

AZUSA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

**TRANSFORMATIONAL SPACE: EXPLORING RITUAL AND
EMBODIMENT IN THE PHOTOBOOK *EVENTS ASHORE* BY AN-MY LE**

by

Sarah Elizabeth Ruthven

A thesis submitted to the

College of Music and the Arts

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree Master of Arts in Modern Art History, Theory, and Criticism

Azusa, California

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is on file with the student's records in the Registrar's Office*

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of Jeffrey Gamble Ruthven and Joy Ann Ruthven.

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So much time and effort have been spent getting to this point. I want to thank all the people who made this possible and offered their guidance along the way. Firstly, I wish to thank Dr. Gene Berryhill, my thesis advisor, for the feedback and encouragement throughout the writing process. Similarly, thanks to Dr. Suzie Kim for the encouragement to keep writing on this topic. And, to my thesis peer reviewer Scott Longnecker, thank you for the careful edits and gentle reminders to use commas. During this process, I was surrounded by the most supportive colleagues whose expertise and thoughtfulness knows no bounds. To my Art Department colleagues: Mark Arctander, Matt Irie, Sandra Lang, Justin Schmitz, and Tom Vician, thank you for sharing your wisdom, resources, and wit. A special thank you to my fellow Art Historian, Dr. Amy Ortiz! Thank you is hardly sufficient to tell you how much your support means to me. From listening to me ramble at lunch, to your ability to calm my nerves and set me straight, you are more than just my colleague and advisor, you are my best friend. And finally, thank you to my family and friends for your support and understanding. Josue Aguilera, thank you for the sacrifices you made so that I could get to this point. Rafael Aguilera, mommy loves you so much. Thank you for as much patience as a three-year old can have, I hope one day to help you through this process with as much joy and love as you have shown me.

ABSTRACT

TRANSFORMATIONAL SPACE: EXPLORING RITUAL AND EMBODIMENT IN THE PHOTOBOOK *EVENTS ASHORE* BY AN-MY LE

Sarah Elizabeth Ruthven
Master of Arts in Modern Art History, Theory, and Criticism, 2017
Azusa Pacific University
Advisor: Gene Berryhill, Ph.D.

This thesis explores the work of photographer An-My Le and her latest photobook, *Events Ashore* (2014). Le combines landscape photography with military presence in a series of images that is both beautiful and transformative. To access this content, and truly understand it, requires a methodology of viewing. This methodology focuses on embodiment as a core strategy to understanding and internalizing the photobook. The natural and technological sublime is considered as a factor that can reach the viewer on a spiritual level and complicate the embodiment of images. Ritual is explored as a means of developing the connection between the viewer and the photograph, to understand the placement of the viewer and the weight of a human life.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2014 the photobook, *Events Ashore*¹, by contemporary photographer An-My Le was published by the Aperture Foundation. In 2012 Le won the prestigious MacArthur Foundation Fellowship which has pushed her work forward into the public eye. In 2017, Le's work will be featured in the Whitney Biennial. The photographs in *Events Ashore* (2014) have been a part of exhibitions and are under gallery representation through Murray Guy, New York. However, it is the photobook, an increasingly popular method of publishing and exhibiting photography, which I will focus on here. Writing about An-My Le, interviews and articles, has largely surrounded her background as a Vietnamese-American airlifted as a child out of Saigon and her photographic work surrounding war and reenactments. Placing her work within this context alone distracts from the discussion of her work within contemporary photographic theory and the transformations possible for the viewer.

Events Ashore (2014), as a physical object in the hands of a viewer requires its own consideration of viewership and the resulting affects. For the viewer transformation of thought and self, an exploration of space and light, as well as delving into philosophical considerations of the contemporary sublime and weight of a human life

¹ Le, An-My (artist), Geoff Dyer (Notes author). *Events Ashore* (Aperture, 2014).

requires a methodology. A focus on the relationship of the viewer to the object, as opposed to beginning with the life of the artist is the central starting point of my discussion. An-My Le's goal is to create both a beautiful picture and an opportunity for deep reflection by the viewer that can become transformative. I am building a methodology of viewership of An-My Le's *Events Ashore* (2014) that has the potential to make the interaction with the photobook not just coherable, but a site of personal reflection and impetus for development and transformation.

Approaching military subject matter, sublime landscapes, the photobook, and technical aspects of photography in Le's work is a daunting task. I will accomplish this by embracing embodied relationships discussed by Paul Crowther, chair of Philosophy at the National University of Ireland, Galway, in his book *Art and Embodiment: from aesthetics to self-consciousness*.² The viewer will reflect upon the subject matter and photographic approach, understanding complicated material through the lens of self or worldliness. I will also address ritual in two ways. Ritual of the individual viewer, turning the page, creating movement and developing a montage for themselves is important to the medium of the photobook. Another approach to ritual will be based on the writing of Victor Turner, in his text *The Anthropology of Performance*.³ Turner explores the middle ground of collective and individual experience. Le's photography of collective military ritual combined with the individual ritual of viewing is best understood through what Turner calls "betwixt and between" states of being. I will theorize on the sublime landscapes and the technological sublime of military presence to direct the eye of the

² Crowther, Paul. *Art and Embodiment: from aesthetics to self-consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 2001). 1-224

³ Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987). 3-185

viewer to embody spiritual transformations. I will cite evidence of the photographic theory informing the artist as expounded upon by her teacher, Tod Papageorge, Walker Evans Professor of Photography at the Yale School of Art until 2011. In his collection of writings, *Core Curriculum*⁴ the understanding of the photograph as trace and embodiment will connect the viewer to the image and process. All this will be done in effort to engage *Events Ashore* (2014) as an informed viewer, a transformed viewer

⁴ Papageorge, Tod. *Core Curriculum* (Aperture Foundation, 2011). 6-179

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A methodology of viewership of the Photobook *Events Ashore* (2014) by An-My Le must be built from a firm foundation of theory. To understand the complex images, it is necessary to consider the ways in which numerous topics connect. The school of photography that Le has been a part of, and is pursuing, in this set of images is important to understanding her process and methodology in creating a picture. The sublime content of the images inherent in her use of landscape photography, portrait, and at times highly religious symbolic content is paramount in interpreting her work, unlocking significant content that connects to the viewer. This means understanding a complex notion of performance and ritual present in the activities photographed and in the ritual of the viewer in front of the photobook. Finally, the viewer can understand these overlapping and connected elements through embodiment of the work.

Photography

In the discussion of photography there are standard bearers that show up in the literature review, typically including Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag. These theorists on the medium of photography offer interesting contributions that have been debated and compounded upon. But there is a newer strain of thinking on the

medium that offers a different look at both the history of photography and what it is today. Turning to these Elkins, Crimp, Papageorge, and Le herself offers insight into the dominant schools of thought that have influenced the photographic.

James Elkins, professor and E.C. Chadbourne Chair in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, responds to the traditional conversation surrounding photography in his essay, *What do we Want Photography to Be?*.⁵ In a comedic manner Elkins requests an end to the use of the word punctum.⁶ Thoughtfully he argues that the term has been used in so many ways and has been stretched too far. Instead Elkins suggests a contemporary revaluation of photography in what he terms, “the post-medium condition”. This phrasing implies that while the initial reaction of early scholars to photography was to think about it as its own medium, the post-medium condition offers the ability to use the language and theory of other media, like painting, to discuss photography, offering a wide range of topics to consider. Elkins is looking for a way forward in the discussion of photography which includes moving from the private and partial punctum to the whole photograph including surface and aesthetics, topics more commonly associated with painting than photography,

⁵ Elkins, James. What do We Want Photography to Be?: Response to Michael Fried, “Barthes Punctum,” *Academic.edu*, accessed 2016, http://www.academia.edu/163435/What_Do_We_Want_Photography_To_Be_unillustrated_version_this_is_now_part_of_What_Photography_Is_.

⁶ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. (Hill and Wang: New York, 1980), 26.
Roland Barthes originally coined the term “punctum” in relation to photography as the single element within a photograph that catches the viewer’s attention and changes their perception of the work. Paired with the studium, the thing about the photograph that creates interest for the viewer based on context and knowledge based in language and not image, the punctum is the visual detail that challenges the studium or enhances viewership. Since his discussion of these elements of photography in 1980 the punctum has dominated discussion and theory on photography. The term has been applied to non-photographic media as well.

to unlock meaning and new ways of viewing nonetheless.

In similar fashion, Douglas Crimp, Professor of art history and visual culture at the University of Rochester, offers a postmodernist consideration of the aura, originally presented by Walter Benjamin as the originality of art that is lost with photography and technological duplication. In his essay, *The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism*,⁷ Crimp argues that in the postmodern era presence, a necessary aspect of originality, is more complex than something just physical. Instead it can be about physical presence, absence, or the object can have presence. These three considerations will require art historians to look to other sources to identify the presence in a work of art from style to representation. Crimp, like Elkins, offers a new way of seeing the medium of photography, an approach that problematizes the common language surrounding the medium and approaches photography from a postmodern vantage point.

The perspective and school of thought that influences An-My Le in her work comes from photographer, and until 2011, the Walker Evans Professor of Photography at the Yale School of Art and the director of the Graduate Study Program, Tod Papageorge. His compilation of writings, *Core Curriculum* (2011)⁸ challenges the dominant discussion on photography and focuses on what he believes are at the center of all photographic work, trace and embodiment. He asserts that the contemporary photograph is responsive and part of a constant state of perception. This is in contrast to the notion that the photograph is only a part of a whole that is only a transcription. The importance of this distinction is in the ability of a photograph to be embodied, and to be

⁷ Crimp, Douglas. "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism." *October* 15 (1980): 91-101.

⁸ Papageorge, Tod. *Core Curriculum* (Aperture Foundation, 2011), 6-179.

transformative.

Papageorge also asserts a new focus in the history of photography. Though simplified, it is as if there were two major schools of thought; represented on one side by Diane Arbus and on the other side by Garry Winogrand.⁹ While the common narrative of art history would suggest that the school of thought represented by Arbus won out, Le is clearly influenced by the trajectory of photography stemming from Winogrand. This trajectory is one that is focused on making beautiful pictures that let the photograph be what it is. In a satirical poem by Papageorge, he skewers Sontag into making the reality of the photograph become a bad thing. In rhyming stanza he notes that Sontag asserted the photograph was problematic and a dangerous falsehood. He then notes that the photograph could simply be what it is, a trace, and an embodied experience that communicates to the viewer not parts but wholes. In arguing through poetic verse he combines the essential elements of photography with beauty in the closing stanza,

*'til rambling from that path, then on
The next, she said the Parthenon
looked better as a pile of stones-
as men, I guess, look best as bones...¹⁰*

It is Papageorge's influence that provides the framework of photographic thought that compels Le to employ the photograph as a continuation of that history surrounded by a new war and a new public sphere that maintains a deep sense of the past while speaking to its contemporary audience.

⁹ Papageorge, Tod. *Core Curriculum*, (Aperture Foundation, 2011), 10.

¹⁰ Ibid., 131.

