

Truth in Art(lessness)

by Alana Markel

I've often written pieces while knowing exactly what I'm going to say from beginning to end. That process is kind of like building a Lego tower; I know the pieces will stick together, it's structurally sound most of the time, but there's nothing particularly exciting or demanding about it. Writing this essay, I reached a new understanding of what it means to have freedom in writing, to give myself the permission to not know, or more so to know and then change my mind. The key component to this freedom was time: to question, to think, to search, to write. And so the essay became more like a sand castle, one that I had to keep destroying and reshaping until I finally walked away from it, and let nature do its thing. If I could return to this piece, I would be remiss not to include the international rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's murders and the responsibility of photographers within this historical moment. I am reminded of McCullin's encouragement to aspiring war photographers to venture into their own communities rather than traveling across the globe: "There's wars going on out there."

—Alana Markel

The photo is split in two by the corner of a building, whose edge runs up and out of sight. On the right side, a young man remains hidden from a team of soldiers that, on the left side, is gathering just around the corner. In this black-and-white image by British war photographer Don McCullin, neither side can apparently see the other, and it's unclear exactly who is doing the hiding and who is in pursuit. The young man is dressed sharply in a close-fitting suit that opens to reveal a crisp button-down shirt and black tie. With dark blond hair swept boyishly to the side, his demeanor is a stark contrast to the rubbled surroundings, suggestive of a schoolboy in his Sunday best. The gathered soldiers appear far more prepared to fight, donned in protective gear with shields and clubs in hand. And yet they appear to be on the defensive; three of the soldiers remain safe behind a full-body shield armed with only a teargas hose. The other two soldiers stand farther back with handheld shields and clubs, leaning away from the dividing corner rather than gearing up to advance. The young man, however, stands fully upright among the dirt, gravel, and chunks of rock that have collected along the side of the building. He holds a wooden plank above his head, his arm cocked at an almost perfect ninety-degree angle. He is frozen in this moment, and whether he looks toward the corner in fear or in anger we cannot know (Kamber).

In this photograph, captioned “Catholic youth taunting British soldiers in the Bogside, Londonderry, Northern Ireland. 1971” (Kamber), McCullin captures this young man in a state of suspended action, the outcome unknown. It’s a powerful image, but calling this remarkable photograph a work of art feels inaccurate. It’s a real moment in history: one of civil unrest, one with real consequence. Additional McCullin images taken seconds later reveal that the young man pictured was instigating this standoff as he hurls the plank and runs off with his friends. Just one month later, in January of 1972, British soldiers shot 26 unarmed Irish Catholic civilians in Londonderry, known today as Bloody Sunday or the Bogside Massacre. As beautifully composed and visually striking as the photograph may be, McCullin is clear as what he sees as his primary vocation: “I’m not an artist. . . . I’m a photographer and I stand by it” (qtd. in Marshall). Yet the question remains whether this declaration matters in the eye of the viewer, or if the distinction is of any importance at all.

McCullin is no stranger to violence. His camera lens has recorded decades of war and conflict, from his schoolmates’ gang activity in 1958 to the wreckage of the Syrian civil war. Throughout his career, he has held fast to the belief that his skill with the camera and extensive body of work do not make him an “artist.” Yet, last year, Tate Britain, one of the largest art museums in the United Kingdom, held a retrospective of McCullin’s work, which was later extended to Tate Liverpool. McCullin even made one of his “not-an-artist” statements at Tate, standing in the midst of his yet-to-open retrospective, a declaration which *New York Times* reporter Alex Marshall noted was “awkward” considering the setting. McCullin then went on to describe his 1968 photograph “Starving 24-Year-Old Mother with Child, Biafra,” as “almost a Madonna and child picture, in the wrong sense” (qtd. in Marshall). This ironic comparison to a classic artistic trope further confuses McCullin’s perspective and doesn’t help to clarify how viewers should interpret his work (qtd. in Marshall).

Jessie Bond of *The Art Newspaper* considers why McCullin’s work has wound up in a prestigious art museum despite his resistance to adopt the label of “artist.” The show’s co-curator Simon Baker defended the presence of McCullin’s work in the Tate network by suggesting that his photojournalism has always “engaged” with “the most historic notion of genres in art” (Baker qtd. in Bond). Regardless, McCullin maintains his position as solely a photographer, one who perhaps knows how to use light to capture his subjects but remains separate from what he calls, somewhat dismissively, the “art world” of “compositioned” photos (McCullin qtd. in Bond). Yet McCullin can sometimes appear to contradict himself in various interviews, all to defend his assertion that he is Not An Artist. In the same interview with Bond, McCullin claims his work has less to do with technical photography and camerawork and more to do with his personal emotions and how he “see[s] and feel[s]” things (qtd. in Bond). In a discussion with Naomi Rea of *Artnet*, McCullin explains that while he does “use composition,” his work is nonetheless “not art.” Interview after interview, McCullin rejects what he considers to be the self-important, “American way of thinking” of photographers as artists, simultaneously acknowledging that there is “a lot” of him in his photographs. “A lot of my integrity and a lot of my emotional thoughts,” he adds (qtd. in Rea).

