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Shot at Dawn: Late photography and the anti-war memorial

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Shot at Dawn: Late photography and the anti-war memorial

The military executions of World War One are the subject of Chloe Dewe Mathews's 2014 photographic series *Shot at Dawn*. These events—in which hundreds of soldiers were court-martialled and executed for cowardice and desertion—remain controversial, without consensus or established collective narrative. This article charts historic negotiations with the subject but also considers more recent efforts to integrate these proceedings within memorial practice. World War One remembrance activities, whilst diverse, have often emphasised sacrifice, heroism and community. Correspondingly, participation and engagement were core values in the major British World War One centenary arts project, titled 14-18 NOW, from which *Shot at Dawn* was commissioned. Chloe Dewe Mathews's contribution to the programme, however, presents a photographic aesthetic of resistance to the principles of inclusivity and remembrance elsewhere embraced by the project. As such, the work challenges the consensual politics of commemoration and—through the practices of late photography, land art and performance pilgrimage—substitutes trauma and forgetfulness for reconciliation and memory.

Keywords: late photography; military execution; memory; performance; pilgrimage; world war one; memorial; archive; land art; war photography.

In *Shot at Dawn* seemingly empty scenes appear across a range of rural and urban locations (Figures 1–4). Each image marks an execution during World War One, the camera working as a proxy for the guns that took the lives of soldiers charged with cowardice and desertion. The photographer has marked these tragic events by embarking on a journey, a performance akin to a pilgrimage, mapping out their locations in space and time, the images photographed at break of day in the same locations almost 100 years later. But while the camera is present, the act itself is absent. There is no trace of the historical incidents or memorials to mark them. The banality of Dewe Mathews's imagery is indeed startling, and yet, each photograph is charged with meaning. It is not the camera that generates this meaning, however; it is Mathews's physical presence, her movement from place to place so carefully timed, bearing witness to those forgotten men. The photographs offer proof of the action and

allow audiences to share in the journey, each photograph acting as a moment's reverie with the emptiness of a minute's silence.

Historicising World War One Executions

During World War One, 306 British and Commonwealth soldiers were court-martialled and executed. Their 'crimes' were cited as—variously—desertion, cowardice, disobedience of an order, sleeping or being drunk on post, striking a superior officer, casting away arms, leaving a post without orders, and communicating with the enemy. Military protocol dictated that the death sentence be carried out at first light; the 306 men were therefore 'shot at dawn'. Taken to a designated space, they were tied to a post, blindfolded and executed by special firing squads of 12 soldiers. These deaths were frequently concealed in the interest of morale. As Robert Graves describes in his World War One memoir *Goodbye to All That*:

Executions were frequent in France. I had my first direct experience of official lying when I arrived at Le Havre in May 1915, and read the back-files of army orders at the rest camp. They contained something like twenty reports of men shot for cowardice or desertion; yet a few days later the responsible minister in the House of Commons, answering a question from a pacifist, denied that sentence of death of a military offence had been carried out in France on any member of His Majesty's Forces.

(Graves 1929, 198)

Not surprisingly, the names of these men were not included in the war memorials commissioned after World War One by the Imperial War Graves Commission. This conflict may have ushered in, as Thomas Laqueur maintains, a 'new era of remembrance' (1994, 152) but the registration of deaths and marking of graves did not extend to the soldiers shot at dawn. Families were not always informed of the circumstances of their loved ones' deaths. In fact, the files on soldiers executed for desertion and cowardice were not released to the public until the 1990s and the United Kingdom was one of the last countries to pardon men executed during World War One. In 1993, the then Prime Minister, John Major, refused to provide posthumous pardons to soldiers convicted of military crimes, reluctant to rewrite history on the basis of contemporary sensibilities (Bellamy 1993). It was only in 2000 that relatives of those shot at dawn joined the ceremonial to the Cenotaph that takes place in London each year on Remembrance Sunday – the anniversary of Armistice Day (Appleyard 2000, 6; Ward 2000, 5). Historians and commentators continued to debate the suitability of the pardon as a response to perceived injustice. For many, a pardon requires convincing evidence of a wrongful conviction according to the law as it stood in 1914–1918 or confirmation of a medical diagnosis that would absolve the soldier of any crime – shell shock or PTSD, for example. Teresa Iacobelli, writing about Canadian courts martial in World War One, concludes that 'the only way to do justice to "military justice"' is to

'assess military law as it was in the context of the times and not in the context of what we wish it was' (2013, 10). Historians John Hughes-Wilson and Cathryn Corns similarly dismiss the campaign for pardons on account of its anachronistic approach to the past—not to mention its leftist political affiliation—labelling it 'a matter of radical and regional politics driven principally by emotion and a sense of grievance or some hope of financial compensation, rather than hard fact' (2010, 447). However, this focus on 'hard fact' at the expense of compassion for the executed soldiers and their families fails to acknowledge both the rigorous historical research undertaken by those supportive of the campaign for pardons and the rightful role that emotion plays in considering the sobering death toll of World War One. Whether those shot at dawn were rightfully convicted under military law is, in many ways, a moot point. The events of the past cannot all be exonerated by historical context. The Armed Forces Act 2006, passed under a Labour government, finally allowed soldiers to be pardoned posthumously. This took the form of a symbolic pardon and did not quash any convictions. Although families of those killed may have preferred the sentences to be overturned, this blanket approach in pardoning the men, in fact, acknowledges the futility, and indeed cruelty, of historicising these events. Rather than searching through meagre evidence for proof of injustice, and conceivably failing to find it, the Armed Forces Act 2006 represents—not, as some would have it, an act of moral superiority from the present to the past—but an act of kindness from one generation to another.

