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# Performing Violence: The (Un)reality of War - Chris Burden, Edward Kienholz, Wafaa Bilal

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# **PERFORMING VIOLENCE**

## **THE (UN)REALITY OF WAR**

CHRIS BURDEN

EDWARD KIENHOLZ

WAFAA BILAL

A THESIS PRESENTED BY  
JORDAN GADD

TO  
DR. FRANCES K. POHL  
DR. KATHLEEN STEWART HOWE

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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“WAR IS DELIGHTFUL TO THOSE WHO HAVE HAD NO EXPERIENCE OF IT.” —ERASMUS

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

On May 4, 2007 the Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal began a performance work with the launch of a website that presented its visitors with an ethical choice: whether or not to remotely shoot the artist with a paintball gun while watching a live web camera feed from the room in which he installed himself.<sup>1</sup> The work, titled *Domestic Tension* [Figures 1-5], concluded with “80 million hits to his website and 60,000 shots fired from 128 countries” in his thirty-one day stay in a room in Chicago's Flatfile Galleries.<sup>2</sup> Bilal wanted the work to bring the conflict zone of Iraq into the comfort zone of the gallery and America at large. His interest in the violence of the Iraq War is extremely personal; his brother was killed in the conflict by U.S. military forces. This performance spread virally through online communities and weblogs and reached the traditional mass media by day seven, in an article in the Chicago Tribune.<sup>3</sup> Bilal intentionally used the Internet in *Domestic Tension* to raise awareness of the violence in Iraq to an audience that reached outside the traditional confines of the fine art establishment. He hoped a mass appeal highlighting the injustices being committed in Iraq would spark collective action against the war.

Continuing his critique of United States foreign policy and the negative stereotypes of Iraqis, Bilal created *Virtual Jihadi* [Figures 6-7] in 2008, a modified version of the popular video game Quest for Saddam. The original game, Quest for Saddam, is a first-person shooter with Iraqis as the targets and Saddam Hussein as the final kill. In *Virtual Jihadi* Bilal plays a suicide-bomber “recruited by Al Qaeda to join the hunt for Bush.”<sup>4</sup> According to Bilal, his modified version is derived from a “new 'skin' to turn the game into a hunt for Bush: The Night

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<sup>1</sup> As of April 2009 the *Domestic Tension* website contains an inactive version of the web interface with a still-image from the web camera of the gallery room and the ‘left-shoot-right’ buttons for controlling the paintball gun.  
<<http://crudeoils.us/wafaa/html/domesticTension.html>>

<sup>2</sup> Becker, Carol. “Introduction: Drawing the Line.” In *Shoot An Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2008, p. xvi.

<sup>3</sup> Bilal, Wafaa and Lydersen, Kari. *Shoot An Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2008, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Bilal, Wafaa. “Virtual Jihadi.” <<http://www.wafaabilal.com/html/virtualJ.html>>.

of *Bush Capturing*” created by Al Qaeda.<sup>5</sup> Bilal states that the purpose of this work is to expose the “travesties of the current war and racist generalizations and stereotypes [of Iraqis].”<sup>6</sup> By inverting the hunter and hunted relationship, Bilal intends the “piece of fiction that uses the video game format to create alternative narratives and perspectives.”<sup>7</sup> He uses the virtual realm to confront atrocities in the real world. This relates to the military’s increasing dependency on digital technologies in warfare. *Virtual Jihadi* was initially going to be presented at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York in 2008, but was shut down by college administrators due to its inflammatory nature.<sup>8</sup> The exhibition was moved to Media Sanctuary, a “grassroots gallery” in downtown Troy, New York, where *Virtual Jihadi* was successfully shown despite a protest led by a local Republican Party activist.<sup>9</sup> Bilal was labeled a terrorist and given body guard protection while on campus. Although Bilal can claim a right to free speech in defending this work, he had to know that a game virtualizing the assassination of the sitting American president would draw heavy criticism. In this instance, a virtual reality intended to dispel stereotypes became too real for the conservative protestors who saw the work as a threat rather than a work of art attempting to raise discourse.

These two works by Bilal engage the body and new media technologies in order to make an impression upon a larger, more diverse audience, through the playful simulation of war in *Domestic Tension* and the virtuality of video games in *Virtual Jihadi*. When performing violence on a computer monitor, the virtuality creates a significant distance between the viewer and the action. Even though the web camera screened the real-time performance of *Domestic Tension*, many visitors to the website refused to believe the shooting was real until media accounts

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Bilal, Wafaa and Lydersen, Kari. *Shoot An Iraqi*. Pp. 169-73.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 169-73.



confirmed the work's reality. Bilal chose new media technologies for their power of democratization, wanting to "reach well beyond the normal art world."<sup>10</sup> Yet the medium's detractors claim the Internet actually further alienates people from their communities and action in the real world.<sup>11</sup> Bilal's works contain this tension between freedom and control inherent in new media technologies.

Bilal's bodily, performative, and interactive responses to the Iraq War recall previous performance works involving guns that investigated the violence of the Vietnam War era, notably Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) and Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz's *Still Live* (1974).<sup>12</sup> In *Shoot* [Figures 8-9], Burden placed his own body in harm's way by having a friend shoot his arm with a rifle, thus implicating the audience members, who were asked to choose between interfering or not in the shooting. Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz's *Still Live* [Figures 10-11] engaged with similar issues of audience participation by situating the site of bodily harm literally in the audience. The work asked the viewer to sign a waiver in order to sit in a 1970s living room tableau to contemplate a television-like box with a loaded rifle pointed at the sitter set to shoot once every hundred years. These works explore issues of war violence, bodily risk, the culpability of the audience, and the role of mass media and technology in encouraging or impeding social change.

An artistic response to the violence of war is not an anomaly. Images of a torturer standing triumphantly over his naked victims, eerily similar to the Abu Ghraib photographs released in 2004, can be found in the sculpture of the ancient Egyptians, Mayans, Greeks and

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Saco, Diana. *Cybering Democracy: Public Space and the Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>12</sup> In 1981 Edward Kienholz retroactively gave equal credit to his wife Nancy Reddin Kienholz for all works created since 1972. (Pincus, Robert. *Kienholz*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 111.)

Romans.<sup>13</sup> More recent, iconic examples critiquing the violence of war include Francisco Goya's *The Third of May of 1808*, Picasso's *Guernica* of 1937, James Guy's *Black Flag* of 1940, and Philip Evergood's *Renunciation* of 1946. Artists commenting on the Vietnam era, besides Burden and Kienholz, include James Rosenquist [*F-111* (1964-5)], Martha Rosler [*Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (1967-72)], and Leon Golub [*Vietnam II* (1973)].<sup>14</sup> Wafaa Bilal is not the only contemporary artist to respond to the violence of the Iraq War. Santiago Sierra, Richard Serra, Mark Wallinger, Steve McQueen, Omer Fast, Joseph DeLappe and the Forkscrew Graphics collective all produced works commenting on, questioning, and in some cases directly agitating for an end to the violence occurring in Iraq. As the Iraq War continues, the Vietnam War remains a conflicted period of violence and loss in our collective memory.

A brief historical account comparing the Vietnam War and the wars in Iraq will elucidate the artistic responses to those wars. Beginning in 1950, Vietnam was a battleground in the Cold War, between communist North Vietnam and non-communist South Vietnam, supported by the United States and the other countries in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).<sup>15</sup> A French colony from the late nineteenth century, Vietnam gained independence with their defeat of the French in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The United States' interest in Vietnam was a part of the containment policy inaugurated by President Harry S. Truman in 1947 with the intent to limit the spread of communism. The United States involvement in Vietnam began in the 1950s with military advisors sent to monitor the region. America's commitment escalated in the early 1960s under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson as events like the 1964

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<sup>13</sup> Wyllie, Cherra "Ancient Rites, Contemporary Practices: Aesthetics of Torture and Accountability." College Art Association Conference. Los Angeles Convention Center, Los Angeles. 25 February 2009.

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion on these works and other artistic responses to violence post-World War II, see: Pohl, Frances K. *Framing America*. Second Edition. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008, pp. 438-447, 456-460 and 510-514.

<sup>15</sup> For further history on the Vietnam War, see: Lawrence, Mark Atwood. *The Vietnam War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Gulf of Tonkin incident prompted a more forceful response by American troops.

The Tet Offensive of 1968 was a turning point in the American public's reception of the war, due, in large part, to its coverage by the mass media. The U.S. public had previously believed the country's military forces were winning the war; the Tet Offensive showed that this was an illusion. This realization, coupled with the public outrage over the My Lai Massacre—the mass murder of unarmed South Vietnamese civilians by the U.S. Armed forces on March 16, 1968—and the increase in gun violence at home amplified opposition to the war. The 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy (whose brother President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963) increased the feeling of domestic insecurity. Due to “gun homicides increase[ing] over 90% in the U.S. between 1964 and 1970” Congress passed the Gun Control Act in 1968 in an effort to curb domestic gun violence.<sup>16</sup> This sense of unrest and unease was compounded by the violence perpetrated by the American government forces not only abroad, but also at home. Most notorious were the Kent State University shootings on May 4, 1970. Students protesting the American invasion of Cambodia announced the week prior were shot at by members of the Ohio National Guard, who were brought in to keep the demonstration non-violent. Four students were killed and nine sustained gun shot wounds. Ten days later city and state police in Jackson, Mississippi opened fire on a crowd of anti-war protestors at Jackson State University, killing two students and injuring twelve. Another incident of escalated violence against anti-war protestors occurred in Chicago at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. The anti-war demonstration quickly turned into a riot as Mayor Richard J. Daley brought in police and National Guardsman to face protestors in what was later determined to be an excess use of force. This tendency towards the use of violence also

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<sup>16</sup> Willick, Damon. “Still Live: The Theatrics of the Kienholz Tableaux.” In *Art Lies*, No. 60, Winter 2008, p. 27.

existed on the most radical side of the anti-war movement. The Weathermen planted bombs in Chicago and New York and declared a state of war on the U.S. government. In their *First Communique*, issued July 31, 1970, the group made a call to arms:

Tens of thousands have learned that protest and marches don't do it.  
Revolutionary violence is the only way. Now we are adapting the classic guerrilla strategy of the Viet Cong and the urban guerrilla strategy of the Tupamaros to our own situation here in the most technically advanced country in the world.<sup>17</sup>

Their call to violence shows a significant shift from the earlier pacifist anti-war demonstrations to a more violent strategy by some anti-war groups, no longer limiting violent activities to factions in support of the war.

