographers of conscience seems to amount to little more than displeasure at the fact that photographs are circulated so diversely; that there is no way to guarantee reverential conditions in which to look at these pictures and be fully responsive to them. Indeed, apart from the settings where patriotic deference to leaders is exercised, there seems no way to guarantee contemplative or inhabiting space for anything now.

So far as photographs with the most solemn or heartrending subject matter are art—and this is what they become when they hang on walls, whatever the disclaimers—they partake of the fate of all wall-hung or floor-supported art displayed in public spaces. That is, they are stations along a—usually accompanied—stroll. A museum or gallery visit is a social situation, riddled with distractions, in the course of which art is seen and commented on.* Up to a point, the weight and seriousness of such photographs survive better in a book, where one can look privately, linger over the pictures, without talking. Still, at some moment the book will be closed. The strong emotion will become a transient one.

The evolution of the museum itself has gone far toward expanding this ambience of distraction. Once a repository for conserving and displaying the fine arts of the past, the museum has become a vast educational institution-cum-emporium, one of whose functions is the exhibition of art. The primary function is entertainment and education in various mixes, and the marketing of experiences, tastes, and simulacra. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York mounts an exhibition of the clothes worn by Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis during her White House years, and the Imperial War Museum in London, admired for its collections of military hardware and pictures, now offers two replicated environments to visitors: from the First World War, *The Trench Experience* (the Somme in 1916), a walk-through complete with taped sounds (exploding shells, cries) but odorless (no rotting corpses, no poison gas); and from the Second World War, *The Blitz Experience*, described as a presentation of conditions during the German bombing of London in 1940, including the simulation of an air raid as experienced in an underground shelter.

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ally the specificity of the photographs’ accusations will fade; the denunciation of a particular conflict and attribution of specific crimes will become a denunciation of human cruelty, human savagery as such. The photographer’s intentions are irrelevant to this larger process.

Is there an antidote to the perennial seductiveness of war? And is this a question a woman is more likely to pose than a man? (Probably yes.)

Could one be mobilized actively to oppose war by an image (or a group of images) as one might be enrolled among the opponents of capital punishment by reading, say, Dreiser’s An American Tragedy or Turgenev’s “The Execution of Troppmann,” an account by the expatriate writer, invited to be an observer in a Paris prison, of a famous criminal’s last hours before being guillotined? A narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image. Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel. No photograph or portfolio of photographs can unfold, go further, and further still, as do The Ascent (1977), by the Ukrainian director Larisa Shepitko, the most affecting film about the sadness of war I know, and an astounding Japanese documentary, Kazuo Hara’s The Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On (1987), the portrait of a “deranged” veteran of the Pacific war, whose life’s work is denouncing Japanese war crimes from a sound truck he drives through the streets of Tokyo and paying most unwelcome visits to his former superior officers, demanding that they apologize for crimes, such as the murder of American prisoners in the Philippines, which they either ordered or condoned.

Among single antiwar images, the huge photograph that Jeff Wall made in 1992 titled “Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)” seems to me exemplary in its thoughtfulness and power. The antithesis of a document, the picture, a Cibachrome transparency seven and a half feet high and more than thirteen feet wide and mounted on a light box, shows figures posed in a landscape, a blasted hillside, that was constructed in the artist’s studio. Wall, who is Canadian, was never in Afghanistan. The ambush is a made-up event in a savage war that had been much in the news. Wall set as his task the imagining of war’s horror (he cites Goya as an inspiration), as in nineteenth-century history painting and other forms of history-as-spectacle that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—just before the invention of the camera—such as tableaux vivants, wax displays, dioramas, and panoramas, which
made the past, especially the immediate past, seem astonishingly, disturbingly real.

The figures in Wall’s visionary photo-work are “realistic” but, of course, the image is not. Dead soldiers don’t talk. Here they do.

Thirteen Russian soldiers in bulky winter uniforms and high boots are scattered about a pocked, blood-splashed slope lined with loose rocks and the litter of war: shell casings, crumpled metal, a boot that holds the lower part of a leg . . . The scene might be a revised version of the end of Gance’s J’accuse, when the dead soldiers from the First World War rise from their graves, but these Russian conscripts, slaughtered in the Soviet Union’s own late folly of a colonial war, were never buried. A few still have their helmets on. The head of one kneeling figure, talking animatedly, foams with his red brain matter. The atmosphere is warm, convivial, fraternal. Some slouch, leaning on an elbow, or sit, chatting, their opened skulls and destroyed hands on view. One man bends over another who lies on his side as if asleep, perhaps encouraging him to sit up. Three men are horsing around: one with a huge wound in his belly straddles another, lying prone, who is laughing at a third man, on his knees, who playfully dangles before him a strip of flesh. One soldier, helmeted, legless, has turned to a comrade some distance away, an alert smile on his face. Below him are two who don’t seem quite up to the resurrection and lie supine, their bloodied heads hanging down the stony incline.

Engulfed by the image, which is so accusatory, one could fantasize that the soldiers might turn and talk to us. But no, no one is looking out of the picture. There’s no threat of protest. They are not about to yell at us to bring a halt to that abomination which is war. They haven’t come back to life in order to stagger off to denounce the war-makers who sent them to kill and be killed. And they are not represented as terrifying to others, for among them (far left) sits a white-garbed Afghan scavenger, entirely absorbed in going through somebody’s kit bag, of whom they take no note, and entering the picture above them (top right) on the path winding down the slope are two Afghans, perhaps soldiers themselves, who, it would seem from the Kalashnikovs collected near their feet, have already stripped the dead soldiers of their weapons. These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses—and in us. Why should they seek our gaze? What would they have to say to us? “We”—this “we” is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through—don’t understand. We don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it was like. We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying
war is; and how normal it becomes. Can’t understand, can’t imagine. That’s what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are right.