

Art, War and Counter-Images

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ABSTRACT The article analyses the relatively meager response of artists to the ‘war on terror’ compared to the response of American artists to the war in Vietnam, where artists organized both exhibitions and protests against the war in South East Asia in the late 1960s. This of course has to do with the transformations going in contemporary art and the broader political context characterized by the hegemony of neo-liberalism. The article juxtaposes an installation by the Retort collective with an installation by Alfredo Jaar, analyzing two different ways of confronting the image war of the capitalist state machine with either a heave-handed use of art or a negative representation.

KEY WORDS Contemporary art, war, Retort, Alfredo Jaar, avant-garde

What if Marx’s challenge or call to the philosophers in the “Theses on Feuerbach” – and primarily to himself, as he probably did not intend to publish the theses – not only to interpret the world (differently) but to change it, was also a call to the artists? What if it said, “The artists have only *interpreted* the world differently, the point is to *change* it”? What if the artists were also expected to transcend the purely contemplative and go to work, get down to it and change the world? Interpretation is good, and good interpretations are better than bad ones, but without the leap into action, interpretation amounts to nothing, Marx insists, and urges the philosophers and artists to intervene in so-called economic and political reality, to step outside the text. The eleventh Feuerbach thesis points to the necessity of activating the context, transforming it, intervening in the ever-changing network of forces that constitutes a historical situation. A transformation ‘of the last instance’, of the concrete facts of capitalism. Interpretation is to be followed by action, meaning change, Marx urges.

Marx’s mobilization or re-activation of the original activist dimension of philosophy, where interpretation equals change and vice versa – change through analysis and critique of the ruling representations – is also present in art. The early 20th-century avant-garde movements are the most obvious examples of such a stance within art, where formal experiments are associated with the need for a radical transformation of both socio-material reality and human consciousness. Groups like the Surrealists and the Soviet Constructivists were not content only to interpret modern life; they wanted to participate in creating a new life beyond the confines of instrumental rationality and the private ownership of

bourgeois-capitalist society. They were not afraid of being down-to-earth or 'secular'; it was not important to uphold art as a distinct, elevated sphere of reality. What one had to do was realize the potential of art in a transformed everyday life. In order to fulfil its lofty ambitions of liberation and emancipation, art, like philosophy, had to realize itself and negate itself as art. The Feuerbach theses demand a farewell to philosophy and art. Breton and Rodchenko both knew that.

Since the hectic and ambitious attempts of the various avant-garde groups to transform not only art but also everyday life in the 1920s, artists have to different extents been similarly urged to 'get their hands dirty' and work with the contingencies of reality and politics, to intervene in the historical context and to use art as a form of protest outside the art institution.

Artists have become involved in ongoing struggles since then (as well as before then), but during the second part of the 20th century such endeavours have become rare, although of course they have not completely disappeared. Nonetheless, they have been confined more and more to the margins of the institution of art, leaving little room for more committed practices. From the perspective of today, a designation such as 'the post-modern' is primarily useful as a description of this development, where resistance to the established has tended to fade away and be replaced by integration into the commercial system of art and the confirmation of established taste. An art practice like Olafur Eliasson's, which consists of offering neoliberal city councils and museums desperate for more visitors gigantic kitschy spectacles without any kind of depth or alternative representation of the world – reducing art to harmless entertainment and a feel-good experience – is just one of the most recent examples of the disappearance of critical art and the abandonment of the original dream of transforming the world.¹

Despite this development, in which art has become part of an expanded experience economy, artists nonetheless try in times of crisis and in situations where political and economic tensions intensify to live up to Marx's dictum about change, and try to continue the subversive project of the avant-garde. The late 1960s is an obvious example of such an attempt in the USA and South America, as well as on both sides of the Iron Curtain in Europe. We are faced with a dialectical relationship where the withering-away of art as an anti-systemic tool intensifies, but where art is nevertheless still being deployed by relatively marginalized and invisible actors in the contemporary art world, by the forces that Gregory Sholette terms "the dark matter of art".²

9/11 and Capitalist Realism

With 9/11 the need to interpret the world with a view to changing it once more became brutally manifest. The spectacular attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by the Al-Qaeda network, and especially the response from the USA in the form of the so-called “war on terror” put pressure on artists as on all others. Once again, political events superimposed themselves on art and forced artists to reconsider the relationship between artistic practice and ongoing political events. The American defence of the existing post-World War Two and postcolonial world order with its extreme global inequality was now perpetuated with state terror and “indefinite war”. American neoliberalism proved willing to invade sovereign countries without the approval of the UN, as well as to create secret torture prisons in the attempt to secure the wealth of the American and Western plutocracy.

