

# DISPLAY TACTICS

## Curatorial Takes on the Invasion of Iraq

By TIRDAD ZOLGHADR



Out of the spate of recent exhibitions that have addressed the subject of war, perhaps the most aggressive in curatorial stance was Jens Hoffmann's "Apocalypse Now: The Theater of War"—curated with the artist duo Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, and shown last fall at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, in San Francisco—which claimed in its press materials that it would "attack" the audience with the "unpalatable side of humanity." The artworks, historical artifacts, and pop cultural relics that constituted the show exemplified the nimble interaction of selection and display that has been a Hoffmann trademark since his tenure at the ICA in London, which ended in 2006. And yet the exhibition betrayed an embarrassing gaucheness in its intention to critique the spectacle of conflict, a spectacle that it appeared to simultaneously employ. Not only were the curatorial statements jarring, claiming to "wage war on the visitor," but the artworks themselves also seemed deliberately chosen for their "shock and awe" effect. Rather than challenge our notion of war as theater, the heavy-handed curatorial choices enforced that very idea (soldiers and war prisoners as dolls and photo motifs; Bruce Nauman's wildly rasping voice in *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* [1968]; select spots where the visitor had to crouch and stoop). Dimming the lights and showing crass objects on labyrinthine panels can be fun, but it does not in any way help you escape curatorial domestication.

The show did engage with histories of war as spectacle, and—in a departure from recent exhibitions like "Memorial to the Iraq War," at the ICA, and "Meanwhile, in Baghdad . . ." at the University of Chicago's Renaissance

Society—it avoided addressing Iraq specifically. The curators attempted a take that was both site specific, with respect to the protest culture of the Bay Area, and universal, in that the art and artifacts examined war as an idea of "human antagonism." Nevertheless, the show's universalizing bluster completely overshadowed the local history, subsuming it into a very different local tradition, that of California culturati standing in for humanity at large. The problem with that kind of blinkered universalism was rendered obvious by the use of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* as a cornerstone of the show—because that film is also

a cornerstone of postcolonial critique, being an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The latter is invaluable not in its "universalism" but in its meticulous description of Euro-American high-cultural fantasies of the black and brown as mute, violent, mysterious, and irrational. It's striking that Hoffmann abandoned his usual light-footed, self-reflexive agility for a show that attempted to address so much but had little more cognitive value than a Metallica CD at full blast. Clearly the collaboration with Allora and Calzadilla, art-tourist mercenaries known for crisscrossing the earth's crisis zones with voracious appetites, did not do him any favors.

This poses the question of what, then, might be a better curatorial model with which to address war and its secondary effects, and I predictably fail to have clear answers. But what I do believe is that rigorously reflecting on site-specific and art-specific histories, strategies, and vocabularies of protest, rather than running head-on into atmospherics, universals, and political pornography—as





**THIS PAGE, LEFT:** Installation view of "Testimony to War: Art from the Battlegrounds of Iraq," at the Visual Arts Museum, School of Visual Arts, New York, 2008. Foreground: Peter Buotie, *Bleeding*, 2007. Photo: Laura Jeffeth. Courtesy the School of Visual Arts, New York. **BELOW:** Poster from "Meanwhile, in Baghdad..." (featuring Matt Davis's Trooper, 2007) at the Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, 2007. Courtesy the Renaissance Society, Chicago.

**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Peter Buotie, *Target of Critique*, 2007. Artist's design produced in various materials and dimensions. Courtesy the artist.

recent politically focused curating seems wont to do—might help unravel not only the challenges of addressing not-so-veiled imperialism 2008, but also the murky mysteries of group shows in general. Thematic group shows of contemporary art always offer clearly verbalized intentions, but we rarely wonder, let alone discern, what the "thematics" stand to gain from the "group," the "show," or the "contemporary art" element in the equation. Just like the terms in the "United Kingdom of Great Britain," an entity that is neither united, nor a kingdom, nor great, those at the Wattis are merely reduced to quaint sloganeering. The theme is never developed, the artists do not form a group so much as get in each other's way, and the art is just illustration. If the intentions can be so clearly verbalized, then maybe a newspaper article would be more adequate.