Sublime

The technology of photography and the technology presented in the photographs of military interventions around the globe provide the context for which the sublime is communicated to the viewer. It is technology and landscape that offer a unique sense of awesome spiritual forces and the presence of real threat that contribute to the sublime experience. Judith Butler, the Maxine Elliot Professor of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkley, writes on topics of human response to issues of violence. Her interests in photography stem from her interest in human response such as mourning. In her essay, *Photography, War, Outrage* (2005)¹¹ she explores the varying types of war photographs influenced by the release of images from Abu Ghraib and embedded war photographers. While this style of photography is different from the images by Le it is important to consider them briefly as most viewers are familiar with this type of image and will bring this typical viewing experience to their experience with the photographs in *Events Ashore* (2014). Her thesis is that these photographs of war can overwhelm and numb viewers while also constructing national identities and future response to war. She makes a particularly salient observation when she notes the overwhelming power of a military or war photograph is its ability to make us see ourselves seeing.¹² The photograph of war, real or staged, has a reflexive quality to help the viewer work through the overwhelming nature of the sublime image to engage the act of viewing, to embody the sublime experience.

Ben Quash, Professor of Christianity in the Arts from King's College, in a lecture

¹¹ Butler, Judith. "Photography, War, Outrage." *PMLA* 120, no. 3 (2005): 822-27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 826.

on *The Desublimation of Modern Art: A Theological Task*, suggests that in contemporary art there is an essentially body based focus in understanding the sublime experience of humanity and art, if it is a representation of the experience of humanity will keep the body at the center.¹³ The experience of humans as focused on the physical body, a site of investigation but also a necessary piece to an authentic viewing experience, the physical space, then extends beyond just the space between the viewer and the art but also to the context of the viewer. Quash's response to his colleagues' discussion of war and the sublime notion of living in a time of war is one of understanding the place of the body, the human experience within art, seeing the self as mortal but also superior.¹⁴ In the current post-modern environment, the body in a space is of utmost importance. And the body in a space in connection with art that explores the vastness and intimate experience of humanity is going to intersect with spirituality and faith.

The sublime presence in Le's work is not only from nature and divine forces, it is also the presence of technological and military force. David E. Nye, professor of American Studies at the University of Southern Denmark writes about the sublime in two ways technological and consumer. His approaches to the sublime are necessary to understand how the viewer is approaching the sublime in a work of art and how a methodology of viewership would help the viewer navigate the challenging experience. In *The Consumer's Sublime* (2006),¹⁵ Nye differentiates the natural sublime from the

¹³ Quash, Ben. *The Desublimation of Modern Art: A Theological Task*. from "Art as Theological Medium: An Integration Seminar," Department of Theology & Religious Studies at King's College London. Video.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Nye, David E. *The Consumer's Sublime* in *The New Media Theory Reader*, Hassan, Robert. & Thomas, Julian. Eds., (Open University Press, 2006) 27-38.

technological sublime. The technological sublime is based in the ability to control nature and the consequences of that control. The viewer, seeing the technological presence of military in Le's photographs is seeing the control of nature, and the potential danger or responsibility that comes with that control.

The consumer's sublime is what Nye believes is at the center of sublime in post modernism. This is a sublime sense that turns from the natural world to connect to the sense of and constant advancement produced by the technological sublime to produce fantasy. The Consumer's sublime ignores how the technology comes about or the effects on nature, it focuses on the imagination and irrational experience to enact it's sublime affect. This sublime in relation to the experience of the viewer is troubling. It can lead to false conclusions, an irrational view of the world, and an escape from reality. Nye notes that while there may have always been an element of escape in the sublime experience, these things have led to transformations in the viewer, lessons to be learned.¹⁶ The fantasy and escape from reality prevent an embodied experience by the viewer.

Embodiment

In the definitive text on embodiment, Paul Crowther, Professor of Philosophy in the School of Humanities at the National University of Ireland, Galway and author of *Art and Embodiment: from aesthetics to self-consciousness* (2001)¹⁷ offers a working definition. According to Crowther embodiment is a way to engage the viewer upon experiencing a work of art. Crowther asserts that art images are complex wholes (sensuous manifolds) which take on a representational format, have culturally established

¹⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹⁷ Crowther, Paul. *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

associations, and are functional artifacts.¹⁸ The meaning of these complex wholes can be understood only when the viewer embodies their own worldliness as a connection to the image. In other words, only when the viewer is aware of their own relationship to the image, and the image's relationship to them, can the meaning be derived through that experience of embodiment. This is also a reaction against a kind of postmodernism that would suggest that meaning lies in power relationships, which for Crowther is too simplistic and relies on sources outside of the viewer's worldliness.

Embodiment is at the core of a methodology of viewership in which a viewer can be transformed in their world view, thinking of contexts in relation to the self, these can be but are not limited to spiritual transformations. Daniel Siedell, Presidential Scholar of Art History and Criticism at The King's College, New York and author of *God in the Gallery* (2008) connects the body with viewer experience recognizing that art and religion is connected through the experience of the viewer.¹⁹ Additionally, culture plays a significant role in the viewing experience. Paul Duncum, Professor of Art Education The School of Art and Design, University of Illinois at Urbana Champagne, defines embodiment as a perceptual experience and engagement with the world in his article, *Visual Culture and an Aesthetics of Embodiment* (2005).²⁰ Of import in his discussion is his consideration of the ramifications of embodiment when applied to controversial or difficult global sites of inquiry like military interactions in the world.

There are limits to the embodied experience from controversial material that is

¹⁸ Crowther, Paul. *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

¹⁹ Siedell, Daniel. *God in the Gallery* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 12.

²⁰ Duncum, Paul, "Visual culture and an aesthetics of embodiment", *International Journal of Education through Art*, 1: 1, 2005.

difficult to embody to the reflexive bind to the self, created by embodiment. Michael Fried, the J.R. Herbert Boone Professor of Humanities and Art History at the Johns Hopkins University, explores these limits of embodiment. In his text *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (2002)²¹ Fried considers the reflexive qualities of embodiment and how it relates to interpretation of a staged scene. His discussion begins with the premise that the body is always in a place, in relation to the world. So a sighted body in a space looks at art from that situation. The embodiment of viewing is from a lived perspective.²² The onlooker of a work of art and the artist interact in large and small ways to space and visual expressions in the process of exchange or transfer from artist to art to viewer and the viewer to the work. What Fried calls, aspectual seeing, a way of seeing that is bounded to the self with no flow of time.²³ This can confirm the embodied experience of a work of art but also gives an unsettling experience as the viewer is aware of the fiction of the scene.

Embodiment and memory work together for a viewer as part of a lived perspective. Collin Counsell is a lecturer in London as well as an editor and author on subjects related to collective memory, performance, and theater. In the introduction essay to his co-edited text, *Performance, Embodiment, and Cultural Memory* (2009)²⁴ Counsell notes that the embodiment of memory can seem only reiterative on the surface. Through performance and ritual, what he calls cultural enactments, the embodied

²¹ Fried, Michael. *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 22.

²² Ibid., 19

²³ Ibid., 23

²⁴ Counsell, Colin and Mock Roberta (Eds.), *Performance, Embodiment, and Cultural Memory*. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 8.

memory is conceived for the present which allows for embodiment of memory to be constructive and ultimately transformative. Embodiment and memory can be triggered by the beholder of an image, but the image can also become the memory itself. Counsell argues that the constructive nature of embodied memory blurs any distinction of the real and the theatrical.

Performance and Ritual

Lived experience, a term initially coined by German Philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) in his expansion of Kant's theories and empirical approach to experience, is connection of embodiment to action or transformation.²⁵ It is in the field of anthropology where Victor Turner, British cultural anthropologist and former professor at the University of Chicago, expands on the connection of performance or ritual, terms he uses interchangeably, to lived experience. In his foundational text, *The Anthropology of Performance* (1987)²⁶ he describes the condition of being "betwixt and between." This is a state where ritual can be transformative for performers in the in-between moments of society, in the chaos of change and disruption. This would place performance in the center of attention with a hermeneutical influence to understand the world. Being in the betwixt and between moment is a way to understand the experience of the viewer who is ritually looking.

The ritual practice of the viewer is significant in how the viewer will embody the work, in the place they inhabit. Graham St. John is a cultural anthropologist and author of a text dedicated to Victor Turner is based on interactions and study of Turner's work and

²⁵ Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 18.

²⁶ Ibid., 10

updating the Turner project dedicated to theorizing performance, *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance* (2008).²⁷ In this text St. John expands on Turner's ideas of ritual when he theorizes that ritual is a metaphorical extension of human concerns. As an anthropologist, he is concerned with the internal experience of those participating in ritual and those observing the ritual. His expansion of the ritual to participant and observer is interesting when applied to an art viewer. The understanding of ritual is both a part of the context of the artwork that displays actors in ritual practice but also to the viewer of that ritual, which may be from a distance or in an entirely different context, time, or space. St. John also connects the theory of embodied experience to better understand the position of an individual in a ritual and how the individual is connected to the group.

In a project between the Faculty of Religious Studies at Radboud University, Nijmegen in the Netherlands and Ritual Dynamics Collaborative Research Center at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, a text was produced to explore the group aspect of ritual in combination with conflicts. *Ritual, Media, and Conflict* (2011),²⁸ edited by Ronald Grimes with numerous writing contributors, considers the intersections of numerous issues in relation to ritual. In one essay, *From Ritual Ground to Stage*, the authors consider the way ritual can be communicated through aesthetic forms to create both outside and inside groups.²⁹ Those who participate in the making of the aesthetic form and those who observe it. While there is no hierarchy to these two groups it is

²⁷ St. John, Graham, ed., *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*, (New York: Berghahn, 2008), 32.

²⁸ Grimes, Ronald L.ed., *Ritual, media, and conflict*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 49.

²⁹ DuBois, F., de Maaker, E., Polit, K., and Riphagen, M. "From Ritual Ground to Stage" in *Ritual, Media, and Conflict*, Grimes, R., Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 57.

important to note that one group can never fully become part of the other group, the experience of inside versus outside is too different, though they may be reconciled.³⁰ The authenticity of the ritual comes to question as ritual is made visible for these two audiences. In considering viewer experience it is not necessary to say that the outside beholder is not having an authentic experience, the insider experience is not the only authentic one. Both groups, through ritual, have an experience of viewing that is unique, their own, and authentic to their context. Though the authors do caution that the viewer of either group must be conscious of this, thoughtful about the authenticity for the process to be transformative.

The transformative element of ritual is connected to art by Julia Werts, Ph.D who organized a Graduate Symposium at Cornell University on the topic of art and ritual recorded in the text, *Visualizing Rituals: Critical Analysis of Art and Ritual Practice* (2008).³¹ Werts argues that the connection of ritual and art is transformative. When ritual is tied to art the transformation comes from the experience of engaging a work of art, the ritual perceived, and the space itself. Key in this discussion is that language can be limiting in understanding ritual and approaching transformation. Metaphor is not the same as the ritual act itself. And so ritual becomes essential to experiencing a work of art in a way that connects the art with the viewer. In an essay within the text *Sun in Your head: Action and Object in Wolf Vostell's TV Decollages* (2008)³² by author Benjamin

³⁰ Ibid., 49.

³¹ Werts, Julia. (Ed) *Visualizing Rituals: Critical Analysis of Art and Ritual Practice*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 5.

³² Lima, Benjamin. "Sun in Your head: Action and Object in Wolf Vostell's TV Decollages" in *Visualizing Rituals: Critical Analysis of Art and Ritual Practice*, Julia Werts, Ed. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 84.

Lima, Assistant Professor of Art History at University of Texas, Arlington, asserts that ritual is the bridge between an active and contemplative response to image. Ritual that offers transformation is essential to an active engagement of the viewer, a viewer that experiences first-hand.