Large parts of contemporary art did not really address this explosive political development, and simply continued as before. As the art historian Benjamin Buchloh writes in the special issue of *October*, contemporary art was thus characterized “by the seeming absence of visible opposition to the Iraq War”.³ The global market for contemporary art and the art institution continued more or less as before as if nothing had happened. The art market boomed in these years and contemporary art was an integral part of the neoliberal finance bubble that grew exponentially in this period. Many works of contemporary art were sold for huge amounts of money, and marketable formats and genres were legion. The themes and styles that were predominant in the galleries in New York, London and Paris were totally disconnected from the stormy, escalating political conflicts and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. That hundreds of thousands of civilians were being killed in the invasions, and that what were once constitutional rights were being ploughed back in the USA, Western Europe and elsewhere – these phenomena were simply invisible. Contemporary art often came off as the cultural expression of an increasingly aggressive and belligerent late capitalism, what the British cultural critic Mark Fischer terms “capitalist realism”.⁴

Confronted with 9/11 and the subsequent wars, the existing art world appeared to be complicit in, even a functional component of the neoliberal complex of state and financial power which, in its attempt to harness the brutal greed driving the world economy, created fictive surplus value, re-colonized Afghanistan and Iraq and suppressed civil rights ‘at home’. The analyses of Marcuse and Debord of art’s ever closer integration into capital and established power seemed once again to ring true, and the

contrast between the mobilization against the Vietnam War of the art world in New York in the late 1960s, and its silence today confronted with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, was overwhelming.⁵ There was apparently enough money in the system for the art world not to worry. Everything was fine.

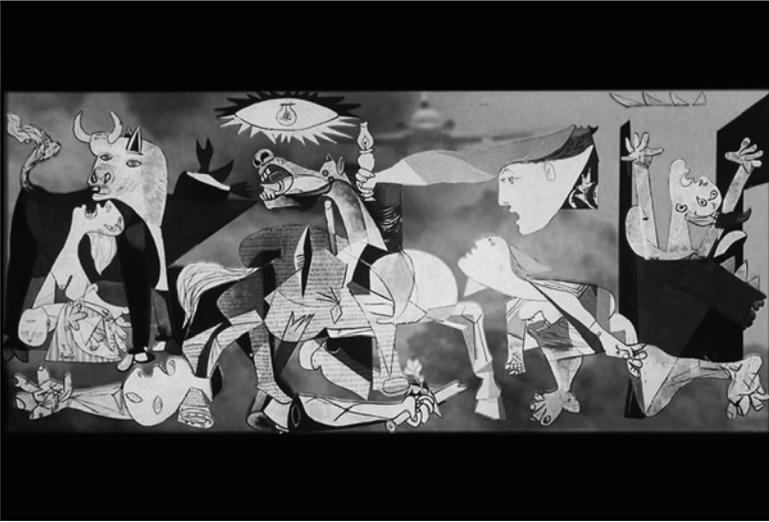
The contrast with the reactions against the Vietnam War is striking. Even though it took some time before there was a major mobilization of artists in the USA in the late 1960s, New York-based groups like Art Workers' Coalition did succeed in mounting relatively large protest actions where art museums like MOMA and the Guggenheim were picketed and forced to close in solidarity with demonstrations and strikes against the war in Vietnam. Before that there had been a number of attempts to make a stand, such as the ad in the *New York Times* in 1965 initiated by the painter Rudolf Baranik and "Angry Art: Anti-War Happening" in 1967, a week-long programme of meetings, exhibitions and poetry readings organized by Baranik in collaboration with the painter Leon Golub and the art critics Barbara Rose and Max Kozloff.⁶ But these events remained relatively isolated, and it was only when the Art Workers' Coalition was created in 1969 that a larger group of artists and art-related people in the USA distanced themselves in a more concerted way from the war, and started collaborating with the contemporary civil rights movement. In the years 1969, 1970 and 1971 the loosely connected coalition was responsible for a long succession of actions against art museums, forcing the museums to include artists on the boards and to publish documents revealing the economic interests of board members in the war in Vietnam.⁷ Any coherent effort along these lines has been sorely lacking in the present situation in connection with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Historical dissent and critique have been scarce. Instead, contemporary art in the '00s has primarily functioned as an exclusive consumer sphere for the wealthy middle and especially upper class who travel from Miami to Basel or Venice searching for experiences and investment opportunities.⁸ In Denmark – a country that abandoned its decade-long foreign policy of support for the UN and as an active broker in international conflict resolution to join George Bush Jr. in invading Afghanistan and Iraq – young internationally acclaimed artists were busy decorating the palace of the Crown Prince, reviving a grotesque feudal celebrity art at a time when Denmark was waging war, participating in military actions where more than a million Iraqis and Afghans lost their lives.

Art as War Resistance

Attempts in the global art world to react to the events and oppose the wars have been few, with nothing comparable to what took place in the late 1960s with the Vietnam War. There have of course been exceptions where artists have tried to use art as a space in which to protest against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and “the war on terror”. Exhibitions like “Memorial to the Iraq War” at ICA in 2007 and “System Error: War is a Force That Gives us Meaning” in Palazzo delle Papesse in Siena the same year tried to address the war and discuss the escalation from above of war and state terror. The exhibition at ICA focused on the Iraq War and consisted of 25 artists’ attempts to create a monument to the ongoing war. Naeem Mohaiemen’s “System Error” focused on the war as a mental state and included comics, press photos and electronic music in an attempt to map war as an always-present unconscious desire.