Although numerous exhibitions are now busily addressing the condition of war, the conditions of its addressing—how come, why here, why now, why this—offer much to think about. Take the current occupation's genocidal prelude: during the UN sanctions of the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis starved to death or were blown to bits by weekly US air raids. This foreplay was the object of high-profile campaigns waged by UNICEF, Edward Said, and Noam Chomsky, who spoke prophetically of the Carthaginian solution, by which a decimated, humiliated, dispirited Iraqi population would be less of an impediment for future plans in the region. In 1996 under the Clinton administration, then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright curtly acknowledged that 500,000 dead kids were

"worth it" (watch the moment on YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lK\\_QshS2EW8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lK_QshS2EW8)). Personally, I do not recall any group shows on the matter. The lack of Euro-American deaths in Iraq was perhaps the reason for this curatorial blind spot, but more important, malnutrition, waste management, water refineries, and medical supplies simply cannot compete with the bling of warfare. Sanctions offer little career leverage thematically speaking,

both within the artworld and without, and do not go over well in the economy of authorship that critic Tom Holert has described, with the Spanish Civil War, thanks to *Guernica*, forever being "owned" by Picasso. In sum, to raise the question of whether our political penchants are driven by pornographic instinct is not a moral question only; it is an aesthetic one as well. As Susan Sontag has pointed out, despectacularization is not an option, considering the irresistible melodrama of violence since the days of the *Iliad*.

Consider the press statement for "Inconvenient Evidence: Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib," on view in 2004 at the International Center of Photography, in New York, and the Warhol Museum, in Pittsburgh: "Unlike traditional war photojournalism, the images were not created as documentation of atrocities, but were actually intended as instruments of maltreatment and sexual/cultural humiliation." Which, I take it, is the reason to instrumentalize them all over again. Rarely has a curatorial agenda been so disarmingly honest. When it comes to thematic packaging, the standard group show is always



**Meanwhile, in Baghdad...**

The Renaissance Society  
at the University of Chicago  
November 11–December 23, 2007





**LEFT:** Installation view of "Meanwhile, in Baghdad..." The Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2007. Foreground: Jonathan Monk, *Deadman*, 2006. Background left: Walead Beshty, *Travel Picture Mist* and *Travel Picture Fog*, both 2006. Background right: Maryam Jafri, "Siege of Khartoum, 1884," 2006. Photo: Tom Van Eynde. Courtesy the Renaissance Society, Chicago.

**BOTTOM:** Installation view of "Memorial to the Iraq War," the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2007. Foreground: Marc Bijl, *Iraqi Stars (Proposal for a Monument)*, 2007. Photo: Samantha Hart. Courtesy the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

dicey enough as an endeavor, in that the work runs the risk of becoming a mere link in a succession of signifiers—the last thing it needs is the bathos of empire unfolding. Press statements aside, it is the prim framing of the standard show that lends the relationship between artworld innocence and human misfortune a comical touch. Consider "Meanwhile, in Baghdad . . ." on view at the Renaissance Society last fall. The accompanying website featured an MP3C tour of the premises, a compelling enough piece in and of itself: a deadpan perusal, without commentary, of a well-hung show within off-white walls and a dark gray floor, dotted with such testimonies as Daniel Heyman's "Abu Ghraib Project," which consists of engravings based on "firsthand accounts of torture." Unguarded by the usual discursive contritions and validations, the video, in a screamingly simple way, says more about good intentions than many a press release, and is thus unintentionally virtuoso in its effective candor.

But if I do not really mind having missed the above events, I might have enjoyed "Memorial to the Iraq War," at the ICA last spring, which invited 26 artists to propose a memorial of the said kind. "The intention," said the press release, was to explore "different perspectives on what can or should be memorialized." Though criticized as a morose concession to the conflict, by memorializing what was and is violently continuing (the artist Liam Gillick wrote in the *Guardian* that the show was "a melancholic and sullen response"), the ICA show did beautifully highlight the traditional character of curatorial and artistic practices as commemorative, reactive, atmospheric, and sentimental. As others have pointed out, the ICA's location in a London neighborhood replete with monuments to Britain's age of imperial glory makes the issue all the more pertinent in a slightly offhand manner. It's by way of these modest contextualizations that the project, seen from afar at least, did appear to avoid the blunders of self-congratulation that mire similar approaches in unknowing parodies of opposition.