Transformation of the viewer within ritual and experience can be part of an individual or group experience. A return to Victor Turner's work offers a way of approaching the individual and group experience, to make sense of the aesthetic experience of each. Within cultural performances which have their own aesthetic style, the middle between fully individual and only collective experiences is identified. The *Communitas* is the middle where embodied experience can be explored.³³ *Communitas* offers a vocabulary and groundwork for a methodology that can involve the viewer who is an outsider with an authentic experience, engaged by the perception of ritual and their connection to the aesthetic object. David Morgan, Professor of Religion at Duke University, writes in his book, *Re-Enchantment* (2008)³⁴ that art and religion and the institutions that promote them are invested in the expression of the soul. It is through the presence of ritual and the act of ritual that the viewer can access those transformative elements that affect the soul. Transformation is about the changed perception and actions of the individual, which must happen at an internal and meaningful level to be effective. A methodological approach that offers a path to transformation is at its core, exploring the *communitas* where the essence, or soul, of the viewer is affected.

Photography informed by a specific set of ideas, counter to the prevailing voices

³³ Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 31.

³⁴ Morgan, Daniel and Elkins, James. (Eds.) *Re-Enchantment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 28.

on the medium that offers a myriad of images, from landscape to portrait can be best understood with a specific methodology of viewership that offers a path to transformation. It is embodying the sublime image cognizant of the ritual act of viewing and the outsider experience that the images in the Photobook *Events Ashore* (2014) by An-My Le are fully developed and perceived. It is from this theoretical understanding of the overlap of ritual, embodiment, sublime, and photograph that a methodology of viewing can be understood.

CHAPTER 3

A METHODOLOGY OF VIEWERSHIP

Upon viewing *Events Ashore* (2014) for the first time I was struck by the many swirling and sometimes competing reactions I had about the work. I turned pages slowly taking in the rich colors, scenic landscapes, and engaging portraits. I found myself reminiscing on my days as a child of two active military parents. Then I would turn the page, struck by the religious iconography that triggered thoughts on the history of art. These different experiences within the context of viewing this text had me thinking about my role as an art historian to approach this work from both the realm of my lived experience and from my professional, informed perspective. Work that can stretch across these experiences is important. How then to make this experience possible for those without a personal connection to the work, or even to help the viewer understand that they are personally connected to the work? A methodology to engage the many intersections Le's photographs weave in and out of is challenging to frame, but is necessary, its affects moving beyond the viewership of just this one book to better understanding approaches to photography and art in general.

This is not a comprehensive background of every perspective and theory related to the work. A methodology of viewership based on my experience and research with

Events Ashore (2014) is what I envision as a strategy to approach this specific photobook and possibly art in general. I am unpacking my experience with the work, aligning it with contemporary theory, and considering how others with diverse world views might approach and be transformed by this work. I am establishing a methodology that considers the relationship of the object (the photobook) to the viewer, the way the viewer can access the varying types of sublimity, and how the sublime can be embodied. This methodology also addresses the embodiment of art and the challenges that come with this method of viewership, ritual practice that is a part of viewership, and a strategy to understand the complexity of the image. This methodology of viewership is particularly focused on these ways of seeing within the context of the photobook medium, a medium for which the viewing experience is unique.

The Photobook as a Unique Medium

The photobook as a tangible object, a thing the viewer holds in their hand, is a medium wholly different from work hung on a wall. While Le exhibits her photographs in galleries, the specific experience of the photobook adds elements to her work, like personal viewing and pacing as the viewer controls the speed at which they see the photographs, how many they see, and in what order. The conventions of the gallery space that direct the viewer are missing and all that is left is simple pagination. Andrea Nelson is currently an associate curator in the department of photographs at the National Gallery of Art. Her dissertation, *Reading photobooks: Narrative montage and the construction of*

modern visual literacy (2007) is a rare discussion of the nuances of the photobook.³⁵ She notes that in the medium, the viewer considers not only the image but also the graphic design inherent in its production.³⁶ The viewer considers the size of the image in relation to the page and the other images. An image that stands alone on a page or is related to a neighboring image becomes part of the interpretation and experience of the image.

A methodology of viewing a photobook has to account for this added layer of image making. Whether an image spreads across the book fold or if two images are side by side, the relationship of the design of the book to the images is part of the visual experience of the photograph and often a part of meaning construction. Dr. Nelson looks back to the photomontage works of the Bauhaus photography professor, Moholy-Nagy in consideration of the history of the photobook and how it addresses the unique experience of the viewer. She gleans from his work and teachings that the photobook is not a mere duplication of events or even a celebration of the technology of the camera. In summarizing Moholy-Nagy's intent with the photobook she says, "Instead he argues for the use of new media for cognitive and perceptual reform, analyzing the social values and perceptual behaviors influenced by technological change rather than fetishizing technology itself. So, instead of reproducing a collection of "objective" photographs, narrative-montage photobooks work to develop cognitive perception and visual

³⁵ Theorizing on the photobook is a relatively new focus in the field of art history. There are a few sources that have worked to organize and explore the history of the medium. Definitive sources exist on this subject such as Parr, Martin and Badger, Gerry. Eds., *The Photobook: A History*. Volumes I, II, II. (Phaidon Press; Revised and ed. edition December 1, 2004). Other scholars like Blake Simpson in Simpson, B. *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation*. (MIT Press, 2006), have explored specific photobooks and their relationship to the serial nature of photography and the ability of images to be read together but also as separate images. An example of these types of photobooks, that through the use of the serial nature of photographs, relate to social realms is *The Family of Man* (Exhibit and Print, 1955)

³⁶ Nelson, Andrea Jeanette, *Reading Photobooks: Narrative Montage and the Construction of Modern Visual Literacy* (PhD. Diss., University of Minnesota, 2007), 11.

literacy.”³⁷ The photobook medium is, by nature of its construction, a teaching tool in the hands of the viewer. It can train the eye of the viewer and exists within the context or social realm of the viewer. The photobook is intimate in the hands of the viewer while also acting as a platform upon which a perception of the world can be built or challenged.

In *Events Ashore* (2014) this intimate read and platform are developed as the beholder moves from section to section and page to page. One particularly interesting graphic design decision develops a layout to consider the application of this methodology. The layout including *Surface Supplied Diving Evolution, Vietnam People’s Navy Diver and Crew from U.S. Navy Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit, USNS Safeguard, Da Nang, Vietnam, 2011* (Fig. 1) and *Diver Propulsion Training, U.S. Marine Corps Special Operations Unit, Coronado, California, 2006* (Fig. 2) offers a montage that spans years, borders, and actions. The viewer is able to discern through the same-sized images that these images offer different skylines, yet the montage effect of the photobook offers a continuous narrative that leads the eye to read one military exercise right into the next. Formally the balance between the figures in each image relates to each other in a way that impossibly brings together the events. In both images the exercises photographed are just that, exercises and the humans involved seem casual, not at the ready. And yet there are visual cues that remind the viewer of the presence of the military and the potential for danger. All of this is communicated through the montage, the perception of the viewer as opposed to the actual things and people presented in the image.

Embodiment as the Central Strategy

The structure of the photobook makes it possible for the viewer to embody

³⁷ Nelson, Andrea Jeanette, *Reading Photobooks: Narrative Montage and the Construction of Modern Visual Literacy* (PhD. Diss., University of Minnesota, 2007), 58.

challenging material within the context of the self. The increased visual literacy that comes from viewing the photobook makes it possible to see in a human-scaled way the challenging and sublime realm captured in a photograph, a series of photographs. Embodiment is the central strategy upon which this methodology of viewership hinges. Paul Crowther expands upon his view of art and embodiment when he surmises that humans interact with otherness through the physical sense and social interactions.³⁸ The photobook, which expands human perception of self and society, becomes a perfect medium for a viewership grounded in embodiment. The theory of embodiment is based on what is called, ontological reciprocity.³⁹ Ontological reciprocity suggests that material things respond back to the viewer, there is a back and forth between the viewer in the world and the material things a viewer interacts with. Therefore, the photobook is not only an object, a small part of a bigger perception of the world. It is an object in relation to the viewer, a conversation, and a whole.

Embodiment as a key tenant of a methodology of viewing establishes the viewer as being in conversation with a world that is scaled or sized to the viewer. Crowther argues that the viewer is not an isolated viewer looking out at the world. He sees the experience of the viewer as a whole experience, not a fragment. Similarly art critic, Michael Fried, explores the embodied experience in his exploration of the work of Adolph Menzel.⁴⁰ As an example of the conversation that embodiment enables between the viewer and the object Fried points to Adolph Menzel's *Unmade Bed* (1845) (Fig. 3).

³⁸ Crowther, Paul. *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.

³⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁰ Fried, Michael, *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 2.

Of the work Fried says that it is, "...a work at once of consummate graphic virtuosity and of delirious sensuous immediacy."⁴¹ These perceptions develop because Menzel's work offers a point of view so that the viewer of the work can position themselves within the work, or the work situates itself within the human-sized world of the viewer. Fried notes that this theme of exchange or transfer between viewer and art is possible with a methodology of embodiment.

Upon viewing the narrative-montage photobook the exchange or transfer noted by Fried is what connects to the viewer's grasp on the world. Returning to Crowther's discussion of Embodiment the concept of "sensuous manifolds" explores the wholeness of the experience of viewer and art. Crowther says,

For the artwork *qua* symbolically significant sensuous manifold is founded on an *internal relation* between the creator's experience and the made artifact. Its integration of symbolic content, sensuous material, and personal experience enables it to reconcile the general subject/object division in a number of ways. For example, in order for the individual to be at home with himself or herself, the needs of the mind and of the senses must both be satisfied. Art is a major satisfaction of this need in so far as it brings rational and sensuous material into an inseparable and mutually enhancing relation.⁴²

Crowther connects the act of making with the experience of viewing. The artist and their intentions is part of the embodied experience of the viewer who is able to reconcile the image to their own worldliness. Fried intersects again with Crowther's ideas in his discussion of viewing that is aspectual. This way of viewing is to view a situation in which time is not affected. The time is internal, related to the maker and the onlooker but not to a measurable passage of time. This feature of embodied viewing makes it possible

⁴¹ Ibid., 41.

⁴² Crowther, Paul. *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

for the viewer to see the montage of images of the photobook as passing in front of them in their current worldliness, not in some distance space with time specific markers.

The casual view, the one the onlooker might flippantly look upon, is an important aspect of some of the photographs in Le's book. In *Flight Deck, USS Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf, 2009* (Fig. 4) the empty deck and claustrophobic space offers a break from the landscapes and portraits that dominate the book. In this image the scale diminishes, the blinds cover the windows offering a reference to the bigger world but not the perspective of it. The viewer is seeing what might be seen while passing from one part of a ship to another. A glimpse that is momentary. But in that view is the casual view within the worldliness of the viewer there is a moment to ground oneself before entering back into the landscape. In these smaller moments and photographs that offer a timeless quality the viewer sees a space unaffected by time and circumstance. Recognizing these shifts between the montage and the moment of timeless rest offers an interesting dynamic in the photobook.

