Critique through the Skin
Wafaa Bilal's *and Counting…*

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Skin, one of the crucial components of body art performances, is indispensable to Wafaa Bilal's durational performance and Counting… *(2010). This article proposes to analyze the semiotics of the skin as a pivotal component of this truly unique artwork, in which the artist merges durational performance art with the act of tattooing. The essay clarifies how Bilal reveals unexpected avenues for thinking about racism and American imperialism, as well as the traumatic effects of global violence by resorting to vulnerability and pain as aesthetic devices. The skin of the artist acts as an interface between the public, the artist, and the deceased of the war in Iraq to produce a reflection on life and loss. Drawing on phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and performance studies, among other things, the analysis examines the potential for performance to generate forms of intersubjective exchange. Bridging the ever-expanding field of skin studies with performance studies and art history, this article theorizes how artistic interpretations of wars may deploy the personal as universal, connecting seemingly remote cultural contexts and relating the history of global violence to the Western public.*

Not long after 8 pm on March 8, 2010, inside the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts in downtown Manhattan, Wafaa Bilal (b. 1966) is sitting, his torso against the back of a chair The characteristic buzz of the electric tattoo machines – its diffuse vibration will form a discreet soundscape for the entirety of the performance – directs the visitor's gaze to the tattoo artist, bent over the back of Bilal. The exhibition space is bathed in a bluish light, which blends with the room's fluorescents. In one corner, facing the artist, someone is solemnly reciting names into a microphone, imbuing the scene with the aura of a strange ceremony; this scene is that of Bilal's performance titled *and Counting…* (Ill. 1). This performance work was intended to ar-

ILL. 1
Wafaa Bilal, *and Counting…*, 2010, performance, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York. Source: https://wafaabilal.com/and-counting/. Courtesy of the artist.

ticulate and "[feel] the pain of both American and Iraqi families who have lost loved ones in the war" in Iraq. As the artist further insisted, the performance aimed to render visible what is usually described as "casualties," whose deaths are often relegated to invisibility in the American context.[1] Devised as an endurance work, *and Counting…* spanned over 24 hours, during which a tattooist created a design composed of 100,000 tiny dots in transparent (blacklight) green ink and 5,000 in red ink on Bilal's bare back. American deaths in the war were symbolized in red, while the blacklight ink evoked the Iraqi deaths.[2] These marks are placed over a minimalist, schematic map of Iraq displaying only the names of the country's main cities, written in Arabic, the contour of his back defining the map's limits. During the performance, the public was tasked with reciting all the names of the disappeared Iraqis and Americans at a microphone nearby.

This enumeration was doomed to failure, yet it effectively echoed the impossibility of the task undertaken by the artist to portray death and loss on such a scale. Even though the event ran almost through the entire 24 hours, Bilal could not make it to the end nor endure the completion of the 105,000 tattooed dots. The pain was overwhelming, and his back was so swollen and red that the process could not go on any further. Although only 25,000 dots, a fraction of the intended number, were tattooed, his back was already covered with them (Pellegrinelli, 2010). But this "failure" points to the irrepresentability of death and grief and the difficulty of truly accounting for the tremendous number of deaths. Bilal's project, therefore, refers to the insufficiency of statistics and systematic representation of war to fully account for the lived experience of loss (Kapadia, 2019, pp. 93-94). His intervention proposes a sensuous mediation of harrowing events, which, in conjunction with the numbers and statistics, calls for a recognition of the universality of pain and the disruption of the apathy toward death often induced by the mass media. The different components of the performance sought to make audible, visible, and felt – often in metonymic ways – the actual existence of Iraqis whose lives were taken.[3] Through the tattooing of these indexical dots, Bilal aimed to render each one its own particular event.

As this article will demonstrate, the skin is a platform on which the performative action of *and Counting…* extends from the closely personal to the largely global. As a signifier of our shared humanness, skin is a deeply personal yet public attribute and functions as a metonym for the whole body. The biggest organ of the human body also *contains* it. Being the most fundamental sense organ, skin is that without which one cannot survive, nor can one survive if it is heavily damaged (Lafrance, 2018, p. 4). It is simultaneously envelope, surface, and vessel; interfacing the external world and the monadic self, it is also what is marked by stigmata: racist, social, and historical categorization, exclusion, violence, and afflictions. Understood as the outward manifestation of "internal" characteristics (such as "race"), skin color casts its bearer in a determined (and oft-unsurpassable) difference. Yet, what most strongly characterizes skin as a marker of difference is, paradoxically, that we all share it. Bilal's work astutely points to this difference/semblance dichotomy and the recognition of an erro-

neous difference that founds forms of racism. For instance, in the context of the War in Iraq, the perception of the Iraqi as an inherently different being facilitates the acceptance of their death as a mere casualty. We are all equals for we all have a carnal envelope, but not all skins are valued equally.