To name one last example of recent curatorial efforts, this past winter the School of Visual Arts, in New York, mounted "Testimony to War: Art from the Battlegrounds of Iraq," which included work by five embedded artists, including an Army major and two sergeants. Against walls duly painted desert beige, half the work echoed curator Francis Di Tommaso's desire to "drive home" the human

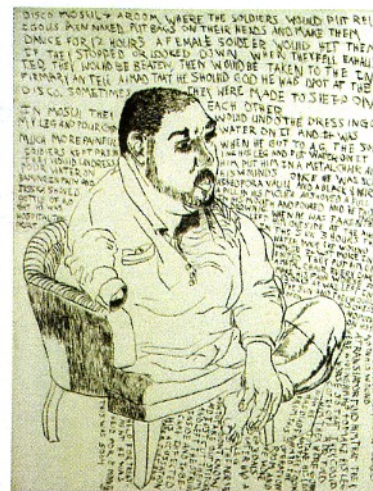
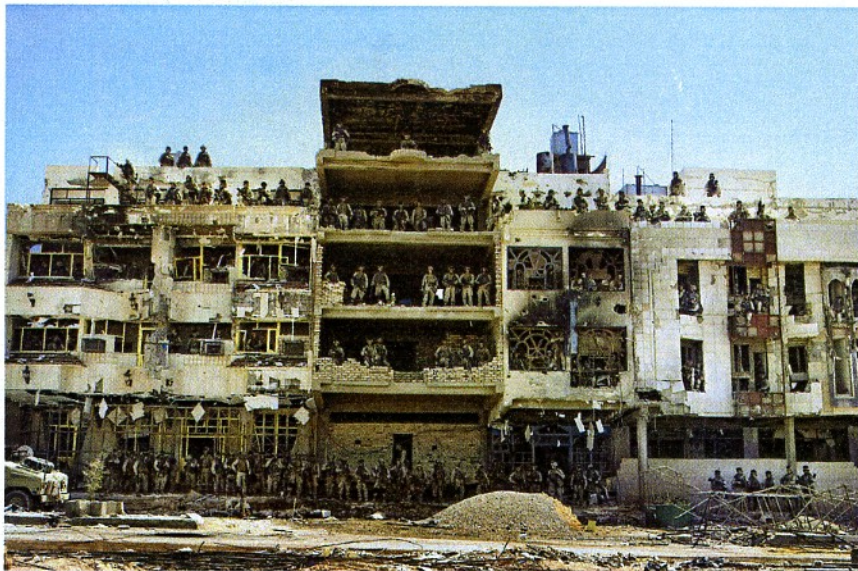
cost of the conflict—for example, via the intimate and now ubiquitous watercolors by Steve Mumford that reference Winslow Homer's watercolors of Civil War scenes—while the other half reflected soldiers' personal preoccupations. Shoulder tags by Peter Buotte evoke Jasper Johns as Buotte contemplates how the flag on his uniform makes him a "target," while Aaron Hughes's video *Drawing for Peace* shows him sketching a bird at a traffic intersection somewhere in, I do believe, Illinois. Although the work was pedestrian, the exhibition was rewarding in that it addressed the notion of art as an independent haven, oscillating



pleasantly between supposedly apolitical aestheticism and supposedly progressive temperament. It's the artists' very "embeddedness" that alters the terms of engagement here, highlighting, among other things, the standard assumption that art reflects a privileged understanding of ideological mechanisms.