In *Events Ashore* (2014) there is a reflection of light on the glass topped table closest to the viewer in the bottom third of the photograph. The reflection is created by the window in the top center of the photograph. *Flight Deck, USS Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf, 2009* (Fig. 4) in comparison to Adolph Menzel's *Balcony Room* (1845) (Fig. 5) asserts the importance of viewing an image within the embodied experience of the viewer. The two works side by side have some similarities. Though compositionally different, Le's photograph has a strong symmetrical center balance while Menzel's painting is asymmetrically balanced with an emphasis on the right side. The presence of a window and a mirror, in Le's case the glass reflective top, offer an opportunity to expand

on a traditional discussion picked up by Michael Fried on the issue of embodied viewing and aspectual seeing.⁴³ The window and the mirror offer different ways of seeing. There is the window which is a representation of an embodied view, the window allows the viewer to see in a way that is related to themselves, their placement within the work and the work in relation to the self. The window is a representation of the way humans see in the world. The mirror is something else, it is seeing a reflection, a reflection that may not always be accurate. Fried argues that the mirror is the subjective element. In Menzel's work the mirror reflection of furniture appears to offer more detail of surface than what the viewers see in their own close-up space. The mirror in Menzel's painting is not the actual world, but an interpretation of it.⁴⁴

In Le's work the symbolism of the window and the reflective glass is flipped. The windows are closed off by the blinds, offering no objective view and filtering the light coming in from outside. The closed windows deny the physical location of the ship at the time. That information is only known through the title. For the viewer the lack of place is in stark contrast to many of the other images in *Events Ashore* (2014). However, this offers some notion of what it is like to be on a ship, out to sea, some inkling of the military experience. I will talk more about this in Chapter 5. The reflection is in the space of the viewer in a way that offers a sense of certainty about the space and the relation of the viewer to the space. The mirror is the trusted perspective. This is, though I think unintentionally, a funny twist on the mirror and the window analogy as a photographer is in the business of the reflection. For the viewer this is an interesting turn in the

⁴³ Fried, Michael, *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 85.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 89

photobook, an image that disrupts the montage, offers another perspective in seeing, and perhaps alerts the viewer to their viewing practice. The embodied viewer remains aware of their place as viewer, and even without a geographic location, has a place from which to relate to the scene, the conversation of object to viewer of embodiment is challenged in this image.

The Problem of Sublime Content and Embodiment

Embodied viewing put into context of the sublime image adds a new layer of viewing that requires tools to access the content. To access the sublime image in context of one's own worldliness could potentially be disconcerting, and at the worst dangerous. Educator Paul Duncum defines embodiment as the experience of perceiving and engagement with the world.⁴⁵ In his essay on pedagogical practice and the connection of embodied viewing to images full of power, violence, and difficult imagery he considers the challenge of this methodology. Duncum argues that in practice embodiment must help the viewer make sense of power and danger, as opposed to only shocking the viewer.⁴⁶ Taking on sublime content as embodied experience could be stressful or chaotic, these conditions could potentially turn the viewer away or make the transformative nature of embodied viewing impossible. Duncum is not suggesting the viewer not embody the work, but he is indicating the need for the viewer to contextualize the images with their view of the world and their own safety.⁴⁷

In embodying the sublime image there is danger in the extremes. Embodying the

⁴⁵ Duncum, Paul, "Visual culture and an aesthetics of embodiment," *International Journal of Education through Art*, 1: 1, 2005.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2

⁴⁷ Duncum, Paul, "Visual culture and an aesthetics of embodiment," *International Journal of Education through Art*, 1: 3, 2005.

work which could alter the worldliness of the viewer or connect the viewer to fantasy. Perhaps it is a limitation of this methodology that the process can only be applied to work whose sublime qualities are of the natural or technological sublime, and not the consumer's sublime as conceived of by David Nye in his essay on the subject of sublime characteristics.⁴⁸ I will expand on this further in Chapter 4 but for the purpose of understanding the methodology it is significant to note that the efficacy of the viewer is in recognizing the method, remaining cognizant of how one is viewing. Whether it is the moment of recognizing the switch in the window with the mirror or in remaining vigilant upon viewing the sublime and embodying the dangerous image, the viewer, in control of the pacing of the montage images, must remain aware of the conversation, the back and forth element of embodied viewing.

Ritual as a Way of Seeing

Ritual is the final piece of the methodology that ties together the sublime image and embodiment in the photobook. There is ritual present in the subject matter of the images but I will discuss that form of ritual in Chapter 5. Ritual in the act of viewing and ritual as a way of embodying the sublime content is my focus here. Ritual is not originally taken up by art historians, but the field of anthropology has long standing research on theorizing ritual as part of their canon. Victor Turner is a definitive voice on the subject matter as anthropological theory crosses over to visual images. Turner defines ritual as, "...the performance of a complex sequence of symbolic acts."⁴⁹ While previous theorists might have defined ritual as an act that is standard across many actors, Turner's

⁴⁸ Nye, David E. *The Consumer's Sublime* in *The New Media Theory Reader*, Hassan, Robert. & Thomas, Julian. Eds., (Open University Press, 2006), 29.

⁴⁹ Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 7.

definition offers an interesting way of thinking about viewing as ritual, it is not done the same way by each person but what is similar about each viewer is that the act of viewing happens in a sequence that is related to the viewer, their culture, their experience. Ronald Grimes and Victor Turner offer similar notions of what ritual is. Grimes adds to his definition that, “Transformative performance reveals major classifications, categories, and contradictions of cultural processes.”⁵⁰ Grimes’ addition of transformation as related to Turner’s complex sequence is why a consideration of the ritual of viewing is essential to a transformative viewing experience. The act of viewing the photobook is ritualistic. The ritual of turning the page, the ritual of viewing, the practice of embodiment focuses on the worldliness of the viewer, even taking in the complicated sublime materials are made meaningful and transformative through the ritual act of viewing.

The state of viewing necessary for this transformative experience of viewing Le’s photobook is what Turner calls the state of being betwixt and between.⁵¹ Betwixt and between is the state of being in the in-between moments of society, in the chaos of change and disruption. The viewer is perched between their own context and the world of the montage within the photobook. Embodying the images, the state of the viewer is altered, in a state of being that must address the current state and the new experiences.

This may seem like a minimal effect but when viewing sublime images that represent real

⁵⁰ Grimes, Ronald L.ed., *Ritual, Media, and Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 57.

⁵¹ Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 19

The statement of Betwixt and between in this text is addressed in Turner’s consideration of the 4 stages of social drama that come from conflicts among individuals. The 4 stages are Breach, Crisis, Redressive, and Reintegration/Recognition. The betwixt and between state is part of redressive action, stage 3. This means that as it is introduced Turner sees it as part of the interactions that may include mediation or arbitration. These are both back and forth concepts that may be similar to the embodiment notion that objects speak back to viewers.

and tangible danger, this in-between state is where the transformative element of the photograph and methodology live. In *Removal of Personal Protective Equipment After Confirmation of Terrorist Chemical Lab, Explosive Ordinance Disposal Training Unit, Fort Story, Virginia, 2014* (Fig. 6) there is the presence of imminent danger. The central figure in state of undress wears a gas mask and evidence of the tools of containment are laid about. Moments of red are strewn about to keep the triangular composition, centering the eye of the viewer on the soldier who appears to have 3 legs. In the notes on photographs in *Events Ashore* (2014), Geoff Dyer argues that the photograph amusingly suggests that the soldier in training has sprouted a third leg in response to the exposure to radiation.⁵² But for the viewer in the betwixt and between moment, ritually looking at the photograph which sits alone in its layout, the embodied viewer sees from their own comfortable context the dangerous scene and the body with an extra limb. Transformed by both the moment of layered bodies and the strangeness of the extra leg that could be jarring when related to the context of the photograph.

Ritual as criticism, as a way of making sense of the world, being transformed by ritual and understanding that ritual is part of the response humans have is at the core of ritual theory as developed by Turner and carried on by Ronald Grimes. In *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction*, Barry Stephenson summarizes the new direction of ritual studies when he says, "...ritual itself as a way of doing criticism, encouraging reflexivity, and creatively responding to social and individual needs and concerns."⁵³ The ritual viewing of the montage photobook, seeing it within an embodied experience and in some way understanding the nature of the sublime, the danger present in the image, these are acts of

⁵² Geoff Dyer (Notes author) Le, An-My (artist), *Events Ashore*. (Aperture, 2014).

⁵³ Stephenson, Barry. *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.

response and criticism. The ability to be transformed, to transform or change the worldliness of the individual and even society is possible through the cognizant practice of ritual. Julia Werts expresses the importance of ritual/performance and art in her introduction to a seminar on the topic. She notes that rituals are like language in that they are metaphors, not the actual event or action. And yet the ritual is significant because, "...the metaphors nonetheless open up a necessary space for understanding various art practices in relation to rituals."⁵⁴ The ritual of viewing offers the space needed for the viewer to reflect on their in-between status as Turner describes ritual as, the space to be transformed, that can perhaps transform society from a different perspective, a change in one's worldliness.

Events Ashore (2014) by An-My Le offers complex and beautiful photographs, a unique viewing experience that can be transformative for the viewer. But to access the rich content a viewer needs skills, a methodology to approach the many dynamics the photobook offers. Through an embodiment approach to the montage photobook the viewer can understand the images in relation to their own worldliness. The sublime content, both technological and natural can be accessed with some limitations to better understand the work, and the world. Finally, it is ritual that offers a way for the viewer to understand their position betwixt and between to both view and make sense of the world.

⁵⁴ Werts, Julia. (Ed) *Visualizing Rituals: Critical Analysis of Art and Ritual Practice*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 7.

CHAPTER 4

THE SUBLIME LANDSCAPE AND SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

In *Events Ashore* (2014), Le addresses the sublime, the body, religion, and the formal qualities of the large format photograph in capturing visual scale and contextual tension.⁵⁵ In an interview and artist-talk through *Aperture* magazine, Le discusses the artistic decisions of layout and composition. She notes her role as a photographer as one who bears witness to experiences and she attempts, largely through scale, to express something greater than the self to the viewer.⁵⁶ The transcendence of the image and the narrative constructed by the artist moves beyond the context in which she made the work into the context or realm of the viewer.

This experience of meaningful work that engages not just the visual senses of the viewer but the physical response of the viewer and their own connections is important. It is when all the senses are engaged that art can create an experience of communion where the body and mind are connected through ritual, through repetitive act. In this case the turning of the page and development of the story becomes a way of experiencing something that is happening now and eternally unfolding. Le's work and its exploration of scale is connected to contexts of power, place, form, and not just the military as a

⁵⁵ Le, An-My. *Events Ashore*. Aperture. 2015. Photobook.

⁵⁶ Le, An-My. *Artist Talk with An-My Le*. Aperture. 2015. Video.

surface concern. She notes that within this book scale is a way to, “Understand the weight of an individual’s life.”⁵⁷ She spends time standing next to the camera taking in the scenes and slowly, methodically considering them. To look into the open seas and consider the weight of one’s life, staring into the infinite is to communicate with the divine. Even the technical slowness of the medium-format camera she works with expresses the methodical process she uses to capture the divine presence.

The presence of the divine in her work is apparent in photographs where she has intentionally tapped into a religious understanding of scale and gesture. In her work, *Clearing Tripwires, U.S. Marine Corps Explosive Ordinance Disposal Technician and Indonesian Combat Engineer, Karang Ketok Camp, Indonesia, 2010* (Fig. 7), Le photographs an Indonesian combat engineer centered in the photograph, hands in the gesture of an orant.⁵⁸ The body positioning of the engineer is an obvious visual reference. But this is not the only aspect that develops a sense of divine presence in the work. It is the rich textures of the natural world, visually captured so that the trees and branches create a cathedral-like experience. The central figure stands in the apse and the leaves and branches jut in soft diagonals to create the vaulted space. In this photograph the light, possibly the tangible presence of the Holy Spirit, is in both the technical elements of the light writing of photography but also as it filters through trees and illuminates in the distance.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ The image of the orant was developed in early Christian art as prayerful figures always in prayerful attention to God. In the ceilings of churches and mausoleums throughout the Holy Roman Empire and Byzantium the orants circumambulated symbols and portraits of Christ with hands raised and heads tilted upwards. The orants could be nameless followers or priests, bishops, even biblical characters. The job of an orant in Christian art was to connect with the viewer as a model for being ever watchful and present for Christ.

