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## **Art and the Iraq war: visibility, materiality and the politics of space**

The palette of this exhibition evokes the realities it contests: burned, scorched, the colours of sand and oil; the orange of flames, explosions and jump suits and the red, white, blue, black and greens of flags and banners, symbols of authority, identity and territory; upended, scrambled and dismantled. Images, typescript and newsprint are juxtaposed with figures of authority and community, implicating the viewer in the systems of representation and association surrounding war. The chaos, destruction and criminality spiralling around and out of the invasion and occupation of Iraq are rendered visible and material in extraordinary fashion.

### **1. War**

Amid a legacy of contested state formation, external intervention and regional conflict, the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation has exacted a terrible toll on the people and landscape of Iraq. The political, sectarian and criminal violence that is the legacy of occupation continues to add to the thousands upon thousands of people killed, many thousands more injured and millions displaced within and beyond the borders of the country. The debris of militarised conflict - unexploded ordnance, shattered infrastructure, polluted air, soil and water that threaten current and future generations - remains after an occupation that made a mockery of the claims of those directing it. Those products of modernisation and development (high levels of education, health and female participation in public life) that had been secured at the cost of Saddam's violent and authoritarian state building project - facilitated and supported by Western powers in pursuit of their own regional interests - have largely been lost. While a measure of security has been attained in some areas, the contours of the Iraqi state remain heavily contested, as regional fragmentation, continued external influence and the interests of sectarian elites inhibit the consolidation of a stable state that might be able to serve the interests of its citizens or negotiate effectively with external corporations seeking to exploit Iraq's oil reserves.

The invasion and occupation also cost the lives of thousands of foreign troops and many thousands more injured and traumatised, while accelerating the hegemonic decline and fiscal crisis of the US state and its UK ally. But with billions channelled to private military, intelligence, logistics and security contractors, the war and occupation have fostered the emergence of a corporate war complex that appears increasingly beyond public purview, scrutiny or control, yet which is simultaneously advanced as an engine of industrial development and competitiveness amid economic crisis and austerity.

As new evidence of brutality, abuse and killings conducted by occupying forces continues to emerge, official investigations and proceedings have tended to focus their attention on the actions of lower-ranking individuals, many of whom have in the end been exonerated. Though they have been disgraced, discredited and removed from office, there has been little accountability for the politicians and bureaucrats who took their countries into

Iraq on disingenuous and false premises.

## **2. Visibility**

The invasion and occupation of Iraq marked a further evolution in the mediatization of war, the means of making it visible (and at the same time other things invisible). If the media production of the first Gulf War constructed a spectacle of sublime geopolitical mastery at odds with the devastating violence actually enacted, and if the effects of the sanctions and bombing regime of the 1990s were largely occluded from the view of Western publics - a visual corollary of the discourse of 'containment' - then the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation were to be rendered visible by means of embedded reporting and officially-sanctioned dispatches from control rooms and government ministries. This apparatus of visibility, furthermore, largely replicated a military-political eye view of the situation. As occupation descended back into war, military officials emphasised success by means of powerpoint presentations, metrics and updates on kill/capture operations, while occupation bureaucrats sought to stage-manage the emergence of a putatively sovereign state.

No regime of visibility, however, can be seamless or complete. The emergence of Al-Jazeera, based in Qatar and broadcasting directly to Arab audiences, presented alternative accounts of war, occupation and resistance. Insurgents and religious extremists began recording videos of their own violence and posting them online. A small community of bloggers within Iraq began to gain an audience outside and to receive exposure in Western media. Close up, eye witness accounts from Iraqis, from humanitarian workers and from unembedded journalists, photographers and film crews began to emerge, even as they faced the escalation of deadly threats from all sides. Their accounts were used in rapidly written plays and exhibitions and footage was compiled into hard-hitting documentary. The image regime, like the fantasy visions of post-war Iraq circulated before the invasion, fell apart.

The politics of visibility of the occupation shifted decisively when photographs taken within the Abu Ghraib prison - constructed for Saddam Hussein's regime with the help of Western firms, but used now in an attempt to contain a growing insurgency - emerged via personal, journalistic and media networks into broader public circulation. Revealing the intertwining of Orientalist theories and prejudices with the genealogies of modern torture, the images from Abu Ghraib both exposed and crystallized the brutality and depravity of occupation.

## **3. Interventions**

The visible is not opposed to the material or to other dimensions of sensibility - these fields are interdependent and mutually constitutive. To see and to hear is also to touch and feel; to think or to imagine is also to visualize, narrate or compose to oneself or with others. It is through such relays that geopolitical power - the ability to exert power over people and places, to project that power at a distance, to prevent other people doing some things and to incite them to do others by controlling their places, to divide or integrate - is to a significant reproduced and extended.