In the public discourse of the United States (and in much of the so-called West), the skin of the Middle Easterner becomes the surface onto which stereotypical and hyperbolic fantasies about Arabs' sexual backwardness, violence, and religiousness coalesce to confirm what is already supposed. A set of random forms comes to perform a falsely coherent syntagm, which the person becomes a prisoner of. The attribute of being an Iraqi forges a marker as indelible as tattoo ink; Whereas nobody thinks of tattooing as a signifier of moral degeneracy, like in the 19th century, the skin's mere surface perversely comes to confirm already known prejudices rather than allowing the individuals to appear for what they are. The artwork does not elucidate the indifference of the American people and the apparent absence of regard from the Western public to their Iraqi counterparts. Quite the opposite, it troubles the possibility of a single adequate representation. *and Counting…* shows that what stands out as different is always, nonetheless, included. Like skin and tattoo, which are ambiguous signifiers at the crossroads between the universality of humanness and signifiers of difference, death and trauma are what shall be included in the accounts of the influence of the United States of America on other parts of the world, notably the Middle East, and in our case specifically, Iraq. Through the skin, the personal merge with the historical and political, and the public is invited to recognize that the lives of Americans are inextricably tied to the lives – and deaths – of Iraqis. While the performance fosters a possibility of recognizing this fact, it foregrounds the fundamental failure to recognize entailed in the repeated disavowal of humanness that undergirds racism.

And Counting… The Psychoanalytics of Racism

The work originates in the death of Bilal's brother, Haji, who was killed by an American missile at a checkpoint in their hometown of Kufa in 2004. However untimely, the tragic event made him one of the many hundred thousand Iraqi deaths caused by the "war on terror", launched by the United

States in 2003, in the aftermath of the attacks on the country on September 11, 2001. Evoking a cathartic response to a traumatic personal experience, the performance confirms the artist's own path through the tangled global routes of displaced people and armed conflicts. Born in Iraq in 1966, Wafaa Bilal was forced to flee shortly after the first Gulf War (1990-91) because of his art and activism against Saddam Hussein's regime (van Sertima, 2011, p. 4). He fled to Kuwait and immigrated to the United States a few years later, where he undertook artistic studies.[4] His personal story also echoes a history of imperialist, military interventions that marked the recent history of Iraq. First through the British occupation (1980-88) and through the United States interventions in the Middle East and Asia that throughout the second half of the 20th century (also referred to as the Forever War) (Kapadia, 2019, pp. 76-77). In *Domestic Tension* (2007), created "to address this chasm between the comfort and conflict zones" (Bilal and Lydersen, 2008, p. 11), the artist established residence for a month inside a room of the FlatFile Gallery in Chicago, where he lived – quite literally – under the gun for a month. With the help of collaborators, he created a motorized paintball gun mounted on a rotating axis whose range could cover most of the space. Programmed to allow it to be controlled remotely through an online platform, a gamified user interface allowed online visitors to shoot at the artist in real time. As the experiment unfolded, a thick layer of gooey yellow paint built up to cover every inch of the room, Bilal's body and clothes, spreading like a second skin.

Throughout the month, the participants were also invited to exchange comments in a chatroom accessed through the online platform. Excerpts of these conversations, reproduced in Bilal's memoirs, show how cruel and unapologetic people can be when hidden behind their screens and keyboards. Some of the worst comments made by players or spectators logged in the chat seemed determined by an orientalist racism: "Anyone stupid enough to set this whole thing up deserves to be shot" (Bilal and Lydersen, 2008, p. 81), "72 virgins await him" (p. 82), "Baba ghanoush" (p. 79) and repeated calls to death. Those comments demonstrate that orientalist viewpoints and Western supremacy do not necessarily come from the accumulation of knowledge about the other, as Edward W. Said suggests in *Orientalism*, (Said, 1979, pp. 31-51) but rather from a vulgar articulation of

stereotyped ideas about the person they are aimed at. It also demonstrates the inherent anti-Arab sentiments of the post-2001 era. In the United States and beyond, 2001 represents a tipping point where perceptions of Middle Eastern people drastically shifted. The years following saw the figure of the dangerous terrorist take the leading role in racist fantasies about the Arab man, replacing that of an overtly hypersexual yet naïve figure with one of extreme violence and control (especially toward women – as manifested by Western media's obsession with themes such as female sexuality, the veil, etc.) (McGowan, 2022, pp. 65-69). This evolution of perceptions morally justified as well as underlay the illegal military intervention (Hussain and Ahmad, 2020, p. 72), and motivated the desire for action despite tangible evidence.