This space is not a cathedral, it is a training ground for military personnel. In this space there is a competing power, the dangerous presence of weaponry and military training, a tension of the natural and technological sublime.⁵⁹ As the eye shifts from orant to US military member on his knee there is a juxtaposition of themes. The US military member is not praying and kneeling at the feet of the Orant/Indonesian soldier. He is there, guiding the movements of his partner to clear the trip wire. It is only upon seeing these contrasting meanings in the gestures of the men that the slight appearance of the trip wire in the bottom third of the photograph appears, menacing. An-My Le's photographs in *Events Ashore* (2014) at times engage in the traditional sense of the natural sublime from walls of water to lush jungle scenes. But always present is technology, walls of water created by low flying helicopters or jungle with military training runs.

The presence of danger and beauty commingling is a running theme in Le's *Events Ashore* (2014) photobook. Her interest and exploration of space in the photograph is an exploration of space in the sublime sense.⁶⁰ There is a risk of seeing danger but as a kind of play, a war with no real enemy. And yet her work entices the viewer to deeply consider the military presence in the natural world, the global threat, the care, and training. It is a different view of the military and in the discontinuities produced in the photographs the sublime is present and complicated. Le's photograph of the trip wire training suggests that in the beauty there is imminent danger. The combination is jarring as the contexts combine. There is an overall sense of stillness in the photograph that at

⁵⁹ Nye, David E. *The Consumer's Sublime* in *The New Media Theory Reader*, Hassan, Robert. & Thomas, Julian. Eds., (Open University Press, 2006), 33.

⁶⁰ Le, An-My. *Artist Talk with An-My Le*. Aperture. 2015. Video.

first look, is the meditative stillness common in the presence of the divine. Or is it the stillness of known but unseen danger? It is difficult to identify art in the post-modern tradition that can have this kind of effect on the viewer, which can tap into the danger of living in a region or age of military conflict but also the perceiving of the divine. Le is in uncharted waters as she combines these themes. In the presence of a continuous narrative of the photobook, this is amplified as the pages turn and the theater of military action unfolds.

Across from *Clearing Tripwires, U.S. Marine Corps Explosive Ordinance Disposal Technician and Indonesian Combat Engineer, Karang Ketok Camp, Indonesia, 2010* (Fig.7) is a photograph taken in Panama entitled, *Tending to a Goat, Animal Technician and Veterinarians from USS Iwo Jima, Punta Robalo, Panama, 2010* (Fig.8). Le refers to these military members as her three graces, tapping into the iconography of powerful religious images. Her “graces” are working, bringing necessary services to areas in Panama and providing training that means the difference between thriving and perishing. Like *Clearing Tripwires, U.S. Marine Corps Explosive Ordinance Disposal Technician and Indonesian Combat Engineer, Karang Ketok Camp, Indonesia, 2010* (Fig.7), the natural fauna of the region is captured in rich detail and the elements of landscape photography are present. Minimal amounts of sky as well as natural and man-made barriers work to create a high horizon line, making the viewer feel closer to the action occurring in the center. There is a white goat that works both visually as a focal point and as an icon. The peaceful and pure animal harkens biblical notions of the symbolism of sacrificial animals, a sacred and fragile animal that needs care. The implied lines of the eyes of the three graces to the goat allow the viewer’s eye to rest on

the act of care.

In combination, these two images are powerful. They show US military personnel in the position of savior and healer, as dutiful and expert. In an age of imagery where journalistic photographs of war and military events proliferate every environment it can be difficult to not become desensitized to images. The excess of the sublime is overwhelming, there is no rest when always looking into the divine presence and technological incursions. An-My Le is creating images that re-enchant the viewer, she taps into medieval Christian imagery and shows power and the sublime but counters it with the icon, and the ordinary moment. She creates a way of approaching the technological sublime without the risk of the flippant and fantastical sublime.⁶¹ These contrasts can only be understood when the viewer is willing to explore the connection of religion and contemporary art. Seeing these two images side by side denies nation-state borders as the horizon line of Panama meshes with the horizon of Indonesia. Space in a physical sense is blurred while the divine space is made tangible.

Understanding Space and the Divine

As a landscape photographer Le makes multiple references to space; how space and scale help her to communicate power and awe inspiring scenes. In her experiences with photographing the military in her photobook, *Events Ashore* (2014), she notes the way that moving from ship to land can have a disorienting effect and how important it is to take some time to get grounded in a new location.⁶² The use of space and scale are ways to capture the power of the military but also the power of the divine. In the

⁶¹ Nye, David E. *The Consumer's Sublime* in *The New Media Theory Reader*, Hassan, Robert. & Thomas, Julian. Eds., (Open University Press, 2006), 34.

⁶² Le, An-My. *Artist Talk with An-My Le*. Aperture. 2015. Video.

photographic diptych, *Noncombatant Evacuation Operation, Marine Corps Training Area, Bellows, Hawaii, 2012 (2 parts)* (Fig. 9) the two images record a training mission of rescue at sea. The usual depth of space in Le's work is missing, in its place is sea mist rising as the helicopter creates a wall between viewer and space. It is an image of rescue. The viewer, who in reality is perfectly safe, is placed in front of the looming wall of sea mist, dark and ominous.

Geoff Dwyer is an author and artist who records military events. In his essay accompanying Le's book he compares this two-part image with Constable's *Cloud Study* (1822) (Fig. 10).⁶³ Both Constable and Le are exploring the natural world and its ability to create place and connect the viewer to the divine. The clouds and sea mist wall bounce light and explore the depth of value changes. There is a disorienting lack of horizon. In Le's work the rescue mission becomes less about routine procedures and more about the helplessness of humans in the overwhelming presence of nature. A military rescue helicopter is a symbol of power and control. Here in the diptych the helicopter is no match visually for the wall of water being created but is somehow victorious in its mission.

The divine is present in the ominous power of nature. Painters like Constable have explored the divine or spiritual significance in nature before. But in Le's work the wall of water is caused by the helicopter so there is an easy explanation for the occurrence. The pairing of these two images creating a narrative is connected not only by name to altarpieces but also in subject. Altarpieces connected the lives of saints and martyrs with holy events in the life of Christ. Making a connection for viewers between the

⁶³ Le, An-My (artist), Geoff Dyer (Notes author). *Events Ashore*. (Aperture, 2014) Photobook.

explainable and fathomable life of people with extraordinary and inexplicable God. Le's first image explains the scene in human terms, the second scene of the ominous water wall connects the knowable helicopter to the unknowable awesomeness of nature. James Elkins suggests a word for talking about religion in art that makes it possible to understand the depth of meaning in this set of images. *Noncombatant Evacuation Operation, Marine Corps Training Area, Bellows, Hawaii, 2012 (2 parts)* (Fig. 9) is "numinous."⁶⁴ The phrase is meant to conjure presence of God in the spontaneous and unknown that reveals holiness. While the creation of the water wall is explained by the presence of the helicopter the numinous quality engages the imagination of the viewer.

Le muses upon the idea that there are many images of helicopters so to make an interesting image the space and depth were important. I would assert here that what makes the helicopter interesting is the numinous quality of space and depth that draws in the viewer and sustains interest. It is the presence of the divine that marries the two images together. The presence of helicopters throughout different geographic changes becomes an interesting visual theme in the photobook. In *Refueling and Resupply Operations, USS Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf, 2009* (Fig. 11) the helicopter follows the diagonal emphasis of the carrier and the wake left in the water. The change in vantage point and scale of the helicopter in this photograph in contrast to *Noncombatant Evacuation Operation, Marine Corps Training Area, Bellows, Hawaii, 2012 (2 parts)* (Fig. 9) creates an important distinction. The helicopter within the composition is not perceived in comparative scale to the water, instead the perspective feels more mundane.

⁶⁴ Elkins, James. *On the Strange Place of Art and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 47.

James Elkins, in his essay entitled, *What do we want photography to be?*⁶⁵ raises important questions about the classical argument by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*⁶⁶ and the role of the punctum. Elkins notes that in a mundane image, like a vernacular photograph, it is at times not the subject matter but the ambiguous details of texture and line that capture the attention of the viewer.⁶⁷ Elkins notes that the fragmentary details are present by default but can play the role of punctum, capturing the attention of the viewer. These are the textures that are rich in Le's photography and make it possible for the viewer's eye to explore the full surface of the image. In this way, the image is not a falsehood allowing the viewer to see beauty in the midst of danger but instead to set a scene that allows the viewer to explore something that may be unknown but in some sense is knowable. The viewer knows that their experience is from a distance however the reality of the details, the textures, and the perspective allow the viewer to explore the vastness of background. The helicopter, still looming just off the bow of the ship acts not as a contrast to those textures but as a tool to organize space and direct the gaze of the viewer. The transcendent quality is in the play of texture, the mundane subject, and the contrast they create.

In variations of the theme of the helicopter Le plays with angles and perspectives and those mundane textures that enrich the photograph and engage the viewer. In *Placement of Warming Hut in Preparation for Naval Ice Exercise, Arctic Seas, 2011* (Fig. 12), the subject matter is clearly the helicopter and its delicately dangling cargo.

⁶⁵ Elkins, James. *What Do We Want Photography to Be?: Response to Michael Fried, "Barthes Punctum"*. Academic.edu, accessed January 27, 2016.

⁶⁶ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. (Hill and Wang: New York, 1980), 25-27.

⁶⁷ Elkins, James. *What Do We Want Photography to Be?: Response to Michael Fried, "Barthes Punctum"*. Academic.edu, accessed January 27, 2016.

Yet the constant white surface of snow is also present and part of the impact on the viewer. There is something knowable in the kinetic qualities of the setting. But the epic scale and proportions change the perceptions of the viewer. Elkins, in his argument on photography and the punctum says, “Those nearly un-seeable pieces and forms, shapes and parts are the *on-and-on* of the world, its apparently unending supply of usually dull and sometimes uninterpretable *stuff*, and for me they are proof of a difference between whatever photography is and the agendas of vernacular photography in particular.”⁶⁸ Elkins is suggesting that more than just focusing on the subject matter, the intention of vernacular photography, the viewer considers the space itself.

Le taps into this reality in her photographs as she explores space and depth in the photographic image. The photograph within the photobook establishes the snowy landscape in all its undulations of surface. But the idyllic landscape is also recognized by the viewer as highly dangerous and while captured as still in the image, is a constantly changing place. The presence of the Helicopter preparing to bring humans in to survive in the space is a sign of human incursion in a difficult place. The helicopter with its cargo as a colorful focal point in the photograph acts as an intermediary between the snowy surface and the cloudy skies. There is room for the viewer to insert themselves in to the detail of the terrain, and to reflect on the presence of help on the horizon.

⁶⁸ Elkins, James. *What Do We Want Photography to Be?: Response to Michael Fried, “Barthes Punctum”*. Academic.edu, accessed January 27, 2016.

