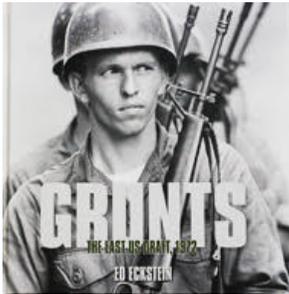


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Grunts: The Last US Draft by Ed Eckstein



Cover: Ed Eckstein's 'Grunts:
The Last US Draft, 1972'

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Ed Eckstein

Grunts: The Last US Draft, 1972

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Albumen Gallery / Online only

Grunts: The Last US Draft by Ed Eckstein / Reviewed by Marco Bohr / 04.09.17

Ed Eckstein's photographic series *Grunts: The Last US Draft* from 1972 is a depiction of the conscription of young American men in the dying days of the Vietnam War. This conflict, which has had such profound geopolitical implications for decades to come, was photographed from an intriguingly local perspective: the series begins at an induction centre in Philadelphia and it ends in Ft. Jackson, South Carolina, where civilians are turned into soldiers through military training. The transformation, from a private citizen to a soldier, is the main focus of Eckstein's body of work.

There is a very clear temporal dimension to this work as Eckstein essentially followed these men undergoing basic nine-week military training. Instead of focussing on the drills and the physical hardship of this training, however, Eckstein appears to focus on more subtle changes that begin to affect the demeanour of these men such as the ultra short haircut imposed onto new recruits. Rineke Dijkstra's before and after photographs of soldiers in the Foreign Legion are a fitting comparison to this approach in a contemporary context. What Eckstein is capturing is therefore not just the 'turning-into' a soldier, it's also the 'stripping-away' of signifiers of a personal identity.

By focusing on this nine-week transition and by displaying the photographs in a chronological order, Eckstein is clearly engaged in a photographic narrative comparable to W. Eugene Smith's classic photo essay 'Country Doctor' from 1948. Here, Eckstein appears to follow the traditional rules of documentary photography which is further emphasized through a caption that states

‘nothing was set up or posed for the camera’. This fly-on-the-wall methodology is underscored by the subjects not engaging or looking into the camera. Here, Eckstein is careful not to pierce the bonds that the men are starting to establish with each other.

In spite of the insistence that photographs are not staged, the military exercises that the men undergo add a theatrical dimension to the work. For instance, one training exercise focuses on trying to grab an enemy combatant’s neck and twisting it. This exercise is performed with a partner in a row. With the movement of this exercise removed through the stillness of the photographs, the visual result bears a resemblance to Ancient Greek sculptures.

Due to the subject matter, Eckstein’s work triggers a number of other visual comparisons such as Stanley Kubrick’s classic film *Full Metal Jacket* from 1987 which similarly focuses on the transition of the private individual into a fighting machine. The fate which some of these soldiers would meet also brings to the fore the depressing work from Vietnam by Don McCullin. But in another sense Eckstein’s work goes beyond the Vietnam War because it depicts something more fundamental that needs to occur before an individual enters a war zone: the stripping back of identity, the breaking down and then building up of skills, the camaraderie and companionship, and the transfer of agency from the individual to the state.

– reviewed by [Marco Bohr](#)

[Grunts: The Last US Draft, 1972 online exhibition](#) is presented in conjunction with the publication of Ed Eckstein’s *Grunts: The Last US Draft, 1972*, published by Schiffer Publishing, available at [Albumen Gallery](#).