

PULL MY HEART STRINGS WITH A GUN

Katrina Kufer explores whether artworks created about zones of conflict are the responsibility of artists as change-makers, industry insiders as distributors, or the audience as viewers.

Artworks on conflict embody the Kantian sublime: a condition of simultaneous pleasure and terror. In 2007 Iraqi Wafaa Bilal created *Domestic Tension*, conceived in response to the news of his brother's death in a strike by an American military drone. The interactive installation involved Bilal sharing a small room in Chicago's FlatFile gallery with a remote-controlled paintball gun, accessible to – and manipulated by – the public via the Internet. Spectators competed with each other to either shoot him, passively observe, or attempt to protect him by blocking would-be attackers. The audience totaled 80,000 individuals from 128 countries. Bilal was shot 60,000 times.

Intended to interrogate the complacency of the USA during the Iraq War, this artwork-cum-political gesture specifically questioned the viewer, typically passive and secure in a safe zone of ethical limbo. In this instance spectators could shoot multiple and continuous rounds of gunfire when Bilal was awake or asleep, without any consequences to themselves and 'protected' by Internet anonymity. Bring forth that sublime predicament: a man is being shot, but it is an 'artwork'. Bilal experienced PTSD as a result of this artistic exercise, yet the aesthetic simplicity and conceptual effectiveness of the work were brilliant. A web of interesting issues emerged, however. This wasn't a 'real' warzone – so why the need to restrain dormant aggression or, alternatively, protect him? Violence and viewing toed an ethical fine line in uncomfortable *Schadenfreude*. The critical point is whether Bilal was perceived as

a human-subjected-to-violence or as human-as-art.

If humans are defined by their humanity, then in situations like this the artist remains viewed as a person, even though he or she might have placed themselves in a dehumanising virtual space. The ability to identify and empathise with them is what, in Bilal's case, caused spectators to engage with the artwork in a preventative manner instead of treating it as a shooting game. This is confusing: an artwork is traditionally appreciated from afar, referential of the real world but rooted in artifice thanks to reproduction and technological distance. It isn't 'real' in the way that the news or the person walking past you in the street is 'real'. How are viewers expected, from the safety of the other side of their computer screens, to not only feel for the artist, but also understand him or her? The circumstances enacted are not commonplace or necessarily easy to relate to, and the public's interaction with this type of situation is based largely on what the media – whether TV, radio or the Internet – presents to them.

Bilal closed this space between the real world and his artwork by disclosing his pain beyond the physical, so that it became an emotional experience of loss and suffering. This is of course a more accessible and universal notion. Suddenly the fun of a 'fake' shooting-game was replaced by a sense of the shame in finding such suffering pleasurable. Suddenly the performance is no longer merely performative, but a powerful tool that could, and did, alter behavior. Viewers reconsidered their relationship to the imposed



violence and understood that being passive did not mean that they were free of responsibility. Is this the power of art? Using examples of completely inhumane acts to elicit humanity?

Without needing to listen too carefully, it is clear that the art world believes artists are the torchbearers of change. From The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (an initiative to fund boundary-pushing Middle Eastern talent), to speakers such as Kamel Lazaar (founder of Fondation Kamel Lazaar) or Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi (founder of Barjeel Art Foundation) at the 2015 JAOU Visual Culture in an Age of Global Conflict symposium in Tunisia, to gallerists, art fair directors and entrepreneurs, there is common agreement: culture is a peacekeeper and art is the way forward. When did art become synonymous with, or as reliable as, the news is perceived to be? According to political scientist Alexandre Kazerouni, the politicisation of art in the Middle East began in the late 1960s when nationalists realised the political potential of culture,

Clockwise from right: Detail from Hiwa K's *This Lennon Tastes of Apple* video, 2011. Image courtesy the artist; Nadia Kaabi-Linke. Detail of *Mein Stein*. 2011. Basalte, quarzite, gneis, greywacke and glass. 560 x 220 cm; Wafaa Bilal. *Domestic Tension* performance. 2007.



particularly through media broadcasting. For example, pan-Arabism reached ideological heights due to the *Voice of the Arabs* radio programme during Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's era. Reach was, and is, key.