CHAPTER 5

MILITARY RITUAL AND VIEWER RITUAL

Military pursuits have long been captured in photographs. The history of wartime photography is rich with both journalistic and artistic images. Photography is the dominant medium in capturing conflict, war, aftermath, and struggle. And in some respects Le's photographic work of *Events Ashore* (2014) is a part of this photographic tradition. Le notes in an interview with Andrew Maerke for *Art iT*, a popular online web publication on contemporary art, that she is interested in not just humans and landscapes but describing human endeavors in those landscapes.⁶⁹ Like other photographers embedded with a military unit, she is capturing the individuals, the space, the action. But *Events Ashore* (2014) is not entirely the same as wartime photographs. There is a unique quality about them that engages the viewer in a different way.

Conflict has long been an impetus for artists to create. Tod Papageorge identifies this particular characteristic as one that has shaped the direction of photography. He notes that photographers Eugene Atget, Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, Josef Koudelka, Robert Adams, and himself are essential figures in the history of straight photography and they all lived through and were inspired to photograph by military conflict. Papageorge ponders that their experience through these difficult times,

⁶⁹ Maerke, Andrew. "Fires on the Plain (Three Part Interview)" *ART iT*, last modified July 2015, accessed September 16, 2016, http://www.art-it.asia/u/admin_ed_itv_e/2sABwLXHQIvNGr4pqE7F/?art-it=194f3cb2df70283a6db24d70efd93012.

“...offered them a particularly powerful method for artistically consorting with a bloody-minded world.”⁷⁰ The influence of war and conflict has eternally influenced photography. But the response has always been diverse from the categorical to the raw and expressive.

The importance of the experience of a photographer’s brush with conflict here is not relevant to the viewers’ interpretation but to the larger picture of visualizing the circumstance of conflict. Papageorge thoughtfully says, “In any event, it seems to me that the war’s most obvious effect on the work of these great photographers was to force the direction of its poetic energies outward into the public sphere, as if that was the only possible space from which meanings useful, or simply recognizable, to a half-destroyed, politically unsettled world might be grasped.”⁷¹ The photograph in a time of war is an impetus for action or transformation of the viewer. A way to process what can otherwise not be fully embodied. The narrative montage of the photobook reveals not just the journalistic appearance of events. It highlights the human lives, within the landscape, the sublime qualities in a format where the viewer can focus on the complicated energy of the time into their own worldliness.

Military Photography and Ritual Embodiment

The connection of war photography and embodiment is both complicated and contentious. The presence of military action within the photographs raises an interesting set of concerns, as does the reality that these photographs are directed and staged. While the men and women photographed are actual members of the military who are engaging in real training exercises and actions, they are at times, redoing actions to be

⁷⁰ Papageorge, Tod. *Core Curriculum*, (Aperture Foundation, 2011), 9

⁷¹ Ibid., 9.

photographed. This is in a similar vein to Le's previous photobooks *Small Wars* and *29 Palms*, where she worked with war reenactors and often participated in the reenactments to capture images. Janina Ciezadlo, freelance writer for *Afterimage* magazine reviewed an exhibit of Le's photographs at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago. The work in the exhibit came from Le's work on *Small Wars* and *29 Palms* but the review provides an interesting interpretation of the Le's work that is relevant to *Events Ashore* (2014).

As Ciezadlo begins to unpack Le's images in the exhibit she notes as her first assertion that the images offer no high drama and that the works are clearly exhibiting preparation as opposed to the act of war itself.⁷² This point is interesting as it poses a problem for the practice of embodiment. This dichotomy of preparation and the act of war is why a consideration of ritual must be a part of any method of viewing work of this nature. Ritual is a significant aspect of military life. There are rituals that dictate every aspect of life. There are two distinct ways that these rituals play out, the first is for spectacle or teaching and the second is for survival.⁷³ It is the later function of ritual that is significant in understanding and embodying Le's work and it is what Ciezadlo fails to see. She sets up a dichotomy between practice and action that does not exist in the military. When the military trains they engage in ritual. This ritual is not an illustration, it is as real as the act of war for its participants. And so photographs of these trainings are

⁷² Ciezadlo, J. A. (2007). "Climate of War," *Afterimage*, 34(5), 26-28.

⁷³ With a combined 25 years of military service by my parents I have witnessed this type of ritual personally. While on a dependent's cruise in the Coronado Bay, CA I witnessed a watered-down version of my father's daily routine. The intent of running through the rituals of reveille, muster, and then daily tasks was to help spouses and children to catch a glimpse of that their loved one was doing while gone for long stretches of time. This ritual was meant to illustrate actions, a basic notion of roll play. While at times there were drills to watch, all were carefully scripted as to not scare anyone but simply to show the viewer an external process.

real, literal representations of what happened. The armed forces use ritual practice so that actions and decisions are second nature, automatic, and fully internalized so that in the act of war they are ready.

A return to training photographs in *Events Ashore* (2014) will illuminate this type of ritual further. In *Clearing Tripwires, U.S. Marine Corps Explosive Ordinance Disposal Technician and Indonesian Combat Engineer, Karang Ketok Camp, Indonesia, 2010* (Fig. 7) the photograph has captured a training mission. While there is no eminent danger while the photograph was taken, the visual communicates something else. The ritual itself engages the sense of danger present. The focus of the central figure as he practices the skill is a reminder that these men are training, are engaging ritual practice because there is a real threat to remain vigilant for. While Ciezadlo says, “The trainees and the reenactors inhabit the virtual landscapes of the future and the past. The viewer sees them apart from their memories and projections in the fragile deserts and forests of North America in revealing a subversive set of dislocations.”⁷⁴ Her argument here that the viewer does not embody the image due to the landscape seems short-sided. The ritual the viewer is witnessing is the same ritual that would be practiced on a training shore in California and the sands of Iraq. The military ritual is consistent. Le is not capturing the illustrative ritual, she is capturing the preparation ritual which is real and foreshadows danger.

The viewer engaging in the sublime presence of military ritual is capable of embodying the action and risk; which is not separate from their own time or worldliness. The military engages in ritual that is timeless and location-less and the viewer must

⁷⁴ Ciezadlo Ciezadlo, J. A. (2007). “Climate of War,” *Afterimage*, 34(5), 27.

recognize that in hopes of embodying the photograph and transforming their own view of risk, danger, war, and ritual. In *Ritual, Media, and Conflict*, editor Ronald Grimes addresses bending of time and space in ritual. He notes that ritual can unfold across time and space but the actors are finite, existing in time and space. He goes on to say, “Ritual is embodied, spatially bound, temporally constrained human activity even if ritual actors aspire to things of global, universal, or eternal significance.”⁷⁵ The author has noted the tension that exists in ritual that is meant to transcend, in this case the presence of real danger or the preparation for it, and the finite quality of humans engaging in the ritual. Though Grimes is careful to not narrowly define what ritual can be he does note here that the quality of ritual to bend time and space in tension with the realness of time and space for the actor is what makes ritual embodiment so important. It is real human action but it can also transcend time and space to be relevant in other times and other contexts.

The Photographic Frame and Military Action

The embedded war photographer hopes to express something real about the danger and risk associated with military presence. Judith Butler writes on the subject of war photography in her essay, *Photography, War, Outrage* (2005). She notes that embedded war photographers offer viewers access to the reality of war but that access is directed by the requirements of the government. Understanding that war photography is restricted in a sense is important to reflecting on how the image can be transformative. There are other views, complicated views that go unseen. In her discussion of war photography she points to a specific set of images that offer insight into the work of An-My Le. Butler notes that the controversial and now infamous images of Abu Ghraib that

⁷⁵ Grimes, Ronald L.ed., *Ritual, media, and conflict*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

shocked the world with their staged and dehumanizing images were, in their own right, war photography. She argues, “The camera angle, the frame, the posed subjects all suggest that those who took the photographs were actively involved in their perspective of war, elaborating that perspective even giving it further validity.”⁷⁶ These staged and posed images functioned in the same way that other war time photographs strive for, they assert a way of seeing the events, they offer the viewer an opportunity to embody the experience, no matter how complicated the material is.

Le’s work at time is staged in a way that suggests portrait and so the staging is so obvious that it is not an issue. In a series of 3 photographs, portraits of women in the US Navy, Le uses obvious staging in a somewhat classical view. In seeing *Line Shack Supervisor for EA-6B Proweler, USS Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf, 2009* (Fig. 13) next to *Aircraft Carrier Arresting Gear Mechanic, USS Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf, 2009* (Fig. 14), and on the following page, set alone in its layout, *Forward Lookout, USS Tortuga, Gulf of Thailand, 2010* (Fig. 15) the classic nature of a three-quarter body and head at a slight angle organizes the portrait. Only in the third portrait is the body and face more frontal and that work seems more like a moment captured than the first two portraits in the series. When Le describes her process she notes that she is always looking and when she observes something she will ask the people involved to redo something she saw.⁷⁷

This process is visible in *Line Shack Supervisor for EA-6B Proweler, USS Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf, 2009* (Fig. 13) where the lighting across the left side of the

⁷⁶ Butler, Judith. "Photography, War, Outrage." *PMLA* 120, no. 3 (2005): 822-27.

⁷⁷ Le, An-My. *Artist Talk with An-My Le*. Aperture. 2015. Video.

soldier, crossing of the hands, and indirect gaze all soften the appearance of the seamen on the deck of a carrier. In this photograph and its neighbor *Aircraft Carrier Arresting Gear Mechanic, USS Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf, 2009* (Fig. 14) the central placement of the figure against the out of focus background reaffirms the portrait qualities of the photograph. In the third photograph of the series the distant background behind the central figure has more clarity and depth but its infinite space functions to keep the female figure in *Forward Lookout, USS Tortuga, Gulf of Thailand, 2010* (Fig. 15) as the main focus. As would be traditional to portrait making in any medium, Le has observed the activities and movements of these seamen and captured moments that reveal something about their work and actions as well as their personality. Their existence in the military as women serving their country is also a narrative that builds in the repetition of portraits. Judith Butler's assertion that war photography by embedded photographers actively asserts a perspective of war rings true with this set of staged images.

There is another type of staged photograph in *Events Ashore* (2014) that is slightly more complicated than the straightforward portraits. The portraits, unlike the staged problematic portraits of Abu Ghraib, lack eminent danger. But in photographs like *Small Arms Target Practice, USS Peleliu, Pacific Ocean, 2006* (Fig. 16) the presence of danger returns through the ritual practice depicted. Like the images from Abu Ghraib the staging here frames the actions of war and the power of military might. In *Small Arms Target Practice, USS Peleliu, Pacific Ocean, 2006* (Fig. 16) the ritual Le observed was soldiers shooting at targets at the end of a ship. The men then retrieved their targets. As they did she noticed the way their bodies were echoed by the targets and the visual interest created when the bodies of the soldiers disguised the apparatus that holds the

targets, making them appear as if they are floating. The men were then asked to hold what they were doing while Le took the picture.⁷⁸ Staging is present but perhaps less obvious as it does not follow classical models like the portrait images do. As Judith Butler notes in her essay of war photography, this staged photograph is asserting a notion of war and actively interpreting events as it records them. Between the formal portraits of female seamen and this staged image of target practice it is the presence of ritual that offers the viewer an opportunity to embody the activity and danger of war.

There is no question that photographs capture the complexity and tragedy of war even when staged. The issue at question is how the viewer can interact with the complex wartime images. Susan Sontag questions the power of the photograph in multiple publications. In her more recent work on the subject, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003)⁷⁹ she recants some of her assertions in her earlier work, *On Photography* (1977).⁸⁰ In her essay, Butler takes on the task of arguing with Sontag on the transitive nature of a photograph. It is only in Sontag's later book that she asserts that photographs are transitive. But Sontag limits that assertion in noting that the transitive quality only has the ability to shut the viewer down, overwhelm them, and make them numb to images⁸¹. She denies that photography has the ability to engage the viewer and create a transformation in their outlook or behavior. This seems to fall short of the actual experience of viewing photographs like Le's work. The photograph is just that, a photograph. This is what

⁷⁸ Le, An-My. *Artist Talk with An-My Le*. Aperture. 2015.