President Richard Nixon began a withdrawal of troops in 1969 as peace talks conducted with Henry Kissinger took place in Vietnam; the Paris Peace Accords were signed on January 27, 1973. This officially ended U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. The final death tolls for the conflict are estimated to be at least two million Vietnamese from North and South, two million Laotians and Cambodians, and 58,193 U.S. soldiers.<sup>18</sup>

The Vietnam era of the 1960s and 1970s, therefore, was marked by violence and a collective confusion over the reasons behind that violence. It is worth noting that the Vietnam War was memorialized not with a heroic statue of military might typical of war monuments, but by what art historian Kirk Savage has described as “the first truly therapeutic monument” meant

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<sup>17</sup> “Weathermen - First Communique, July 31, 1970.” The Pacifica Radio/UC Berkeley Social Activism Sound Recording Project. University of California, Berkeley Library. Last update 15 August 2005.  
<<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificaviet/weatherunderground1.html>>.

<sup>18</sup> For the specific U.S. death count, see: “Statistical information about casualties of the Vietnam War.” The National Archives. <<http://www.archives.gov/research/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html>>.  
For the other figures, see: Wiest, Andrew A. *The Vietnam War: 1956-1975*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2003, p. 85.

“to heal a collective psychological injury,” Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial of 1982.<sup>19</sup>

As the American public continues to deal with the horrors of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, no memorial has been finalized for those that died at Ground Zero in New York City.

A significant reason for the backlash against American commitment in Vietnam was the high level of casualties, the result of combined ground and aerial offensives and advances in technology, with better automatic weapons and aerial bombing capabilities. The institution of the draft also ensured that the war was felt by a majority of American families. Furthermore, this was the first war to be highly covered by the mass media, with nightly news coverage of the damages and a constant reminder of the body count. Newspapers and magazines reinforced the destruction and loss with iconic photographs such as the 1972 image by Associated Press photographer Nick Út of the Vietnamese child Phan Thị Kim Phúc running naked down the street after a South Vietnamese napalm attack. A 1968 photograph by Eddie Adams of the execution of a Vietcong prisoner on a Saigon street brought the lawlessness of Vietnam into American homes. According to the group Critical Art Ensemble, the war machine, “the apparatus of violence engineered to maintain the social, political and economic relationships that support its continued existence in the world,” is reinforced by the sight machine that “generate[s] representations that normalize the state of war in everyday life” through a “ceaseless barrage of visual stimulation.”<sup>20</sup> This is done through the violence represented in mass media forms of television, movies, video games, printed news and the range of digital images readily available on the Internet. With an increase in media coverage comes a certain level of saturation, wherein the day-to-day images of violence become commonplace, thus desensitizing their audience to such atrocities. The publishing of the

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<sup>19</sup> Savage, Kirk. “Trauma, Healing, and the Therapeutic Monument.” In *Terror, Culture, Politics: Rethinking 9/11*. Eds. Daniel J. Sherman and Terry Nardin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, p. 106.

<sup>20</sup> Critical Art Ensemble. “The Coming of Age of the Flesh Machine.” In *Electronic Culture*. Ed. Timothy Druckrey. New York: Aperture, 1996, pp. 391-2.

Pentagon Papers in the New York Times in 1971 revealed the level to which the U.S. government deceived the public of its involvement in Vietnam, validating the critiques made by the anti-war movement.

It is important to note that the current Iraq War is the third Gulf War in which the United States has played a significant role. The first was the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 and the second was between Iraq and Kuwait from 1990-91. The United States supported Iraq in the first Gulf War against Iran but fought against Iraq in the second war and continues to do so in the current conflict. The 1990-91 Gulf War was quick, with the United States only militarily engaged for seven months. Ground fighting was limited so most of the war was fought in the air, in a disembodied engagement resembling a video game where the soldiers were removed from the destruction below. Speaking on the 1990-91 Gulf War, Paul Virilio calls it the “first ‘live’ war” because it was “extremely local in space, but global in time...thanks to CNN and the Pentagon.”<sup>21</sup> This live-ness created a “de-realization, the accident of the real. It’s not one, two, hundreds or thousands of people who are being killed, but the whole reality itself.”<sup>22</sup> By being a live war, it becomes unreal. This virtuality of real wars, including the current conflict in Iraq, leads Americans who are supposed to be shocked and outraged that their government is carrying out such violence on their behalf to a detached mentality where it is not their responsibility to act against the war.

The current Iraq War marks a decided return to a drawn-out, visible, bodied war similar to Vietnam. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush declared the far-reaching ‘War on Terror,’ which included the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 to eradicate

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<sup>21</sup> Virilio, Paul, as quoted in Louise K. Wilson, “Cyberwar, God and Television: Interview with Paul Virilio.” In *Electronic Culture*. Ed. Timothy Druckrey. New York: Aperture, 1996, p. 325.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325.

Al-Qaeda, the “extraordinary rendition of detainees to secret prisons in other countries, and the Patriot Act.”<sup>23</sup> After accusations that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and that Saddam Hussein's regime was too repressive to remain in power, Congress approved the ‘Iraq War Resolution’ in October 2002. The Iraq War began with the ground invasion ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ in March 2003. Despite numerous attempts in subsequent years by opponents of the Iraq War to scale back the United States' troop commitment, it was not until President Barack Obama announced an exit strategy on February 27, 2009, with U.S. combat forces scheduled to leave Iraq by August 31, 2010 and a transitional force to remain through 2011.<sup>24</sup> President Obama’s administration also retired the term ‘War on Terror’ in a memo stating the preferred nomenclature is ‘Overseas Contingency Operation.’<sup>25</sup>

While the protests against the Iraq War were modeled after Vietnam protests, they did not have the same efficacy and have leveled off in size and scope as the war drags on. In the introduction to the Winter 2008 issue of the journal *October*, dedicated to the cultural response to the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, the editors note: “At the time of the Vietnam War protests, the growing intensity of those protests was represented in the media, and as a result of this simultaneous presence in the media imagery and public space, the government...did have to modify its policies.”<sup>26</sup> According to Coco Fusco, “during the Vietnam conflict, Americans were bombarded daily with media images of the physical toll of war on both soldiers and civilians, and this was key to the development of antiwar public sentiment and to the recycling of those

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<sup>23</sup> Fusco, Coco. In *October*, No. 123, Winter 2008, p. 53.

<sup>24</sup> Obama, Barack. “Obama’s Speech at Camp Lejeune, N.C.” *New York Times*. 27 February 2009.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/27/us/politics/27obama-text.html>>.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, Scott and Al Kamen. “‘Global War On Terror’ Is Given New Name.” *Washington Post*. 25 March 2009.  
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/24/AR2009032402818.html>>.

<sup>26</sup> Buchloh, Benjamin H. D. and Rachel Churner. “Introduction.” In *October*, No. 123, Winter 2008, p. 7.

images of atrocities by artists who were against the war.”<sup>27</sup> Many within the government, especially military and defense leaders, believed the United States lost in Vietnam due to a lack of popular support at home caused by mass media coverage of the atrocities committed. The military thought that stricter control of reports of casualties and destruction could correct this lack of public support. George W. Bush’s administration continued to censor photography of dead American soldiers returning home from Iraq in flag-draped coffins, a media control held over from the 1990-91 Gulf War. This ban was removed by President Obama’s administration in February 2009.<sup>28</sup>

The seemingly unending nature of the Iraq War draws comparison to the Vietnam era, but there is a discernible difference in the media coverage, public outcry and artistic response. Despite the government’s attempts to control the information war in the 1990-91 Gulf War, it was the first televised war with live coverage of missile strikes and reporters live from the frontlines. The notion of a live war continued in the 2003 invasion of Iraq with reporters embedded with military units and coverage of the war by independent journalists published on the Internet. With media saturation and an increased desensitization to war and its horrendous effects, “today’s public forms of opposition and social activism hardly receive comprehensive coverage.”<sup>29</sup> The level of newspaper coverage of the Iraq War has dropped off significantly since its beginning, because the stories no longer carry the sensationalism necessary for today’s readers. The absence of a draft in the Iraq War also stands out as a major cause of the difference in the perceptions between Iraq and Vietnam. Forced conscription gives war a greater impact on families and friends who could potentially lose a loved one. Without a draft a vast majority of the

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<sup>27</sup> Fusco, Coco. In *October*. No. 123, Winter 2008, p. 53.

<sup>28</sup> Lacayo, Richard. “The Pentagon and Pictures of Soldiers’ Coffins.” *Looking Around, Time Magazine*. 27 February 2009. <<http://lookingaround.blogs.time.com/2009/02/27/the-pentagon-and-pictures-of-soldiers-coffins/>>.

<sup>29</sup> Buchloh, Benjamin H. D. and Rachel Churner. “Introduction.” In *October*, No. 123, Winter 2008, p. 7.



population never faces the possibility of this loss. For all of these reasons, most importantly a general desensitization to images of violence and the unreality caused by a live war, the Iraq War seems to be less at the forefront of our collective consciousness than Vietnam. Countering this seeming lack of interest is of utmost importance to artists responding to the current conflict in Iraq.

Despite some striking differences between the Vietnam War and the Iraq War, the pre-digital work of Chris Burden and Edward Kienholz and the post-digital works by Wafaa Bilal respond to the violence of war through the use of the body, performance and audience confrontation. According to Elizabeth Grosz, “The body has been regarded as a source of interference in, and a danger to, the operation of reason”—the reason supporting the institution of war.<sup>30</sup> Burden implicated his own body, Kienholz placed the site of harm in the participating audience member’s body, and Bilal asked his audience to choose between shooting at him or not. These performance works all attempt to raise awareness of the violence committed in the name of war but fall short of effecting real change.

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<sup>30</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. “Refiguring Bodies.” In *The Body: A Reader*. Eds. Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco. London: Routledge, 2005, p. 47.

## **Chapter II**

### **Chris Burden**

Chris Burden's practice in the 1960s and 1970s centered on the use of his own body in radical performance works questioning the nature of art itself. *Shoot* from 1971 is arguably the most famous. Other notable works from this period include *Through the Night Softly* (1973), *Trans-fixed* (1974) and *Doomed* (1975). These works were presented to small groups and then traveled through the art world and popular culture via word of mouth and accounts in journals and the news media. In *Through the Night Softly*, Burden held his hands behind his back and crawled through fifty feet of broken glass on Main Street in Los Angeles. According to Burden, "There were very few spectators, most of them passersby."<sup>31</sup> For *Trans-Fixed*, Burden lay chest up on the back of a Volkswagen Beetle and had himself crucified to the car with actual nails hammered into his hands. This work was seen by many as commentary on consumerism, specifically America's fascination with car culture as the new American religion. *Doomed* was performed in April, 1975 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Burden placed a slanted piece of glass against a gallery wall and lay underneath it with a clock ticking beside him. Neither the museum staff in charge of the work nor the visitors knew that Burden intended to stay under the glass until "someone interfered in some way with the piece."<sup>32</sup> After "forty-five hours, a museum guard placed a pitcher of water in reaching distance to Burden. Burden then smashed the glass, and took a hammer to the clock, thus ending the piece."<sup>33</sup> According to Schjeldahl, "*Doomed* unmasked the absurdity of the conventions by which, through assuming the role of viewers, we are both blocked and immunized from ethical responsibility."<sup>34</sup> The audience, including the staff, is torn "between the citizenly injunction to intervene in crises and

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<sup>31</sup> Horvitz, Robert. "Chris Burden." *Artforum*. Volume XIV No. 9, May 1976, pp. 24-31.  
<<http://www.volny.cz/rhorvitz/burden.html>>.