Lina Lazaar, JAOU founder and curator of *All The World's A Mosque*, exemplifies a modern-day attempt to harness political potency into one exhibition. A temporary exhibition briefly in Carthage in May 2015, the pop-up space comprised 22 shipping containers filled with works by 22 artists, including Adel Abidin, Zoulikha Bouabdellah and Wael Shawky, among others. In Lazaar's words, it was a space that "questions everything in a respectful way," appealing to the five senses as Islam calls upon five pillars, and with the artworks serving as tools for Lazaar's message. Described as a mosque, then not a mosque, then a space of universal peace, *All The World's A Mosque* was less about the specific religion and more about the intentions of such a space, suggesting that

if the world were entirely a sacred space then conflict would be nonexistent; a Utopian ideal manifested in a lot of dangerous-looking works (take Iraqi Mahmoud Obaidi's hallway-hung blades, *Confusionism*, 2013, for example).

Admittedly art is still largely accessible, and thus effective, to only a very small pool of people. Their plan of action is usually to sit and ponder over it instead of heading for the front line and, whilst art may (mostly) be a space of freedom, its voice is only heard by a marginal group and its political impact therefore limited. Of the artists present at JAOU, none betrayed any innate political prowess or ambition. Not Hiwa K, political asylum-seeker and Iraqi performance artist, who said, "Does art have to answer to political issues? Or just open a space to think about it?" furthering it with a metaphor that he hopes it is "like acupuncture, not surgery." Nor Tunisian-German installation artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke, whose explanation of the political significance of her work began

with her remarking that her public sculpture, *Mein Stein* (2011–14, stones representing displaced ethnic diversity), was built discretely into Berlin's streets to avoid taking up space. This all seems rather reluctant and low-key for such championed reactionaries.

The art industry delegates responsibility to artists as change-instigators, but it seems that the artists themselves are more about stirring debate on potential futures rather than placing themselves in the vanguard of political change. It is a discussion between those who make art and those who look at art. Wafaa Bilal achieved some shift in focus and emphasis via *Domestic Tension*, but how far do artistic boundaries have to be pushed to startle the public out of its sense of conflict-image fatigue? It's a double-edged sword. If works are potent enough to break into the 'real world', they are swept into the maelstrom of news, first-hand experiences and word of mouth. How can a viewer avoid feeling jaded



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or detached when bombarded repeatedly with such imagery and with situations that are multiple TV/phone/computer screens away?

Some works do break through, however, among them Hiwa K's *This Lemon Tastes of Apple* (2011). This video shows him and others marching through Kurdistan until officials begin a chemical attack, chemicals which smell of apple and are counteracted by lemon. Is it an artwork, documentation, or somewhere in-between? Or is it 'Snuff'? This uncensored material shows one man becoming injured moments before his death. It is difficult – Hiwa K, after presenting the work in Tunis, lamented melancholically, "I don't know why I showed this, or stayed in the room." This is no longer simulation. If art is supposed to be artifice stemming from reality, then this is too

real, even for the artist himself. But should it not be easier for the public to digest this knowledge as we watch the camera-captured work on a projector screen? The familiar scent of apple lacks the threatening connotations it does for Hiwa K, so the impact is again lost a little. While it is unbiased insight, viewers still struggle to recognise their role in this scenario, both unwilling and unable to intervene, and so remaining on the 'safe side.' It may just be art, but in the real world there is no remote to push stop, no gallery door to exit to safety.