Film scholar and philosopher Todd McGowan describes the unconscious roots of racism not as a problem of knowing (an epistemological problem), but as a problem of enjoyment (McGowan, 2022, pp. 7-9). Fueling the racist's behavior, the racist structure emerges from the erroneous reasoning that a certain object of desire is rendered inaccessible because the racial other is standing in the way. Impeding on one's enjoyment, the violence that is required to get rid of the inconvenient racialized subject acts as the process from which enjoyment is derived, while only reinforcing the appeal to racism (McGowan, 2022, pp. 27-28). The self-fulfilling nature of the system instills the mainstream discourse on the Forever War with the conception that the Arab could be conceived as the one who prevents American citizens from enjoying some form of past freedom that would have been withdrawn from them. Bilal's artwork thus emerges from a visual regime where skin color not only often defines one's social and economic status, but more pervasively, through racialization, determines one's right to live or die, based on the preservation of others' enjoyment. In this schema, external threats are substituted for internal issues, and the security imperative invoked by proponents of military interventionism abroad masks problems inherent in and internal to the United States.

Already in 1952, in an early theorization of the psychoanalytic implications of racism, Frantz Fanon described skin as the visual enabler of racism, or, as he put it, the "epidermalization of inferiority" (Fanon, 1952, p. 8). His seminal *Black Skin White Masks* explores how racialized individuals

are subjected to violence and racism because of the very color of their skin. Fanon discusses the near impossibility for the visually racialized individual to become the white's equal as a "corporeal curse" (Fanon, 1952, pp. 89-90). Immediately following the September attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, Balbir Singh Sodhi, an Indian immigrant to the U.S., was murdered by someone who mistakenly mistook him for a Muslim man.[5] The 2005 case of Jean Charles de Menezes, a Brazilian worker in London who was killed by the London police after agents mistakenly identified him as an Arab terrorist, is also exemplary of this curse.[6] These examples highlight how the ascription of an "identity" onto brown-skinned persons operates in dangerous ways in the wake of the 21st century, making them become the object of a heightened scrutiny over the last 25 years. Accounts of the issue of race prior to the new millennium made clear that the issue of "race" has evolved to include Middle Eastern people or Americans of Middle Eastern descent in the United States. If it was previously more of a political question, largely dependent on the Israel-Palestine question (Hatab Samhan, 1987, pp. 11-12), perceptions of Arab people have evolved to resemble more classical conceptions of "race". Skin has therefore become, literally, inescapable for those perceived as Arabs.

For centuries, skin was thought to hold no secret about its bearer's internal conditions: a marker of health, immorality, backwardness, or degeneracy, skin afflictions were used by artists to connote negative moral or social attributes (Reinarz, 2013, pp. 8-9). It was a screen that "broadcasted messages about the person wearing it" (Reinarz, 2013, p. 8). In this sense, if skin was assumed to be (and still is, to a great extent,) the external manifestation of a subject's inferiority, and problematically, the equivalent to their interiority (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001, p. 4), it confirms that race works as a self-confirmation process. As the historian Barbara J. Fields and sociologist Karen Fields demonstrated with their notion of "racecraft", the existence of race is based on a tautological reasoning in which the markers that are supposed to prove the existence of different races emerge from the idea that races exist in the first place; the process of racecraft therefore consists in confirming the existence of race using parameters that were themselves created by race (Fields and Fields, 2012), and involve a near-magical procedure (racecraft as a form of witchcraft), by which cultural and social

features both appear to be clarified by race and are deployed to produce and naturalize race.[7] Recourse to race thus serves to naturalize historically, socially and economically determined inequalities and inherently carries the idea of a biological hierarchy among human individuals.

Such confusion between the outside and the inside generates the schema of inescapability described by Frantz Fanon, where one's physical appearance restricts one's general claim to universality. Worse, to only oppose rational arguments to those racist attitudes remains useless, as they are founded in inconsistencies and contradictions, and the failure to recognize the other as an equal contributes to another form of aesthetic enjoyment. In some of his performances, such as *Domestic Tension*, Bilal surrenders himself to the racist impulses of an anonymous yet active audience. In *and Counting…,* Bilal's interpellation/identification as an Iraqi person, which once seemed absolute and inescapable, now seems almost uncanny, as it unarms the violence of the anonymous crowd and substitutes it with the intimacy of a common gesture. Focusing on the body of the artist without his voice or gesture, the space created by the performance allows not only for the recognition of the Iraqi as equal to all others, but conversely for the American as an equal to the Iraqi.