Andy DeComyn's 2001 *Shot at Dawn Memorial* at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire—self-funded and donated by the artist to the relatives of executed soldiers—was influential in changing perceptions of those shot at dawn and instrumental in their long-overdue pardoning. It remains the only monument to all 306 soldiers (DeComyn, 2017). Photographer Chloe Dewe Mathews was also conscious of the importance of commemorating these men. *Shot at Dawn*, commissioned by the Ruskin School of Art at the University of Oxford for the First World War centenary art series 14-18 NOW and exhibited as part of Tate Modern's *Conflict, Time, Photography* exhibition in 2014, comprises 23 photographs. Each image documents the location, in France or Belgium, of a World War One execution for cowardice or desertion:

Whether slag-heap, back of a primary school, churchyard, town abattoir or half-kempt hedgerow, these places have been altered by a traumatic event. By photographing them, and titling them the way I did, I am reinserting the individual into that space, stamping their presence back onto the land, so that their histories are not forgotten (Dewe Mathews in Finch 2014).

Shot at Dawn works to re-establish the connection between the place and the person who died there. It is worth noting that Dewe Mathews does not limit her work to British and Commonwealth soldiers. Roughly 1,000 men from European armies were executed by firing squad between 1914 and 1918. Dewe Mathews's work focusses on the experiences of British, Irish, Belgian, French, French-African and Commonwealth

soldiers—executed in Northern Europe at World War One’s Western Front. Her decision to select subjects from diverse backgrounds draws attention to the inequities of court-martial sentencing. To use the United Kingdom as an example, 3,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers were sentenced to death for desertion or cowardice but 90% of these were commuted to imprisonment. Non-commissioned soldiers were far more likely to suffer the death sentence than officers (Putkowski and Sykes 1989, 16). A significant proportion of the 10% executed were also non-English. Of the 306 shot at dawn, an estimated 26 were Irish—a disproportionately high number when one considers that these were volunteers and not conscripted soldiers (Walker 2007, 7). Dewe Mathews memorialises, for example, Private James Crozier—a Belfast-born soldier executed in France for deserting his post in 1916. The ‘regional politics’ of the pardon campaign in the 1990s, cited by Hughes-Wilson and Corns as a weakness of the movement (2001, 447), would seem to be necessary on such an unequal playing field.¹ Another of Dewe Mathews’s images commemorates four North African soldiers executed in Belgium on 15 December 1914 for refusing to leave the trenches. In fact, ten French-Algerian soldiers were executed in this instance but only the names of four could be confirmed. The employment in World War One of soldiers from Europe’s colonies was widespread; Dewe Mathews quietly questions its appropriateness and commemorates those not always memorialised in official war narratives.

Shot at Dawn’s transnational approach is just one of the ways in which the work departs from the image of the conventional memorial. Unlike many monuments to the dead, Dewe Mathews’s series makes no attempt to represent the departed. *Shot at Dawn* is a series of empty photographs, showing no sign, no trace, of these men’s fates. The images—rather than engaging with the legacy of the First World War—remain resolutely contemporary. As lieux de mémoire or ‘sites of memory’, they demonstrate no relationship with the past and no acknowledgement of their historical significance. Despite Dewe Mathews’s claim that her work remembers the forgotten, the dead men are markedly absent from the photographs. If, according to Pierre Nora, the responsibility of a ‘site of memory’ is ‘to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a stage of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial’ (1989, 19). Dewe Mathews’s concentration on the ‘now’ and not the ‘then’ has failed to produce a meaningful memorial to those shot at dawn. However, the ‘meaningful memorial’ is often constructed in the interest of the presiding government, supporting officialised narratives of war, heroism and sacrifice. Catherine Moriarty describes how, at the ‘unveiling ceremonies’ of war memorials after World War One, ‘the audience was urged to convert its grief to pride’ (1997, 135). Bereavement, and the attendant anger at a futile loss of life, was translated into pride—both in the dead soldier and the larger cause. Men court-martialled for cowardice and desertion were excluded from these ceremonies; shame, not pride, characterised responses to their sacrifice.

Dewe Mathews avoids any attempt to integrate the memories of those shot at dawn with traditional war memorials and, in resisting the popular historical narrative and its typical commemorative expression, she retains the trauma of the original tragedy and bears powerful witness to it. The photographs appear to take the form of testimony, as trauma theorist Shoshana Felman understands it:

[T]estimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference (Felman 1992, 5).

Despite the 2006 pardon of the British and Commonwealth soldiers shot at dawn in World War One, cowardice in a martial context remains a complex and controversial issue. It has yet to be fully integrated into officialised narratives of war and military engagement. It also remains broadly antithetical to popular movements otherwise sympathetic to the sufferings of veterans, such as charitable organisation Help for Heroes and Prince Harry's Invictus Games for wounded armed services personnel. The raw banality of Chloe Dewe Mathews's images resist such totalising narratives and retain their traumatic edge. Jenny Edkins, also writing on the subject of trauma, suggests:

Trauma is that which refuses to take its place in history as done and finished with. It demands an acknowledgement of a different temporality, where the past is produced by – or even takes place in – the present (Edkins 2003, 59).