One of the most interesting examples of the heavy-handed use of the art space as a place for opposition to “the war on terror” was the contribution of the Retort collective to Okwui Enwezor’s Seville Biennale “The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in the Global Society”.⁹ Here anger was given free rein. The installation “Afflicted Powers”, which was located in one of the first rooms of the former monastery turned art centre Centro de Arte Contemporáneo, Monasterio de la Cartuja, was composed of a projection, two pamphlets in stacks on the floor and quotes from John Milton on monitors. The two pamphlets “Neither Their War Neither Their Peace” written and distributed at antiwar demonstrations in San Francisco in February 2003 and “All Quiet on the Eastern Front”, composed during the bombing of Lebanon in August 2006 and distributed on line and published as an article in *New Left Review*, were used to paper two walls of the room in a tile-like orange and brown pattern, as well as stacked on the floor as handouts in English and Spanish that the visitors could pick up and take with them. On the end wall there was a projection of a six-minute film that begins with a black screen and the sound of rain and thunder, and continues with grainy black-and-white images of demonstrations against Franco during the Spanish Civil War that slowly fade into a sequence of images from demonstrations by millions of people against the impending invasion of Iraq. The images from the 1930s and today fade in and out of each other, and throughout the film there are several layers of images at the same time. The sound of rain is replaced by the sound of the demonstrations, where singing and drumming protesters march with a banner depicting Picasso’s *Guernica*, which was originally included in the Spanish Pavilion at the



Retort: Afflicted Powers, Seville Biennial 2006.

World Exposition in Paris in 1937 and depicts the bombing of a Basque town. The film then cuts from the protesters' banner to Picasso's iconic antiwar painting with its deformed animal and human figures, and this in turn becomes a foreground behind which images of air strikes from the Spanish Civil War, World War Two, the Vietnam War, the Iraq War and the bombing by the Israeli State in Lebanon in 2006 appear. Napalm bombing in Vietnam, an Iraqi night sky illuminated by missiles hitting a target, and dead Lebanese children wrapped in plastic are seen behind Picasso's braying horse head, the woman stretching her arms to the sky with a scream and the torn body parts. At the bottom of the image flames shoot up as if the painting is on fire. The horrors of the past and of today fused in a nightmare image of war and destruction. In the sequence where *Guernica* is partly consumed by flames and destroyed by bombs the audio track consists only of rain, thunder and the sound of shots – the songs and drumming of the protesters have disappeared. The images of war and state terror are then replaced by a shot of an airliner landing on a runway against a blue sky. The airliner in this shot brings the war back home, implicating the spectator in the history of terror from above, and the ability of the State to unleash tremendous bouts of death and violence. Because airliners are always former bombers. Then the film cuts to an image of dead children's bodies in makeshift plastic wrappings after the Israeli bombing of Qana in Lebanon in July 2006. At the end *Guernica* fades away and is replaced by a dark night sky sporadically illuminated by lightning or explosions. Opposite the projection there are two LED screens on which a phrase from Milton's *Paradise Lost* is shown: "And reassembling our afflicted Powers, Consult how we may henceforth most offend Our Enemy, our own loss how repair, How overcome this dire Calamity, What reinforcement we may gain from Hope, If not what resolution from despair."¹⁰

The installation was characterized by a consistently sombre tonality. The present is horror, and modernity is mass death. As it says in one of the pamphlets: "We have no words for the horror of the present, for the ghostly bodies showing through the plastic wrap. No words for the faces of despair and elation bubbling from the TV screen, faces of hatred and madness and dedication to death, faces that have had the truth of 'collateral damage' played out to them over the cell-phone videos even before the sound of the drone has faded."

The projection on the end wall connects the antifascist struggle of the 1930s with the opposition to the Iraq War today. Picasso's *Guernica* plays a central role in the movie as an expression of the violence and mass

killing that terror from the air had produced, then and now. Literally out of the blue, unprecedented industrialized mass death materializes, dissolving former front lines and making the idea of the civilian completely meaningless. From Spain to Iraq and back again. That is why Picasso's monument of a painting still speaks to the present, and with Retort's installation *Guernica* returns to Spain as an element in a critique of the terror of the modern nation-state, and continues its life as artistic opposition to such terror. From the Spanish Pavilion in 1936 to the street demonstrations in San Francisco in 2003 to an art biennale in Seville in 2006. The use of Picasso's *Guernica* is of course also a reference to the bizarre scene in February 2003 when UN officials hung a blue curtain over the tapestry reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica* outside the Security Council in the UN building in New York, since the Bush administration deemed the picture an inappropriate background for the American Secretary of State Colin Powell's press conference about the coming American invasion of Iraq.¹¹ The need to control the means of symbolic production gave it all away and confirmed the Situationist analysis of the significance of images in contemporary politics and the State's almost paranoid attempt to control any and every detail of its self-staging.¹² The State is itself subject to the conditions of the Spectacle, so what is shown on the screens matters.