Thinking through the Skin[8]

Skin is a border of surprisingly malleable nature; at once porous and permeable, it adapts, morphs, is marked by different contexts and marks in return. Skin is the most visible and expressive organ of the body, and this is why performance has seen it be used to represent the actualization of individual subjectivity (Roques and Vigarello, 2013, pp. 85-87). Sylvie Roques and Georges Vigarello demonstrate that hurting skin is an effective strategy to illustrate human suffering in general (Roques and Vigarello, 2013, pp. 93-94). Skin marks. It registers the shape of teeth when bitten; skin wrinkles, it bumps, folds when torn or bunched; it blushes and changes texture when harmed. Blood creates a color and texture contrast with skin, whose surface then becomes something like a canvas. Simultaneously, it acts both as a visual signifier of difference and as an interface enabling the transformative, intersubjective experience central to the discipline

of performance art. Skin is capable of "double sensation": it touches and reciprocates touch – it is simultaneously the subject and object of touch (Lafrance, 2018). Skin creates the materiality of the signifier as much as the signifier defines its materiality (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001, p. 15). Despite not being fully containable, skin has a concrete materiality, and its corporeal existence, as skin scholar Marc Lafrance underscores, "is omnipresent and inescapable: there is no getting beyond it. On the other hand, however, the skin is always already in flux. It is a fluid boundary and a leaky interface" (Lafrance, 2018, p. 6). Unless hidden, skin is always available to sight. It interrupts gaze, and meaning is projected and diffracted on its surface. But it is only this: a mere surface that evades assumptions about the depth it conceals. In itself, precisely – as Fanon demonstrated – skin has no depth.[9] Just as film scholar Laura U. Marks has argued for the filmic medium's hapticity, skin operates as a screen upon which images and symbolism merge through sensorial cognition, where they summon conscious and unconscious sensorial associations (Marks, 2002, p. 222). The sight/site of the skin in the performance entails a subconscious recognition of the spectator's own derma; this phenomenon emphasizes the role of skin in the differentiation between self and other (Cavanagh, Failler and Hurst (eds.), 2012, pp. 3-4), but also as the connection between the self and this other.

Compared to the strategy used for *Domestic Tension*, which aimed at extending beyond the borders of the art world into the world (Kamat and Bilal, 2010, p. 318), the event at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts occurs on a quasi-epidermal scale. The movements the artist executes are minimal, and the performance operates through an intimate (if still public) mode, reminiscent of the logic of familial gatherings or of certain mourning practices. Conducting the event, the artist is present but surrenders to the tattooist and the audience, adopting a posture of radical vulnerability. By being tattooed by another artist, Bilal submits to the artistic action of the other, seemingly surrendering the very creative gesture involved in realizing part of the artwork. At times, he asks that the lights be turned off in order to be able to see the blacklight ink. Nonetheless, his nominal role in the unfolding action has the effect of distributing his agency amongst the room, as if the audience had a tangible responsibility. This device radicalizes a vulnerable stance reminiscent of performers dating back to the seventies.

Cultural theorist Ronak K. Kapadia draws on Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* to highlight this element of the performance, claiming that "closer inspection reveals that [Bilal's] work resonates […] with the radical passivity that Halberstam sees in female masochistic performances" in the sense that Bilal knowingly "participate[s] in the 'willing giving over of the self to the other, to power.'" (Kapadia, 2019, p. 89). Artists such as Chris Burden, Gina Pane, and the duo Abramović-Ulay all enacted self-masochistic actions that emphasized the importance of the body in a fragile equilibrium between human subjectivity and its relationality to others (O'Dell, 1998, pp. 26-27). Chris Burden in *Shoot*, 1971, was shot in the arm by a collaborator to evoke the consequences of wars and gun violence in the United States; between the early 1970s and the 1980s, Gina Pane made a series of feminist performances in which she subjected herself to pain, using the cutting of her skin with a razorblade as a recurring motif (*Lait chaud* (1972), *Azione sentimentale* (1973), *Le corps pressenti* (1975), etc.); *In Talking about Similarity* (1976); Mariana Abramović and Ulay staged a dialogue in which, after the latter had sown his lips shut with a needle and thread, Abramović had to answer the public's questions in his place. All three cases deploy pain as a social tool and a vehicle for critique. Moreover, it asserts the other as the necessary counterpart for subjectivity formation to occur and to safeguard the quality of gesture as an artwork.