Nevertheless, what appears to be a deeply restricted, self-ghettoized, derivative, and almost emasculated role for art's investigational value is perhaps not



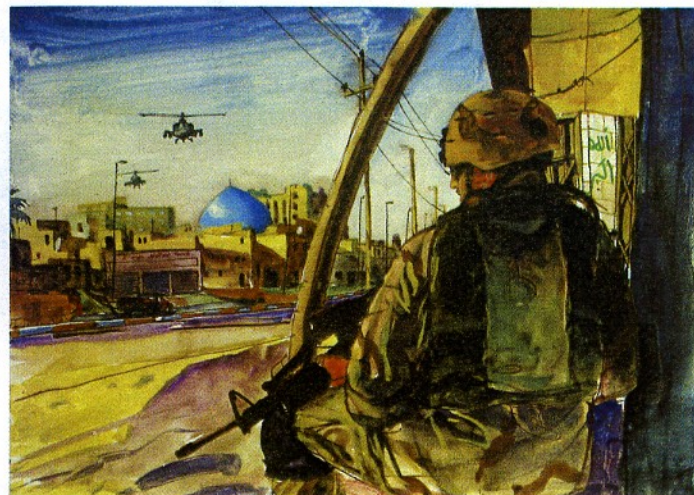


**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Lucian Read, *After three weeks of fierce fighting, Marines and sailors of the 4th Marine Regiment crowd the windows and doors of ravaged hotels in Najaf that they took in a nighttime assault, 2004*. Digital photograph, 40 x 60 in. Courtesy the artist.

Daniel Heyman, *Disco Mosul, 2006*. Drypoint print on BFK, 27 x 22 in. Courtesy the artist.

Steve Mumford, *Arkansas National Guardsmen Patrolling off Haifa Street, Baghdad, October, 2004, 2004*. Watercolor and ink on paper, 11 1/2 x 14 1/2 in. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery, New York.

Screen shot from YouTube: Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is interviewed by Lesley Stahl for the *60 Minutes* report on the UN embargo of Iraq broadcast in May 1996. Image courtesy of *60 Minutes*/CBS News.



as dismal as all that. "Apocalypse Now: The Theater of War," for example, came frustratingly close to a valid proposal in light of regional reflexivity and the effort to contextualize the issue within a genealogy of local approaches. Generally speaking, it's promising to address a pressing issue through a side door, and this sets "Apocalypse" apart from most of the recent curatorial takes on the invasion of Iraq, which, in some form or another, have been unable to avoid the reduction of art to the documentation of interchangeable calamities of human suffering, or to a documentation of the artist's superior right of entry to political ideology. Alas, grounding your commentary in Artaudian atmosphere and globalizing claims, precisely when the context is one of attempted global hegemony via military means, is probably a bad idea.

What might be helpful is a tiny bit of critical theory. I do not mean the curatorial use of our theoretical heritage as a discursive toolbox, but rather the movement's mentality of strategic restraint. Judging by all the documentas and many biennials since the mid-'90s, everything from de Manian allegories to Foucauldian biopolitics to Deleuzian rhizomes has been liberally applied to critical shades of curating in a bold manner, in which the exhibition "performs," "discusses," "maps," and "plays on" the above concepts, sometimes heroically. Rather than elaborate on the adequacy of these appropriations, it simply bears mentioning that the fervent application of such lingo to curatorial

practice betrays an eagerness for investing the exhibition armature with theoretical credentials that, paradoxically, do little to further the transparency of the curatorial framing, and instead render it needlessly opaque.

In the wake of 1968 and the Vietnam War, the aforementioned vanguard of what is now institutionalized critical theory was widely described as useless. Metadiscursive, derivative, tactical, and consciously self-ghettoizing approaches were considered too abstract to apply to stolid events like the war and the protest movements it inspired; such methods lacked the blueprint thrust of Marxism or existentialism. In fact, however, the poststructuralista, from de Man to Foucault to Deleuze, were personally committed to activist pursuits, but in a style not unlike some artists of the time—for example, the currently ubiquitous Lawrence Weiner, who engaged in a variety of activist causes but scrupulously separated his professional practice from his political one. The idea being that philosophy's potential lies within its very negativity, its deconstructive possibilities to make visible the potentially oppressive mechanism, and in its ability to clear a fragile space for some kind of transcendence thereof, but not in its promise to point the way or ventriloquize the oppressed. Tellingly, the poststructuralist project fostered a politicization of knowledge at an unprecedented scale, a feat that lies well beyond the wildest hopes of any curatorial approach that does not aggressively engage with its own histories, political vocabulary, and aesthetic appetites.