

RITA LEISTNER AWARD-WINNING PHOTOJOURNALIST



*Rita Leistner is a politically and socially engaged photo-based artist and documentarian. A former photojournalist with a master's degree in comparative literature and half a decade working as a lighting technician in the film industry, Rita's work overlaps genres. Rita's career as a photojournalist hit its stride when she moved to Cambodia in 1997. She is co-author of *Unembedded: Four Independent Photojournalists on the War in Iraq*. Her latest book, *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan*, is an interdisciplinary work about photography, language, technology and war. Her recently completed ten-year project, *Levant Trilogy*, will be exhibited this summer at the Fotofestival Lotz. Rita teaches the history of photojournalism and documentary photography at the University of Toronto and is represented by the Stephen Bulger Gallery.*

What specific challenges as photojournalists do image makers face in conflict zones?

It can be dangerous. You have to be highly alert, you have to listen to anyone you can find with more experience than you. Crowds, youth, can be the worst. Identify your friends or possible exit strategies. On the other hand, local people suffering in a conflict often appreciate that journalists take risks right alongside them. There is a certain allegiance that can form and that may provide you with a local safety net. There are of course many logistical challenges that come from being somewhere you might not always have access to electricity (to charge your gear), or food may be scarce, or you might run out of gas because there is no fuel—and being stranded is never a good thing. Mobility, health, safety, are all intertwined. If you get sick, or injured, a whole new level of complication arises. You may be somewhere there is no quick way out, and almost certainly you will not have immediate access to the best hospitals. Kidnapping and capture is an increasing risk since the Iraq War. It amazes how often people ask me, ‘were you ever afraid?’ Out of discomfort, I always laugh when I answer them that yes, I have been afraid to varying degrees on countless occasions. If you are not someone who can handle fear well, you should never go to a conflict zone intentionally.



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What kind of conflict zone training do you have? Have you taken a HET course?

Before I went to Iraq for the first time in March 2003, I participated in a four day HET with the Canadian Military. One of the exercises was a mock kidnapping. The ‘assailants’ put bags over our heads and hauled

us off a bus. I used to wear strong prescription glasses for seeing distances. When I was sitting on the side of the road with a bag over my head, it occurred to me that if I ever lost my glasses or had them taken from me I would be incapacitated. The next week I scheduled an appointment to have corrective laser eye surgery. That boosted my confidence enormously before going to Iraq. Later I received a Rory Peck Trust Bursary to take further training with Centurion Risk Assessment Services. I have pretty good 'roughing it' skills from spending nearly a decade working in the Canadian Wilderness. That's helped me a lot along the way too.



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How do you prepare for an assignment?