The titles of the two pamphlets in the installation refer to the inter-war period of Picasso's *Guernica*. "Neither Their War Nor Their Peace" refers to the title of a Surrealist pamphlet from 1938 "Ni de votre guerre, ni de votre paix" in which the French Surrealists opposed the United Front government of Léon Blum, which abstained from intervening in the Spanish Civil War, thereby giving Franco a free hand to kill off the Spanish Republic. "All Quiet on the Eastern Front" is a detournement of the English title of Erich Marie Remarque's novel from 1929 (*Im Westen nichts Neues*) about the horrors that German soldiers experienced at the front in World War One. These references and the use of *Guernica* create a dialectical image in Walter Benjamin's sense, where the past sheds light upon the present in a moment of danger. As Benjamin writes, the victims of the past spring forth from the depths of history and demand retaliation, fill the moment with potency, with revolutionary potential, and blow it out of the advancing continuity of modernity and the eternal return of primitive accumulation such as war and looting. Such images channel the anger of the defeated and transform it into courage and resistance. The struggles of today and the outstanding debts of the past are brought together. The present is possessed by the past and the crisis

continues. The military actions of the USA today in Iraq are in that respect a continuation of Franco's war in the 1930s; both are examples of state terror where the nation-state declares a state of emergency, takes control of science and the economy and uses all available technological-instrumental means to achieve brutal political-economic ends.

Retort's installation "Afflicted Powers" presents itself as an attempt to challenge the ruling powers and their deadly combination of extreme military power and 24-hour spectacle with the politics of fear, but with no illusions about the ability of art to alter this state of affairs. The installation therefore points to the antiwar resistance out in the streets, and evokes the contours of a coming revolutionary 'collective subject' able to challenge both the war and the peace of the ruling order. As they write in the pamphlet from 2003: "The best we can offer is negative wisdom, addressed to comrades in a dark and confusing time. The answer to War is not Peace. 'War is the health of the state', as Randolph Bourne indelibly put it, but so is the so-called Peace that the state stage-manages for us -the peace of cemeteries, the peace of 'sanctions' and 'containment', the peace of the 'Peace Process' (photo opportunities on the White House lawn plus gunships and bulldozers in Jenin), the decade of Iraqi deaths unseen on your TV screens. 'Neither their War nor their Peace' should be our slogan."

The installation in Seville is a spatial staging of this "negative wisdom", a pamphlet made into an art work where Retort points towards the existence – however brief and ephemeral – of a critical collective subject and at the same time rejects false hopes and focuses on the current defeat of the war resistance, the fact that the enormous demonstrations against the war in Iraq all over the world had no impact on the political decisions. The political horizon was blocked off by "the war on terror". In the film the war machine, overriding public opinion, annuls the collective subject in the streets and sets whole countries on fire trying to prolong capital's insatiable need for profit. The chaos of voices, rhythms and banners at the beginning of the film points towards a public sphere that could have existed but was suppressed and replaced with an image economy in the service of capital equipped with overwhelming military power. The installation is therefore characterized by a certain kind of literalness. Beyond the obedient complicity of the media in the coverage of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Retort tries to visualize and show the truth of the victims. They *do* exist and cannot be dismissed with a reference to the complex formal play of art and the indefinite displacement of the referent. Retort is not primarily interested in aesthetic subtleties, but