The labels that accompany the photographic work—naming the men shot and stating the date and location of their execution—certainly historicise *Shot at Dawn* and represent its memorial aspect but the images themselves demonstrate the extent to which these forgotten landscapes have moved on. They contain wheelie bins, plastic buckets and graffitied walls, not to mention modern architecture. These are images of the present rather than the past; they attest, as all testimony does, to the crisis of history and its failure to account for traumatic and politically contested events. The locations of military executions are not heritage sites. As Dewe Mathews herself remarks, they have become slag-heaps, schools and abattoirs. Conversely, the named battlefields upon which soldiers fought and were killed in World War One remain protected spaces. Verdun in France was classified as a 'Red Zone' as early as 1919 and is today 'closed to habitation and normal usage and reserved for forestry and commemoration' (Amat 2015, 47). The forgetfulness of *Shot at Dawn* connotes death, not the immortality that memory and memorials enshrine. But its forgetfulness may also be more powerful than any pat remembrance.

Dewe Mathews's effort to avoid the traditional memorial is made more remarkable by the prominence of gravestones and churchyards within her imagery. Three of the photographs contain grave markers but, of course, none belong to the men shot at dawn. These are community spaces, closed to foreign soldiers or indeed their grieving families. Dewe Mathews's refusal to commemorate these men while at the same time representing obvious 'sites of memory' asks us to interrogate, not only

the traditional memorialisation of a nation's war dead, but our continued investment in the 'monument' as an appropriate method of remembering those we have lost.

Contemporary Memorialisation

This reflexive and questioning approach is surprising given the context of the work's commission. *Shot at Dawn* was part of a large 5-year programme of arts activities in Britain to commemorate the centenary of World War One. Titled 14-18 NOW and funded by government and lottery money alongside a breadth of commercial and charitable partners, the programme commissioned 325 artworks. The most recognised works include Paul Cummins and Tom Piper's installation of 888,246 ceramic poppies initially at the Tower of London, which has since toured the UK, and Jeremy Deller and Rufus Norris's live performance *we're here because we're here* (2016) featuring 1400 voluntary participants dressed in First World War uniforms appearing unannounced in locations across the UK to mark the Battle of the Somme. The purpose of the programme was overtly commemorative, but there was also a clear desire to draw out contemporary responses:

We firmly believe in the transformative power of the arts to bring the stories of the First World War to life. Perceptions of the war have been shaped by the artists of the time, including poets, painters, photographers and film-makers – many of whom served and who reflected on the war and its effects. One hundred years later, today's artists are opening up new perspectives on the present as well as the past (14–18 NOW 2017).

Storytelling was a theme of the programme and many of the artworks reflect this vision, with Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018), a colourised and digitally enhanced documentary based on footage sourced from the Imperial War Museum archives, a representative example. Other artworks emphasised the act of remembrance, although the strategies used throughout the commissions resisted traditional memorial aesthetics, absorbing and building upon counter-memorial discourse and postdigital thinking, to produce works that were often participatory, ephemeral and mutable. Kate Pullinger and Neil Bartlett's *Letter to an Unknown Soldier* (2014), for example, responded to *The Great Western Railway War Memorial* in Paddington Station, London, where a soldier is depicted reading a letter. Participants were invited to submit letters written for a fallen World War One soldier—as embodied in the memorial—which were then published online. Similarly, in *Lights Out*, around 16 million people in the UK switched off their lights between 10pm and 11pm, leaving a single candle burning, to mark the outbreak of World War One. Artists Ryoji Ikeda, Nalini Malani, Bob and Roberta Smith and Bedwyr Williams created light sculptures across the country for the event, and Jeremy Deller designed a free app, which featured four short films that self-erased at 11pm on 4 August 2014. In these artworks, as with many others commissioned by 14–18 NOW, participatory methods and networked