<sup>32</sup> Schjeldahl, Peter. "Performance: Chris Burden and the limits of art." *The New Yorker*. 14 May 2007.  
<[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/artworld/2007/05/14/070514craw\\_artworld\\_schjeldahl](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/artworld/2007/05/14/070514craw_artworld_schjeldahl)>.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

the institutional taboo against touching art works.”<sup>35</sup> Questioning the role of the audience is a touchstone in Burden’s performances. Burden’s use of his own body in these works of social commentary calls up Michel Foucault’s assertion that “the body is...directly involved in the political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.”<sup>36</sup> The performance of violence on one’s own body is a decidedly political act.

Chris Burden attended Pomona College in Claremont, California for his undergraduate degree and received his MFA degree from the University of California at Irvine in 1971. At the time of his graduate studies, the Vietnam War had reached its height and anti-war sentiment was strong. The assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, shootings on college campuses, and the fixture of images of gun violence and war on the television all contributed to Burden’s interest in implicating his own body in an act of violence. In a 2006 interview with Doug Aitken, Burden named all of these as influences for *Shoot*:

Vietnam had a lot to do with *Shoot*. It was about the difference between how people reacted to soldiers being shot in Vietnam and how they reacted to fictional people being shot on commercial TV. There were guys my age getting shot up in Vietnam, you know? But then in nearly every single household, there were images of people being shot in TV dramas. The images are probably in the billions, right? It's just amazing. So what does it mean *not* to avoid being shot, that is, by staying home or avoiding the war, but to face it head on? I was trying to question what it means to face that dragon.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, Michel. “The Political Investment of the Body.” In *The Body: A Reader*. Eds. Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco. London: Routledge, 2005, p. 100.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel, Noel, ed. *Broken Screen*. New York: D.A.P. / Distributed Art Publishers, 2006, p. 76.

To comment on the violence of the period, Burden felt the need to turn the tables and choose to have violence enacted upon his own body rather than the body of another. In 1971 in the private F Space Gallery in Irvine, California, Burden had a friend shoot him in the arm with a .22 caliber rifle from fifteen feet away. The audience consisted only of close friends. The actual performance was not intended for the public but the textual, photographic and video documentation ensured that the work would reach a mass audience and transcend the specific time and location of the actual performance.

As an art student Burden could have chosen to perform the work publicly during a 1971 Duchamp symposium held on the U.C. Irvine campus.<sup>38</sup> Burden was aware of the problem of enacting gun violence within university space:

I thought: 'Guns on campus; that could be problematic.' It would have been a crisis with the Chancellor. It's not about testing the University or anything like that. I thought doing it in a university context could be problematic for the university. I'd already thought about shooting and being shot, and so I thought this would be a perfect place to do it and then I thought better of it. Which I think was a wise decision because the campus police would have been involved.<sup>39</sup>

His choice to perform the shooting in a private, intimate setting shows an awareness of the ethics involved with using a potentially lethal instrument in a work of art.<sup>40</sup>

Burden's *Shoot* was part of a wave of body and performance art that started in the 1960s, notably including Joseph Beuys, Vito Acconci and Carolee Schneemann. Performance art was a

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<sup>38</sup> Stiles, Kristine. "Burden of Light." In *Chris Burden*. Fred Hoffman, coordinator. Newcastle upon Tyne: Locus+ Publishing, 2007, p. 30.

<sup>39</sup> Burden as quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>40</sup> For an account of the 2004 incident in which graduate student Joe Deutch "played Russian roulette with a fake but real-looking gun" in Chris Burden's studio art class at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), that concluded with Burden and his wife Nancy Rubins, also a professor at UCLA, resigning from the university after the school chose not to expel the student, see: Schjeldahl, Peter. "Performance: Chris Burden and the limits of art." *The New Yorker*. 14 May 2007.

part of the conceptual art movement that focused on the idea and meaning behind a work of art rather than the object itself. Lucy Lippard and John Chandler wrote in “The Dematerialization of Art” in Art International in February 1968 that the conceptual art movement has “set critic and viewer thinking about what they see rather than simply weighing the formal or emotive impact.”<sup>41</sup> Performance as art grew out of the Futurist, Surrealist, and Dada (whose performances were staunchly anti-war) movements as well as the Happenings of the 1960s. Performance art privileged chance and the involvement of the audience. While Burden was not included in Lea Vergine’s 1974 seminal text Body Art and Performance, many of the issues in his works are discussed in Vergine’s introductory essay.<sup>42</sup> Vergine lays out the reasons for the proliferation of body and performance art that began in the 1960s. One of these reasons is that the artist is “obsessed by the obligation to exhibit himself in order to be able *to be...to grasp the existent* in all of its brutal physicality.”<sup>43</sup> Burden created *Shoot* in order to experience what it would feel like to get shot. In watching Burden get shot the audience is supposed to imagine what it feels like to experience that pain through a projection of Burden's body onto theirs. Carolee Schneemann, commenting on *Interior Scroll* (1975) confirms this projection: “The force of a performance is necessarily more aggressive and immediate in its effect—it is projective.”<sup>44</sup> The political implication of Burden’s self-inflicted pain in a Vietnam-era work is best put by Vergine: “those who are in pain will tell you that they have the right to be taken seriously.”<sup>45</sup> According to Amanda Jones, in a contemporary survey of the artist's use of the body, “the body can be viewed as a means of enacting and asserting the self within the social. The body is the site

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<sup>41</sup> Lippard and Chandler, as quoted in Taylor, Brandon. *Contemporary Art: Art Since 1970*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005, pp. 20-21.

<sup>42</sup> The current printing of Vergine’s text includes a January 2000 essay: “Diffused Body and Mystical Body” where in the first paragraph Vergine admits Burden to the performance/body art canon she established in 1974. (Vergine, Lea. *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language*. Torino: Skira, 2000, p. 269.)

<sup>43</sup> Vergine, Lea. *Body Art and Performance*. P. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Taylor, Brandon. *Contemporary Art: Art Since 1970*. P. 37.

<sup>45</sup> Vergine, Lea. *Body Art and Performance*. P. 8.

through which public and private powers are articulated, it then becomes the site of protest.”<sup>46</sup> While Burden was not necessarily protesting the war, he intended to raise a discourse about the violence of war that pervaded society and the mass media. By pushing his performance to the extreme of self-inflicted pain, Burden was able to perform a shooting that avoided being overlooked in the violence saturated mass media culture of the 1970s.<sup>47</sup> Burden's body is the central subject of *Shoot*, but the work included an audience, raising the issue of the audience's role in the performance.

In performance art, a “public is needed to complete the event; it must be involved in a collective experience that leads it to reconsider its quotidian existence and the rules of its ordinary behavior.”<sup>48</sup> The public in Burden's work consisted originally of his friends in the gallery but quickly expanded as descriptions, photographs and video documentation reached a mass audience. Vergine writes of performance art, “the relationship between public and artist becomes a relationship of complicity.”<sup>49</sup> Whether or not the audience was aware of their culpability, Burden believed that everyone in the gallery was “implicated in this act of self-inflicted violence by their failure to intervene.”<sup>50</sup> The readily available documentation of the performance—a video can be found on YouTube—raises the awareness of complicity in situations of violence to everyone who views the work.<sup>51</sup> While the video clip's audience cannot stop Burden from getting shot—the event happened over thirty years ago—an ethical question of allowing gun violence to be visited on another visible body is asked in every viewing of *Shoot*. In the 2006 interview with Doug Aitken, Burden stated the “most important part of my

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<sup>46</sup> Jones, Amelia. “Survey.” In *The Artist's Body*, 18-47. Eds. Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones. London: Phaidon Press, 2000, pp. 22-3.

<sup>47</sup> O'Dell, Kathy. *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Vergine, Lea. *Body Art and Performance*. P. 26.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> Warr, Tracey, and Amelia Jones, eds. *The Artist's Body*. London: Phaidon Press, 2000, p. 122.

<sup>51</sup> For the *Shoot* video clip on YouTube, see: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26R9KFdt5aY>>.

performances is that they are disseminated as thought.”<sup>52</sup> *Shoot* was performed to confront issues of the 1970s but has a lasting impact as gun violence continues to plague our world.

Kathy O'Dell, in her work on masochism and performance art of the 1970s, directly addresses Burden's *Shoot*: is it masochistic art? The idea of having yourself shot could fall into the category of masochistic behavior, the finding of “pleasure in being subjected to pain.”<sup>53</sup> While Burden had to go to the hospital after being shot because the shooter did more than just graze his arm, this was not the artist's intent.<sup>54</sup> Burden's own description of the event is rather neutral, not the reaction to a traumatic experience. While an outsider may classify Burden's work as masochistic, Burden himself rejected the masochistic label.<sup>55</sup> His intent was to spark a dialogue through controversy, not have himself shot for pure pleasure.

In a 1975 collage/mixed-media work on paper, *The Commentaries – Novitiate Franciscan*, Burden disclaims the insinuation by Peter Plagens in a 1973 New York Times article that his work was done just for effect in order to gain entry to the art establishment as dictated by the popular magazines at the time, notably Artforum, Avalanche, and Flash Art.<sup>56</sup> In this work Burden responds to Plagens' article by stating “the masochist intends to hurt himself, that's not my intent”<sup>57</sup> and “You've got it backwards. I dictate to Avalanche, Flash Art and Artforum what art is.”<sup>58</sup> Burden's intent was to experience getting shot in a culture where everyone is trying to avoid getting shot—in the presence of a culpable audience. It is worth noting that Burden chose to be shot, whereas the soldiers in Vietnam or political demonstrators did not choose directly to have themselves shot, although they did place themselves in a situation

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<sup>52</sup> Daniel, Noel, ed. *Broken Screen*. P. 76.

<sup>53</sup> O'Dell, Kathy. *Contract with the Skin*. P. 1.

<sup>54</sup> Plagens, Peter. “He Got Shot—for His Art.” *New York Times*. September 2 1973, D1, D3.

<sup>55</sup> O'Dell, Kathy. *Contract with the Skin*. Pp. 1-2.

<sup>56</sup> Schimmel, Paul. “Work Drawings: Chris Burden on Paper.” In *Chris Burden*, 368-81. Newcastle upon Tyne: Locus+ Publishing, 2007, p. 371.