If the new norm is hyper-stimulation and with violence dominating popular culture, the gut-punch of actual violence suffers from being continually watered down by creative interpretations. Hiwa K may be as close to reality as one can get, but it is a singular

perspective. This is not to say it is false or illegitimate, but it is 'manufactured' in the sense that it is presented in 2D after the event: a visual experience that directs eyes towards a particular narrative. It may be radical in content, but it is controlled in presentation. Egyptian filmmakers Philip Rizk & Jasmine Metwaly's 2015 Venice Biennale-exhibited film *Out On The Street* explores the reasons for a protest in Cairo by low-income workers. While endeavouring to present a reality about exploitation and systematic corruption that lead to illness, injury and death, Rizk clarifies they did not want to turn reality into spectacle, but acknowledges that the outcome is a film that blurs the line between fact and fiction. The artists present bleakness, but with the buffer of an artwork artifice. Metwaly stated in an interview that,



Facing page: Installation view of Nadia Kaabeh-Linke's *Mein Stein* in Berlin's Kreuzberg district. 2011–14.

Left: Tania El-Khoury. Installation view of *Gardens Speak*. 2014. Photography by Jesse Hummford. Image courtesy the artist.

All images courtesy the artist and Laurie Shabibi, Dubai, unless otherwise specified

"We are not trying to provide solutions in the film." So they aren't political activists either, but still have viewers oscillating between cognitive understandings of the work as art versus a tangible reality.

Théodore Géricault's iconic *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819) is acknowledged as the first work that depicted events (a shipwreck at the time) realistically in lieu of romanticising them, so why cannot art now take the next step and create progress? The development of Contemporary art abandoning conventional forms and media certainly opens new potential, with dissolving boundaries always "useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art." (Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1955). The way we understand art has altered, and thus the context and techniques involved must follow suit. "The manner in which human sense perception is organised, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well," continued Benjamin. We have archives, and now we have the Internet.

Knowledge does not need hierarchy and can be reconfigured rhizomatically by creative liberty, historical records and current

events. Images are "composed, decomposed, recomposed," according to Syrian artist Khaled Abdulwahed. In this sense, archives are not a necrophiliac notion, but very much alive and subject to questioning. Abdulwahed's film *Jellyfish* reveals how Syrian activists, in the light of international media restrictions in Damascus in 2012, began sending their personal footage from mobile phones to media outlets, but not without spicing it up. In what he describes as "the media game", he recalls the levels of image manipulation that skew any situation towards a more dramatic (and potentially enticing) narrative. Are we really at an age when reality alone is just not enough?

Conflict areas often go hand-in-hand with censorship. Consider *Sabra and Shatila Massacre* (Dia Azzawi, 1982), befittingly reminiscent of *Guernica* (Picasso, 1937), and Moroccan Mounir Fatmi's *Save Manhattan* (2004), which stacked literature on Middle Eastern religious and political issues in front of a light to create a cityscape shadow of New York pre-9/11. The work itself develops: as public knowledge alters, the books on the table change and the silhouetted landscape behind it adjusts accordingly. Practices become increasingly more subtle and conceptual,

abandoning literal illustration. This may be as much to do with Benjamin's notion of our understanding of art and of history shifting than it is with censorship. Take Syrian artist Sulafa Hijazi's 2001 drawing, *Masturbation*, a figure with male anatomy in the form of a gun. Remarkably effective, based on the reaction when it was shown at JAOU, but also swiftly censored across the region. Hiwa K's video of a death-inducing riot is permitted, but not a drawing of gun-happiness. If an artist's role is to disperse unbiased (albeit single-channel) perspectives, then should it not be someone's responsibility to ensure that the public receives the 'full picture' of varied perspectives?

Maybe we are looking at this incorrectly. Perhaps it is not about the industry defining the nobility of artists' roles, or the artist needing to clarify why they do what they do. If the only way the public responds proactively results from shock value or a tugging at heartstrings, as achieved by Lebanese Tania El-Khoury's *Gardens Speak* (2014), in which viewers dress in plastic, lie on the individual grassy graves of victims of the Syrian uprising and listen to stories of their final moments read by surviving family members, then maybe it is more about us, the viewers. Perhaps it is just about how invested we really are in caring. 