technologies were utilised to create experiential memorials. They resist the monumental tendencies of early and mid- twentieth century war memorials, and in doing so assert a contemporary and inclusive tone. A key property of this counter-memorial aesthetic is that of negation, or negative space: monolithic stone structures replaced by open spaces, light projections and performances; the specificity of inscribed names and heroic statues replaced by open-ended, co-creative frameworks; permanence and substance replaced by the ephemeral and embodied (Stevens, Franck and Fazakerley 2012). For early proponents of the counter-memorial—for example, artists working in post-WW2 Germany—the expectation was that the artwork would disrupt, bringing with it a plurality of experiences focused on personal responsibility, interpretation and active engagement (Young 1992). The intention was to destabilise the normative commemorative procedures that encourage collective memory and bring about instead a ‘counter-memory’—an adjusted recollection of shared memories. In this context, monuments are ‘material devices for social control’ (Molyneux 1995, 18) that enforce a homogenised collective narrative. For Young (1999), counter-monuments that rupture this effect compel audiences to take responsibility for the act of remembrance themselves, thus forming a counter-memory. In this regard, the counter-memorial was envisaged as maintaining an open wound. The problem, as argued by Noam Lupu (2003), is that the counter-memorial project, highly developed in late twentieth-century Germany, largely failed, with few memorials moving discourse away from mainstream narratives. Instead they remained homogeneous, encouraging a process of summation, acceptance and resignation. In the case of high-profile works such as Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz’s (1986) *Harburg Monument against Fascism* and Horst Hoheisel’s (1987) *Aschrottbrunnen*, the memorials themselves were variously disliked, ignored or treated like other didactic monuments, with passive reverence or bored acceptance. Despite this apparent failure, recent memorial activities demonstrate the integration of counter-memorial aesthetics into mainstream practices. Memorials to the 9/11 attacks range in style, with many taking the form of archetypal monuments, but some high-profile examples feature counter-memorial qualities. The *National September 11 Memorial and Museum*, for example, features two pools, negative spaces at the base of the former World Trade Centre. *Tribute in Light*, an installation of 88 searchlights oriented to create two beams of light representing the fallen twin towers, is equally ephemeral. But neither attempts to disrupt collective narratives. As Stevens, Franck and Fazakerley note, counter-memorial strategies, ‘arose in response to specific historical situations and traumas, but they have themselves become normative, redeployed in diverse geographical and political contexts to do very different kinds of work’ (2012, 986). Elizabeth Strakosch goes further, arguing that ‘counter-monuments, like their traditional forebears, are nation-building rather than “nation-challenging.”’ (2010, 268). Negation, in these memorials, has shifted from being a politicised conceptual approach to a normalised aesthetic. Correspondingly, much of the work commissioned by 14–18 NOW features the aesthetic of counter-memorials, but without any destabilising intent. Rather, examples such as *we’re here because we’re here* (2016) and *Lights Out* (2014) emphasise togetherness and nobility, and with it the assertion of collective memory ahead of trauma, senselessness or difficulty, despite the counter-memorial associations of the artistic methods used. Inclusivity and impact were evidently drivers in the choice of commissions, and it is notable therefore that

participatory methods—common across the artworks—have faced recent criticism (Dreher 2012; Couldry 2010; Bickford 1996). Tiffany Fairey argues that participatory methods, rather than give voice, often curate and define content:

managerial tendencies and funding requirements that expect participatory projects to have pre-defined objectives and outcomes undermine grass roots ownership and the capacity of participatory processes to shape and build projects from the bottom up (2017, 114).

Whilst many of the high-profile artworks in 14–18 NOW could be framed as didactic and homogeneous, the intention here is not to critique the politics of the commissions, but rather to place *Shot at Dawn* in context as part of a larger body of commemorative practice, and to highlight the decoupling of counter-memorial methods from the ambition to produce reflexive responses. In this light, *Shot at Dawn* is unusual in its refusal to directly commemorate. This is a result of both the form and content; it engages with a complex, disturbing subject that is without consensus and presents it in a manner that offers little guidance in how to respond. *Shot at Dawn* avoids normative narratives and instead seeks to evoke counter-memory, acting to destabilise notions of heroism and empire by instead emphasising trauma and uncertainty.

Photography, Presence and Absence

To achieve this, *Shot at Dawn* directs us to an absence. In this manner, the work sits within the documentary genre of ‘late photography’ as termed by David Company (2003; 2006; 2007, 27), where sites of conflict or trauma are depicted after the event. Prominent examples are drawn from the practices of Angus Boulton, Luc Delahaye, Willie Doherty, Paul Graham, Lori Grinker, Mike Kratsman, Roi Kuper, Brian McKee, Joel Meyerowitz, Richard Misrach, Richard Mosse, Simon Norfolk, Gilad Ophir, Sophie Ristelhueber, Paul Seawright and Donovan Wylie (Company 2003; Faulkner 2014; Lisle 2011; Lister 2007; Roberts 2009). Throughout this work various sites are presented as empty landscapes devoid of people.

In Joel Sternfeld’s pertinent *On This Site: Landscape in Memoriam* series, for example, fifty-two locations throughout America from the 1990s are depicted, each of which was a site of violence (Sternfeld 1996). They are photographed long after the event, and each shows an empty scene, made meaningful only by the short text opposite which describes the violent event in brief, dispassionate words. The events are personal to Sternfeld, each one having occurred within his lifetime, and witnessed through a media lens. As Kate Palmer Albers remarks in *Uncertain Histories: Accumulation, Inaccessibility and Doubt in Contemporary Photography*:

The sites Sternfeld chose rarely reflect official memorials or otherwise-sanctioned sites of memory that were treated exhaustively in the media. Instead, of the fifty-two photographs in the series, the locations are, in

most cases, completely unrecognizable as sites of past violent crime, and sometimes squarely at odds with viewers' media-inflected memories of the event. Throughout *On This Site*, one is struck with the ordinariness, and even the occasional beauty, of the locations (2015, 111).

Similarly, in Paul Seawright's *Sectarian Murder* series, first appearing in 1988, photographs mark the locations of sectarian attacks in Belfast, near Seawright's childhood home in Northern Ireland, where civilians were killed for their perceived religion (Seawright 2017). Alongside the imagery are captions adapted from newspaper reports describing the events, but with references to Catholic or Protestant backgrounds removed. Again there are no plaques, memorials or markers of past trauma. Across Dewe Mathews's, Sternfeld's and Seawright's various works, themes of forgetfulness and remediation are explored through a combination of clipped text and uninhabited landscapes. The emptiness of the scene is filled by the text, its importance inferred through the care and effort evident in the creation of the photographs.