Performance scholar Kathy O'Dell's book *Contract with the Skin* discusses such canonical performances and suggests that a contract-like bond is formed between the artist and audience members through the display of transgressive acts of self-harm (O'Dell, 1998, p. 2). For O'Dell, the metaphor of the contract refers to the prevalence of legal practices in modern life and works to clarify the unspoken understanding that occurs between audience and performers. This form of figurative contract is what brings the public, artists, and collaborators to accept otherwise unacceptable actions and to remain in their assigned roles (O'Dell, 1998, pp. 2-4). Contemporary societies, for instance, pathologize the decision to self-harm because this type of transgression of bodily integrity is deemed to threaten life itself and to compromise the skin's quality as a sacred boundary (Le Breton, 2006, p. 478). But as sociologist David Le Breton emphasizes, attacks against the skin are never targeted at life, but rather

always constitute attacks against some symbolic meaning attached to this skin (Le Breton, 2006, p. 476). This is why the laceration, the opening of the derma, and the spilling of blood are deemed adequate vehicles of meaning in artistic contexts (Le Breton, 2013, pp. 106-108). They operate precisely as sacrificial acts: they allow the subject to operate on themselves a transformation of the sacrificed substance, a radical revolution of the self (Le Breton, 2006, p. 478). Paradoxically, the public's presence secures the effective separation between a true self-destructive act and the destructive act as allegory (Cascarino, 2018, p.156). Still, it does so precisely through its non-intervention; denoting in passing that the perverse hapticity of such performative actions always prevails, O'Dell remarks that "no matter how much fantasy such theatrics employed, the audience's attention could never wander far from the reality of the artists' self-tortured bodies" (O'Dell, 1998, p. 5). This is because acts of self-mutilation are inherently social: they captivate the viewer's attention to produce a vital bond, and to suture the viewer to the action precisely through the very transgression of social norms (Cascarino, 2018, p. 154). In all these cases, the public must have observed a simple set of implicit rules: only witness and be an accomplice to the performance. This constraint against intervention, with the painful and seemingly endless process of harming one's body, is what ultimately opens a space to think this violence both on the fictional level and the concrete reality of war violence in *and Counting…* As the tacit agreement between the performer and the audience appears oddly close to reality, it replicates the apparent lack of concern toward human suffering induced by media such as television.

Bilal's piece endeavors to engender this disruption of the habituation to images of war and, perhaps, prompt action. Appearing as the performance unfolds, the map on the artist's back etches the interlocking histories of Americans and Iraqis like an ephemeral archive. Each dot puncturing the performer's derma is reflected by the litany of names recited at the microphone, punctuating the event with a solemn rhythm. Through the act of tattooing, the spectator is drawn closer to Bilal's experience. The surface of the skin becomes the rough terrain of the war zone; the needle pressed into the carnal landscape parallels the warfare drones or the planes piercing the faraway ground with explosives, mutilating and interrupting

the rhythm of nature and cities, and merely evokes the remoteness of those who control them. As the artist himself stated, his performance sought to engage members of the public in a political dialogue in which they would otherwise have been unable or unwilling to enter (Kamat and Bilal, 2010, p. 316). This forced intimacy ruptures what Judith Butler describes as the "exclusionary norms by which fields of recognizability are constituted". The philosopher stresses that those are "fields that are implicitly invoked when […] we mourn for some lives but respond with coldness to the loss of others" (Butler, 2009, p. 36). Butler suggests that any fundamental sense of humanity is already mediated between lives worthy of being grieved and lives that do not appear to exist in the first place (Butler, 2009, p. 50). Bilal's memorial illustrates this otherwise abstract "shared humanity". In his memoirs, the artist recounts an interview he saw in 2007 of a "young female American soldier whose job was to drop bombs remotely on Iraqi targets, directing them from a computer console in Colorado"; answering a question, the woman said she had given no second thoughts and was trusting her superiors (Bilal and Lydersen, 2008, p. 10). Distance prevents people from feeling accountable for their actions.[10] Politicians and the mass media in the United States both foster an understanding of American identity based upon the impermeability of the border. The control over foreign sovereign territories and the killing of those who live there are just logical extensions of this imperative.[11]

While the extensive and painful tattooing process is, in the artwork, meant to create a memorialization of war that (re-)activates a traumatic kernel despite the geographical, social, and, *primarily*, symbolic distance, *and Counting…* "challenge[s] the 'disembodying' accounts of subjectivity" produced by modes of world-making that focused on language at the expense of the lived, bodily experience (Marc Lafrance, 2012, p. 18).[12] On the one hand, highlighting the racist attitude involved in responding with indifference to the death of thousands of Middle Eastern people, it emphasizes that American subjectivity-formation post-2001 is co-constitutive of the country's military involvement in Iraq. Bilal's skin foreshortens the disruption caused by the war in Iraq. It not only "seek[s] to think about [skin]" – about the slipperiness of visual identification – but "to think *with or through*" it (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001, p. 1).

