

THE ART WORLD

# THE ART OF WAR IN “THEATER OF OPERATIONS”


*Can an exhibition about the Gulf wars provide new ways of seeing such dismal subject matter?*

By Peter Schjeldahl

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Sue Coe’s “Bomb Shelter,” from 1991, appears in PS1’s show about the Gulf wars. Courtesy the artist and Galerie St. Etienne

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I have rarely looked forward with less appetite to any art show than I did to “Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars, 1991-2011,” which fills the Museum of Modern Art’s PS1 annex, in Long Island City, with more than three hundred works by eighty-two contemporary artists, including thirty-six Iraqis and Kuwaitis. Why revisit the concatenating disasters in Iraq for which my nation bears responsibility: the blitz that drove Saddam Hussein’s troops out of Kuwait in 1991 (remember when he seemed the worst person in the world, several human beasts ago?), and the full-on invasion of 2003, whose terrible consequences have not ceased since Barack Obama declared an end to American combat involvement in 2010? But I boarded the No. 7 train with wary curiosity, piqued by the novelty, in these days of mutually entangled art and politics, of a show that centers on hard historical fact rather than on curatorial themes or theories. The idea promised acid tests. Might art afford new things to know and new ways to feel about matters that are so dismaying and depressing that they hobble the brain and lock down the heart? And might it do so without sacrificing the aesthetic and spiritual cultivation that is art’s reason for being?







"Lounging Woman," by Martha Rosler, from 2004. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

Not really, on all counts. There's the sour news, which is complicated by tangential sensations of grotesquerie and elegance, fury and poignance, and, perhaps, of philosophical insight. "Poetry makes nothing happen," W. H. Auden wrote. The same goes for visual and—rife in the show—conceptual art. But, of course, things make poetry and art happen: the death of W. B. Yeats, in Auden's case, and the causes, events, and consequences of human suffering, in that of "Theater of Operations." The simpler the subject, as a rule, the more amenable to creative recollection and refinement. The PS1 show, curated with abundant wall texts by Peter Eleey and Ruba Katrib, sputters with attempts to seize on tractable aspects of a daunting complexity. Most informative are scrappy works by Iraqi artists whose struggle to make art becomes a subject in itself. A fledgling art world in Baghdad in the nineteen-eighties, led by painters bent on adapting Western modernism to native traditions, succumbed not to violence but to deprivation under the sanctions that were imposed on Iraq by the United Nations in the period between the wars.

With access to the outside world choked off and even rudimentary art materials all but unobtainable, Iraqis, including the superb painter Hanaa Malallah, developed varieties of *dafatir* (notebooks): ruggedly handmade books that are like the dream diaries of constricted personal lives and thwarted artistic aspirations. Malallah immigrated to the U.K. in 2006. A new work by her, "She/He Has No Picture" (2019), amplifies the *dafatir* aesthetic to generate a wall-filling array of portraits, drawn on scorched canvas, that are derived from photographs of some of the more than four hundred civilians who, in 1991, were killed in an air-raid shelter by a U.S. "bunker-buster" bomb—whether on purpose or in error remains a matter for debate, while not mattering to them. The raw authenticity of the *dafatir* clashes with the comfortable sophistication of works by European and American artists who respond far more to media reportage of the wars than they do to the wars themselves. Exceptions include the veteran British graphic artist Sue Coe, who finds focus for her classic

Expressionism and her lifelong sorrow and anger at human barbarities. But, for the most part, a sort of clammy vicariousness reigns.

Installation view of “She/He Has No Picture,” by Hanaa Malallah, from 2019. Courtesy the artist; photograph by Matthew Septimus.