<sup>57</sup> O'Dell, Kathy. *Contract with the Skin*. P. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Schimmel, Paul. “Work Drawings: Chris Burden on Paper.” In *Chris Burden*. P. 371.



where gun violence was likely.<sup>59</sup> Jones best sums up O'Dell's argument on *Shoot*'s relation to the violence of the era: “[his work] is a means of countering the broken social contract evidenced by the tragedies of the Vietnam War.”<sup>60</sup> Even though Burden set up the occasion for the violent act and the audience could have stopped the work, Burden remained in control of the work by using a friend as the shooter. His choice to have friends as the audience also points to him presupposing that the audience would not intervene and he would indeed get shot. Although the chance of an intervention is diminished by Burden’s choice of audience, the opportunity for interference remains, bringing the issue of audience culpability to the performance.

The issue of documentation in temporal performance works is exemplified by what remains of Burden's *Shoot*: text descriptions, still photographs and a short video clip. Documents are required for temporal works to remain meaningful. Vergine's groundbreaking text was itself constructed primarily of artists' statements coupled with documentary evidence of their works. In 1974, as performance art was developing, documentation was already under consideration. Burden talks about experiencing the real shooting and the documentation that persists: “the physicality of *Shoot* was very real. The piece exists as a photographic image, but it exists as a mental image in people's imaginations too, even for those who didn't necessarily see the piece.”<sup>61</sup> Burden was aware of the power of photographs, as he wrote to Avalanche in 1971 about *Shoot*: “I hope to have some good photos.”<sup>62</sup> O'Dell posits an argument for audience implication through documentation: “in the case of...Burden's *Shoot*, for which audience participation was nonexistent or minimal, photographic documents of the pieces create an infinite number of

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<sup>59</sup> O'Dell, Kathy. *Contract with the Skin*. P. 12.

<sup>60</sup> Jones, Amelia. “Survey.” In *The Artist's Body*. P. 32.

<sup>61</sup> Daniel, Noel, ed. *Broken Screen*. P. 76.

<sup>62</sup> Burden as quoted in Stiles, Kristine. “Burden of Light.” In *Chris Burden*. P. 30.

'attendants'.”<sup>63</sup> These attendants are an extension of the culpable audience in Burden's illumination of gun violence in the Vietnam era. While the performance remains shocking today, art historian Damon Willick claims that the *Shoot* archival materials “do little to reverse the common passivity of audiences to media images of the violence of society,” reducing the work to “a spectacular solipsism.”<sup>64</sup> Perhaps the Kienholz’s *Still Live* can reverse this passivity by asking the viewer to place their own body in front of a loaded rifle.

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<sup>63</sup> O'Dell, Kathy. *Contract with the Skin*. P. 24.

<sup>64</sup> Willick, Damon. “Still Live.” In *Art Lies*, No. 60, Winter 2008, p. 26-7.

## **Chapter III**

**Edward Kienholz**

Based in Los Angeles since the 1950s, Edward Kienholz is best known for his large-scale, life-size sculptural tableaux that explore social and political issues. Working at the same time as the abstract expressionists and minimalists, Kienholz created maximalist narrative tableaux by assembling “discarded objects to reconstruct everyday environments and in turn to make us see the workings of contemporary culture more lucidly and startlingly.”<sup>65</sup> The use of found objects can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp’s use of ‘readymades’ and is exemplified by Robert Rauschenberg’s ‘combine’ paintings of the 1950s and 1960s. Rather than abstract his social commentary, Kienholz attempted to recreate the everyday in order to force the viewer to consider their position in relation to the troubles Kienholz highlighted. According to Robert Pincus, Kienholz’s works are an:

intensified version of the given social world. It forces us to think about the darker, troubling, and more covert aspects of contemporary Western culture—with a decided emphasis on American society—by giving it back to us in a distorted form that strives to reveal its underlying cruelties.<sup>66</sup>

By enveloping the viewer in the work theatrically, the tableaux turn “viewers into implicated witnesses.”<sup>67</sup> Kienholz had a strong liberal political bent and sought a “non-elitist, populist art” that could “inspire his audiences to action beyond the confines of art galleries and institutions.”<sup>68</sup> In recreating everyday environments, Kienholz blurred the distinction between art and life in exploring the issues of abortion, state mental hospitals, the death penalty, prostitution and war.

Two works from 1968, *Eleventh Hour Final* [**Figure 12**] and *Portable War Memorial* [**Figure 13**] critique the Vietnam War and the passivity of the American people toward violence.

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<sup>65</sup> Pincus, Robert. *Kienholz*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Crow, Thomas. *The Rise of the Sixties*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 72.

<sup>68</sup> Willick, Damon. “Still Live.” In *Art Lies*, No. 60, Winter 2008, pp. 26-7.

*Eleventh Hour Final* presents a model suburban living room, with a sofa facing a concrete television that resembles a tomb with “the war’s weekly death toll painted permanently on the screen.”<sup>69</sup> The death toll is not limited to American casualties and injuries but also lists the number of enemy dead and wounded.<sup>70</sup> Inside the television the “dismembered head of an Asian child with ominous glass eyes stares out of the console” to relate a singular bodily representation of death to the abstract and distanced death toll.<sup>71</sup> This work disrupts the familiarity of the everyday living room to highlight the television’s role in bringing the war home to the American public. While television images of violence galvanized opposition to the war, the casualty statistics conveyed by the television can be viewed as a “desensitizing instrument for communicating the brutalities of war.”<sup>72</sup> In 1968, with the escalating violence in Vietnam relayed by the television, Kienholz was outraged that there seemed to be “no end of American involvement in sight.”<sup>73</sup> He hoped that his bodily representation of the death toll would spark its audience out of complacency.

A few months later, Kienholz created *Portable War Memorial*, a tableau exploring the interrelations between war and American consumerism. The work features chairs and tables in front of the facade of a 'hot dogs and chili' fast-food stand, complete with a working Coca-Cola vending machine, Uncle Sam propaganda poster, sculptural imitation of soldiers raising the flag at Iwo Jima, and a blackboard with the “names of 475 nations that no longer existed in 1968” in chalk under a cross that says “Portable War Memorial Commemorating V Day.”<sup>74</sup> All of the nations on the blackboard had perished due to war. According to Thomas Crow, this work

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>70</sup> Selz, Peter. *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, pp. 48-9.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>72</sup> Pincus, Robert. *Kienholz*. P. 64.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>74</sup> Selz, Peter. *Art of Engagement*. P. 48.

explores “the perversion of memory in the suburbanized political mind of the country, in particular the potent but distorted recollection of patriotic solidarity fostered during World War II.”<sup>75</sup> When exhibited during the Vietnam War, Kienholz was attacked by the right wing for being unpatriotic. Kienholz defended his intentions:

I would first of all never insult this country as I love it perhaps even as well as you. I would, however, in my [own] way presume to change it...Our moral/ethical posture is not so shining that we should weight other cultures with it. We should, perhaps, as a nation and as individuals, understand ourselves and our influences to a far greater degree.<sup>76</sup>

Kienholz goes on to say, “I truly regret those men/all men who have died in the futility of war because in their deaths I must comprehend our future.”<sup>77</sup> By recreating the everyday in order to highlight a political issue, Kienholz asked all who saw the work to reconsider the collective passivity towards the brutalities of war.

In 1974 Edward Kienholz returned to the issue of war and the nature of gun violence in *Still Live*, installed in the lobby of the Hochschule für bildende Künste (Academy of Fine Arts) in West Berlin as a part of a city-wide project to place art in non-gallery spaces. Despite its creation for a German audience, the work still tackles war and gun violence from an American perspective. Urban violence was also an issue in Berlin at the time, with the Red Army Faction responsible for arson, bombings and assassinations since the late 1960s in the name of radical leftism.<sup>78</sup> *Still Live* dealt with these issues through a more active engagement with the audience. As one approaches the work, one encounters a living room tableau fenced in with barricades and

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<sup>75</sup> Crow, Thomas. *The Rise of the Sixties*. P. 151.

<sup>76</sup> Kienholz, Edward. “The Portable War Memorial.” *Edward Kienholz*. Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1970, n.p.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> “Red Army Faction.” Encyclopædia Britannica. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/494068/Red-Army-Faction>>.

barbed wire held down by sandbags. As you cross into the living room, two skull and crossbones signs announce the danger Kienholz created. The living room contains a “comfortable grouping of furniture (armchair, table, lamp, magazines etc.)” with a “black box mechanism containing a live cartridge and a random timer triggered to fire once within approximately the next 100 years.”<sup>79</sup> In order to experience the work, the viewer had to sign the following contract:

I the undersigned am at least 18 years of age. I fully and soberly understand the danger to me upon entry of this environment. I hereby absolve the artist Edward Kienholz, the owner of the piece and the sponsors of this exhibition of any and all responsibility (morally and legally) on my behalf.”<sup>80</sup>

While there will always be some question as to whether or not the rifle was actually loaded and set to fire randomly, the starkness of this contract certainly heightened the reality of a potential for injury or death. *Still Live* asks the viewer to risk death in the familiar setting of a living room.

*Still Live* proved so controversial when it was first exhibited that German authorities placed Edward Kienholz under arrest for “unauthorized possession of arms” and “the suspicion, of a conditional, but intentionally attempted homicide.”<sup>81</sup> Possession of firearms was not permitted by the Allies who controlled West Berlin at the time.<sup>82</sup> The work was saved with help from the American Consulate and moved to neutral Switzerland; this was the first time the Allies had intervened in a criminal case in Berlin since the 1940s.<sup>83</sup> The work has only been exhibited once in the United States, well after the end of the Vietnam War, at the Braunstein Gallery in San

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<sup>79</sup> Kienholz, Edward. *Edward Kienholz: Still Live: Aktionen der Avantgarde, Projekt für ADA2*. Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 1975, n.p.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Wiegenstein, Roland H. “How the Allies kept a ‘Death-Machine’ Alive” reprinted in Kienholz, Edward. *Edward Kienholz: Still Live: Aktionen der Avantgarde, Projekt für ADA2*, Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 1975, n.p.

<sup>82</sup> Kienholz, Nancy Reddin. “Chronology.” *Kienholz: A Retrospective*. Walter Hopps, ed. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996, p. 258.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

Francisco in 1982.<sup>84</sup> The work remains in storage in the collection of Nancy Reddin Kienholz today.