Dermographia: Inscribing Meaning in the Skin

At once a catalyzer of stigmata and a tool for emancipation, tattooing has a complex history which reflects the duality of *and Counting…* and participates in the critique the performance enacts. Within the realm of performance art, if marking the skin as such is not a recent phenomenon, as we have seen, the use of tattoos probably attests to the increase of this practice in society at large. In recent years, several contemporary artists have reclaimed tattooing as a practice for themselves and included it as part of myriad different artistic practices, to the extent that tattooing in contemporary art is hardly homogeneous at all. Let's note the provocative tattoo performances by Ron Athey as a precedent to Bilal's performance, or, perhaps more harmoniously, the practice of Mary Coble, who used inkless tattooing in durational performances. The conceptual *Blood Script* (2008) was the synthesis of three previous performances where the artist asked the audience to inscribe derogatory terms that had been directed at them onto her body using markers. In this final piece, the artist had these terms tattooed on her body using no ink in a refined typography. The process problematized the tension between harmful language and queer identity formation, and constituted an anti-performance where those words, rather than doing things, were believed to be undoing the harm caused by those insults and to be expelling their destructive spirit. Those latter artworks dealt with tattoos as a means to discuss marginality and recognition in the context of the fight for LGBTQ rights, and therefore closely followed the methods and reflections behind feminist performance artworks from the early 1960s to the late 70s. Bilal's artwork, although taking some of the same methods, directs its gaze at the racial and geopolitical issues emblematic of the early millennium in a novel way.

In this perspective, his approach might seem closer to that of the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, who used tattoos in conjunction with performative strategies at different moments in his career.[13] For one of his performances, entitled *Tim* (2006), Delvoye tattooed a back piece on model Tim Steiner, and subsequently paid him to pose for long days in museums as a "living canvas" (King, 2019, pp. 6-22). With disarming literalness, Delvoye offers an illustration of a "cultural worker" involved in the articulation of the logics of modernism in a global capitalist setting (Dimitrakaki, 2011,

pp. 191-192). His polemical strategy supplements the modernist artistic gesture with a neoliberal twist: Steiner's body-canvas is *rented* by museums around the world. One can be doubtful about the extent of the actual critique the work enacts. Rather, *Tim* exemplifies how, as a commodity, art can easily circulate through borders. To further exemplify *Tim*'s non-critical approach, the pictorial style chosen for the back piece corresponds to major tenets of tattoo-making: clear and defined lines, symmetry, contrasting colors, etc. For Bilal, it is almost the opposite. More akin to a skin disease than a map, the final design subverts most tattoo conventions (see Ill. 2); obscure and opaque, its meaning is not self-evident and is rather ambiguous. The "canvas" is, then, not the back of the artist but the *context itself*, and the "image" depicted is not the map but the *cartographic imaginary* of a globalized geo(bio)politics. The artwork proposes an aesthetic of the encounter staging the encounter as a central component of global capitalism as we know it today, to record this as a historical moment and produce ways to reflect upon this moment.[14] Most crucially perhaps, it uniquely places the United States as a total, if novel, imperial power at the center of those unequal relations and records the still-evolving place that this country occupies within the global equilibrium. The American involvement in the Middle East, generally, and in Iraq, specifically, long predated the invasion of the latter in 2003 and the 2001 attacks. For example, the Reagan administration provided support to Saddam Husseyn's Iraq in the context of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, 2001, p. 2610). Following 1945, the United States gradually replaced the old, waning influence of imperial forces of Europe, weakened by the war.

But let us come back to the subject of tattooing. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the development of pseudo-scientific theories trying to associate the act of tattooing with criminality or overall degeneracy was on the rise (Etz, 2023, p. 6), largely contributing to the broader flourishing of racist scholarship. Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso's

ILL. 2 (OPPOSITE)
Wafaa Bilal, *and Counting…*, 2010, performance, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York. Courtesy of the artist.

Crime, Its Causes and Remedies was one of the infamous examples that mediated popular understandings of tattooing in Europe. According to him, "the custom of tattooing" had to be considered alongside a plethora of manners and physical characteristics pointing to "atavism." Lombroso goes as far as to claim that "many of the characteristics presented by savage races are very often found among born criminals" (Lombroso, 1911, pp. 365-366). Ideas such as his contributed to linking the act of tattooing with crime and crime with race,[15] constituted in a greater conception of a human hierarchy. A few years earlier, Austrian architect Adolf Loos, in *Ornament and Crime* (1908), characterized the ornamental traditions of South African and Persian cultures as backward, and claimed that Europeans have evolved past ornamentation (Loos, 2002, p. 24). According to him, following the same logic, tattooing as body adornment is a thing of the past and is only a marker of degeneracy (Loos, 2002, p. 19-20). If this interpretation now reads erroneous and absurd, it still carried a long way into the twentieth century, and made the history of tattooing one of othering, a corollary of the colonial impetus of anthropological classification. However, the practice of tattooing was already well anchored in both Europe and the United States at that point. The encounter with Polynesian people in the late 18th century, which likely gave the practice its name by deriving the word from Polynesian *tatu* (to mark) or *tatau* (to strike), ought not be understood as the discovery of the practice at large, which dates back several centuries, even millennia (Caplan, 2000, xv). If the Pacific encounter is not the origin of the European practice of tattooing – it was believed that the expansion of European colonizing countries into the Pacific and their encounter with the Polynesians was a catalyst for a renewed perspective on tattooing during the 18th century (Caplan, 2000, xv) – it nevertheless reinforced the already existing liminal status of the practice by ascribing it to the developing conception of the racial (ethnic) other (Caplan, 2000, xiv-xv). Throughout history, tattoo was from time to time present and/or absent from consciousness. Gaps in historical records, like that of the period between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century, should not be read as a defect in the archive, as historian Jane Caplan has noted, but "its character of always being in transit from or to the multiple horizons of a self-centred world, of circulating most actively on the margins where it is