⁷⁹ Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), i-131.

⁸⁰ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1977), 175-183

⁸¹ Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), i-131.

Papageorge is cheekily arguing in his poem *An Unfinished Poem in Response to Susan Sontag's On Photography*.⁸² In the middle of the final stanza he says,

...but wove in the air,
as if her hands could put it there,
a mammoth camera, blind to thought,
ingesting worlds and spewing rot.⁸³

It is Papageorge's reminder that the photograph is enough to be transformative through viewer response. As Butler notes it is in our recognition of the frame and embodiment of the context where the transformation upon viewing is paramount. Butler says, "If we see as the photographer sees, then we consecrate and consume the act."⁸⁴ Butler also notes the difficulty of this type of seeing, the embodiment of both the content of the photograph and the frame the photographer has used, difficult but not impossible.

Ritual and Communitas

The transformation in the hands of the viewer is facilitated through the connection between the military ritual and the ritual of viewing. The experience of the viewer with those participating in ritual is at the core of what cultural anthropologist Graham St. John is discussing when he addresses what he calls, "embodied experience."⁸⁵ In this usage of embodiment St. John is interested in the internal experience and the observable actions. In other words, embodied experience is the connection between the person and the group, the internal experience of those in the ritual and the outside observer's embodied

⁸² Papageorge, Tod. *Core Curriculum* (Aperture Foundation, 2011), 130-131.

⁸³ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁴ Butler, Judith. "Photography, War, Outrage." *PMLA* 120, no. 3 (2005): 822-27.

⁸⁵ St. John, Graham, ed., *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*, (New York: Berghahn, 2008), 32.

experience in the ritual of viewing. The anthropological approach does not compare and contrast these experiences or set them at odds, but instead tries to reconcile them. St. John is interested in the shared element of embodiment between the cultural insiders, in this case the military actors, and the cultural outsiders, those viewing the photographs.

St. John is developing a theory originally discussed by Victor Turner who calls this reconciliation of insider and outsider, *Communitas*.⁸⁶ St. John refers to this notion of *communitas* as embodied experience. He criticizes Turner's term because it has expressly liberatory and Christian connotations. St. John notes that the term *communitas* is less about observable ritual, instead it focuses on internal experiences that can be shared. Perhaps this is problematic for a theoretical structure in anthropology but for the purpose of making sense of images and the possible transformation of the viewer, *communitas* is an essential part of military actions and sharing the experience of the actors.

Turner begins the construction of *communitas* with an understanding of what changes about ritual after the postmodern turn. The performance of ritual by the military actors would move from a context dependent event to what Turner passionately states:

Performance, whether as speech behavior, the presentation of self in everyday life, stage drama or social dram, would not move the center of observation and hermeneutical attention. Post-modern theory would see in the very flaws, hesitations, personal factors, incomplete, elliptical, context-dependent, situational components of performance, clues to the very nature of human process itself, and would also perceive genuine novelty, creativeness, as able to emerge from the freedom of the performance situation.⁸⁷

In this light performance is part of the experience of humanity which can be shared and understood by both performer and audience. To reconcile the observer's experience and

⁸⁶ Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 31.

⁸⁷ Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 7.

the actor's experience the focus remains on the commonalities of the ritual act. Ritual acts as a frame that has a structure, and it is within that ritual structure that the outside observer can connect with the military actor.

Photographs in *Events Ashore* (2014) reveal this kind of ritual that focuses on those human commonalities, the moments of narrative that reconcile the observer with the actor. Photographs that do more than illustrate *communitas*, images that develop it. In the photograph *FOD (Foreign Object Detection) Walk, USS Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf, 2009* (Fig. 17) the possibility of *communitas* between actor and observer is present. The photograph sits alone in its layout. Just below the horizontal middle of the photograph a long line of seamen in kelly green shirts and camouflage pants stretch across the runway of a carrier. They obscure the horizon line produced by the vast sea and sky and the edge of the carrier in the distance. Also diminishing the size of the human figures are the large aircraft behind them. The row of seamen is cropped on the left and right to suggest that this line of people carries on further. And while there is clearly order to what these men and women are doing, there is not strict military formation or regimented fashion one might expect to see. The title reveals the task and Le notes in an interview that she found this action to be rather interesting to photograph. She describes the action as a slow methodical walk looking for any small fragment of metal that could potentially cause harm during take-off.⁸⁸

The ritual practice of the participants offers insight into the methodical practices these men and women go through on a regular basis. And the particular task being photographed is a reminder that their actions have life and death consequences. Ritual

⁸⁸ Le, An-My. *Artist Talk with An-My Le*. Aperture. 2015. Video.

actions like these are in place for the purpose of safety. But present in these ritual actions are the kind of human traits that Turner identifies as key to ritual experience and the kind of traits that reconcile the observer to the actor. The figures in the photograph look down and at varying angles, their posture ranges from casual to upright. There is a woman wearing a sling, another seamen touches the nose of the jet. The embodiment of this image, this ritual, for the viewer is the embodiment of human process. While the context of the carrier flight deck is likely foreign to the viewer, the human process is not. The ritual of working together at an important task is part of this process. But even more it is the individuals identifiable with unique narratives playing out in the photograph, and yet still they seem to function as a cohesive group. *Communitas* is built between observer and actor through the embodiment of the human process and the imperfections, narratives, and novelty of the situation.

The commitment of the participants and the observers is paramount in embodying the unique human process of ritual. The term “ritual commitment” is theorized in *Ritual Media and Conflict*.⁸⁹ In Chapter 2: From Ritual Ground to Stage, the discussion of ritual commitment is not only an issue of the actors playing their part honestly but also about the observer understanding their place and role.⁹⁰ The authors say, “Practitioners, performers, and audiences need not agree on the meaning of a ritual in order to agree that a ritual is important. It is important that the participants consider their ritual important but not that they agree upon, or even know, the meanings of their actions.”⁹¹ As another way

⁸⁹ Grimes, Ronald L.ed., *Ritual, Media, and Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 49.

⁹⁰ Dubois, Fletcher, De Maaker, Erik, Polit, Karin, and Riphagen, Marianne. “Chapter 2: From Ritual Ground to Stage” in *Ritual, Media, and Conflict*. (ed) Grimes, Ronald L. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 53.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 49

of reconciling the observer's experience of ritual to the participant's experience, building *communitas*, there does not need to be a common understanding of the two groups.

Returning to *FOD (Foreign Object Detection) Walk, USS Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf, 2009* (Fig. 17) in the light of ritual commitment it is possible to see that even without the knowledge of the action in the photograph, there can be *communitas*. The observer does not need to know about the search for small metal scraps to see human process and embody the experience. And there need not be agreement on what is happening between the observer and participant for true transformation of the viewer to occur. The viewer need only to commit to the ritual act of viewing and embodiment fully. The authors go on to say that, "Efficacy is partly, but not only, in the eye of the beholder, and it is based on complex factors that shape the people's expectations and experiences."⁹² Efficacy, for the viewer, the power to be committed to viewing that allows embodiment, comes from the ritual of viewing itself and is not dependent upon the image. However, efficacy of the viewer when looking upon military images is another way to approach the power and authority implicit in military images. To embody that would be complicated but to reconcile that power with personal efficacy to interpret and relate to ritual is to build up yet another layer of *communitas*.

An-My Le's efforts to describe human endeavors in the photographs of *Events Ashore* (2014) offers an opportunity to viewers to commit to the ritual of viewing and to build *communitas* between themselves and the military actors in the work. But this is no simple act considering the difficult subject matter of military actions, rituals, and spaces. There is power in both the frame of the photograph to record military ritual and in the

⁹² Ibid., 57

embodiment of those images. The transformation of the viewer, the efficacy of the of the participant, is to tap into the transitive quality of a photograph, embody it, and act differently as a viewer.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

An-My Le's *Events Ashore* (2014) photobook is a dynamic publication flush with challenging and beautiful photographs. There is an opportunity upon viewing this publication to transform as a viewer. But no causal viewing of the individual photographs or collective images within the photobook will get the viewer to a place of new understanding and engagement with the world. The viewership needs to respond to the complicated imagery and content with a process to make sense of the image and its connection to the viewer.

To access these images I have developed a methodology of viewership that focuses on theories of embodiment, sublimity, and ritual through the photographic medium. This methodology hinges upon careful scholarship and consideration of important voices in the fields of art, art history, theology, and anthropology. The scholarship developed in Chapter 2 lays a foundation for thoughtful analysis and the theoretical underpinnings that make sense of looking and acting upon that viewing process.

The viewing process as articulated in Chapter 3 focuses on the viewer's process of seeing. This methodology is built around the specific medium of the photobook but develops strategies for singular images as well. The methodology considers layout and characteristics of the photobook itself, but also focuses on the formal qualities of

individual images. Braiding together embodiment as the primary perspective of viewing with the essential qualities of the sublime and ritual practice offer the viewer a way to see and a way to understand Le's complex photographs.

Focusing on sublimity and ritual within the photographs of *Events Ashore* (2014) promotes a theoretical understanding of the topics that focuses on their essential traits with the intent to develop them further in the context of Le's work. Recognizing the sublime as related to nature and technology in the context of military photography offers a way of approaching the challenging subject matter. Embodiment of the sublime is developed in Chapter 4 to understand how the sublime is related to the worldview of the observer. This allows for a rich analysis of the work without the overwhelming sense of foreboding dominating the interpretation. Similarly, ritual as developed in Chapter 5 offers a way of understanding and reconciling the experience of the viewer to the experience of the military members in the photographs.

Finally, the use of this theory in context of pedagogical practice is presented as a way to make the methodology coherent. Chapter 6 begins the conversation that will occur in a History of Photography course to begin shaping the experience of the viewer. This lecture is meant to teach students to view Le's work and then expand that practice out to other photographic examples.

As An-My Le's photographs reach a larger audience through prominent placement in the upcoming Whitney Biennial and continued interviews and exhibits it is important to develop ways to viewing. The work demands strategies that give the viewer the necessary agency to approach the photographs, and to be transformed by them.

CHAPTER 7

EPILOGUE: A LECTURE FOR HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The following is a lecture written for delivery to students in Art 175 History of Photography at McHenry County College. The course description is, “History of Photography traces the development of photography as an art form from 1839 to the present. It includes critical analysis of types of photographs for their aesthetic and humanistic values, emphasizing photographs as expressions of the ideas and beliefs of photographers within their cultural and social contexts.”⁹³ The course is offered online and students enrolled in the course are not expected to enter with any prerequisite knowledge of the subject matter. Most students enrolled in the course are photographers but some students take the course for the purpose of transferring it as a humanities credit. There are many other art history courses students can take. Most students who take this course are at the very least, interested in the photographic medium and at the most, working photographers in fine art or commercial photography.

As an instructor of Art History at McHenry County College I am teaching this course and developing content from rigorous research. Having developed a theoretical methodology of viewing supported by research on photography, sublimity, ritual, an An-My Le’s photobook, *Events Ashore* (2014), it is my intent to develop this research into an

⁹³ Course Description is copied from the 2016-2017 catalog at McHenry County College, Crystal Lake, IL.

online lecture for students in the History of Photography course.

