

“Drawing the Line,” an Introduction to SHOOT AN IRAQI: ART, LIFE, AND RESISTANCE UNDER THE GUN

by Wafaa Bilal and Kari Lyderson, City Lights, San Francisco 2008.

Drawing the Line

“This isn’t a time for art,” he said. “This is a time of war.”

I said: “It is never a time for war, but it is always a time for art.”

Wafaa Bilal

Part I

I visited Wafaa Bilal several times while he was performing Domestic Tension at Chicago’s Flatfiles Gallery in the spring of 2007. Each time I entered the space, I was brought to tears. What had once been a spotless, white-cube gallery had become, over a short time, startlingly chaotic. Wafaa’s installation room was covered in a sticky, slippery, soupy yellow paint, whose fish-oil smell permeated everything. It seemed impossible to breathe, let alone sleep, eat, write, or think in such a space. As Wafaa wrote at the time, “The scene is like some natural disaster - except it’s not natural. It’s an entirely manmade disaster. That’s what war is.” The chaos surely startled me. But probably the most disturbing aspect of all was the sound of the gun, out of which the paint-ball bullets flew with such velocity that at one point they cracked the protective Plexiglas shield behind which Wafaa attempted to compose his thoughts and maintain his blog. The gun poked its head up out of its armature and roved the room, continuously simulating the frustrated and impatient gamers at the other end of the Internet.

If Wafaa sat outside the range of the gun for more than a few minutes to speak with friends and visitors, the arm would raise itself up like a periscope, pivoting and trying to locate him. And when the gun would go off, splattering yellow paint on the wall, the floor, the computer, or actually hitting Wafaa, the sound was as loud as a .45 caliber semiautomatic. I had not anticipated this sonic disturbance and how unnerving it would be. On my first visit I wondered aloud and naively why anyone could want to shoot Wafaa - one of the sweetest, gentlest people I had ever met; someone who had been through so much and yet appeared

to hold no rancor. On my second visit I found Wafaa much more haggard and agitated. “How can you sleep with this gun going off continuously?” I asked. “I can’t,” he said. The firings unexpectedly had triggered an old anxiety in him associated with life under Saddam Hussein and his time spent in the refugee camps of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, where he and his brother routinely would say good night to each other as if it were good-bye, fearful that one of them might not be there in the morning. So many others had been kidnapped by guards - raped, murdered, and lost forever. On this visit, Wafaa insisted that he turn the camera on me and ask for my thoughts about the project. But I sensed he had another motive, that he didn’t want to step outside the circle of the piece and talk with me. He had to show that he was still inside the event. “If I step out of the line of fire for too long, even just a few minutes,” he said, “they get upset.” They, the ones in part responsible for the 80 million hits and the 60,000 shots from 128 countries over 30 days, would hurl insults at him across the Internet if he left the room, accusing him of going for a walk, eating with friends, just having fun, or making fun of them. They would deduce that the whole thing was a fraud, a sham, and that he never really was physically in the space. His absence would trigger their mistrust and paranoia and make them very angry. They would then write racist accusatory comments on the blog.

I have no idea what we talked about on that visit and in that interview; I was too focused on the gun, expecting it to go off at any time, like torture schemes where the randomness of the action, the not knowing when the pain would be inflicted, creates intolerable anxiety. Wafaa appeared able to endure the gun. Whenever it would break down and the firing would stop for at time, however, he also would break down. As he has written, when you are being shot at you go into “survival mode”; when the shooting stops, one can allow oneself to feel the pain.

On my final visit, the piece was almost over. As I walked into the gallery, I saw Wafaa outside his room for the first time in a month, asleep on the small ledge under the gallery windows. The sun was streaming into the space and he had his keffiyah (black-and-white scarf) over his face. The gallery attendant offered to wake him, but I asked him not to. He seemed so peaceful, and by then I understood what a few moments of deep sleep might mean to him. But before I left, I walked around to peer into

his room. It was even more chaotic, drenched in inches of paint, the smell permeating everything. That day, said the gallery attendant, they had run out of paint balls since hackers had found a way to turn the gun into a machine gun, and the pellets were flying nonstop and out of control. Friends were reprogramming the gun, and others were taking up a collection to buy more paint balls. But did I want to help buy more ammo with which these aggressive gamers could attack Wafaa? I knew he was adamant that the project continue as promised, never wanting to appear that he had stopped because it had all simply become too much. And so I left the nuts and dried fruit I had brought for him, along with some cash.

