

# Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011. MoMA PS1, New York

(3rd November 2019–1st March)

by **ROBERT SLIFKIN** *Feb 2020*

Few subjects in the history of art seem as universal and venerable as war. From ancient monuments commemorating military victories and celebrating soldiers to modern condemnations of its brutality (with Picasso's *Guernica* still serving as the decisive archetype), war has provided the sort of epic subject-matter and grand scale that has conventionally implied historical significance and major statement. Yet as this briefest of trajectories suggests, modern artists have increasingly taken on the role of critical witnesses rather than official emissaries and have focused their attention more often on the victims than the victors. Indeed one could argue that modern art's commitment to expanding aesthetic boundaries (of what sort of subjects are suitable for depiction and what sorts of materials can constitute a work of art) has developed alongside what the philosopher Paul Virilio has described as the 'deterritorialization' of warfare, in which lines between civilian and combatants have become indistinct and the threat of mass violence is a constant if suppressed feature of everyday life.(1) Which is to say that the blurring of art and life typically ascribed to the artistic avant-garde (a term with notably martial etymology) finds an unexpected correlate in modern military techniques.

*Theater of Operations*, a large and at times overwhelming exhibition at MoMA PS1, New York, dedicated to the art produced in response to the two Gulf Wars that the United States and its allies waged against Iraq between 1991 and 2011, is notable for the equal attention it gives to the work of artists on both sides of the conflict.(2) Arranged in roughly chronological order

across the three floors of the museum and featuring over 250 works by eighty-two artists, the show demands a certain amount of stamina. Yet its extensiveness seems appropriate for what has ostensibly become the lengthiest military operation in the history of the United States, beginning with its attack on Baghdad following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1991 and then, in the wake of the events of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 and George W. Bush's dubious claims of 'weapons of mass destruction', recommenced in 2003. Despite the capture and execution of the Iraqi dictator in 2011, there has never been what could be considered an outright victory or, for that matter, an end of hostilities in the region, a point that was brought to the fore by the United States' targeted attack on Iranian Major General Qassim Suleiman on 3rd January 2020, almost exactly in the middle of the exhibition's four-month run.

The curators, Peter Eleey and Ruba Katrib, effectively present the complex, multivocal history of these wars by juxtaposing artists from the two regions within the same galleries, often to striking effect. In one of the first rooms of the show multipart arrangements of works by Louise Lawler and Hanaa Malallah, both dealing with the often overlooked and uncounted Iraqi civilian deaths caused by the war, face one another on opposite walls. Lawler's photographs, with titles such as *34,452* and *654,965* (2004/2007), allegorise the (notably divergent) estimated casualties of Iraqi civilians between 2006 and 2007 through their depiction of a sliver of sunlight cutting through shadow to expose the complex network of lines from a Sol Lewitt wall drawing. In contrast, Malallah's intimate portraits of Iraqis (2019) who were killed while hiding in a civilian bomb shelter targeted by United States forces take on the authority of eyewitness testimonial, despite being based on newspaper photographs. Born in Iraq in 1950, Malallah, like many of the artists represented in the exhibition, left her native country to study and practice art abroad, in her case London. Produced by collaging small

fragments of burnt canvas into the distorted visages of the dead, her works, with their grisaille palette and simulated craquelure, suggest both the mediation and neglect that Lawler's works indicate metaphorically and in a notably more restrained lexicon.

The pairing of Lawler's and Malallah's works establishes a comparative paradigm that recurs throughout the show: artists from the United States and Europe principally access images and information about the war indirectly and from afar, portraying its effects through their representation in the media, or through oblique symbolism; those working in and around Iraq present the subject with a greater sense of bluntness and emotional immediacy, even when capturing these events through mediated channels. For instance, Monira Al Qadiri's video *Behind the Sun* (2013) appropriates amateur video footage of Kuwaiti oil fields that were ignited by Saddam's retreating forces, setting the distinctly apocalyptic imagery of plumes of fire and smoke rising from the desert against a soundtrack taken from Islamic television and Arabic poetry and, through this conjunction, the timeless world of theology against the budding twentyfour-hour news cycle.

The pervasive televised representation of the war in the United States is the subject of Michel Auder's marathon video *Gulf War TV War* (Fig.28). Culled from hundreds of hours of videotaped broadcasts, and often bearing the fringes of commercials that served as the ostensible ground to the figure of the news, Auder's work with its jittery cuts mimics the act of channel surfing, presenting such early infotainment as a wily if not wilful technique of inattention devised by the corporate sponsors of the broadcasts. As suggested by the title of Alan Sekula's trenchant installation (1991/1996) of nine colour photographs of American citizens, including young children, reaching out to touch the mortar gun of a tank against the sunny California sky, for most Americans, this was largely a 'war without bodies'. Auder's video insinuates that the faces of newscasters and other 'talking heads' largely replaced the

televised bodies of dead and injured of the last major American military intervention, in Vietnam.