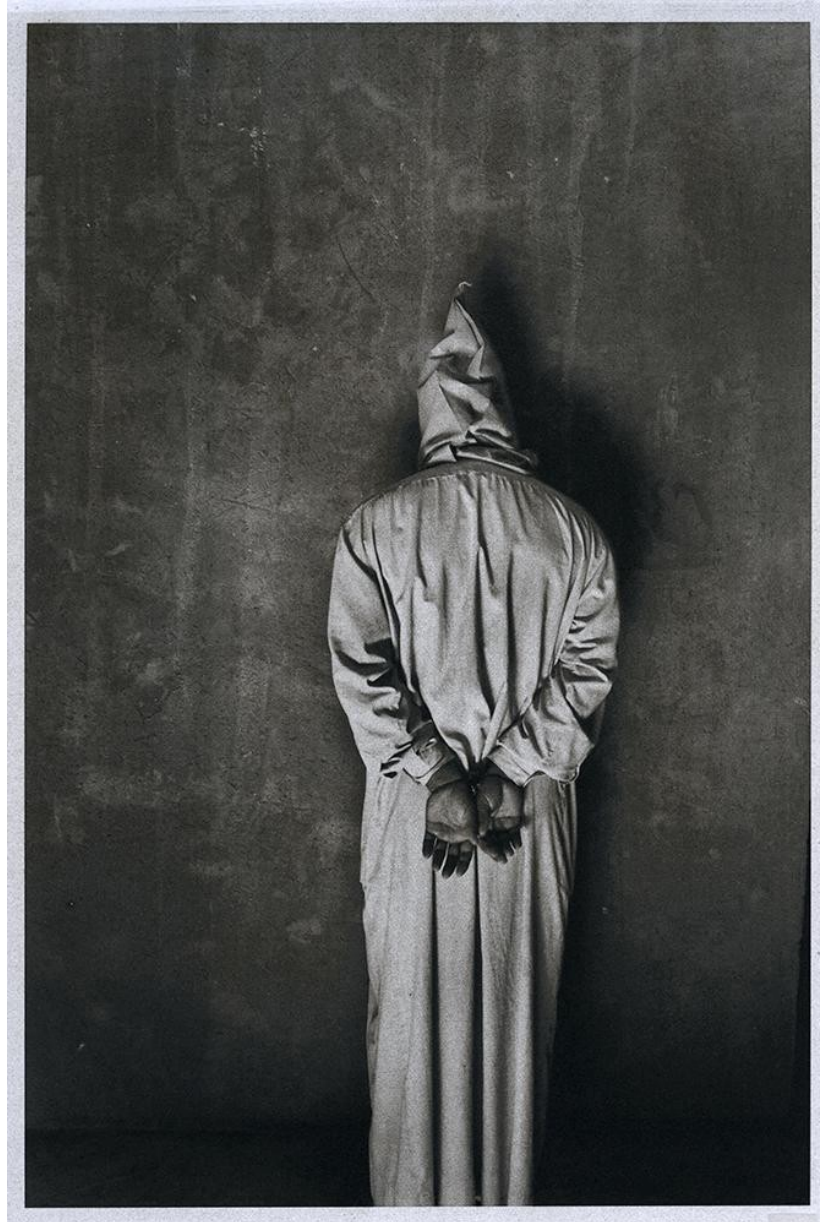
I am constantly in a state of preparing for my next assignment or project. It's a mode of being. I'm either researching and reading or honing my gear. I am one of the most organized people I know. I can find any item among my extensive photography equipment or photo archive in a matter of minutes. You always want to travel as light as possible, so I start with laying out a wish list of gear, then figure out what I can carry on a particular trip—which will depend on how I plan to get around as much as on what I plan to shoot—and then start taking items away until I am at the minimum of what I need. Having to bring body armour is a disaster in terms of weight, but sometimes you don't have a choice. Body armour means fewer socks and underwear, fewer batteries, just about everything gets reduced to less than what you want to take when you have a 30 pound metal plate in your luggage. When I went to Iraq for the first time, I hadn't planned on entering the country on foot—a tough three-day journey through the Taurus Mountains. I had to reduce to my kit to its minimum. I left behind my Nikon FM2, batteries, a spare lens, a couple of books and most of my clothing. Three months later, my only two pairs of underwear were in pretty bad shape.

Your favourite gear and why.

I love my Quantum battery pack. Knowing I can shoot all day and not worry about my flash depleting, and that I can charge it on any vehicle, is a big stress reducer. It is totally reliable. I also love handy little bags and pouches. Photographers are bag addicts. I'm always in search of the perfect way to organize everything. And an old krama (scarf) from Cambodia. It's handy for just about everything, and reminds me of where I started (my first foray into international photojournalism was in Cambodia in 1997). And a really good flashlight with a red filter in case you need to use it at night and not be seen. Something to read (a real book you don't need electricity to read), always about the country I'm visiting, as well as a phrase book if I don't know the local language. And lots of painkillers.

Have you ever faced an ethical challenge in the course of your work? How did you handle it?