Later, when Wafaa Bilal asked if I would write the introduction for the book about the project, I assumed the book would be about its specificities - the responses from the media, photos, excerpts from the blogs, and so forth. It had not occurred to me, and perhaps had not yet occurred to him, that the book, this book, would be a memoir that wove in and out of the project, telling the story of his life in Iraq, his journey to the U.S., and all the heartache and complexity in between. But of course it made perfect sense that it was his life under Saddam Hussein and the effects of the most recent American war in Iraq that were the background for Domestic Tension, and that the past, as well as the present, was always in the forefront of his thoughts. Nothing short of this intensity would have fully explained the motivation for the performance and installation that had captured the imagination of so many. When I finished reading this manuscript, I emailed Wafaa to say that I had a much better sense of all that he'd been through. He replied that it didn't matter what someone had gone through; only what they made of it mattered. What Wafaa has "made of it," over and over again, is art.

Part II

Hannah Arendt thought, "behavior could be judged by moral criteria as right or wrong, but action is judged for neither its motivation nor its aim, only for its performance..."

Wafaa Bilal is an artist who puts his body on the line to remind us, as he says, that those who live in the "comfort zone" do not

understand “the conflict zone.” In *Domestic Tension* the artist sitting creates discomfort, as he makes himself a target for a world anxious to decathect its violence.

For this piece the attackers were mostly video gamers and paint-ball junkies “intrigued by the possibility of shooting someone hundreds of miles away with a click of their mouse,” Bilal writes. As I noted, there were those bloggers who would hurl racist epithets and recriminations at him online if he went out of their sight for more than a few minutes. And there were those who kept him up all night shooting. But there were others. A group called Virtual Human Shield succeeded in jamming the site for seven days, keeping away those hackers who were trying to shoot at him continuously. There was Matt Schmid, a former U.S. marine who heard about the installation on the radio, went online, saw someone shoot at and break Wafaa’s only lamp, and came to the gallery the next day with the gift of a pole lamp, taller than the range of the robotic arm. There were those who brought food. There was a high-tech professional who heard about the piece, and, anticipating the amount of virtual participation Wafaa’s web site would receive, came into the gallery and volunteered to connect the project to a larger server that could manage the unexpected high volume of hits. He maintained the site for the entire run of the project. There were many friends and artist collaborators who helped Wafaa develop the technology and build the device and who stayed close throughout. There was a very forward-looking, courageous gallery director who was willing to offer her white-cube space for such an intervention and live with its destruction during Wafaa’s installation. And there was Wafaa himself, passionate and forgiving, whose attitude has always been that people simply need to wake up and realize that the Iraqi war is not a virtual war, not a video game, and that real human beings on all sides of the conflict are being killed daily. Wafaa has said, “Art doesn’t have to change life, it just has to start something...” No matter what people thought while entering into this encounter, they surely came out of it changed.

I have always very much liked Hannah Arendt’s definition of action, which, when applied to such acts of performative art making, comes closest to explaining Wafaa’s intentions. She defined action as a “risk” that takes place in the public arena. As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl has written about Arendt’s concept, “Because ac-

tion, unlike a fabrication, is unpredictable, it requires not skill or strength or application of violent force for achieving a result, but courage in the face of the unknown, action is risk." In Arendt's sense art at times can expose the "truth of an event." Young-Bruehl uses the example of Arendt's recognition that Faulkner's *A Fable* allowed its readers to "accept the fact that something like this war [World War II, in this instance] could have happened at all"; that it allowed people simply to "face its reality." This outcome is very much what Wafaa was after. He could not abide that Iraqis were dying every day, that American soldiers were dying every day, that his country had been completely decimated, and, yet, for most people, life in the U.S. was going on routinely, as if nothing was happening, and, worse, that his own life in America could go on as if nothing was happening. This reality was so upsetting to him that he had to create a situation that made him and us conscious every moment that our fellow humans were suffering. He was aghast to learn that in this war people could die by the hands of those not even in Iraq, those who were stationed in some unknown location launching missiles that killed real people from an armchair, as if it were all one extreme video game invented by those who knew nothing about the "enemy" or the disaster they were creating and surely did not want to know.

The performative nature of the project is that it simply asked us to stop and take responsibility for our actions and the actions perpetrated by our government in our name. Wafaa felt he had nothing to lose, or, as he has written, "I had already lived and faced death in three other countries." But there are things as fearsome as death - the racism and explicit demonizing of all Otherness, the blurring of all that is considered "different." The rage hurled at Wafaa during the course of the piece shocked him to the core.