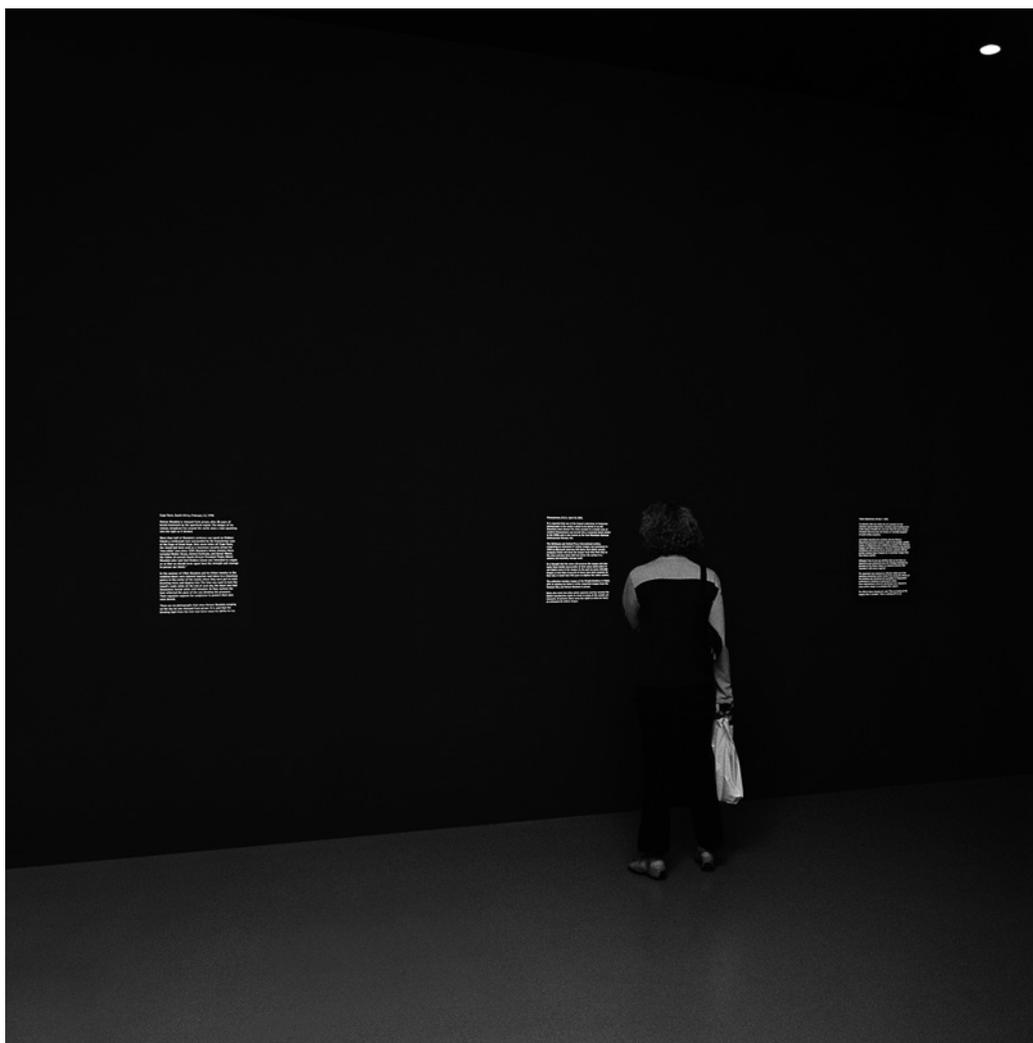
in effect. The historical situation forces them to react. The barbarism of capitalist modernity has to be rejected.

Beyond the illusions of the autonomy and unlimited freedom of the art space, Retort's approach is 'old-fashioned avant-garde modernist'; following on from former avant-garde projects like the Situationist International's "Destruction of RSG-6" in 1963, there is less focus on aesthetic delicacies and more focus on political analysis and the exposure of injustices.¹³ It's a kind of clumsy installation art of angry protest, a propaganda tool for furious resistance to war, and a pessimistic anti-capitalist analysis.

Negative War Aesthetics

While Retort in "Afflicted Powers" takes a very explicit or heavy-handed approach where they mock the state and show the horror of the war with an array of images, the Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar chooses to refrain from showing images at all in his installation "Lament of the Images", which was included in Okwui Enwezor's "Documenta XI" in 2002.¹⁴ Jaar's installation consists of two spaces separated by a long corridor. In the first room, which is sparsely lit, there are three white-glowing texts on the wall next to one another. The first text describes the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 after 28 years of imprisonment on Robben Island, where photographers from all over the world were present to document the event as Mandela was released. Mandela did not weep – he had lost the ability to do so as a prisoner working in the limestone quarry where white limestone reflected the glare of the sun. The next text explains how Bill Gates plans to digitalize a large collection of photographs – 17 million historical photographs from the Bettmann and United Press International archives, including some of Mandela's release – and afterwards bury them in a 220-foot deep inaccessible mine in Pennsylvania, making the digital versions available for purchase on line. Gates owns 65 million photographs he plans to digitalize and bury. The last text describes how the American Department of Defense bought the right to all satellite images of Afghanistan and neighbouring countries before the invasion of Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, making it impossible to access any images of the invasion besides the ones the American military supplied, and thus effecting a 'blackout' of the invasion of Afghanistan. After reading the three texts, the spectator walks along a small narrow corridor before reaching a new room with a light emanating from a big bright screen that momentarily blinds the spectator who finds her/himself in front of the screen with no images to see. Images are absent or have been removed.

As the American visual theorist Johanna Drucker writes in "Making



Alfredo Jaar, Lament of the Images, 2002. Courtesy of the artist, New York.

Space: Image Events in an Extreme Space”, Jaar’s installation is a critique of the image control that characterizes modern capitalist society.¹⁵ The texts in Jaar’s installation about Gates and the American Defense Department point to the strict control exercised when states and companies buy the rights to pictures and either sell them or keep them secret and invisible. What we are confronted with is the political and political-economic control of images.