Presupposing being asked why he created a work that could potentially harm his audience, Kienholz answered in his artist statement:

I have been asked with some justification why I would build such a piece. My purpose is certainly not death. Quite the contrary, I would hope that this work may be able to invoke new and positive responses to the wonders of life.<sup>85</sup>

By 1974 the fighting in Vietnam had ended, but Kienholz remained fascinated with the role of the television in bringing the war home, whether in the United States, Germany or elsewhere. He wanted to disrupt the quotidian experience of passively sitting in front of the television, watching the death tolls rise during a war, by placing a loaded rifle in a suburban living room. Kienholz was “interested in making an environment that was threatening—a work that would infuse the everyday violence of American society into the usually placid exhibition space and, by association, the middle class American home.”<sup>86</sup> He literally put the elephant of recent memory, the horrors of war and gun violence in the room and asked the viewer to confront it if they chose to sign the contract and step inside the barricades.

*Still Live* relies on theatricality—Kienholz saw audience participation as the best means for effecting change. By connecting the idea of gun violence with the image of the everyday in the living room tableau, Kienholz evoked the words of the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, who said that through interaction with the everyday, “lived experience is taken and raised up to

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<sup>84</sup> McCann, Cecile N. *Artweek*. 28 August 1982, p. 16.

<sup>85</sup> Kienholz, Edward. *Edward Kienholz: Still Live: Aktionen der Avantgarde, Projekt für ADA2*, n.p.

<sup>86</sup> Willick, Damon. “Still Live.” In *Art Lies*, No. 60, Winter 2008, p. 23.



critical thinking.”<sup>87</sup> Rosalind Krauss describes the performative aspect of *Still Live* in which the viewer enters the work:

The drama of motion is one that the spectator completes or bestows on the assembled work, his participation enacting in large scale or explicit gesture the ‘subliminal activity’ which the work suggests. The sculpture makes the viewer complicit with the direction of its ‘journey’ through time; in being its audience, he becomes, automatically, its performer.<sup>88</sup>

She goes on to call Kienholz’s works “theatrical, although no internal mechanization impels the sculptured actors to ‘perform’ in time.”<sup>89</sup> Through this theatricality of the everyday Kienholz answers a question proposed by Lefebvre:

How are we to dispel a state of confusion which grows from year to year, and certainly forms part of the world as it presents itself...Can the study of daily life still serve as a guiding thread through the complexities and sediments of modern society?<sup>90</sup>

Kienholz certainly believed that this tableau would impel its participants to reflect on the death caused by war and gun violence.

Commenting on *Eleventh Hour Final* and *Portable War Memorial*, Robert Pincus writes that they “strive to mirror the elemental realities of war—individual death or the demise of an entire society—in a vivid way. If we are repulsed enough by what we see, each work suggests, perhaps our view of the institution of war could be altered substantially.”<sup>91</sup> I would add *Still Live* to this group—by 1974 the Paris Peace Accords had been signed—but the war remained fresh in

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<sup>87</sup> Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. III*. Trans. Gregory Elliot, London: Verso, 2005, p. 10.

<sup>88</sup> Krauss, Rosalind E. *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999, p. 221.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>90</sup> Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. III*. P. 40.

<sup>91</sup> Pincus, Robert. *Kienholz*. P. 70.

the minds of the American public. Kienholz wanted to create a work that would sear the participant with the real potential for individual death at the hands of the institutions of war and gun violence. *Still Live* arguably forced the audience's active participation in confronting issues of gun and war violence more so than Burden's *Shoot*. Complicity may be more understandable in watching an artist get shot in a performance of his own creation, but deciding whether or not to sit in front of a potentially loaded rifle forces the viewer to think about violence in relation to their own body. The role-reversal Kienholz orchestrates, where the viewer becomes the participant, is altered again in Bilal's *Domestic Tension*, where the audience becomes even more culpable than the audience of Burden's *Shoot*. Bilal's audience must decide for themselves whether or not to inflict pain upon the artist.

## **Chapter IV**

**Wafaa Bilal**

Wafaa Bilal, born in Iraq in 1966, grew up witnessing death and oppressive violence committed against his friends, family and country under Saddam Hussein's regime.<sup>92</sup> Saddam understood the power of television, using it to distribute images figuring him as a "benevolent bearer of gifts" while secretly placing a "mukhtar" in each neighborhood to act as a spy on his citizens.<sup>93</sup> Bilal was not allowed to study art at the University of Baghdad because his cousin was considered a dissident by the ruling Ba'athist government. According to Bilal, "the government understood the power of those fields [art and physical education]" and their potential for dissident influence, so Bilal was forced to study geology and geography.<sup>94</sup> As a Shia Muslim, he suffered with Saddam's rise to power. He was arrested and tortured for creating art in opposition to Saddam's regime and had to escape into refugee camps in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. He lived as a refugee for about two years until he was granted asylum in the United States in 1992. Once in the U.S. he pursued the academic artistic training he had always desired, earning a BFA degree from the University of New Mexico in 1999 and a MFA degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2003. Bilal is currently a practicing artist exhibiting internationally and an assistant professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.<sup>95</sup>

There have been numerous artistic responses to the Iraq War, ranging from high art in the gallery or museum to the art of consumer and urban culture. Santiago Sierra's *Polyurethane Sprayed on the Backs of Ten Workers* [Figure 14] was executed in a London gallery in 2004 with video documentation ensuring its tangibility. Sierra hired ten Iraqi immigrant workers and had a rough coating of polyurethane sprayed on their backs as they stood against a wall in the

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<sup>92</sup> Bilal recently published a book that pairs the story of his life with his journal from *Domestic Tension*: Bilal, Wafaa and Lydersen, Kari. *Shoot An Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2008.

<sup>93</sup> Bilal, Wafaa and Lydersen, Kari. *Shoot An Iraqi*. P. 35.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-7.

<sup>95</sup> Wafaa Bilal's website: <<http://www.wafaabilal.com>>.

gallery.<sup>96</sup> He turned these workers into a statuesque undefinable mass only recognizable as a group of human beings by the title of the work. Sierra deals with the wider issue of exploitation of the Iraqi people in the global economy rather than directly addressing the violence of war. While Bilal uses his own body, Sierra continues the exploitation of the bodies of others through payment the workers desperately need. While many sing the praises of Sierra's works for raising awareness of the poor's plight to the middle-to-upper class members of the fine art establishment, Rubén Gallo asserts that "Sierra's interventions are *acts* and not *representations* of exploitation" and therefore ultimately "destructive."<sup>97</sup>

Several artists engaged with the public sphere, including Forkscrew Graphics, a collective that created a set of guerilla posters in 2004, titled *iRaq* [Figure 15], that riff on a now iconic viral Apple iPod marketing campaign.<sup>98</sup> Inserting silhouetted depictions of torture at Abu Ghraib and insurgent fighters against the same brightly-colored backgrounds of the iPod advertisements, Forkscrew Graphics successfully turned consumer culture into an indictment of the Bush Administration's foray into Iraq. These posters first showed up on the streets of Los Angeles in 2004 and remain available for free on the Internet.<sup>99</sup>

Richard Serra's *Stop Bush* [Figure 16] from 2004 was used as a viral promotion for the website pleasevote.com in the 2004 election (now defunct) and was included in the 2006 Whitney Biennial.<sup>100</sup> This graphic work, which diverges from his massive steel constructions, depicts the same silhouetted, hooded Abu Ghraib prisoner used by Forkscrew Graphics, with the words 'Stop Bush' at the top. This politically agitative work links the torture carried out at Abu

<sup>96</sup> Searle, Adrian. "Buried alive." *The Guardian*. 13 July 2004. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2004/jul/13/1>>.

<sup>97</sup> Gallo, Rubén. *New Tendencies in Mexican Art in the 1990s*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 115-6.

<sup>98</sup> Pohl, Frances K. *Framing America*. Second Edition. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008, p. 559.

<sup>99</sup> See: <<http://www.bloodforoil.org/iRaq-posters/>>.

<sup>100</sup> Allen, Greg. "The Mellowing of Richard Serra." Greg.org. 7 July 2004. <[http://greg.org/archive/2004/07/07/the\\_mellowing\\_of\\_richard\\_serra.html](http://greg.org/archive/2004/07/07/the_mellowing_of_richard_serra.html)>.

Ghraib directly with George W. Bush's presidency and asks the country to not re-elect the incumbent responsible.

Two projects in Britain examined the nature of their country's participation in the Iraq War. Mark Wallinger installed *State Britain* [Figure 17] at Tate Britain in 2007, a “life-size replica of Brian Haw's recently illegalized protest against the Iraq War in Parliament Square.”<sup>101</sup> Wallinger won the Turner Prize in 2007 for this work. Steve McQueen's *Queen and Country* [Figure 18] suggested replacing the “face of every single dead soldier on a postage stamp, thereby substituting the image of the sovereign with that of the fallen soldiers.”<sup>102</sup> These two works' engagement with the public sphere allowed for art to enter the public discourse on who goes to war and for what purpose.

Other artists took up new media in their responses to the Iraq War, including Omer Fast's 2007 video *The Casting* [Figure 19], exhibited in the 2008 Whitney Biennial. The work consists of a double-sided video projection with two narratives told seamlessly by a U.S. Army sergeant: his romantic encounter with a woman who self-mutilates and his accidental shooting of an Iraqi.<sup>103</sup> The script is performed by actors, calling into question the value of truth in narrative recollections of war stories.

The new media artist Joseph DeLappe uses the U.S. Army's first person shooter video game, *America's Army*, to bring the realities of the Iraq War to the digital realm. In DeLappe's *dead-in-iraq* [Figure 20], an ongoing work since March 2006, he plays this video game, a major recruitment tool aimed at generating interest in the Army in the younger, computer-literate demographic, as the character ‘dead-in-iraq’ in order to type the “name, age, service branch and

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<sup>101</sup> Bishop, Claire. In *October*, No. 123, Winter 2008, p. 25.

<sup>102</sup> Enwezor, Okwui. In *October*, No. 123, Winter 2008, p. 41.

<sup>103</sup> Kaufman, Jason Edward. “Omer Fast.” Whitney Biennial 2008.

<[http://www.whitney.org/www/2008biennial/www/?section=artists&page=artist\\_fast](http://www.whitney.org/www/2008biennial/www/?section=artists&page=artist_fast)>.

date of death of each service person who has died to date in Iraq.”<sup>104</sup> He does not actively participate in the action of the game and is usually killed quickly after entering the game world, thus having to continually start from the first level. DeLappe wants to make the game’s players realize that this game is the trigger that starts many soldiers on the path toward enlistment, a path that could end with their body being returned in a coffin, like the soldiers he lists in the game who were killed on duty in Iraq.