Indeed, Auder's canny edits and supplementary subtitles slyly brand certain segments as 'fake news', reminding the viewer how the first Gulf War prefigured not only the invasion of 2003 but also our current historical moment of political turmoil and spectacularised journalism. Considering how the so-called Second Iraqi War entailed a certain tragic reprise and subsequently slipped into the seemingly ceaseless and categorically unwinnable 'war on terror', it is not surprising that repetition is something of a leitmotif for many of the artists in the show. Sometimes the repetition takes on an explicit cross-cultural valence, as in Urok Shirhan's 'remake' (2012) of Paul Chan's *Baghdad in No Particular Order* (2003), recalibrating its prototype by drawing upon home videos to suggest a degree of familiar intimacy as opposed to Chan's outsider's perspective. While artists such as Auder and Lawler, as well as Wally Hedrick in his painting *Rondo/ Rhondo* (1970, 1992 and 2002; private collection), returned to an earlier body of work to invest it with new meaning, the political resonances of other works by western artists are emphasised by their inclusion in the show and in particular by being exhibited alongside the typically more explicit imagery of Iraqi artists. For instance, in another particularly compelling juxtaposition, Sturtevant's simulated recreation in 1991 of Jasper Johns's *White flag* (1955) brings the military and racial connotations of the canonical painting to bear on the country's new imperialistic ventures in the Middle East, whereas a pile of liquorice lozenges in Felix Gonzales-Torres's *Untitled (public opinion)* from the same year takes on the semblance of an endless supply of bullets.

The speed of modern warfare has made it notoriously difficult to apprehend and record, and artists have long had recourse to methods of recreation and revision to represent combat, investing even eyewitness accounts with a sense of belatedness and omission. Themes of rehearsal inform An-My Lê's

unnervingly candid photographs of military training exercises (2003–04) and Harun Farocki's cool tutorial videos, which document the traumatic effects of modern warfare (2009). The dynamics of repetition and deferred reportage are equally fundamental to the numerous examples of artist's books, or *dafatir*, exhibited in the show. These typically accordion-format volumes became a prevalent practice for many Iraqi artists in the 1990s. Drawing upon a tradition of calligraphic manuscripts, many of the *dafatir* bring a diaristic perspective to the bibliographic associations of archival collection and portability. In Mohammed Al-Shammarey's *My trip from Basra* (2003), for instance, maps and passport stamps jostle with graffiti-like calligraphic marks to suggest the diaspora and dislocation caused by the war, while in Kareem Risan's *The fires of Baghdad* of the same year the artist physically burnt and tore pages to convey the precarious situation of both bodies and things (Fig.29). (These imperiled dynamics of movement were brought home at the opening of the exhibition, which a number of Iraqi artists included in the show were unable to attend due to the current 'travel ban' instituted by the Trump administration in 2017.) The theft and displacement of cultural artefacts caused by the many instances of looting became an unintended consequence of the war. These themes are vividly addressed in Dia al-Azzawi's box-like *dafatir* that serve as movable collections and Nuha Al Radi's *Embargo* sculptures which assemble uncanny surrogates for the victims of war from detritus and stones (Fig.30).

*Theatre of Operations* appears at a moment when the art world – and for that matter large segments of the world at large – is particularly sensitive to the possibility that every account of a heroic victory or innovative creation, whether aesthetic or political, not only occasions the marginalisation and often misery of other people but is arguably predicated on acts of oblivion and aggression. Weaving together multiple narratives into a compelling if still incomplete survey of this crucial moment in contemporary history, the show,

like the more inclusive recent rehang of MoMA itself, suggests that there are many histories of modern and contemporary art, and that such multiplicity offers up new aesthetic and ethical criteria based on empathic dialogue across cultures. Some viewers will no doubt regard many of the works as heavy-handed and their often distressing messages as too much tied to the contingencies of discrete events, too *engagé*. But in its cumulative effect, *Theater of Operations* presents an array of salutary and significant models for artistic practice and political engagement for our precarious present.

1. P. Virilio: *Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles*, New York 1990.
2. *Catalogue: Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011*. Edited by Peter Eleey and Ruba Katrib. 275 pp. incl. 100 col. + 20 b. & w. ills. (MoMa PS1, New York, 2019), £40. ISBN 978–0–9968930–8–4.