least visible" (Caplan, 2000, p. xv). This mythology echoes what anthropologist Alfred Gell theorized as the inherent ambiguity of tattoos; the tattoo sits simultaneously on the skin and in the skin, evoking circulation between the interior and the exterior Caplan, 2000, pp. xiii-xiv), and is reminiscent of what Fanon identified as the confusion of form with essence, or as an individual's interiority and physical appearance. In his "conversation" with Hegel, Fanon shows that although the skin (and, in our case, the combination of skin and tattoo) is the surface through which an individual is recognized as such, it is a mistake to understand this external surface as revealing inner truths about the person wearing it.

In 1936, anthropologist Winifred Smeaton described, in a conference paper, the richness and complexity of tattoo culture in Iraq (Smeaton 1937, pp. 53-61). In Iraq, the custom of tattooing tiny dots is present in rural areas to this day, where to *daqq* (to strike) or *dagg* (to knock) (in Arabic) serve therapeutic purposes. This type of tattooing, in contrast to the more ornamental forms that are meant to mark special moments of one's life, is seen as magical and is believed to have healing capabilities (Etz, 2023, pp. 88-89). But connotations around the practice are also uneven in Iraq. In an interview, Bilal recounted that shortly before, while he was in a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia, he and his brother were close to being denied emigration to the United States because of the tattoo the latter sported on his arm (Kamat and Bilal, 2010, p. 325). "The reason […] was that the American delegation had apparently learned that tattoos are socially prohibited in Iraq" (Kamat and Bilal, 2010, p. 326). His brother decided to burn the tattoo with the help of a cousin. In America, the practice of tattooing has been associated with sailors as well as the military since the Second World War (Govenar, 2000, pp. 212-214) . If tattoos were present in the American collective imaginary from the 1930s onwards, it is only after 1970 that the practice really started to gain traction, following periods of prohibition that effectively banned it in places like New York City (Lodder, 2022, pp. 223-228). Over the last decades, tattoos have become a ubiquitous component of visual culture in the West, and their reputation have evolved from a marginal practice to a mainstream one (Barron, 2017, pp. vii-ix). Yet, despite their omnipresence, they can still be seen as a stigma. In Bilal's account, not only was the discrimination against tattooed migrants by the Americans presumptive, but

it also rehearsed old prejudices that no longer had currency in the United States. Inadvertently, it aligned with the pseudo-scientific tradition that associated tattooing with crime and implicitly engaged a colonial aesthetic of identification, in which the Americans represented the Other through structures of fetishistic recognition (if probably largely unconscious).[16] In the story, Americans found in the practice of tattooing the meaning they already expected to find, in line with what the world, as seen through the lens of the Empire, should have been.

If Bilal's performance resonates with that of Ron Athey and Mary Coble, it is because they are less coded within a register of the aesthetically pleasurable than within one of the negative, of the haunting, of the trace. These tattoos symbolically observe traumas and attend to the un-representability of death and loss. Predicated upon this failure, the un-representable nature of their object heightens the power of these scars, a form of abysmal absence. As an extension of (self-)portraiture, performance – and more precisely body art – radicalized the critical legacy initiated by the avant-gardes of the mid-twentieth century. Amelia Jones stresses in *Body Art/Performing the Subject* that modern art history and criticism were largely constituted through the failure to properly grasp the subject. Aesthetic categories are, in other words, founded upon errors. For Jones, the body's power in art precisely exists to compel a re-evaluation of our interpretative categories (Jones, 1998, pp. 8-9). The emergence of body art catalyzed a modality of criticism that allowed to identify that modernist art discourses had afforded some individuals with creative transcendence while others were confined to their immanence (Jones, 1998, pp. 45-52). Drawing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Jones emphasizes that subjectivity always entails a fundamental (traumatic) split (Jones, 1998, pp. 182-183, p. 197). Therefore, in Bilal's work, though it may seem that tattooing dots representing Iraqi lives in invisible ink itself replicates the failure to conceive of Iraqi lives equally as lives and re-enacting their violent abstraction, it must be noted that the idea of an invisible life is also an abstraction. Further, the tattoo allows for the recognition of the split within Iraqi identity, and in parallel, the lack in the American one.