Wafaa Bilal also takes up new media in *Domestic Tension* and *Virtual Jihadi*, exploring the themes of performance, the body, war and mass media that are present in Burden’s *Shoot* and the Kienholz’s *Still Live*. For *Domestic Tension* Bilal lived in a white-walled gallery room twenty-four hours a day with a paintball gun and camera mounted facing a bed, coffee table and exercise bike, plus a desk and chair protected by a plexiglass shield. The paintball gun rotated from right to left on a fixed horizontal axis so that Bilal could duck out of the line of fire. He spent a lot of time tied to his bed so that he could rest out of range. The ties were necessary to keep him from getting hit if he sat up quickly during the night. The paintballs were yellow (a more positive, playful color compared to black or red) and smelled badly of fish oil while the sound of the paintballs hitting the gallery walls was deafening. The Internet audience was intentionally made unaware of either condition in order to be distanced from the reality of the shooting environment.

With technical assistance from friends and colleagues, he built a website with buttons for ‘left,’ ‘right,’ and ‘shoot.’ When ‘left’ or ‘right’ was clicked, the paintball gun tracked left or right. The ‘shoot’ button released one paintball at the targeted location. The website featured a web camera streaming the gallery room, live, twenty-four hours per day, as well as a chat room

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<sup>104</sup> DeLappe, Joseph. “dead-in-iraq.”  
<[http://www.unr.edu/art/delappe/gaming/Dead\\_In\\_Iraq/dead\\_in\\_iraq%20JPEGs.html](http://www.unr.edu/art/delappe/gaming/Dead_In_Iraq/dead_in_iraq%20JPEGs.html)>.

so that the audience could communicate with one another and with Bilal. He used the computer in the room to monitor and comment in the chat room and create video diaries posted on YouTube. He never left the gallery but would take small breaks outside of his room. He made a point to be in front of the camera and gun as much as possible to counteract claims that the project was a fake. In one instance, when the paintball gun was hacked to fire continuously like a machine gun, Bilal disconnected the “compressed-air canister that powers the gun” to fool the audience into thinking they were shooting live rounds but the fact that “there is so much yellow everywhere, they can’t tell whether they’re actually firing or not.”<sup>105</sup> Bilal fooled the audience for personal safety, not because he wanted to disrupt the reality of the performance.<sup>106</sup>

Many of the chat room participants called the project a fake but Bilal invited them to visit the gallery and see for themselves. News accounts of the performance confirmed the work’s reality for those who remained skeptical. The chat room provided a place for all involved to share their opinions on everything from the purpose of the work to opinions on the Iraq War. In *Domestic Tension*, Bilal complicates Foucault’s statement that the inmate in the panopticon “is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication.”<sup>107</sup> The chat room allowed Bilal to monitor the participants’ discussion as well as insert his own point of view into the narrative. While he imprisoned himself in the gallery for thirty-one days, he also created a place for his own verbal agency to operate.

Despite the temporality of the work, *Domestic Tension* continues to exist through the archival documentation created by the execution of the work itself. The web camera recorded the entire event, Bilal posted video diaries to YouTube, the now inactive website remains, and there are photographs, video clips and screen captures of the website interface available on the

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<sup>105</sup> Bilal, Wafaa and Lydersen, Kari. *Shoot An Iraqi*. P. 81.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>107</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Vintage Books Edition, 1979, p. 200.



Internet. According to Becker, Bilal “did nothing but record the process while the world fought over him.”<sup>108</sup> Bilal himself speaks of his need “to document myself even as I sink into a black hole of grief.”<sup>109</sup> The nature of the Internet provides the ideal space to archive a performance work. While not everything available during the thirty-one days remains for posterity, the numerous written accounts, photographs and video ensure the project's continued existence in the virtual world. With the Internet increasingly becoming our collective and public archive, there is much more documentation available on the Internet for Bilal's work than Burden's *Shoot* or the Kienholz's *Still Live*.

Bilal's desire to reach a mass audience fueled *Domestic Tension*, a project that grew out of Bilal's confusion over how passively Americans could go about their everyday lives while their country was inflicting pain and suffering in Iraq. The war became very personal with the 2004 death of his brother by explosives dropped from an American helicopter after an unmanned U.S. military drone reported that the area was clear of human life.<sup>110</sup> Bilal became concerned with the idea that someone in the United States, in what he considers the “comfort zone,” could kill his brother halfway around the world in the “conflict zone” without ever confronting the victim.<sup>111</sup> Bilal forces the audience to face the artist-victim in *Domestic Tension* through the streaming web camera unfolding the events live.

Bilal wanted to jar Americans into recognizing their passive complicity in the destruction of his country. He thought it best to engage viewers so that they became a part of the performance rather than just present a passive experience. *Domestic Tension* created a work of art with an open narrative where the work was ultimately directed by its participants. Bilal knew

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<sup>108</sup> Becker, Carol. “Introduction: Drawing the Line.” In *Shoot An Iraqi*. P. xix.

<sup>109</sup> Bilal, Wafaa and Lydersen, Kari. *Shoot An Iraqi*. P. 48.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

the work needed to “pose real ethical choices for the participants” in order for the work to avoid becoming another video game where only virtual ethics exist.<sup>112</sup> Along political lines, there were three main groups of people participating in the work: “peace seekers,” “aggressors,” and the “simply curious,” who mostly watched the other two groups fight over Bilal.<sup>113</sup> He felt that he was filling a wide range of roles for different people in the diverse audience he sought to reach: “symbol of the anti-war movement; lightning rod for hatred and racism; subject of intellectual discussion; diversion for the bored; company for the lonely.”<sup>114</sup> Among this wide range of Internet participants was a group of hackers, who either racist or bored, found a way to turn the paintball gun into a machine gun that continuously fired at Bilal. This shows the potential for brutality in the seemingly anonymous culture of the Internet. Others quickly formed the ‘Virtual Human Shield’ to continuously click the gun away from Bilal in order to save him from the constant barrage of yellow paintballs. These two forces were playing out their own war in Bilal’s room in Chicago through the Internet. At the completion of the project Bilal stated: “We silenced one gun today and I hope we will silence all guns in the future.”<sup>115</sup> This statement reflects his intent to stir discourse about ending the violence of the Iraq War in particular, and eventually all war.

While the political message championed by Bilal is apparent, its affect on him personally is less so. Regarding the personal, “this project has allowed me to deal with things I had avoided for a long time; the loss of my brother and my father, my family.”<sup>116</sup> Because the Iraq War and its violent nature was so personal for Bilal, he never considered not using his own body. He knew in order for the work to have the most impact, the artist must be the victim. The work

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110-11.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>116</sup> Bilal as quoted in Becker, Carol. “Introduction: Drawing the Line.” In *Shoot An Iraqi*. P. xx.

brought back the post-traumatic stress symptoms he developed in Iraq and the refugee camps. He often felt “lonely and vulnerable” and was deeply disturbed by the sound of the paintballs hitting the wall and the fish oil smell of the splattered paintballs that covered his room.<sup>117</sup> This work could also be considered masochistic in the vein of O'Dell's discussion on Burden's early performances. While Burden denies any masochistic intent in his work, Bilal describes his performance as a “masochistic display for the camera” and by extension the Internet audience.<sup>118</sup> Despite the painful nature of the work, Bilal denies any suicidal impetus: “I'm not trying to kill myself. I'm just an artist trying to make a point.”<sup>119</sup> He willingly subjected his body to pain in order to confront the public's passivity to the violence carried out by the U.S. in Iraq.

The way in which the audience experiences another person's pain differs greatly from the experience of the person suffering the pain. Elaine Scarry discusses the difference between thinking about “one's own physical pain” and about “another person's physical pain” as two wholly distinct orders of events.<sup>120</sup> Scarry continues:

for the person whose pain it is, it is ‘effortlessly’ grasped; while for the person outside the sufferer's body, what is ‘effortless’ is *not* grasping it...Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed.<sup>121</sup>

This detachment from another's pain is complicated by the virtuality of experiencing Bilal's pain on a computer monitor. When a body becomes pixels on a screen, it is:

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<sup>117</sup> Bilal, Wafaa and Lydersen, Kari. *Shoot An Iraqi*. P. 30.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>119</sup> Bilal as quoted in Becker, Carol. “Introduction: Drawing the Line.” In *Shoot An Iraqi*. P. xxii.

<sup>120</sup> Scarry, Elaine. “The Body in Pain.” In *The Body: A Reader*. Eds. Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco. London: Routledge, 2005, p. 324.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

no longer the site of an embodied identity with a rich biography, it becomes instead, in this instance, a space of exploration: either serious (when converted into medical programs) or playful (when converted into video games) or most often both, as in the new interactive media category of ‘edutainment.’<sup>122</sup>

Bilal’s works certainly turn the human body over to play through digitalization, in a new crossover category I call ‘agitainment’ where a political position is agitated for through a highly entertaining method such as a ‘virtual’ paintball game. In the virtual world:

Simulation parodies the physical in a way that potentially (perhaps often) mocks and disrupts it. As a consequence, meanings and concerns that matter in our fleshly encounters—a patient’s pain, a person’s death—may become irrelevant in digital simulations.<sup>123</sup>

He continuously talks about the struggle between his mind and his body during the thirty-one days but once he emerges, even though physically battered, he felt a sense of mental renewal and clarity in moving forward politically against the war. This is a personal victory, but does not ensure a collective march against war due to the digital reception of Bilal’s body in real pain.

The new media art works by Wafaa Bilal, as well as Omer Fast and Joseph DeLappe, grow out of an art historical tradition with its roots in the theories and practice of Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaists. Duchamp wrote on the inclusion of the audience, an important aspect of new media art: “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”<sup>124</sup> Later in the twentieth century,

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<sup>122</sup> Saco, Diana. *Cybering Democracy*. P. xxi.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

<sup>124</sup> Duchamp, Marcel. “The Creative Act.” In Lebel, Robert. *Marcel Duchamp*. New York: Paragraphic Books, 1959, pp. 77-8. <<http://www.iaaa.nl/cursusAA&AI/duchamp.html>>.

the Fluxus group's Happenings, especially the work of Allen Kaprow, explored unpredictability and the “layers of time, space and interpersonal interaction, which in many ways anticipated the interactive, event-based nature” of new media works like those of Wafaa Bilal.<sup>125</sup> A number of artists and exhibitions in the 1960s through the 1980s took up the “radical and unfamiliar” ideas of information, networks, and communication, including ‘Information’ at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by Kynaston McShine in 1970.<sup>126</sup> ‘Information’ explored the premise that “art was at an impasse, paralyzed by world events and weighed down by materiality, and also that art was something very separate from entertainment-based spectacle.”<sup>127</sup> Bilal’s new media works explore traumatic world events and blur the boundary between political engagement and entertainment. Also noteworthy is Sherrie Robinowitz and Kit Galloway’s *Electronic Cafe* of 1984 which linked “areas of Los Angeles in ‘telecollaboration’” echoing the Internet collaboration between Bilal and his works’ participants scattered across the globe.<sup>128</sup> More recently, Nicolas Bourriaud’s idea of “relational aesthetics” explains the global new media context in which Bilal lives. Bourriaud writes of a “relational art (an art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and private symbolic space)” that “resembles a period of time that has to be experienced, or the opening of a dialogue that never ends.”<sup>129</sup> Twenty-first century culture is based on social exchange because of the rise of networks, both physical and electronic, so it follows that its art would include these modes of communication and interaction.