While Sternfeld's and Seawright's practices would appear to be working in active contrast to media narratives, a theme Martin Lister (2007) argues is common throughout late photography, the emphasis in *Shot at Dawn* is on the absence of narratives and the obscurity of these histories. In this regard, the photographs 'alert us to the fragility and threatened condition of memory, functioning as both a vector of memory and something that brings the possibility of remembrance into question' (Faulkner 2014, 123). For Debbie Lisle, late photographs act in contrast to images of atrocities where there is usually an underlying asymmetrical hierarchy at work between the viewer and the pitied subject. Instead, she argues, late photography 'reorients this ethical viewing relation by creating an elongated space of encounter in which viewers are not necessarily locked into a familiar hierarchy vis-à-vis distant places and people' (2011, 874). In this regard, late photographs are characterised by an openness (Campany 2003, 126) that allows for interpretive space and simultaneously limits 'the possibility of its co-optation into existing political rhetoric' (Faulkner 2014, 125).

The compositions in Dewe Mathews's *Shot at Dawn* series are more than empty however; they are abrupt, awkward and banal. This is not simply the result of the locations being overrun or reused. Rather the visual approach taken is at odds with the traditions of landscape or portrait photography, resulting in images that seem to actively resist reading. Viewed individually and without the context of the labels, it is difficult to determine the subject of each image. Rarely is an element made distinct from the rest of the imagery, be it through difference in colour, framing of elements, depth or position within the composition; there is an inscrutable and seemingly arbitrary sameness about everything shown. In those rare examples where an element is highlighted—in *Shot at Dawn no. 15*, a bushy tree sits centrally as our apparent point of focus—the mundanity of the subject means that it remains inexpressive and abstruse. We, as an audience, are excluded. This effect is heightened by the lighting. Rather than create contrast and indicate volume, form, or visual hierarchy, instead the early morning light is vague, soft and indistinct. There are almost no shadows. This is

not to suggest that the images lack detail, however. The murkiness is saturated with visual information, made all the more impactful by the scale of the works; each image is 120cm tall and 150cm wide with the resolution and detailing of a medium format photograph. As objects, the photographs are imposing and uncompromising, presented without a mount or any stylistic concession beyond a thin, utilitarian black outer frame.

In this regard, the works bear striking similarity to Jean-Marc Bustamante's *Tableaux* series. *Tableau no. 17* (1979), for example, closely resembles Dewe Mathews's *Shot at Dawn no. 4*. In both, a scene is depicted with a road arching away from the foreground into the middle distance. Trees bleed off the edge and a band of land, pale in the distance, is visible on the horizon line. Whilst Bustamante's photograph is brighter—it was shot at midday—they both share an odd, even lighting (Amaro 2002, 159). The images are almost identical in scale and are both highly detailed. Michael Fried describes Bustamante's *Tableaux* in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, suggesting that for the viewer the combination of subject, large scale, composition and density of information 'tends to distance, in that sense to "exclude", him or her by virtue of its mute, uninflected, unmetabolizable thereness' (2008, 21). This quality is even more evident in Dewe Mathews's *Shot at Dawn no. 7*, where sinewy branches and leaf-covered earth form little more than a collection of textures, much like Bustamante's *Tableau no. 105* (1991). Both are vast images, carefully crafted and highly detailed, their physicality inviting inspection and suggesting significance, but they are almost without signification. Fried quotes art critic and curator Ulrich Loock in identifying a 'silent recessiveness' within photography that excludes the viewer, where things are presented 'in all their physicality, as material realities, but, because the gaze is not allowed to penetrate the scene [they are] deprived of all (imaginary) bodily interaction with them' (Loock in Fried 2008, 21). Bustamante describes his *Tableaux* as being 'without qualities', making the viewer 'equally responsible for the work'. His 'aim is to make the viewer become aware of his or her responsibility in what he or she is looking at' (2008, 20). This effect is not restricted to Bustamante's practice, with a similar quality described in the late photography of Simon Norfolk and Luc Delahaye. As John Roberts argues, '...large-format photography is able to secure a cognitive-delay in perception or, more precisely, allow the spectator of photography to reconnect their absorption in the photodocument to a rare sublimity' (2009, 292). The slowness described here demands purposeful engagement and affords little compromise, opening space for contemplation. To return to Faulkner: 'Here slowing down is not just a matter of the time it might take to contemplate the detail presented by late photographs, but also the possibility to imaginatively locate oneself as a spectator in the limbo-like stasis of their *lateness*.' (2014, 134). In Dewe Mathews's *Shot at Dawn* series, in creating compositions that exclude and slow the viewer, the works not only point towards forgetfulness, but challenge viewers to consider their responsibility in narratives of nation, duty and sacrifice.

A large body of scholarship has reflected on the relationship between mortality and the photograph, including the much-cited works of Roland Barthes, André Bazin and Susan Sontag. Typically in this approach, the photograph is described as creating a contrast in which the subject appears alive but gone. This occurs because the representation is of such perceived accuracy and similitude that it appears immediate,

contemporary, present and alive. However, because the representation is also indexically tied to a moment in the past, the subject simultaneously appears gone and somehow dead. Roland Barthes describes:

For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolute superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ('this-has-been'), the photograph suggests that it is already dead (1980, 79).