That's a complicated question. I was drawn to photojournalism because of its power to effect political and social change. So I believe the impulse to be a photojournalist is ethical in itself. If you believe this, then you can justify almost anything you do to advance that end. Sometimes I have had to keep my mouth shut in order to keep covering a story or even for my own safety. I think it's unethical to take photojournalistic images and not do anything with them, or just use them as portfolio pieces or for entering contests. There has to be some kind of sustained effort to make the photographs serve a purpose. I feel very guilty about not trying harder to get certain photographs I took of Iraqi prisoners published. The soldiers in some of my photographs went on to murder local Iraqis. Publishing those photographs, even if no one wanted to pay me for it, may have made a difference and saved lives. But I was too insecure and inexperienced to do the right thing.



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Describe your favourite image. What keeps you shooting?

My favorite image is often the one I am working on at the moment. What keeps me going is that a photograph can still excite me. The day I am only excited about my old work will probably be the day I won't have the motivation to keep going. It's a metaphor for life in a way: you have to keep believing there is something or someone worthwhile ahead for you.

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A common misconception about conflict zone photographers is... It's a hard thing for most people to understand, so there are a lot of misconceptions that I can understand. I think it's also different for men than it is for women. There is a peculiar macho, romantic bravado around it. One of the first great war photographers was Gerda Taro, who was killed during the Spanish Civil War. Had she lived to be a part of Magnum, who knows how differently history would have played out. As a woman, if you say you are a conflict photographer, eyes glaze over and I think they just can't imagine you were actually there, in the middle of it. So in my case, the misconception is usually that, as woman, I can never have done anything that was all that difficult. I wish I could say things are changing, but I'm not sure that's true. The other big misconception is that it pays well.



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What advice do you have for prospective conflict zone photojournalists?

I would never recommend anyone become a **conflict zone photojournalist**. But I can tell them what the great [Robert Nickelsberg](#) told me: "Set your shutter speed on high, take a lot of frames, and hope to hell one of them is in focus." The first time I photographed a firefight I was shaking so badly that at 1/250th of a second all my photographs

were completely blurred. Before I go into any risky area, I ask myself the following three questions: Why me? Why this? Why now? If I can't come up with compelling reasons then I won't go. But if I can, and especially if I am the only one there, then I think I have a responsibility to go. The Internet and the smartphone have rendered the act of bearing witness almost universally accessible so there are fewer reasons for specially designated photographers to simply bear witness. But showing up as an outsider is an important act of solidarity. That human presence of a few professional journalists (foreign and local) on the ground can go a long way, to say nothing of the importance of the infrastructure and codes of ethics and professionalism that trained photojournalists bring to a story.



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Tell us about your most recent assignment or work.

I spent six weeks last winter in Khalil (Hebron), Palestine. It was freezing and there was no indoor heating to speak of. Everyone thought I should be used to the cold being Canadian, but I tried to explain that in Canada it's only cold outside. It helped me to understand the low-grade and constant hardship experienced by people in places with poor infrastructure—social, public utilities, on top of all the security issues. I made a body of work I call 'Surveilled Landscapes,' about sentry towers, surveillance cameras, check-points, soldiers with cameras, the separation wall. It's part of a three-part series I've now shot in Lebanon, Israel and Palestine over a ten-year period. Being under constant surveillance and at the barrel end of a machine gun, even if you are not shot, takes an emotional toll. A friend of mine who lives in Palestine told me she was suffering from depression. I told her that anyone who lived with that constant state of feeling powerless would be crazy if they weren't depressed. When I came home I was surprisingly messed up. When someone has so much control over you and you can't react, you have to bottle everything up inside. I was really triggered anytime anything made me feel powerless, no matter how seemingly trivial. I

knew enough from past experience to talk to a therapist about it. I'm lucky in that I have an insurance policy in Canada that covers therapy.

The three parts of this project are going to be shown together for the first time this summer in Poland at the [Fotofestiwal Lodz](#). I've picked two images from each part for my battleface gallery.