Conclusion

The derma bears the traces of past events as much as it indicates the future. Tattooing without ink still produces a trace. At the moment of execution, "tattooing without ink produces a crisp bloody line, and the marks fade with time to leave subtle scarring" (Dominic Johnson, quoted in Atia, 2019, p. 1081). The life no one heard about still produced its trace. The real failure occurs when a lost life has not allowed for change to take place. Bilal's back becomes a palimpsest for this history: through the strange relationship between the invisible and the visible, the subcutaneous and the apparent. The affliction-like trace over the artist's back recalls a history that resists representation yet refuses to disappear. Bilal's performance is a cartography of the myriad meanings of skin in the context of the early 20th century. It is also a sign that individuals are repositories of political history. *and Counting…* connects the social and cultural context of Iraq and the apparent remoteness of Western spectators. Through this interface, the personal experience of the Iraqi whose relative has been murdered is revealed as intrinsically connected to the American public and posits the United States as a neo-imperial power, which inadvertently opens lines of exchanges through the destruction and desolation it creates. The "failed" attempt to depict the ravages of the war, the uncanny final tattoo, the small-scale exchange initiated in this New York gallery on March 8th, 2010, all articulate a complex, impossible yet necessary call for a more comprehensive, multilayered understanding and questioning of an ever-renewing world order that more often than not relegates a basic sense of humanity to the unknowing tomorrows of wars.

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NOTES

1 Wafaa Bilal, "and Counting…," Works, http://wafaabilal.com/and-counting/.

2 The actual number is estimated to be much higher than this conservative estimation. Some sources place the number of Iraqi deaths that are directly imputable to the war since 2003 to around 300,000: Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, "Iraqi Civilians," Costs of War, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/iraqi. Other sources, considering deaths that are attributable to indirect consequences of the war, suggest that the number could even be 500,000 or higher (Nodell, 2013).

3 During an interview, the artist said that he meant to create "a physical platform that allow[ed] people to engage with [his] performance and acknowledge the dead" (see Kamat and Bilal, 2010, p. 329).

4 Wafaa Bilal, "Frequently Asked Questions: What Is Domestic Tension About?," Wafaa Bilal: Domestic Tension, https://web.archive.org/web/20070620111358/http://www.wafaabilal.com/faq.html (accessed November 5, 2023).

5 BBC, "US 9/11 revenge killer convicted," October 1, 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3154170.stm.

6 Amelia Jones brings this example to contextualize her book Seeing Differently (2012), in which she argues that we are not beyond the questions and problems raised by identity/recognition (or rather, sometimes, misrecognition) (Jones, 2012, pp. xx-xxi).

7 Race (the idea that there would be different human races), as a scientific concept, has been largely proven false. Yet, its currency to describe and understand ethnic and cultural differences is still prevalent in the American context. (On that specifically see Fields and Fields, 2012, pp. 118-121).

8 This phrase is the proposition made by Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey in the opening of their collection of texts on skin. On the first page, they mention that they endeavour "to think about […], but also with or through the skin" (emphasis in the original text) (see Ahmed and Stacey, 2001, p. 1).

9 I am responding here to Lafrance's summary of Fanon's argument in Black Skin, White Masks, emphasizing that race has no depth. While this is true, I

wish to point out that while skin has incredible phenomenological and symbolic potential, it nonetheless has no depth as such (Lafrance, 2018, p. 8).

10 As Bilal reflected, commenting on the relationship between Domestic Tension and the reality of US warfare in the Middle East (Kapadia, 2019, p. 84).

11 This is particularly clear in the address to the nation on March 19th, 2003, when the President announces the start of the invasion of Iraq (Butler, 2009, p. 43, p. 47, p. 51).

12 Marc Lafrance is drawing from Sarah Ahmed and Jackey Stacey's Thinking Through the Skin.

13 Notably, and controversially, on live pigs. (Calchi-Novati, 2011, p. 41).

14 Bilal has said that the main intention behind his work is to create spaces of encounter, but that his primary audience is the people living in comfortable situations outside of war zones (Kamat and Bilal, 2010, p. 329).

15 Etz mentions other examples such as Alexandre Lacassagne and Adolf Loos (Etz, 2023, p. 6).

16 In her book Seeing Differently, Amelia Jones discusses Heidegger's concept of representation, in which the subject understands the world as if it were rendered in a picture. To supplement her discussion of colonialism and aesthetics, she draws from Lacan to posit that the all-knowing subject of colonization always recognizes the other through unsurpassable fantasy structures (Jones, 2012, pp. 82-84).