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# Degree Critical



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## From Afar, A War

*By Sumeja Tulic*

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Elia Suleiman, *Homage by Assassination*, 1992, film still, 35 mm film. Courtesy of Video Data Bank.

I usually begin writing with the help of philosophy. I do so not because I know so

much about it, but because I can accept philosophy as a mediator between sentiment, history, and thought, which is a fancy way to say between my experience and the world I've been taught. I seek it—that which I call philosophy—amongst underlined sentences and favorites: Simone Weil in summer when one needs to be reminded of God, and Hannah Arendt in the winter when one needs to survive. For the other two seasons, gentle and placid by comparison to the former two, I often turn to Bruno Latour. So, before writing about an art exhibition about war, I did what I have done before when writing about kneeling during an anthem, Yugoslav Brutalist architecture, a Romani painter, invisibility, and love as “something”—I turned to the philosophers. What soon became clear to me is that war can't be rationalized and dealt with through philosophy. I tried; I failed.

My failure had nothing to do with the fact that the day I'm drafting this piece, a global war is a realistic possibility. My failure had nothing to do with my ideological and political sentiment about wars, which I'll cautiously describe here like the cynicism of a person whose hand has just thrown a Molotov cocktail.

My writing strategy failed because, in trying to write about war, I tried to hide, and you can't hide from war, not even in military camouflage. War is an omnipresent and all-encroaching production. Unlike patriotism, which provides different forms of participation, war imposes a choice between ally and enemy.



Francis Alÿs, *Color Matching*, 2016, film still. Courtesy of Ruya Foundation.

I'm not sure if a large-scale group exhibition can assemble a composite of 30 years of wars for audiences to behold from afar, but *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011*, organized by MoMA PS1 curators Peter Eleey and Ruba Katrib has tried to. The timeline that frames the show starts with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, continues through the two Gulf wars, and ends with Barack Obama's withdrawal of American troops from Iraq in 2011. It features 300 works by over 80 artists from Iraq and abroad who have engaged with the decades of killing, destruction, sanctions, suffering, instability, and occupation in Iraq and its surroundings. Some of the works in the exhibition are deeply personal, others, although made from afar, stunningly clear and evocative.

The title of the show isn't an allegory but an actual military term: a "theater of operations" is a sub-area within a landscape of war. One could say that the theater of operations is akin to an act within a larger, theatrical play (of war). The play separates itself from the rest of reality through a dramatic enactment of war. The conceptual meaning of the show's title imposes itself as a framework of its experience. The walkthrough is layered with the quest to confirm one's location in space, distance from the next target, and coordination between now and what should be next. At this point, it bears acknowledging that the exhibition is, spatially and curatorially, a maze. I was never exactly sure

where I was.

The incisiveness of Elia Suleiman's short diary-style film, *Homage by Assassination* (1992) derives from the preciseness of its location. It shows Suleiman in his New York studio-apartment attending to his daily routine. He edits his work, uses the bathroom, boils milk, and watches a couple fight from his window. Suleiman's mundane patterns slowly dissolve into an absurdist interplay between the artist's life occurring in the peace of his apartment and his fear that his homeland, Palestine, is at the threat of Iraqi Scud missiles. Aside from marking the far-out boundaries of the theatre of operations, Suleiman's piece underlines the biographical conclusion of his wall text. The artist, like most of the others included in the show, has left his native country and lives abroad now.



Afifa Aleiby. *Gulf War*. 1991. Oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 27 1/2" (100 x 70 cm). Courtesy the artist.

Another of these artists is Afifa Aleiby, whose two paintings from 1991, *Gulf War*, and *War Painting (The Destruction of Iraq)*, are included in the exhibition. Aleiby's paintings are portrayals in grief and surrender. The latter is portrayed as a woman in a white dress standing in front of the bullet-ridden Mesopotamian statue. Whether it once depicted a man or a god, who can say?

Tarek Al-Ghoussein was born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents living in exile. *Theater of Operations* includes an untitled series of Polaroids Al-Ghoussein took in 1991, while in Cairo, of TV news coverage of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the subsequent Gulf War. The Polaroid screengrabs sequencing the war—soldiers in motion, closeups of George H. W. Bush and Saddam Hussein, oil well fires, a woman mourning the loss of her child, a man raising his arms up, smoke, more fire—are oddly beautiful considering what they portray, and can be interpreted as an exercise in distorting distance and conventional notions of presence and documenting.

Unlike Al-Ghoussein, who remained far from combat activities, Francis Alÿs and his work *Color Matching* (2016) hinge more closely to war. In 2016, Alÿs spent nine days embedded with Kurdish forces in northern Iraq. In *Color Matching*, we see the Kurdish soldiers preparing for an attack on Isis-held Mosul and the artist's hand squeezing oil-color, tapping and mixing it on a small palette. Alÿs's painting activity is aimed at matching the colors of the combat arrangements unfolding before him. Mimesis in action.

We see a different scene, from the opposite end of the spectrum, in Verne Dawson's painting *Massacre* (2004)—the final scene. Dawson depicts people, killed and maimed, body limbs flailing in a sand-covered patch of land with an oil refinery in the distance, the stereotyped landscape of the Gulf. The surreal scene of death and despair at the edge of a city reveals some otherwise faceless characters: mother, child, soldier, and man.



Installation view of Hanaa Malallah, *She/He Has No Picture* (2019) on view in the exhibition *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011* at MoMA PS1, New York from November 3, 2019 to March 1, 2020. Photo by Matthew Septimus.

These characters are revisited, even more intimately, in Hanaa Malallah’s piece, *She/He Has No Picture* (2019). Composed of brass plaques, burnt canvas, and canvas with pencil, the installation commemorates the killing of 408 Iraqi civilians who sought safety in a bomb shelter in the Amiriyah neighborhood of Baghdad during the early hours of February 13, 1991, when it was attacked and destroyed by U.S. smart bombs. After the attack, Mallallah visited the remains of the Amiriyah shelter and was struck by the commemorative photographs of the victims left at the site by their relatives. Unable to photograph these relics at the time, due to the shortage in film resulting from UN-sanctions, Malallah began a 28-year-long process of collecting images and information on the



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translated their names by using an ancient Islamic system in which Arabic letters are assigned a numerical value. Alongside the portraits and the translated names are brass plates engraved in Arabic stating, “She/He Has No Picture.” These brass plates are polished to a mirror finish that enables viewers to see their own reflections.

I don’t remember seeing my own reflection. If I was reflected, I was no more than a blur, passing through. The mirror surface does nothing to rouse my empathy; it is the numerals that do. I know that behind the numeric values were faces with my first name and, perhaps, my father’s first name and, for sure, my brother Muhammed’s. You can’t hide from war when your namesake has died in it—afar doesn’t exist. Just like it found Saddam Hussein in a six-to-eight-foot deep hole, outside of his hometown, Tikrit, war also found me, in Queens, New York.

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*Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011 is on view at MoMA PS1, 22–25 Jackson Avenue, Queens, through March 1, 2020.*

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