“Lament of the Images” prompts a discussion of the blindness of the spectator; lots of things are invisible: things we cannot see, things images cannot reproduce. The important and true images do not exist, or are being kept back, buried, and cannot be captured in a photograph. The three illuminated texts question the ability of images to reproduce an event and represent it in all its complexity. Instead of trying to show the invisible images, Jaar empties the art space of images and confronts the spectator with a blank white screen that forces the viewer to close her/his eyes for a brief moment. The light does not render visible; it conceals. There is nothing to see. As the American art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes, “the installation physically mimics Mandela’s and the other prisoners’ experience in the quarry”.¹⁶ This is negative representation in Theodor W. Adorno’s sense, where a traumatic historical event is brought forth and presented indirectly.¹⁷ Unlike the dominant negative aesthetic of representation practiced for instance by Daniel Liebeskind, Anselm Kiefer and others, Jaar’s installation is directly connected with ongoing political conflicts, although without making explicit the violence of the capitalist mode of production.

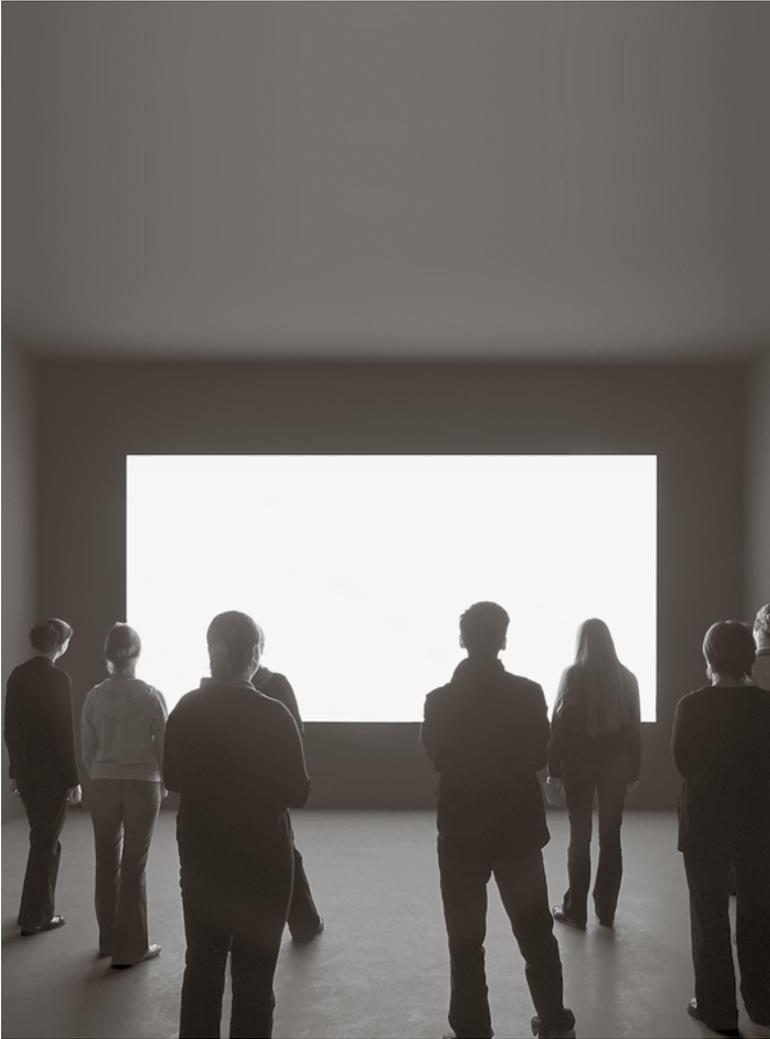
As the title indicates, the installation is a lament. The images are gone, buried by the world’s richest man or hidden by the American state as part of an image-political, military operation. This has been the case with Afghanistan and was even more so with Iraq. Today there exists a global sphere of images – that is, a sphere where images circulate globally and are interpreted in local contexts that oblige the State to intensify its control of the images. Huge economic and political interests are at stake here, and not only the State, but also a variety of political and religious groups and multinational firms are trying to possess, control and direct the images. Jaar therefore doubts whether images are able to testify any more. It is no use relying on the revelatory potential of the images, their capacity to uncover and show hidden truths. Today images are either kept back, stay within closed circuits or do not reproduce the important aspects of an event. We cannot trust the images we are allowed to see, and there is no point showing revealing images, as they only confirm

the visual bombardment that makes it impossible to orient oneself and evaluate the circulating representations, whether they are circulating as press images or as artworks. Today both have become a kind of smoke screen.