In a world so dependent on technological networks for its existence, there are two diverging lines of thought on the positive or negative effects of the Internet on society. The

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<sup>125</sup> Greene, Rachel. *Internet Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2004, p. 20.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>129</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. France: Les Presse Du Réel, 2002.

“technological utopian” view claims that the Internet “democratize[s] information” and that “networking via computers also facilitates communication among a larger number and broader spectrum of individuals, enabling people from different remote locations to associate with each other.”<sup>130</sup> This is the position that Bilal believes in when he states that he used the Internet in his art to reach a more diverse audience in condemning the violence of the Iraq War. The “technological dystopian” point of view says that vast amount of data available on the Internet “numb[s] people with a glut of...information” and “further isolate[s] and disaffect[s] individuals from their communities...distract[ing] people from social problems and collective-action remedies by giving them a false sense of political effectiveness.”<sup>131</sup> According to this dystopian view, despite Bilal’s success in reaching a wide audience, his virtual art work with its notions of play and distance from real violence cannot propel people to action against the war. While *Domestic Tension* and *Virtual Jihadi* may have raised a certain level of consciousness, the works cannot effect real change.

The Internet aspires to be a truly public sphere but falls short because an individual interacting on the Internet acts from a computer, usually in a decidedly private setting, like a home or office. There are methods of tracing a computer user’s location by Internet Protocol (IP) address, as the chat room in *Domestic Tension* did, but this IP address can be altered to mask one’s real life identity without too much technological know-how. Despite the Internet not being a “‘universally accessible tool of communication,’ owing to the unequal access to technologies and material resources,” T.J. Demos claims that it does “bear critical potential: specifically, that of breaking through television’s space of ‘social confinement and depoliticization,’ which is

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<sup>130</sup> Saco, Diana. *Cybering Democracy*. P. xv.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xv-xvi.

arguably the biggest obstacle to democratic politics today.”<sup>132</sup> On the other hand, Okwui Enwezor notes, “the idea of the public sphere...has become completely indistinguishable from the entertainment sphere.”<sup>133</sup> This is troublesome if the Internet audience that participated in *Domestic Tension* associated the performance with entertainment instead of political activism. The group Critical Art Ensemble highlights the failure of the Internet in activism: “Organizing over the Internet is far more efficient than any former means; however, the organizational process has to deliver embodied resistance in real space. This is where it has failed in the antiwar movement.”<sup>134</sup> A discourse in the digital realm can be constructive but it might not lead to real actions effecting real change in real space. The art historian Zainab Bahrani accurately sums up the problem with Bilal's artistic and political engagement via the Internet: “the YouTube public sphere encourages a fast-food version of political engagement” that produces no tangible change.<sup>135</sup>

The attraction of fictional play associated with the virtuality of gaming in *Domestic Tension* and *Virtual Jihadi* seems to ask the audience to gloss over Bilal's political message in order to simply ‘play’ the ‘game.’ While that conscious decision has ethical and political import, it does not necessarily transcend into real change. The shock and interactivity of the work make it powerful and attention-grabbing but also detract from its intended goal by inducing passivity. Bilal’s project exploits the interactivity of the Internet as theorized by Pierre Levy:

Rather than sending out a message to receptors outside the act of creation who are invited to give meaning to the work after the fact, here the artist attempts to establish an environment, an arrangement of communication and production, a

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<sup>132</sup> Demos, T.J. In *October*. No. 123, Winter 2008, p. 36.

<sup>133</sup> Enwezor, Okwui. In *October*. No. 123, Winter 2008, p. 42.

<sup>134</sup> Critical Art Ensemble. In *October*. No. 123, Winter 2008, p. 32.

<sup>135</sup> Bahrani, Zainab. In *October*. No. 123, Winter 2008, p. 13.

collective event which involves the recipients, transforms interpreters into players, and places the interpretation in the same loop as the collective activity.<sup>136</sup>

The problem is that the political call to action is lost in ‘playing’ the work. While this kind of work “invites one to grow and inhabit a world” this world is not necessarily the real world.<sup>137</sup> As the quality of virtual representation increases, the virtual world ever more closely resembles the real world, furthering the mentality that one’s actions in the virtual world need not translate into the real world.

*Domestic Tension* and his re-purposed video game work *Virtual Jihadi* both play on the notions of the simulation of war and soldier role-playing. This draws on the history of war video games, from the early 1990s first-person shooter Doom to the very real emulations of World War II in Call of Duty and the futuristic war scenarios found in the Halo series. The creation of a virtual world in both *Domestic Tension* and *Virtual Jihadi* centers on the idea of telepresence. Greene describes this as the “sensation of feeling in a different place or time by virtue of technologies of coordination.”<sup>138</sup> This occurs when the virtual world begins to seem like the real world. It creates an “intimacy that belies geographical distances” while simultaneously suggesting that “Internet...cultures are 'virtual', existing in ether or in an almost fantastic realm, with no impact on actual behavior, natural resources, lands or existing systems.”<sup>139</sup> This is problematic for the creation of new media art that hopes to spur people to action. While browsing the Internet and living in its virtual world, it is easy to forget about the physical, non-virtual world. The notion of playing a game that exists in both of Bilal's works allows for “role-playing opportunities...dramatic narrative possibilities, and...show-stopping architectural

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<sup>136</sup> Levy, Pierre. “The Art of Cyberspace.” In *Electronic Culture*. P. 367.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 367.

<sup>138</sup> Greene, Rachel. *Internet Art*. P. 67

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-8.



spaces.”<sup>140</sup> On the use of cyberspace by artists, “it is therefore natural that the creative effort is shifting away from the messages towards the devices, the processes and languages, the dynamic ‘architectures’ and environments.”<sup>141</sup> The idea of interactivity where an audience, or player, is required changes the nature of games as forms of art. It also introduces the concepts of surveillance and voyeurism: anyone could watch Bilal live in *Domestic Tension*.

According to Slavoj Žižek, “the ultimate lesson of virtual reality is the virtualization of the very true reality.”<sup>142</sup> If a virtualized reality of war violence is internalized by a participant of Bilal’s works, then a call to effect change against this violence in the real world could go unnoticed. Through this process, Žižek says reality has become a “mirage of ‘virtual reality’” where “the ‘true’ reality itself is posited as a semblance of itself, as a pure symbolic construct.”<sup>143</sup> Virtuality complicates action in the real world because “virtual reality puts the user’s sensory system into a direct feedback loop with a computer” disallowing any agency in the real world.<sup>144</sup> While the virtual world can reach a mass audience, it cannot impel them to any social or political action. Thus Bilal’s performance can lead the participatory audience to an awareness of the violence committed by the United States in the Iraq War, but cannot compel them to act out against the war. Bilal’s works become like Burden’s *Shoot* and are not able to reverse the passivity in the audience despite the large group reached. The saturation of violent images in mass media and our newfound tendency to experience the world virtually, actually virtualizes the real world. This turns Bilal’s works into digital solipsisms—intriguing and fun, but not politically motivating.

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>141</sup> Levy, Pierre. “The Art of Cyberspace.” In *Electronic Culture*. P. 366.

<sup>142</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. “From Virtual Reality to the Virtualization of Reality.” In *Electronic Culture*. P. 295.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>144</sup> Hayles, N. Katherine. “Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers.” In *Electronic Culture*. P. 261.

## **Chapter V**

## **Conclusion**

The performance of violence remains shocking to its audience because of the use of the body, something physical that the audience can relate to. In Burden's *Shoot*, the audience is asked to sit idly by while the artist has himself shot with a rifle. The performance does little to reduce passivity towards violence due to violence saturated media culture. The Kienholz's *Still Live* asks the audience to participate in the performance of the work by choosing to confront and risk death in the comfort of a living room tableau. Perhaps placing one's own body in harm's way will have a deeper impact on one's awareness of violence. As in installation, the work falls short of this goal because it failed to reach a critical or mass audience. Bilal's digital works of the agitainment variety have been successful in garnering a large audience, particularly outside of fine art institutions, but their virtuality detaches the audience from effecting real change. In *Domestic Tension*, the digital reception of Bilal's body in pain makes the war violence he is critiquing feel unreal. His works' use of new media technologies may raise consciousness of war violence but have the unfortunate reverse effect by virtualizing the live and very real Iraq War to the point that it seems like an apparition, another harmless event like the shooting of an Iraqi with a yellow paintball in a gallery in Chicago from the comfort of your dorm room in Claremont, California.