This lecture will occur early in the curriculum of the course. Students in History of Photography will first consider an overview of the long history of photography, focused on major developments in technologies and fractures in style and theory. Following that, students will learn basic skills of observation and analysis. The focus will be on developing Formal Analysis, Socio-Cultural Analysis, and Expressive Analysis.⁹⁴ Students will learn to look carefully and critically at photographs, apply their knowledge of context and influences, and consider the response to the work both historically and personally. Having accomplished those tasks the curriculum will focus on the methodology of viewership addressed in Chapter 3. This lecture introduces the methodology to students. Students will also be introduced to the photography of An-My Le and the core topics of straight photography, montage photobooks, sublimity, military photographs, and ritual. It will be assumed that students have a big picture understanding of the history of photography and skills to think critically about art.

Lecture

Good Morning Class.

This lecture marks a shift in our studies from big picture looks at the medium of photography and viewing skills to a focused discussion of a specific style of photography, a specific set of theories, and a specific approach to looking at photographs.

⁹⁴ Barrett, Terry. *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*. (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000), http://www1.udel.edu/art/rmarquez/416/barrett_criticizing_art.pdf The three forms of analysis are summarized from this text in which Barrett focuses on description, interpretation, and judgment. I have been using this source for the last 10 years as a college educator as a way to organize viewing art for entry-level college freshmen in 100 level art courses. The categories are simplistic and while separated there is an obvious overlap of the forms of analysis. But they organize viewership and a disciplined viewing of photographs is necessary to engage in the methodology of viewership I have theorized on in this master's thesis.

My objectives in this lecture are:

1. to introduce you to a methodology of viewership based in the practice of embodiment. And,
2. to introduce you to the work of An-My Le through her photobook, *Events Ashore* (2014).

The outcome of this lesson is that you will be an informed viewer, applying a way of seeing to a new set of images and from this you will be transformed in thought and action through looking.

To begin we will focus on the medium of the photobook. You already know the photobook has a long history and that it has surged in contemporary photography as a popular way of producing photographs. We have seen photobooks range from hand-made limited edition books to mass produced and widely distributed books.⁹⁵ *Events Ashore* (2014) is produced through the Aperture Photobook Project. With this kind of support the project is full color, with many images printed in high quality. The slick appearance of the book and professional layouts are the first visual observation upon seeing the text. Moholy-Nagy, who we referenced in our discussion of the history of photography lays out an important distinction to consider as the viewer. He tells us that narrative-montage photobooks work to develop cognitive perception and visual literacy, which is to say that looking at *Events Ashore* (2014) will change you as a viewer.⁹⁶ As you turn pages and observe the development of images, they will change your perception of space, they may

⁹⁵ Students will have seen reference to *The Family of Man* created by Edward Steichen for The Museum of Modern Art as an example of a mass-produced Photobook as well as numerous small edition photobooks that change as new books are published with the intent to always show contemporary photographers.

⁹⁶ Nelson, Andrea Jeanette, *Reading photobooks: Narrative Montage and the Construction of Modern Visual Literacy* (PhD. Diss., University of Minnesota, 2007). For further discussion and theory on photobooks refer to Chapter 3 of this thesis.

feel timeless, and they will absolutely change the way you view other photographs.

For this lesson the focus will be on one layout with two photographs. As observers we will work with the images within the layout and as solo works of art. The layout includes *Assault of a Fortified Position Supported, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, Pohakuloa Training Area, Hawaii, 2012* (Fig. 18) and *Seabees on Liberty, Naval Mobile Construction Battalion, Moroni Beach, Comoros, 2009* (Fig. 19). Start with formal analysis, careful viewing of the visual details present in the layout. (Pause for observation). Notice that the photograph on the left is larger than the photograph on the right. Consider other big observations like the image on the left being more muted in color than the right, the presence of cloudy sky in both works, texture towards the bottom of both photographs, even groupings of humans in both works. From these big picture observations of the layout it is possible to see some commonalities that allow the images to flow together. As you do that think about what else flows together. The photographs have been sized so that horizon lines flow together.⁹⁷ Your cognitive perception of the locations and time is changed. These photographs are three years apart and geographically distant. From the beginning observation of layout, we are already hinting at context and meaning, seeing the way formal analysis opens a path to context, or socio-cultural context.

Let us unpack a few observations to better understand the works of art and to focus on how we can embody these photographs. As the viewer, it may be tempting to see these works as separate from oneself, something you skim over like a Facebook post,

⁹⁷ Le, An-My. *Artist Talk with An-My Le*. Aperture. 2015. Video. Le discusses the fusing together of horizon lines in her interview. She does so in relation to space and landscape photography and in her brief discussion of making later editing decisions to create this book.

another Instagram selfie, etc. We have already discussed how in art seeing is more complicated than that. So, we are going to focus on seeing this work in relation to ourselves. As you observe think about how this image fits in your worldview, what scholars call, worldliness.⁹⁸ From this lens you have to think about photographs of the military that you have seen, any interactions you have had with the military, your worldview on politics, your understanding of the value of human life, etc. Those things shape the way you interact with these photographs. The photographs in turn should challenge your ideas, get you thinking, and perhaps connect you to the soldiers present in the photograph. Theorists on theater performance talk about this kind of interaction as blurring the line between practice and reality.⁹⁹ This is supported by the earlier observation that the location and time are blurred together across these two images due to technical layout decisions.

It is not a huge stretch then, to think of yourself as an infinite viewer of this timeless and location-less span. The events in these photographs can be playing out in front of you just as much as they can be historical reference. We will come back to this point throughout the semester as we view journalistic photography and the photographs of the WPA later in the semester. To add another layer to our observation of the work, we now must think about what it is that we are embodying. This is going to require continued formal analysis and a blend of socio-cultural analysis with your embodied

⁹⁸ Crowther, Paul. *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 3. Further discussion of embodiment as part of the methodology of viewing is in Chapter 3.

⁹⁹ Counsell, Colin and Mock Roberta (Eds.), *Performance, Embodiment, and Cultural Memory* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 12. The editors of this text analyze performance and ritual as a way of preserving and creating memory. The discussion surrounding theater and performance is an impetus to discuss ways of observers and actors interacting.

interpretation or expressive analysis.

Beginning with the image on the left, *Assault of a Fortified Position Supported, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, Pohakuloa Training Area, Hawaii, 2012* (Fig. 18) take a moment to observe. Remember to let your eye wander but be thoughtful of the path they take. (Pause for observation) An-My Le uses a medium format camera to take these photographs which gives her the ability to capture intricate detail. The large vista scenes that are apparent in this layout are repeated throughout her book. The gentle curve of the highly-textured ground leads to the middle of the photograph where soldiers stand, some as silhouettes against the dark foreboding cloudy sky. In the Midwest, we know those clouds, those spell weather trouble. In art there is a long history of using a foreboding sky to signal danger. So now Le, the artist, is tapping into not only what she saw that day but also to the rich tradition of art and our own experience as viewers.

The term art historians use to reference the power and awe of natural forces like weather is sublime. Morley Simon, a contemporary theorist on the sublime teaches us that in contemporary art the sublime is the un-representable in art.¹⁰⁰ This means that the sublime is not just about a romantic view of nature, it is any force such as technology, power, force, the divine, or the value of life.¹⁰¹ This means that the sublime encounter with weather, an uncontrollable force of nature is not the only way to see the dangerous and awesome sublime content in the photograph. There is also the presence of military soldiers, with the technology and force they represent. The soldiers are made small by the

¹⁰⁰ Morley, Simon, ed., *The Sublime* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2010), 19.

¹⁰¹ Nye, David E. *The Consumer's Sublime* in *The New Media Theory Reader*, Hassan, Robert. & Thomas, Julian. Eds. (Open University Press, 2006), 30. My concept of sublime is largely influenced by the distinction between the natural sublime, technological sublime and what Nye describes as a problematic consumer sublime, Discussion on this theory is found in Chapter 4.

overwhelming landscape, this might be translated as the humans made small in contrast to a divine force. Yet they still represent danger or safety depending on what side of the hill you are on as the viewer.

The sublime qualities can be challenging to embody. They are difficult, the sublime is intentionally large, looming, and dangerous. How can that fit within your own worldliness? Also interesting is to think about how you can connect with this if you've never seen conflict on this level, or felt the danger of military presence. For this reason you can focus on ritual practice to understand the grand sublime effects within your own worldview. Victor Turner is an anthropologist who writes on ritual practice. In art history we often turn to other subjects and fields of study to inform our perspective, this is where the research trends in the field are at right now. Keep this in mind for your research presentation at the end of the semester. Turner talks about a moment of being "betwixt and between" and that is relevant to our practice of viewing.¹⁰² This is his way of talking about being in the moment of change or chaos, as something changes.

You may never have served in the military but your worldliness likely includes some understanding of chaos and change as a human process. Ritual is a way that humans make sense of the world around them but also a way to participate in the human experience. Military ritual includes going through the kind of training drills we see in this photograph as if the event were real. This is what it means to be ready should the real event occur. As a viewer you can engage in the same kind of ritual. You can view this frozen moment with the space to think and consider, to pair this image with your

¹⁰² Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 10.

understanding of the world.

As if to ensure that the viewer sees *Assault of a Fortified Position Supported, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, Pohakuloa Training Area, Hawaii, 2012* (Fig. 18) as a human endeavor, not lost in the landscape but as the primary subject, Le has paired this work with the image on the right, *Seabees on Liberty, Naval Mobile Construction Battalion, Moroni Beach, Comoros, 2009* (Fig. 19). Here the ritual of the soldiers likely feels a little more familiar. Remember that formally the eye can move from one horizon line to the next without any obstacle. So you are likely to see this image as an extension of the other. A formal analysis of the work yields an interesting observation, the contrast of the Seabees relaxing and the local young man walking out of the water. In an embodied view that considers the sublime and ritual this work presents a challenge, but maybe the most potential for transformation in the viewer as well. The image can seem mundane, a lovely landscape and a rather fortuitous moment where the men reclining do so in such a visually formal way creating a strong diagonal. But as an extension of time and space from the other image, does this image extend the sublime military danger? I don't have an answer to give you. But in considering your response you as the viewer are forced to embody the images, match them up to your worldliness, or challenge it.

Focusing on the beach you should also take note of the men relaxing yet they create a rather rigid formation. Their bodies mirror each other and they create an implied diagonal across the sand. There is order in this photograph where we might expect to see leisure. The sublime sky from the left seems to have lifted and the high soft clouds no longer threaten. The viewer can see into the distance where the hill had been blocking our

view offering a sense of the unknown. These observations help to connect with the image, your ritual of viewing is connecting you to the rituals you are perceiving.

We have covered a lot of content in this lecture regarding one layout in *Events Ashore* (2014) by An-My Le. To review:

1. The photobook as a medium offers a unique viewing experience that must be considered when analyzing works of art.
2. Review of Formal, Socio-Cultural, and Expressive Analysis as tools for looking.
3. There are many ways of looking but the strategy of embodiment allows the viewer the ability to see the work through the lens of self, in relation to their own worldiness.
4. Sublime content can be present through nature and technology. In relation to embodiment the sublime qualities pose a challenge to making sense of experiencing art.
5. Considering ritual present in the photograph and the ritual of viewing is a way to embody sublime content and a strategy to connect to the work in a meaningful way.

As you view other selections by An-My Le from *Events Ashore* (2014) take note of your methodology or strategy of viewing. This will be your writing assignment for the week.

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