For André Bazin, photography 'embalms time' (1967, 15), the subject abruptly frozen in a past moment made abruptly present, with the affect that, as Susan Sontag describes, 'photographs are *memento mori*' (1979, 15), reminders of mortality and passing. Barthes goes on to say: 'Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe' (1980, 96). The associations of death and photography, so evident in Dewe Mathews's *Shot at Dawn*, could easily be taken to suggest Barthes' 'catastrophe' is at work too. However, whilst the photographs in *Shot at Dawn* do communicate a seemingly real-world, or documentary, representation tied to a moment in reality, because the subject in each photograph is withheld, there is no confusion between 'the Real and the Live'. Death is undoubtedly a theme of the work, but the images themselves do not present a crisis of alive-but-dead (as Barthes describes) and instead the subject remains visually absent, conceptual and of a never-lived past. This is challenging and unusual because it confounds and exploits our expectations of the photograph. It is achieved by introducing, to use Brian Rotman's terminology, a 'meta-sign' (1987, 1), where an absence disrupts the usual code of signification. In *Shot at Dawn*, the meta-sign is the absent visual subject. Put simply, the images create unusual meaning by being photographic portraits without figures. The absence is palpable because the images are similar enough to other photographs that their indexical origin is clear, but their composition and style contradict the usual representational norms found in photography. The effect of there being no subject visible in the imagery is that they become more than banal. It is as if we as an audience note that the photograph's usual alive-but-dead quality is missing and are abruptly confronted with an absence. Thus, the photographs create cascading levels of negation: As a group, the photographs are conceptually 'late' depicting an event that has passed; upon viewing individually, the compositions resist reading, presenting only a profusion of details and little coherence from image to image; in terms of style, what consistency there is—the format and title—suggest portraiture, but again, where there should be something, instead there is nothing.

The titles of the works in Dewe Mathews's *Shot at Dawn* series exploit this effect. Unlike Joel Sternfeld's and Paul Seawright's use of text, here no narrative is offered and instead we are provided with facts: names, times and places. By stripping

back the details of each execution, Dewe Mathews avoids framing the events as a story to be told anew. In much the same way that the blanket pardons given in the Armed Forces Act 2006 were designed to carefully avoid moral judgements of each individual case, in Dewe Mathews's work, by presenting neutral facts alongside imagery where something appears to be missing, it becomes about forgetfulness and testimony rather than the narrative drama of each execution. John Tagg argues that '[p]hotographs are never "evidence" of history; they are themselves the historical' (1994, 65), by which he means they are direct products of the conditions at their time of production and can only be understood in this context. *Shot at Dawn* draws this out; it resists didactic commemoration and instead reflects our conditions and contemporary comprehension of historical events. By offering the individuals' names, the imagery is framed as a series of portraits in which the subjects are missing. By visiting the sites, Dewe-Mathews reframes them as sites of memory, but rather than offer the salve of narrative, instead she evokes crisis by fixating on a void. This act directs attention to our contemporary position and the irreconcilability of the war memorial form with uncertain, complex and traumatic events.

Performing Pilgrimage

This emphasis on absence has precedent. London's Cenotaph, the imposing Portland stone war memorial on Whitehall, for a time offered an effective negotiation of presence and absence. It was made ready for a march past during the peace celebrations on the anniversary of Armistice Day in 1919 but it was, in fact, a temporary structure fashioned from wood and plaster. It proved so popular with the public that it was made permanent by architect Edwin Lutyens in 1920. As an empty tomb or what Jay Winter describes as 'an embodiment of nothingness' (1995, 105), the Cenotaph provided a flexible focus for the nation's grief and desire to remember the dead. What those who commissioned the monument did not anticipate was that the public would use the Cenotaph, not as an abstract war memorial and object for reflection, but as a proxy grave for those who did not return from the war. The effect of its emptiness was that it offered space for individual remembrance. The memorial was inundated with personal wreaths, bouquets and cards detailing the deaths of thousands of soldiers. Plans to house these dedications at the Imperial War Museum were abandoned because of the sheer number. Grieving families travelled hundreds of miles at all times of the year to lay dedications (Edkins 2003, 57–72). The Cenotaph became, in other words, the subject of earnest pilgrimage. The battlefields of World War One in France and Belgium also attracted pilgrims, and D. W. Lloyd notes that guidebooks, and the visitors themselves, preferred the term 'pilgrimage' to 'tourism' when travelling to these haunted landscapes (1998 13-48). London's Cenotaph has since had its use extended, first in 1945 to commemorate World War Two military dead, and then to all British military casualties. These changes have seen the symbolic emptiness of the Cenotaph colonised, drawing it into mainstream politics with its meaning now reified around national service. Those first pilgrimages to the Cenotaph, however, alert us to the importance of embodied and individuated acts of remembrance that are unencumbered by didactic signifiers.

