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Art in the Aftermath of 11 September
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Debate

KHALED RAMADAN

Art in the Aftermath of 11 September

As a cartoon figure, Dirk always dominates the last page of NU, *The Nordic Art Review*. One of Olav Westphalen's best Dirk strips is the one that follows the 9/11 – in his word – 'occasion' (NU vol. 111, no. 6/01). The first drawing starts by showing Dirk as an angry artist. The second shows him together with an art critic in a gallery where Dirk is telling the critic that we cannot go back to business as usual. In the third, Dirk underlines that artists have to rise to this historical occasion. In the fourth drawing Dirk emphasizes that artists' work should be part of a mighty struggle for a truly democratic and peaceful world. The critic then comes to his senses and asks: 'How do you reflect all that in this new piece of yours?' While looking at a sculpture entitled *Perseverance* Dirk answers: 'Well it is a mould of the permanent dent I put into my couch while watching the CNN for two months.' The result is a positive cast of Dirk's ass.

To chase the change and look for it in deliberate rational ways with known outcomes is not the way to practise art. Change should come as a natural reflection and not as a rational behaviour dictated by the mass media only. Artists who choose to switch and adjust their art production according to what they have heard on CNN, which keeps telling us that it is the time of change and that the world will never be the same, should try to take a neutral look into their behaviour. They have to ask themselves where they stand in relation to 'other' news, which we do not see on CNN. Since when did the world become static and unchangeable? It has always been exposed to and reflected fluxes and constant change in all fields and in all directions. The world never looks at itself at any moment of time. So 'it will never be the same' is just an empty statement.

►
American Football
(life size, 9mm bullets), by Khaled Ramadan.

Detector of change

In *FlashArt*, December 2001, Giancarlo Politti wrote that art has always been the sensitive detector of change and is a delicate seismograph of our time. If art is about detecting first and curing afterwards, why

after 9/11. Voices from the USA, Germany, and the Arab peninsula were all busy condemning the 'occasion' but at the very same time answering those who say 'these things should not happen here, not in the US' with a 'well, these things should not happen anywhere'. Art should be concerned with all human communities and not only one of them. As Politti said, art should be humanity's most sensitive alarm, detecting changes within human communities at large, always using the same barometer of value judgement.

anti-war statements made before 9/11. Donna Huanca, who works in the gallery, stated that '[t]hey said we were displaying anti-American activities.' Huanca asked if they were familiar with the artists and emphasized the role of art at such a critical time. The agents were more interested in where the artists were from. They were pointing out negative things, like a new painting by Lynn Randolph of the Houston skyline on fire, and a devil dancing around with George Bush Sr. in the belly. The Art Car Museum's director, James Harithas, described the visit from the G-men as unbelievable. 'People should be worried that their freedoms are being taken away right and left.' Robert Dogium, the FBI spokesman, said the visit was just a routine follow-up on a call 'from someone who said that there is artwork of a threatening nature to the President'.

Another incidence which makes us think deeply before producing art after the world has decided to change itself is this:

On 26 October it knocked on the door of the art activist A. J. Brown: 'Hello, we're from the Raleigh branch of the Secret Service. We're here to check if you have anti-American material in your apartment.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, we got a report that you've got a poster of anti-American nature.'

'Have you got a warrant?'

No. But they wanted to come in and look around. They explained to Brown:

'We already know what it is. It's a poster of Bush hanging himself.' Well, then it's a poster with a target on Bush's head.

The poster they were interested in was one that depicted Bush holding a rope, with the phrase: 'We Hang on Your Every Word. George Bush. Wanted: 152 Dead.'

The agents kept looking at the walls that contained posters from the Bush counter-inaugural, a 'Free Mumia' poster, and a Pink Floyd poster with the phrase:

'Mother, should I trust the government?' Then they asked: 'Do you have any pro-Taliban stuff, any posters?'



No UN (life size),
by Khaled Ramadan.

then did art activists not detect the other side of the coin? Can art activists afford the humanistic luxury of reacting seriously only to what is taking place within the American boundaries? If we look into what most visual artists did after 9/11, the majority went into writing, shocked and without knowing how to approach it. For those who chose to do it straight after the 'occasion', their achievement, as Dirk's, came from one source only, namely CNN. This unbalanced behaviour is what artists are supposed to abandon. So far columnists, writers, and authors have been pretty effective straight

Who is challenging what?

The role of art is not only to detect and react but also to challenge the unspeakable and the 'political correctness'. At any time, from art one must expect confrontation rather than confirmation. Therefore, art should be political and analytical if it wishes to keep its position as detector.

The latest challenge to the art world after 9/11 came in suit. Terrence Donahue of the FBI and Steven Smith of the Secret Service arrived at the Art Car Museum, an avant-garde gallery in Houston. *Secret Wars* was the title of the exhibition, which contained

Penetrating the Real Thing

The theorist Slavoj Zizek described the fall of the WTC comparing it to the Hollywood catastrophe as 'the element of truth'. Zizek writes that in Karl-Heinz Stockhausen's provocative statement that the planes hitting the WTC towers were the ultimate work of art, one can see the collapse of the WTC towers as the culminating conclusion of the 20th-century art's 'passion for the real'. The terrorists themselves did it not primarily to provoke real material damage but for the spectacular effect of it: the authentic 20th-century passion to penetrate the Real Thing. The Real Thing is what the world (including the art world but excluding the Hollywood planet) has been witnessing so far. The Real Thing has always been out of the Hollywood planet. But when the Hollywood planet was hit by reality, suddenly the world of our fantasy became a Universal Reality.

Slavoj Zizek plays with reality, authenticity, and the fake sphere in order to welcome the new and free world in joining the Real World. He says that '[t]he ultimate American paranoid fantasy is that of an individual living in a small idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while all people around him are effectively actors and extras in a gigantic show. These shots were always accompanied with the advance warning that 'some of the images you will see are extremely graphic and may hurt children' – a warning which we never heard in the reports on the WTC collapse.

We were told that nothing will be the same in the era of post-9/11. In reality things look different. September 11 means that nothing has really changed. The world's conflict patterns did not change a bit. Change as such did not emerge in art, politics, military, or – well, I cannot say that nothing happened to the economy. That alone will have its impact on all sectors including art. The collapse of the stock market in NY in the 1930s did indeed take with it the local and the overseas art life. Such economic changes are never without consequences. Yes, in that sense one can confidently say that world matters are getting worse.

Art activists in the shadow of the 'event' have to make a stand. Either you are with art or you accept everything your government says, whether it is true or false. Are the artists going to do something about it or are they going to wait for the CNN to do so?

Dear ART, Welcome to Slavoj Zizek's Desert of The Real.

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