

ARTFORUM

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“Zones of Conflict”

PRATT MANHATTAN GALLERY

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By Miguel Amado

Representations of war have always played a significant role in shaping the collective unconscious. The live coverage of the early-1990s Persian Gulf military campaign, however, inundated television viewers with too much footage and trivialized the power of media images within the public sphere. This prompted the rise of alternative discourses addressing the strife—including, in recent years, an impressive array of artistic reactions, which London-based scholar T. J. Demos attempts to capture in “Zones of Conflict.” Given the enormous scope of the task, he decided to concentrate on bringing together photographs and videos by fourteen artists and one writer that question the documentary mode.



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Where do I stand?*
What do I want?, 2007, cardboard, paper,
tape, 47 x 67”.

An-My Lê's series “29 Palms,” 2003–2004, shot in the style of nineteenth-century American landscape photographic tableaux, depicts large-scale exercises performed by armed forces in a Southern California desert, allegorically shifting the theater of operations onto US soil. Focusing on destroyed infrastructures, Emily Jacir's photographs examine the effects of the Israeli–Palestinian dispute on the region's inhabitants. In *Bank Mirror, Ramallah, April 22, 2002*, bullet-shattered glass, fragmentarily reflecting several individuals, constitutes a metaphor for the unstable circumstances of their everyday lives. The blurring of fact and fiction, a concern pervading many of the works on view, characterizes Hito Steyerl's *November, 2004*. Inspired by the aesthetics of exploitation genres, the artist captures her best friend, Andrea Wolf, playing the lead character: a woman warrior in this feminist film. Later in her life, Wolf entered combat, joining the forces fighting for Kurdish independence. Killed in 1998, she became revered by the Kurds as a revolutionary, a mirroring of her role in Steyerl's video. Political commitment is also a trademark of Thomas Hirschhorn; copies of his 2007 text-based collage *Where do I stand? What do I want?* are distributed for free at the gallery's entrance. Mapping Hirschhorn's personal opinions and positions, this collage calls attention to his socially engaged practice while extensively referencing global discord. These works anchor the exhibition in the realm of activism, revealing that the zones of conflict suggested in its title are taking place not only on a national stage but also on a personalized, subjective level and that the response of each individual—whether artist or viewer—is a contribution to the change so urgently needed in the present state of affairs.