Regardless of his reasoning, McCullin maintains a final, immovable distinction: he is not an artist. But why not? After all, much of McCullin's work simply *seems like art*, whatever that means. It's unclear how McCullin's work, sifting through rolls of film for the perfect image in a darkroom, is so different from that of painters going through hundreds of canvases, of film actors asking for another take, or of writers hunting for just the right word choice (not unlike what I am doing at this very moment). Still, there must be some reasoning behind McCullin's insistence on the distinction. Perhaps there is a different set of rules when it comes to the brutality that the vast majority of McCullin's work captures.

In "How to Tell a True War Story," Tim O'Brien attempts to clarify his story's title in a series of episodic paragraphs. *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien's celebrated collection of short stories based on his time as a soldier during the Vietnam War, is a book of metafiction rather than the memoir it may seem to be. Though O'Brien writes himself as the protagonist, the book is still a "work of fiction," as O'Brien plainly states on the title page. But this specific story begins with a seemingly contradictory phrase: "This is true" (75). The first vignette in "How to Tell a True War Story" is about the narrator's platoon mate, Bob "Rat" Kiley, who writes a letter to the sister of Curt Lemon, his recently killed friend. Kiley "pours his heart out" and mails the letter but the sister never responds (76). The story ends with Rat expressing his resentment in the form of a misogynistic epithet. The narrator conveys his own frustration over how to convey the unimaginable realities of war to those back home: "A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things they have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it" (76).

In a review of McCullin's exhibition for the (art!) magazine *Frieze*, Darran Anderson highlights the "anti-heroism" in McCullin's work, echoing O'Brien's argument above. Anderson notes that there is "no trite moralism" or "consolation" in the images; McCullin is "lucidly devoid of ideology," for example, capturing incredible photos from both sides of the Berlin wall (Anderson). Yet O'Brien and McCullin's perspectives are far from interchangeable. The second vignette in O'Brien's "How to Tell a War Story" recalls his experience of walking through the jungle with his platoon on the day Curt Lemon died. He remembers with great detail war buddies Rat Kiley and Lemon laughing and playing chicken with smoke grenades: "They were kids; they just didn't know" (O'Brien 77). They keep traveling, and then in an instant, Lemon steps on a detonator and is killed.

These are the events that happened, *devoid of ideology*. Yet, O'Brien describes witnessing Lemon's death as "almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms" (78). O'Brien claims that this imagery is not "abstraction" but rather the closest thing to the truth, as "it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen" (84, 78). O'Brien admits that he can never fully express what it was like to watch Curt Lemon die in an instant, in the chaos of the explosion, the intricate "jumbled" pictures and overall "surreal seemingness," but he explains that "What seem[ed] to

happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way” (78). In Adrian Searle’s review of the Tate retrospective, he notes McCullin’s “insistence on black and white,” referencing the literal photographs but perhaps also suggesting McCullin’s overall philosophy, one that brings about Searle’s observation of “stark truthfulness, stripped of any glamour.” This philosophy seems to differ from that of O’Brien, who proposes that the concept of truth lives in a larger, grayer sphere, where some stories, like Lemon’s death, can only be remembered surreally and not two-dimensionally.

By the end of the story, O’Brien has dismantled the entire concept of a “true” war tale. The truth has a different set of rules when it comes to war, so many rules that there seem to be none at all. There are even true stories that “never happened,” because “Absolute occurrence is irrelevant” (89). O’Brien argues that just because something happens doesn’t make it true; it must *matter* that it happened, whether or not it did. His concept of truth may have more to do with a feeling, an acute understanding, rather than a momentary accuracy, like that captured by the click of a camera. O’Brien makes this point not only in this chapter but through the mere existence of his novel. *The Things They Carried* is fictional, but true. Creative, imaginative, *artistic*, but true. Maybe O’Brien actually “threw down the parts” of Lemon that got stuck in a tree after he was blown up, maybe his platoon mate sang “Lemon Tree” as they “peel[ed] him off,” maybe it kept him up at night years later (89). Maybe not. Either way, there’s no questioning its emotional integrity; it would be a failure of the reader to do so.

Even so, McCullin may feel the need to declare himself as separate from those like O’Brien, who construct their own fictionalized “truths,” no matter how grounded in reality they are. And yet, Anderson begins his review by comparing McCullin’s work to a series of prints by Spanish artist Francisco Goya, noting that McCullin’s photos “seem a modern incarnation” in their similarly brutal depiction of violence, along with their shared stoicism and resignation towards their subjects (Anderson). Goya’s series, called *The Disasters of War*, is “an assault on the sensibility of the viewer,” each violent image accompanied by a phrase that “badgers the viewer,” like “No se puede mirar” (“One can’t look,”) or, famously, “Yo lo ví” (“I saw this”) (Sontag). The artist’s early-nineteenth-century etchings are a practical example of war photography. As Susan Sontag writes in her essay “Looking at War,” “All the trappings of the spectacular have been eliminated: the landscape is an atmosphere, a darkness, barely sketched in” in order to “move the viewer closer to the horror.” Sontag suggests that this elimination is a necessary step for authentic, appropriately horrifying war photography—one that not all photographers abide by.