Wafaa Bilal positioned himself on the literal line of fire and waited. He did nothing but record the process while the world fought over him. In this he became representative of many things during the course of this project, but for most people his identity as an artist was lost even though he positioned himself in a gallery and saw the entire action as performance - a deliberate inactivity of sitting still - while the world took shots at him. Although it was a collaborative venture, created with the assistance of other artists, he alone was the sitting duck. In the end he was so distraught

by the gunfire, the lack of sleep, the randomness of the shots, the sound, the inability to escape, that he experienced post-traumatic stress, as if he had been in an actual war zone. It was surely astounding also that such conditions of war could be replicated in a gallery room while the outer spaces of the gallery housed regular art shows and on weekends were often rented out for weddings. For those guests who came to these events he probably appeared like the Hunger Artist in Kafka's parable, a curiosity engaged in an unnerving performative action of his own instigation. I am certain that the real significance of the piece could never possibly have been understood by those who asked Wafaa - exhausted and completely covered in yellow paint - to stand by them while someone else took their photo.

He created an axis of action to intercept daily life. Yet his actions were modest given the enormity of his concerns - war, reparation, life, death, the passing of time, the development of human consciousness and responsibility. They simply point in the direction of his obsessions, sadness, and impotence. At the end of the project Wafaa said, "We silenced one gun today and I hope we will silence all guns in the future" Perhaps without actually meaning to, he has come to reflect the unique ability of artists to engage the largest questions of life and society in their bodies, and to do so within mundane gestures, in this case sitting - in full consciousness, yet without judgment - while 60,000 people took shots at him. In his metaphoric embodiments and personifications of grave social concerns, he is unwilling to blame. So in spite of his stated intentions not to judge, his actions render the rhetoric around most political concerns and activism as hollow and cowardly, because as humble as such performative acts may appear, they are courageous. He placed his "body on the line." Nothing could be more dangerous, literal, or metaphoric than this.

Part III

“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. I miss them terribly. I miss home.”
Wafaa Bilal

No matter what I could imagine about Wafaa's life before he came to the U.S. or his stress during the time I have known him, I could never have reconstructed the complexity of the life he led in Iraq or the degree of loss he has experienced. Partly this is because Wafaa's gentleness - the sheer good-naturedness of his attitude to all of us as Americans and to America as his adopted home - is omnipresent. He appears forgiving even to those responsible for the destruction of his own country and the annihilation of his family in Iraq. What he is unable to forgive and, therefore, expends boundless energy trying to counteract, is the silence that continues to surround the war.

The compelling text which follows sets the stage for Domestic Tension by providing Wafaa's entire history - everything that led up to the project. We come to understand life under Saddam Hussein and life in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and in the U.S. as he has experienced it. We are taken into the dynamics of his family and the tragedies of loss that he has suffered in relationship to them - his over-zealous brother, who was killed by Saddam Hussein's forces; his erratic and often cruel father, who simply wastes away after his eldest son's death; his mother, who tries to hold the family together; the effects of Wafaa's departure on his younger brother, who must take over care of the family; all the pain of his childhood and all the pleasure of daily life within his extended family. We are also able to observe the passion to become a serious artist that drives him to learn English, to want to attend college in the U.S., to fight to get to graduate school, to teach, and to continue to make work. He has had to come so far. The paint-ball project, which was at the center of my original interest, now has taken a back seat to his life. I have become fascinated that anyone could live with such precariousness and still manage to believe that humanity might learn from its mistakes and social systems might evolve.

Throughout Wafaa's life, no matter how difficult, absurd, tragic, or painful his situation became, he always returned to the making of art. This practice sustained him, often helping him to earn a living and to assess his situation. He traded artistic skills for survival and even successfully built a temporary shelter out of handmade bricks that kept him and his brother safe in the refugee camps. His training accounts for very practical skills as well as those that enable him to give form to his thoughts so that he might place them in the public arena. His work has always intended to reflect his complex situation. Each action can be understood as part of his life's work, and his life's work was, and is, to engage an audience in serious dialogue. He does not worry if he disrupts or disturbs; he cares only that he asserts his right to articulate his opinion in whatever form is appropriate, so that that which is repressed and unspoken can be revealed and so that issues he believes significant to the public good might be put into the public arena for debate. For Wafaa all such interventions are embedded in his practice as an artist and therefore should be acceptable for discussion. But what horrifies and confuses him each time is that the possibility for the debate he so craves is often suppressed in the U.S. Were his pieces understood as art manufactured in the spirit of free expression, he is then convinced their manifestations as art actions would be allowed to complete themselves. People could then engage and learn from them; the dialogue would be open, and consciousness would result. This is what he expects from a democracy - that it not fear its own contradictions.

Some may see this expectation as naive; I see it as brave and forever hopeful. But, alas, Wafaa has paid dearly for his optimism. Because he puts himself so clearly on the line, there are those who have referred to him as a martyr, but he refuses the term. "I'm not a martyr," he has written. "I'm not trying to kill myself. I'm just an artist trying to make a point." He makes his points through provocations that break the continuity and demand response. Both the consequences and the rewards of such actions are immense.