Dewe Mathews too performs an individuated act of remembrance. By visiting the sites in which the court-martialled soldiers were executed, she embarks upon a performance that could be described as a pilgrimage, with each resulting image marking an empty grave.² In this regard, each of the photographs functions as a trace of an action tied to a specific time and place. A number of photographers have explored the photograph as a performance enacted across multiple images, such as Ed Ruscha's thematic series *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963) or *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (1967). These images engage with the world in a documentary mode that is 'quasi-systematic' and 'interrogative', and in which meaning emerges through the interrelationships of the images (Iverson 2007, 105). What sets *Shot at Dawn* apart is the testimony this generates, the photographic activity acting not as an intellectual exercise, but rather bearing witness through performance. Whilst all photographs can be described as having, to quote Green and Lowry, a 'performative indexicality' (2006, 130)—the photographer, or at least their camera, was there, opposite the subject—here Dewe Mathews has gone further than simply pointing to a space and its story. By journeying through France and Belgium—and recreating the events of 1914-1918—she has entered into and embodied that space. In this regard, Dewe Mathews's practice is closer to works of land art, in particular Richard Long's seminal 1967 *A Line Made by Walking*.

In undertaking a psychogeographical pilgrimage to the killing sites and engaging directly with the spaces she discovers, Dewe Mathews could certainly be described as a walking artist. Several of the photographer's other projects echo Long's *A Line Made by Walking*. Her continuing work *Caspian*—commentating on the Caspian Sea's oil industry and related environmental crisis—includes an image of a stony beach or water's edge, split down the middle by a long slick of oil. More pertinently, in her recent photographic series *Thames Log*, the photograph *Wittenham Clumps, 4.30am* depicts a rural landscape at dawn at the centre of which is an arrow, indicating the direction of travel to summer solstice runners. In *A Line Made by Walking*, the traces of Long's walking performance are presented photographically as evidence of the activity. The representation is indexical, but at two removes; first is the damage to the grass, the mark on the space, and second is the photograph, a representation of the damage. However, while both Long and Dewe Mathews offer examples of somatic practice as the very foundation of their still photography, Dewe Mathews is reluctant to leave her own mark on the landscape. In both *Caspian* and *Thames Log*, the lines are those made by others. In *Shot at Dawn*, significantly, there is no trace at all—not of Dewe Mathew's practice, not of any historical act. These locations are deliberately unmarked. To create any physical memorial would draw the executions into a collective narrative of remembrance and pride. By leaving the sites untouched the performance retains the authenticity of a personal pilgrimage, and emphasises tragedy ahead of military honour.

Likewise, the strongly cartographical aspects of Dewe Mathews's project remain underdeveloped. In order to identify the locations of soldiers' executions, Dewe Mathews undertook a challenging mapping project—using scant military information and local knowledge to pinpoint the settings for these discrete killings. As an excavation project that never breaks ground, Dewe Mathews relies on our sense of the palimpsestic when considering landscapes and localities. In the conceptual land art of

the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of 'overlay'—a complex layering of environmental, historical and imaginative forces at work upon the earth—informed artists' understanding of the connections between history, often prehistory, and the modern day.³ Dewe Mathews's retention of contemporary signifiers—dustbins, aerials, loft conversions—at sites of World War One activities maps such an overlay. But it does so quietly. In *Walking and Mapping: The Artist as Cartographer*, Karen O'Rourke uses Michel de Certeau's distinction between place, as planned, and space, as experienced, to discuss how '[s]tories have the power to transform places into spaces by awakening inert objects' (2013, 143). She describes the correspondence of walking and mapping as 'an urban form of tracking in which the footprints of past travelers, reactivated by contemporary practitioners, link past and present, real and virtual' (O'Rourke 2013, xiii). Dewe Mathews tracks these military events and illuminates them for the modern viewer but the relationship she represents between past and present always favours the latter. Her labels name the town and the district in which soldiers were killed but an interested observer, or indeed a relative of those shot at dawn, would be unable to easily locate the settings for Dewe Mathews's photographs. The successful monument requires the ritual of mourning, repeated at regular intervals; as Alex King remarks, 'memorials, no matter how solid, are no less part of a pattern of human action than ceremonies' (1999, 150). But Dewe Mathews inhibits future pilgrimages to the sites of the dawn killings. The artist maintains the obscurity of these events as a purposefully self-effacing act. *Shot at Dawn* does not seek to remember, store and disseminate spatial data; it chooses to forget it. The desire to tabulate loss and preserve the morbid details in a material object holds little value here. Rather, memory making becomes a practice or ritual with the resultant photograph as just one aspect of a complex process that refuses to privilege remembrance over forgetting.

This forgetfulness need not suggest a lack of historical rigour, however. Dewe Mathews's photographic series closely reconstructs the executions carried out in World War One—substituting, as her title *Shot at Dawn* alludes to, the gun with the camera. The photographer has painstakingly identified the locations of each soldier's death, travelling multiple times to the scenes, and she shoots the space not only at first light but at the same time of the year at which the men died. Her reconstruction of their deaths is both temporally and spatially accurate. In theatrical terms, the photographer uses a blocking process to ensure precision—positioning herself as one of the scene's main performers. But the point of view that this enactment demands raises certain questions. Dewe Mathews puts herself in the position of the 'shooter'. As she says herself, 'I was placing my tripod around the same spot where the firing squad had stood and looking directly at the place where the victim was placed' (Dewe Mathews in O'Hagan 2014).