## **Appendix A**

### **Images**

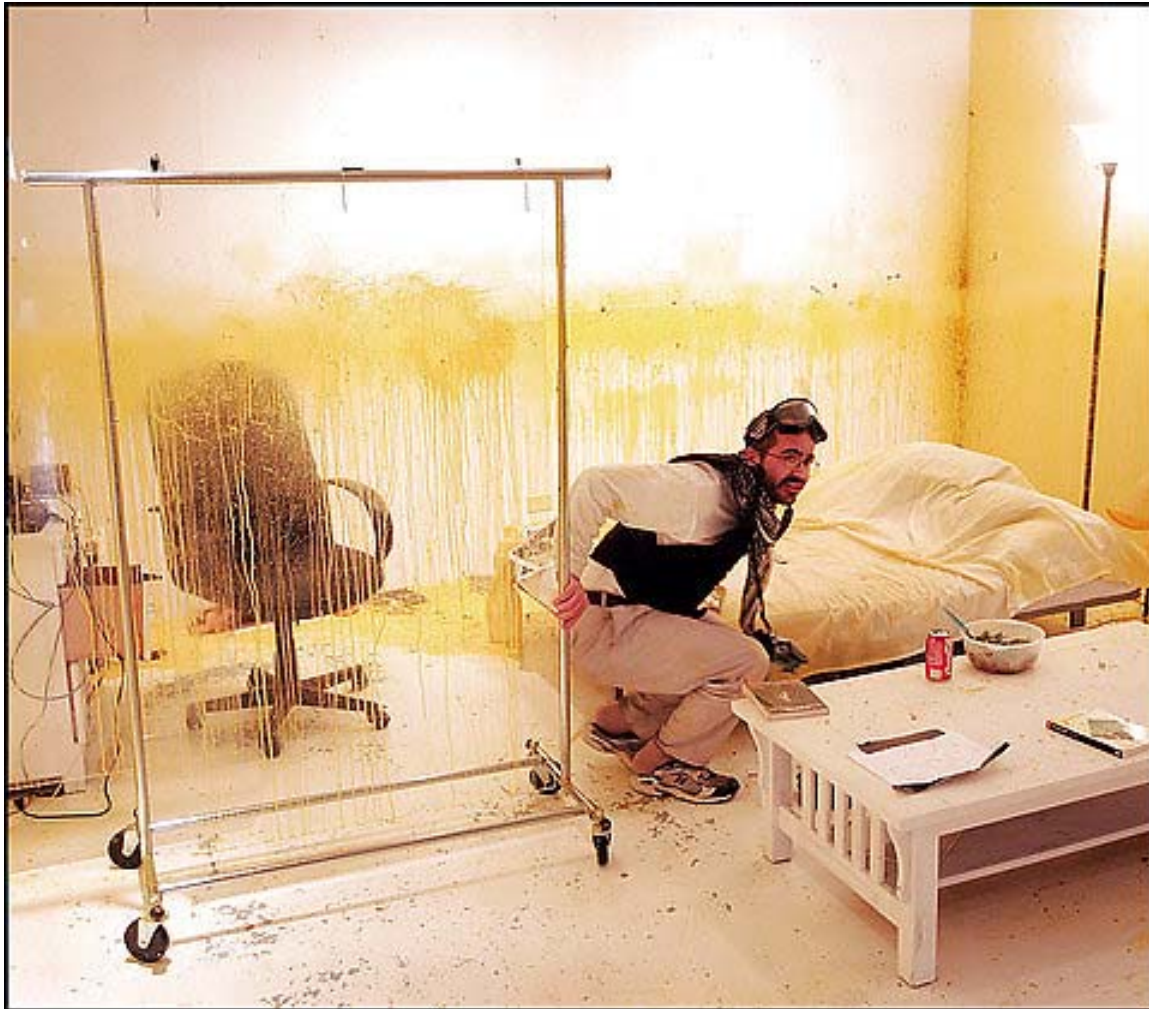
**Figure 1**



Wafaa Bilal  
*Domestic Tension*  
Installation view, Flatfile Galleries, Chicago, Illinois  
May - June 2007

Source: <<http://www.daylife.com/photo/0bFE0P67sJgmL>>

**Figure 2**



Wafaa Bilal  
*Domestic Tension*  
Installation view, Flatfile Galleries, Chicago, Illinois  
May - June 2007

Source: <<http://microrevolt.org/reblog/archives/2007/05/antiwar-art-in-.html>>

**Figure 3**



Wafaa Bilal  
*Domestic Tension*  
Installation view, Flatfile Galleries, Chicago, Illinois  
May - June 2007

Source: <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/pritheworld/3120788914/>>



**Figure 4**



Wafaa Bilal  
*Domestic Tension*  
Installation view, Flatfile Galleries, Chicago, Illinois  
May - June 2007

Source: <<http://www.daylife.com/photo/0gWG3u7bvx3a>>



**Figure 5**



Wafaa Bilal

*Domestic Tension*

Screen capture of inactive website interface

May – June 2007

**Figure 6**



Wafaa Bilal  
*Virtual Jihadi*  
Screen capture detail  
2008

Source: <<http://www.digitalmediatree.com/sallymckay/?48024>>

**Figure 7**



Wafaa Bilal  
*Virtual Jihadi*  
First-person shooter persona modeled after Wafaa Bilal  
2008

Source: Debatty, Régine. "A few words with Wafaa Bilal." 12 March 2008.  
<<http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2008/03/what-did-your-previous-project.php>>

**Figure 8**



Chris Burden

*Shoot*

Performance still, F Space Gallery, Irvine, California  
1971

Source: <[http://www.12ozprophet.com/index.php/kr/entry/chris\\_burden/](http://www.12ozprophet.com/index.php/kr/entry/chris_burden/)>

**Figure 9**



Chris Burden  
*Shoot*  
F Space Gallery, Irvine, California  
1971

Source: <[http://www.12ozprophet.com/index.php/kr/entry/chris\\_burden/](http://www.12ozprophet.com/index.php/kr/entry/chris_burden/)>

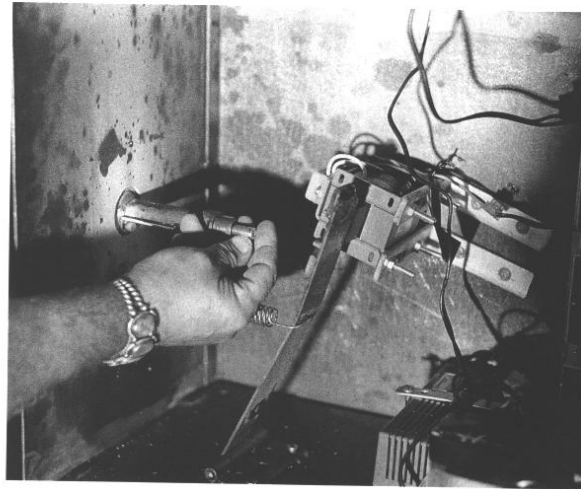
**Figure 10**



Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz  
*Still Live*  
Installation view, Berlin  
1974

Source: <[http://www.lalouver.com/html/kienholz\\_bio\\_80s.html](http://www.lalouver.com/html/kienholz_bio_80s.html)>

**Figure 11**



Kienholz loading the firing mechanism

Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz  
*Still Live*  
1974

Source: <[http://docentes.uacj.mx/fgomez/museoglobal/ART\\_PG/K/Kienholz.htm](http://docentes.uacj.mx/fgomez/museoglobal/ART_PG/K/Kienholz.htm)>



**Figure 12**



Edward Kienholz  
*Eleventh Hour Final*  
1968

Source: <<http://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/manson/catalog/kienholz.htm>>



**Figure 13**



Edward Kienholz  
*Portable War Memorial*  
1968

Source: <<http://www.beatmuseum.org/kienholz/memorial.html>>

**Figure 14**



Santiago Sierra  
*Polyurethane Sprayed on the Backs of Ten Workers*  
2004

Source: <[http://www.lissongallery.com/#!/exhibitions/2004-07-13\\_santiago-sierra/](http://www.lissongallery.com/#!/exhibitions/2004-07-13_santiago-sierra/)>

**Figure 15**



Forkscrew Graphics  
*iRaq (Yellow)*  
2004

Source: <<http://www.bloodforoil.org/iRaq-posters/>>

**Figure 16**



Richard Serra  
*Stop Bush*  
2004

Source: <[http://grammarpolice.net/archives/2004\\_07.php](http://grammarpolice.net/archives/2004_07.php)>

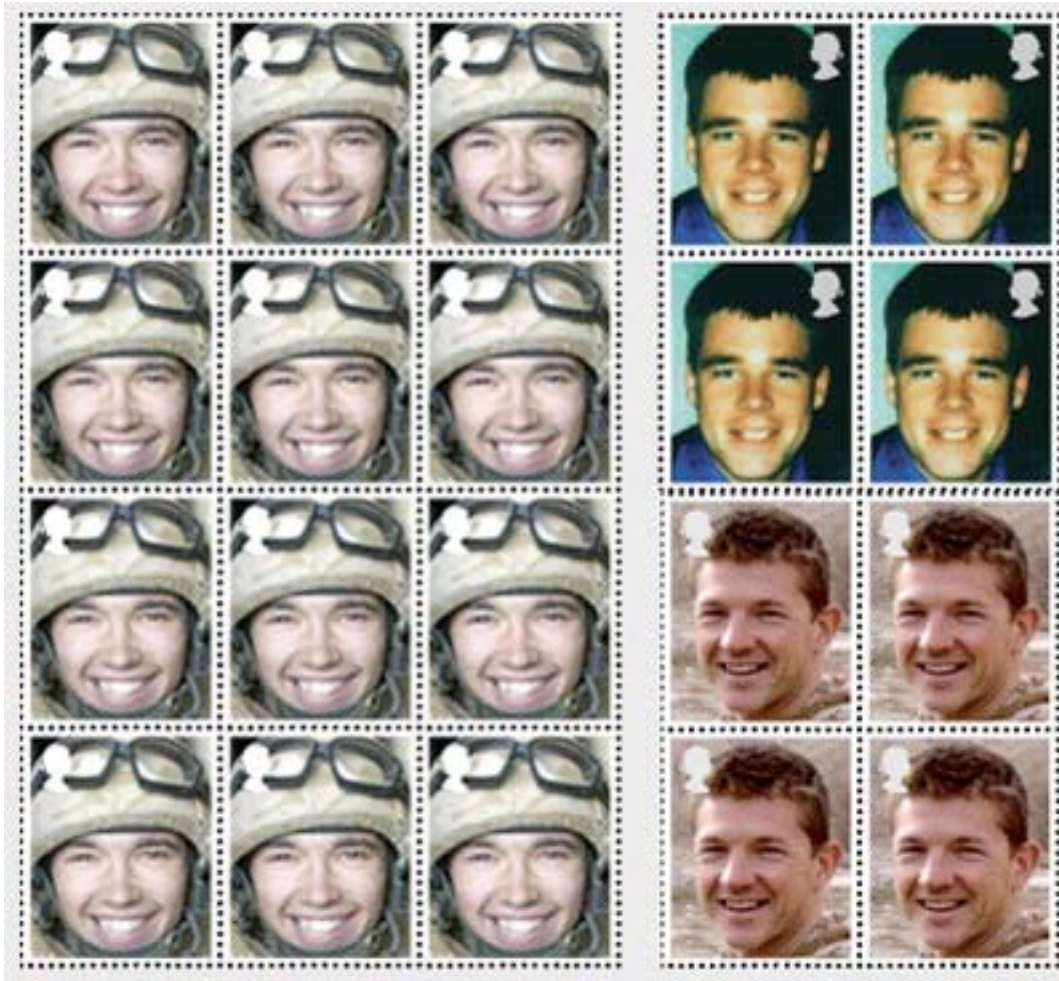
**Figure 17**



Mark Wallinger  
*State Britain*  
Installation view at Tate Britain  
2007

Source: <<http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/turnerprize2007/images.shtm>>

Figure 18



Steve McQueen  
*Queen and Country*  
2007

Source: <<http://www.johnsonbanks.co.uk/thoughtfortheweek/index.php?thoughtid=260>>



**Figure 19**



Omer Fast  
*The Casting*  
Production still  
2007

Source: <[http://www.whitney.org/www/2008biennial/www/?section=artists&page=artist\\_fast](http://www.whitney.org/www/2008biennial/www/?section=artists&page=artist_fast)>

**Figure 20**



Joseph DeLappe  
*dead-in-iraq*  
Screen capture detail  
March 2006 - ongoing

Source: <[http://www.unr.edu/art/delappe/gaming/Dead\\_In\\_Iraq/dead\\_in\\_iraq%20JPEGs.html](http://www.unr.edu/art/delappe/gaming/Dead_In_Iraq/dead_in_iraq%20JPEGs.html)>



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