What, then, might be the role of art in representing and contesting the regimes of visibility and invisibility surrounding contemporary warfare? What kinds of techniques,

materials and affective economies might it mobilise in relation to the means of violence and legitimation, and the experience of destruction and loss? How might such tactics create openings for critical scrutiny and intervention? In the most striking art to emerge in response to the invasion and occupation of Iraq, aesthetic interventions in the regimes of visibility and materiality surrounding war enact a critical politics of space. The works of Hanaa Malallah and kennardphillips work through images, materials, effects and experiences of power and destruction, composing an alternative rendering of geopolitics that implicates others in the reproduction of that which they contest. Emerging from very different personal trajectories, political circumstances and theoretical inspirations, their works in common seek to engender a visceral response to the violence of war, playing across the boundaries that conventionally separate art and politics and collapsing one into the other.

A resident of Baghdad until 2006, Hana Malallah's practice has emerged over a thirty five year period, in which her education and art practice have intertwined with the experience of the Iran-Iraq war, the first Gulf War, the sanctions regime and the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation. By means of what she calls ruins technique, her work both expresses and seeks to communicate the experience of destruction, operating the space between figuration and abstraction.

Much of her early work following her move into exile materializes directly the destructive transformation of Baghdad and Iraq under the spiralling dynamics of occupation, armed resistance and growing sectarian conflict. In these works, the authority and coherence of cartography - quintessentially an instrument of power over territory by means of visual knowledge - is destabilized, as maps or map-like grids are marked by military symbols and typography and allusions to sectarian divisions, are torn, scorched and blurred, evoking the chaotic, violent geography of post-invasion Baghdad. Alluding to the violence inherent to Iraqi state hey question the extent to which any division into green zone and red zone can ever be meaningful: no grid or enclosure can contain the violence of urban conflict. Her work has further engaged with the production of national identity, state legitimacy and imperial power by means of a reworking of the US flag, in which its correct orientation is unsettled, its surfaces are scorched and its stars are replaced with burn marks and, in a gesture that recalls one Iraqi journalist's media-room protest against George W. Bush, a pair of shoes. Hanaa Malallah's more recent work extends her concerns with ruins and ruination, expanding to embrace sculptural practices. This work also continues her exploration of the cultures and symbolic and numerical systems of Mesopotamian civilizations, as well as the experience of destruction and loss of heritage. After the destruction and looting of the museums and collections of Iraq, traces and remains - a burnt and partially dismembered chair that now serves as a perch for a solitary bird, distressed fabric entangled with some electronic component (forbidden dual use technology, part of a missile guidance system or an IED detonator?) must stand in for now absent artefacts.

The work of kennardphillips - a collaboration between Peter Kennard and Cat Picton-Phillips that began in response to the 2003 invasion - stands in critical counter-point to that of Hanaa Malallah, presenting a radical critique of the images and practices by which empire, nation, war and state are made visible and sensible via media practices and networks. If Malallah's work is concerned with the experience and consequences of invasion and occupation, kennardphillips are concerned to expose the

mechanisms through which they have come about and their connections to wider systems of violence and exploitation.

Targeting the close alignments and connections between political authority and media representation, they present sovereign power as both an absence (in their depiction of the podium used for presidential press conferences) and an obscene presence (in the montage placing Tony Blair, apparently taking a camera-phone picture of himself, against the backdrop of a burning oilfield. For kennardphillips, montage retains its radical potential to reveal how ideology works by collapsing different frames of reference, forcing statesmen to appear within the same frame as the unbearable violence of occupation. Bypassing the layers separating decision makers from the actual exercise of subjective violence, they shorten the chain of command to a single step. Reproducing photographic images taken from the newswires on top of distressed layers of newspapers, their works enact a materialised critique of media discourses and image-effects and their devastating embodied consequences. The montages of kennardphillips thus present an alternative reading of geopolitics, while bringing into view the mechanisms of political and editorial control by which war is rendered visible to spectators and audiences. Deployed in political actions and campaigns as well as in galleries and museums, their work presents a kind of counter-cartography, a mapping of how power operates through images to reproduce war as spectacular, dignified and necessary.

#### **4. Beyond Iraq**

The exhibition of kennardphillips and Hana Malallah in collaboration counterpoises views from different locations and journeys with respect to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. The largest works exhibited here approach the dimensions of works by old European masters or medieval tapestries. They are scaled to be seen in the grandest exhibition spaces, bringing war home to the centres of power, but are yet to appear there. Exhibited here in close proximity, their works resonate with each other and with the shifting, contested geopolitics of Western intervention. As the visibility of Iraq in Western media and public imaginations declines, these works demand a reconsideration of the causes and consequences of invasion and occupation, of questions of responsibility and accountability. But this accounting also needs to reach out more widely, as other occupations and uprisings across the globe contest established political orders, and are repressed using technologies pioneered and refined in war zones, at borders and in carceral institutions. War and peace do not occupy separate spaces; they are entangled and connected and are perhaps becoming more so, as 'security' emerges once again as the over-riding principle of political life. As the geopolitical gaze shifts to new potential targets and new interventions, while other spaces are fortified, surveilled and secured, other ways of imagining politics and space are (as always) urgently required. As they render present the violence of contemporary war, at the margins of these these works lies the question of what alternative ways of combining politics and space might look like.

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