She is not the first artist to do this. Andy DeComyn's 2001 *Shot at Dawn Memorial*, an outdoor-sculpture, is arranged in the shape of a Greek amphitheatre and contains multiple elements (2017). The figurative statue of a blindfolded soldier is a portrait of Herbert Burden, executed in Ypres in 1915. The 306 wooden posts represent all the British and Commonwealth soldiers executed in World War One for desertion and cowardice—each of them named. Looking at the image, one might well overlook the six fir trees behind the benches provided for visitors to the memorial. In actual fact,

they are part of DeComyn's work and represent the firing squad. When visitors to the arboretum sit on the benches to view the work, they too view the soldiers from the perspective of the shooters. This clearly has ethical repercussions. The artists are complicit. So too the viewer. One of the effects of this is to encourage the viewer to consider the other soldiers anonymised as part of this court-martial process, namely the 12-man firing squad. Firing squads were often composed of men from the same regiments as condemned soldiers. They were under strict orders to undertake executions and would have been vulnerable themselves to arrest had they refused to carry them out. While not victims to the same extent as those shot at dawn, these soldiers were not willing participants in this brutal ritual. To view the scene through their eyes is to better understand the requirements of military service. It also urges the viewer to question the entrenched notions of duty and gallantry that underpinned these events. In terms of photographic practice, Dewe Mathews is again performing a role. Her re-enactment of these events relives the trauma of them. Anthony Babington, in his seminal *For the Sake of Example: Capital Courts-Martial 1914-1920*, captures the regulated and ritualistic nature of the military execution:

Death did not come to them, random and abrupt, on the field of battle; it came with a measured tread as the calculated climax of an archaic and macabre ritual carried out, supposedly, in the interests of discipline and morale (1983, vii).

This highly choreographed event is reenacted in Dewe Mathews's process of reshooting the executions. The photographer describes how the 'whole project had a kind of slow, solitary rhythm of its own that was unlike any other project I have done' (2014).

The discussion of complicity and stigmatisation that *Shot at Dawn* undertakes is made more fascinating when considered alongside the traditions and norms found in war photography. Photojournalists such as Robert Capa and George Silk, active during World War Two, consolidated the image of the war photographer. Patricia Vettel-Becker describes their popularity with the public:

Their celebrity was as much about the risks they took to capture their images as it was about the quality of their photographs, for each shot testified to the bodily presence of the photographer within the arena of combat. Indeed, it was the dangerous conditions under which these photographs were taken that made them credible, that made them real (2005, 34).

In shooting World War One a hundred years after it ended, Dewe Mathews maintains a significant distance from war conditions. Her relative safety, not to mention her gender, prevents her from participating in the history of combat photography. Risk—and the desire to prove one's masculinity—is entirely absent from the enterprise. So far away

from the theatre of war there is no drama; it is predictable, safe and sad. The bodily presence of the photographer is there, however, maintaining the parallels, but this is everything war photography is not: the images resist interpretation, drama or satisfaction and jingoistic narratives of pride and remembrance are rejected. The recent integration of 'war photography' within the broader genre of 'documentary photography'—the latter cited by Dewe Mathews as the mode of enquiry she employs in *Shot at Dawn*—should not distract us from the ways in which Dewe Mathews distinguishes her work from that of combat journalists. As she says herself,

I was drawn to the idea of arriving somewhere 100 years afterwards. It's almost the opposite of war photography. So, instead of the photographer bearing witness, it is the landscape that has witnessed the event and I who am having to go into that landscape in the hope of finding anything tangibly connected to the event. It was almost like having to find a new language or way of seeing (2014).

Dewe Mathews's foregrounding of the silent landscape, at the expense of her own photographic profile or any characterful realisation of the soldiers shot at dawn, acknowledges history's—sometimes casual, sometimes intended—absentmindedness. But, rather than swap this historical amnesia for a bland memorialisation, Dewe Mathews chooses to accentuate the disremembered. The images in *Shot at Dawn* are traces of a pilgrimage—one that interrogates the relationship of memory, movement and the photographic object and privileges forgetfulness, as a mode of resistance, over normative and reassuring forms of remembrance.

(7905 words)

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- ¹ Historians have done important work in recent years on the 'regional' picture of wartime executions; see Robert King, *Shot at Dawn: The fifteen Welshmen executed by the British Army in the First World War* (Stroud: The History Press, 2014) and Stephen Walker, *Forgotten Soldiers: The Irishmen Shot at Dawn* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2007).
- ² Several of Dewe Mathews's other works engage with issues of pilgrimage and dislocation. Her series *Sunday Service*, exhibited in 2014, depicted the retooling of industrial spaces for religious services by African Christians in South London. Her earlier *Hasidic Holiday* focussed on British Orthodox Jews holidaying in Aberystwyth while her more recent *Thames Log* reflected on London's great river, documenting encounters and events that often turned out to be religious or ritualistic in nature.
- ³ The term 'overlay' is discussed in *Uncommon Ground: Land Art in Britain 1966-1979* (London: Southbank Centre, 2013), 68. It is the title of Lucy Lippard's 1983 book about the relationship between contemporary art and prehistory, taken by Lippard from Alfred Watkins's 1925 *The Old Straight Track*, an autoethnographic study of ley lines across Southern England and inspiration for much of Richard Long's work.