The control of images has been especially evident in connection with these wars, as one of Jaar's examples shows. The American military has tried to exercise control – so far invisible – of images from the battlefields in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the images that circulate tend to have a special character which in effect makes the war invisible. Even though new, more accessible image technologies have made it possible for ordinary soldiers and private individuals to take photographs and videos and thus function as amateur war photographers, it is very rare for such images to surface in the wider public sphere. Of course it happens. The photographs from Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad are the best example of that. American soldiers abused Iraqi prisoners there – and documented it. The photographs from the prison are an example showing that the Defense Department's control of the images is not always successful. But this is the exception. Ordinarily the military decides on and is able to control which images get out. As the American war photographer Zorian Miller explains in an interview, the military makes it almost impossible to see "the reality of war".¹⁸ Miller's example is the very few images that have circulated of the more than 4,400 American soldiers killed in Iraq. There is no doubt that the relationship between military and press has become really close. As early as 2000 the journalist Alexander Cockburn revealed that the American cable news channel CNN had employed a handful of people who were at the same time part of the psychological research team at the American military base Fort Bragg.¹⁹

Besides controlling the media, the army also tries to control the image production of the individual soldier. Drawing on the lessons of the Vietnam War, where a significant part of the American public was slowly mobilized into opposition to the war when confronted with images of dead American soldiers, the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld prohibited the use of cellphones with cameras in 2004 following the circulation of photos of coffins with dead American soldiers wrapped in the Stars and Stripes.²⁰ At the same time the American military blocked all access to Internet pages such as Youtube and Myspace from army computers. Instead soldiers were offered the opportunity to upload images on the army's own homepages, where one can also find official videos from operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.²¹

Jaar's conclusion regarding this development is that the image has lost



Alfredo Jaar, *Lament of the Images*, 2002. Courtesy of the artist, New York.

its ability to show truth. Art therefore has to create images differently. It is no longer relevant to try to locate the non-spectacular images, because the photographic testimony will necessarily end up as part of the spectacle. Jaar is torn between on the one hand wanting to show the tragic and terrible effects of war, and on the other hand knowing that artistic representation is unable to capture the event in all its complexity. This is the tension Jaar is trying to express in his both radically iconoclastic and nostalgically iconolatric installation which points self-reflexively to the disappearance of the image, and mourns the missing counter-image, doubting the critical capabilities of art. After working with the genocide in Rwanda himself for years, Jaar doubts the ability of images and art to render such events. When governments lie consistently, art's ability to create fictions loses its significance. Art can try to mock state power, accusing it of being cynical, demagogic and murderous; but mockery is ineffective when confronted with lies, torture and mass killing. The images of suffering no longer mean anything. They glide smoothly into the image-bombardment of the media, or disappear as a result of the manipulation of the State. As Jaar explains: "I believe we have lost the ability to see and be moved by images."²²

The image is no longer an objective, neutral presentation of facts. In Jaar's installation there is therefore no authoritative political position that can base its utterances on the unquestionable truth-value of the evidence, as is the case in Retort's "Afflicted Powers". In "Lament of the Images" it is the spectators' interpretation that is central, and the unambiguity of representation is questioned. Jaar shows that reality is more something that is produced than a fact to be understood. This does not mean that we have to take flight into a fantasy world disconnected from politics, but that uncertainty is a constitutive basis of any future image-creation that defies the easily decipherable signs of the media: a kind of weak, defensive politics of the image that nonetheless makes an attempt at opposition.

Exodus

Each in their own way, Jaar and Retort use the relative autonomy of the art space to reflect on and criticize the wars of the present situation. Of course it remains questionable what the gallery space and the art institution can offer in this state of affairs. Small, limited gains are clearly of some value, especially now. All counter-images count. But most contemporary art confirms rather than challenges the spectacle and the dominant politics of fear. It is therefore important to dismiss all the illusions

in circulation about the redeeming potential of art. The conception of the ability of autonomous art to transcend barbarism and refine humankind has always been grossly exaggerated, as American queer theorist Leo Bersani writes in his *The Culture of Redemption*.²³ This of course does not mean that we should give up, or that art cannot play an important role in the anti-capitalist and anti-systemic struggle. Nor does it mean that art cannot produce counter-images. The history of the avant-garde shows that it can. But the history of the avant-garde also shows how necessary it is to take critical action against the institution of art if the social-revolutionary potential of art is to be realized and used to produce counter-images to state terror, the politics of fear and racist exclusion. Jaar's negative presentation and Retort's heavy-handed propaganda both exemplify how the space of art can be used as a place for the production and presentation of counter-images. It is fortunately still possible to be critical of the art institution and to mourn its continued wretchedness, as is the case with Jaar, or to attempt some kind of Brechtian refunctioning, like Retort; but it is only outside the institution that a creative anti-systemic, anti-capitalist praxis is truly possible. It is likely that those who used to be called artists can best contribute to the creation of another world as elements of a wider anti-capitalist struggle outside the art institution forgetting the conventions and norms of contemporary art. Retort point in this direction with their installation where art is just one means among others including demos, books and pamphlets. The lessons of the protest art of the 1960s, the AIDS activism of the 1980s and the 'blacker' fractions of the alter-globalization movement can all be starting points for such a creative praxis on the margins of or wholly outside the sacred halls of art. Today counter-images are rarely produced in art. Instead it is the photographs from Abu Ghraib or the Wikileaks videos that shift the balance of power and threaten to discredit the nation-state and weaken its grip on the population. The September 11, 2001 precision bombing of New York and Washington is one sign of the importance of images in modern capitalist society. Art could be turned into a privileged social sphere where creative dissent is produced, but this is rarely the case. At present contemporary art is not where this battle takes place, and contemporary art is not the sphere within which the counter-images are produced. Marx was right, then: the crucial efforts will take place 'outside the text'.