What made the Gulf War and the Iraq War different from others in the immemorial annals of human atrociousness? (At points in the show, I found myself disgusted with our animal species.) Super-duper technology, of course. Many—too many—of the artists seize on easy ironies of mediated information (televised spectacle as somehow malignantly manipulative rather than banal), tendentious incongruities (the artist Martha Rosler’s well-known montages of sinister soldiers in battle array and of upper-class women vamping in deluxe homes prove what, exactly?), and fixate on remotely deployed weaponry (as if this were any more reprehensible than dealing death with clubs and knives). When will we stop obsessing about our gimmickry of communication and just communicate as best we can? Inexplicably, to me, the show’s catalogue features a reprint of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s flashy, repellently foolish essay of 1991, “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place,” which sashays past the actuality of blasted lives for fancies of postmodernist exposition. According to Baudrillard, “simulacra” have come to displace realities in human understanding. No, they haven’t. But the callousness of his essay may symptomize the

condition, shared by all, of feeling overwhelmed by today’s volume and speed of information.

Two works in the show, neither of them notably original, do a lot to both dramatize and counter art’s worldly futility. “Touching Reality” (2012), by the icily didactic Swiss installation artist Thomas Hirschhorn, is carefully obscene. In a nearly five-minute video projection, a hand on an iPad flicks through color photographs of human bodies that have been blown open or blown to pieces in unspecified military or terrorist incidents. I girded myself to watch but was defeated as the hand paused now and then and, with a thumb and a forefinger, enlarged horrific details. The deliberation made this a work as much about the hand’s owner—a possessor of steel nerves and forensic curiosity—as about the destroyed bodies. As art, it invites viewers to identify as similarly tough or, failing that, to sample the sort of trauma that harrows and blights survivors of war. Is the effect salutary, fuelling righteous rage at the governments, movements, and random insanities that entail murder as a matter of course? Or might long exposure to such sights desensitize us? I wouldn’t know. After about a minute, I fled.

“Gulf War,” by Afifa Aleiby, from 1991. Courtesy the artist

“Untitled (Iraq Book Project)” (2008-10), by the Australian Rachel Khedoori, who is of Iraqi-Jewish descent, fills a large room with long tables that bear seventy large books, each of about seven hundred pages, which are jammed with run-on text in a nine-point, typewriter-like Courier font. I estimate the over-all word count to be well north of a hundred million. What’s printed is every article Khedoori could find online, starting in March of 2003, that contains the word “Iraq,” “Iraqi,” or “Baghdad.” All were written in—or have been translated into—English: globalization’s lingua franca. Dip in. Stools that can be wheeled

around, from table to table, are provided, and you may turn pages. You will encounter passages of perfectly fine journalistic prose that is taut with the urgency of breaking news—some of which, inevitably, you read once and, after some hours of searching the chronological sequence, might read again. The work made me feel, strongly, two things: helpless and serene. With a disarming tranquillity, it materializes the maddening torrent of news and views that can't be adequately comprehended, any more than a teacup can collect a waterfall. The room is evenly lit and quiet. Nothing glows or clicks or hums. So much art in the show importunes. Khedoori's left me in peace, with the welcoming, chaste beauty of the open books in an afternoon that felt spacious and unhurried. I almost felt like setting up a cot and moving in.

Installation view of “Untitled (Iraq Book Project),” by Rachel Khedoori, from 2008–10. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Galerie Gisela Capitain; photograph by Matthew Septimus.

What do we talk about when we talk about war? Anything except war, it can seem, when visual art is the language. Asked for contrary examples, most of us would cite some pictures by Goya, from two centuries ago, and jump to one by Picasso, from 1937 (what is it about Spain?), then fumble in memory for anything else at once adequate to the subject and distinguished as art. Novels, sure, and movies, which pick us up in one time and set us down, satisfied, in another. The relative failure of “Theater of Operations” to encompass a violent and, lest we forget, ongoing history underscores the limitation of pictures and



objects, in that regard, but also their compensatory power: to occupy, with us and like us, only the present, in which not to be troubled and confused is not to be paying attention. ♦

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*Peter Schjeldahl was *The New Yorker's* longtime art critic until his death, in 2022, at the age of eighty. He joined the magazine as a staff writer in 1998.*

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