Sontag considers the case of Sebastião Salgado, who has been under fire for his photographs, which, although “spectacular,” “beautifully composed,” and “cinematic,” have garnered an audience in “highly commercialized situations” (Sontag). Sontag argues that the photographs themselves are problematic, noting that they capture the suffering of populations from an outside perspective and “focus on the powerless” without naming them: “Taken in thirty-five countries, Salgado’s migration pictures group together, under [a] single heading, a host of different causes and kinds of

distress. Making suffering loom larger, by globalizing it . . . invites [people] to feel that the sufferings and misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed by any . . . intervention” (Sontag). Sontag reasons that Salgado’s paintings are so “epic” and “vast” that they dull and dilute the viewer’s empathy; our feelings “flounder” in that vastness and the subject’s suffering is made “abstract.” Sontag isn’t saying that beauty cannot exist in war; instead, she subscribes to Leonardo da Vinci’s philosophy on painting battle scenes: “The image should appall, and in that *terribilità* lies a challenging kind of beauty” (Sontag). All McCullin’s reviewers seem to agree; though room after room is filled with “masterpieces,” in truth his images are disturbing evidence of “crime scenes” (Anderson). Anderson notes the eerie nature of the Tate exhibit, the quiet “shuffling” of museum visitors among these piercing, horrifying images. Perhaps McCullin’s work feels safer in this comparatively sanitized context. The question now is why McCullin continues to protest claims of his own artistry when there is no doubt that his photography is absolutely, devastatingly true.

The camera lens’s focus rests eternally on a black and white photograph hung against the grey wall of the exhibit. Confined within the black picture frame, a boy with albinism looks out. He is starving to death. Not much else seems important to the image, not the holes in his sweater or the deck of cards he carries. There is the boy to his left, out of focus, whose hands rest on his head. He is starving. More boys gather further left and out of frame. They are starving. However, photographer Matt Dunham has brought our attention to someone else, someone outside of Don McCullin’s *Albino Boy, Biafra*, which is pictured hanging inside Tate Britain. It is a museum-goer, whose bald head is the only similarity between the photographed visitor and McCullin’s subject. Facing away from the camera, all that can be seen is his blurred but prominent figure engaged in an unmistakable act: his hands clasp and steady an iPhone, which glows to reveal a tiny image of the framed photograph as he takes a picture of his own (Searle).

And now I begin to understand.

In “Looking at War,” Sontag describes the famine McCullin photographed in Biafra as a “crime[] of the greatest magnitude.” Surely this photo of a photo doesn’t belong on an iPhone, nestled between pictures of last night’s dinner and dog sightings. The word “voyeurism” (Searle), thrown around sporadically in the exhibition reviews, takes on a new meaning. I can now visualize what Sontag calls a historical “iconography of suffering.” The suggestion that we have an “appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain” comparable to our “desire for ones that show bodies naked” is no longer just an idea on the page but a truth in an image (Sontag). In wrestling with this concept, the question of Don McCullin’s artistry—or lack thereof—feels distant, trivial, unseemly.

At the end of “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien shares that sometimes people will approach him and express that they were surprised they liked his war story, that it touched them; he responds in his head with the sharp words of a bereaved Rat Kiley: “*You dumb cooze*” because they weren’t “listening” (90). He sighs that again they weren’t “listening” and missed the point, and as such, the war stories must be told again

and again, with new parts and people made up “to get at the real truth,” which is not really about war at all, but about “sunlight” and “love and memory” and “sisters who never write back and people who never listen” (91). I suppose I am one of those people, one of those who seeks an objective truth rather than an emotional one, a “real” one. You could be, too, if I’ve made you an accomplice in my questioning, my hypothesizing, my “indulg[ing] in abstraction [and] analysis,” and by doing so stripping away part of the truth (O’Brien 84). And the “truth” is the *thing*, the only thing. Right now, while I deliberate over all of this on my computer, a global pandemic rages and people are dying. I scroll through photographs of empty streets in New York. I am grieving a dear friend killed by COVID-19. I begin to appreciate that “The memory of war . . . is mostly local” (Sontag). I’m reminded of the picture of the Catholic boy from Londonderry, wooden plank in hand. It is only an image to me, one that I can study from a distance and search for some sort of meaning in. To someone else, it is their family’s history, a reminder of a time of loss, and little else. I begin to understand McCullin’s words, his continual resistance to the word “artist,” and his contradicting and ever-changing justifications. That maybe it comes not from a place of ego but from the knowledge, after sixty years of photography, that we struggle to hear him. Instead, we idolize, we take pictures of his pictures, and we analyze. McCullin is what Sontag considers to be a “morally alert photographer,” one who avoids the “exploitation of sentiment” at all costs (Sontag); he refuses to be confused with those who claim their work as art, as something that can be studied from different perspectives. In the current age of aestheticized, often untrustworthy news, McCullin is putting his foot down. There is no gray area in the death of a child. There are no two schools of thought in viewing a dying mother and her starving child. This is how it happened: “Asi sucedió.” McCullin’s only comment: “Yo lo ví.”

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