Thanks to Iain Boal.

Notes

1. As T. J. Clark writes: “And maybe it is true that there could and can be no modernism without the practical possibility of an end to capitalism existing.” *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 9.

2. “[C]reative dark matter [...] makes up the bulk of the artistic activity produced in our post-industrial society. However, this type of dark matter is invisible primarily to those who lay claim to the management and interpretation of culture.” Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), p. 1.

3. Benjamin Buchloh and Rachel Churner, “Introduction”, *October*, no. 123, 2008, p. 3. Symptomatically for this state of affairs, until this theme issue *October* had not addressed or discussed the “war on terror” or the war resistance that did take place on streets and on the margins of the art institution.

4. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There no Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009).

5. Herbert Marcuse, “On the Affirmative Character of Culture” [“Über den affirmativen Charakter der Kultur”, 1937], in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Mayfly, 2009), pp. 65–98.

6. For an analysis of Baranik’s projects, see David Craven, *The Poetics and Politics of Rudolf Baranik* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997). For an analysis of the politicization of the New York art scene, from the ad in New York Times to the Art Workers’ Coalition, see Francis Francina, *Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999).

7. For a contemporary account of the Art Workers’ Coalition, see Lucy Lippard, “The Art Workers’ Coalition: Not a History”, *Studio International*, no. 927, 1972, pp. 171–74. Recent accounts include Julia Bryan-Wilson, “From Artists to Art Workers”, in *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 13–39; and Alan W. Moore, “Taking It Out of the Modern: Founding the Art Worker’s Coalition”, in *Art Gangs: Protest & Counterculture in New York City* (New York: Autonomedia, 2011), pp. 10–26.

8. Cf. Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

9. The formulation “heavy-handed use of art” comes from Guy Debord’s description of the Situationists’ approach to art in the text “The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics and War” [“Les Situationnistes et les nouvelles formes d’action dans la politique ou l’art”, 1963], trans. Thomas Y. Levin, in Tom McDonough (ed.), *Guy Debord and the Situationist International* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 159–66.

10. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I [1667], available online: www.paradiselost.org

11. Betsy Pisik, "The Picasso Cover-Up", *Washington Times*, February 3, 2003.

12. Cf. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* [*La société du spectacle*, 1967], trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

13. In 1963 the Situationist International mounted an exhibition at Gallerie Exi in Odense in Denmark where they transformed the gallery into a nuclear shelter as a critique of the nuclear power balance of the early 1960s. The exhibition was considered a continuation of the actions of the British Spies for Peace who had revealed the existence of secret bunkers in Britain in April 1963. Cf. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, "To Act In Culture While Being Against All Culture: The Situationists and the 'Destruction of RSG-6'", in *Expect Anything Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere*, eds. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen (Copenhagen: Nebula; New York: Autonomedia, 2011), pp. 75–113.

14. In his short article "Gaza" Francis Frascina juxtaposes Retort's "Afflicted Powers" and Jaar's "Lament of the Images". My juxtaposition of Retort and Jaar is indebted to Frascina's. Francis Frascina, "Gaza", *Art Monthly*, no. 325, 2009, pp. 9–12.

15. Johanna Drucker, "Making Space: Image Events in an Extreme State", *Cultural Politics*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2008, pp. 25–46.

16. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Lament of the Images: Alfredo Jaar and the Ethics of Representation", *Aperture*, no. 181, 2005, p. 42.

17. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Trying to Understand *Endgame*" ["Versuch, das *Endspiel* zu verstehen", 1961], trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen, in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 241–75.

18. Nils Thomsen, "Krigen uden ansigt. Interview med Zorian Miller", *Politikeren*, 6 September 2008, p. 14.

19. Cf. Alexander Cockburn, "CNN and Psyops", *Counterpunch*, 26 March 2000, available online at www.counterpunch.org/cnnpsyops.html

20. For an analysis of the role of the American media in communicating the horrors of the Vietnam War, see Daniel Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). According to Hallin more or less all the major mainstream American media understood themselves less as reporters and more as patriots.

21. Cf. Patrick Jackson, "Controlling the Bandwidth of War", *BBC News*, 15 May 2007, available online at www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6657309.stm

22. Alfredo Jaar in interview with Pat Binder, 2002; quoted by Solomon-Godeau, "The Lament of the Images", p. 42.

23. Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).