

Aesthetics of Terror

Manon Slome

The use of “aesthetics” and “terror” in the same sentence is more than disturbing. What is meant by each term, and how can they be linked? From the start, let me emphasize that I do not equate the word “terror” only with the actions of “terrorists” and war with its opposition, as in “the War on Terror.” The Iraqi war, which began on March 20, 2003, was entered into under false premises; thousands of soldiers have died; tens of thousands have been horrendously wounded; and over three hundred thousand Iraqi civilians have been killed, maimed, and traumatized. Through government sanctioned abuse and torture of detainees, and the refusal to abide to the protections of the Geneva Convention, we have squandered our claim of spreading democracy in the world: indeed, former Attorney General, Alberto Gonzales, called such a democratic conception of politics “quaint.” These circumstances must also be seen and understood as terror. As critical theorist Giorgio Agamben asserts:

A state, which has security as its sole task and source of legitimacy is a fragile organism; it can always be provoked by terrorism to become itself terrorist.¹

As for the use of “aesthetics,” I use this term in a neutral sense, as in a study of the forms and principles by which the images under investigation are used, not with a reference to the word’s popular connotations of beauty or value. I am in search of what can be termed an “aesthetics of terror” much in the way that the nomenclature “fascist architecture” immediately connotes a style of building. At this stage, we may not have the clarity of distance as in the aforementioned example, but such an aesthetic of terror is, I believe, permeating our popular culture and that of the visual arts. As Henry Giroux expressed it in a powerful book, *Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism*:

Just as the necessity of fighting terror has become the central rationale for war used by the Bush administration and other governments, a visual culture of shock and awe has emerged, made ubiquitous by the Internet and 24-hour cable news shows devoted to representations of the horrific violence associated with terrorism, ranging from aestheticized images of night time bombing raids on Iraqi cities to the countervailing imagery of grotesque killings of hostages by Iraqi fundamentalists.²

The link between terror and aesthetics first became apparent to me in the preponderance of images I kept seeing in galleries that seemed to belong more in the pages of Time magazine or in news coverage than in an art space—depictions of tanks and soldiers, riots in the streets, bodies strewn on the ground in the “aftermath” of conflict. As striking as many of these photographs were (some meticulously printed and presented, others “raw” with the negative edges of a contact sheet kept as part of the composition, some real footage, others staged), I questioned their function in the museum/gallery setting. Were they protests? Did they make visible (a claim I have heard) images that the newspapers would not print because of their inflammatory nature—disclosing what the government wanted to

keep hidden? Or did this translation or appropriation of war imagery, images of suicide bombers, real or fictional, itself become another trope, a kind of pop, in the sense that it was an uncritical mirroring of images already circulating in our culture, only now the soup can has become a gun? Did they move viewers closer to an apprehension of truth, allowing them to get closer to an independent experience of terror, or did they simply isolate and aestheticize the experience, projecting and protecting at the same time?

A seemingly unconnected incident heightened this questioning. I was in a department store in New York and saw a coat that was “designed” to look like the coat worn by a homeless person. A sleeve was fastened with safety pins to the body of the coat, a twisted piece of rope formed the belt, mismatched buttons were poorly stitched along the front, and threads dangled everywhere. The price tag at \$3,500 made it one of the more immoral objects I have seen and I was struck yet again by the principle of absorption, by how the market/fashion apparatus can transform and thus make palatable (invisible) aspects of our world that either don’t conform to the consumer visions of America or would somehow challenge the prevailing fictions. If the coat becomes an example of “urban chic” and thus removes us from noticing the “homeless” connotation any more, cannot the same be done with warfare—a question that is central in Martha Rosler’s *Bringing the War Home* series. If, in a sense, our life of comfort and security can be assured by a war “out there,” fought by others, what price do we put on a human life, a limb, a dying child, a bombed village? “Some things money can’t buy. For everything else there is Master Card,” goes a contemporary advertisement. For the illusion/delusion of being “tough” on terror and protecting our access to oil, it seems that we are, indeed, often willing to exchange the priceless for profit.

The mechanisms for selling war were much like any other commodity-based campaign. The *New York Times* reporter, David Barstow, revealed the attempt by the US government to achieve “information dominance” through the use of “message force multipliers,” retired military officers acting as “military analysts” whose supposed long service has “equipped them to give authoritative and unfettered judgments about the most pressing issues of the post-September 11 world”.

Hidden behind that appearance of objectivity, though, is a Pentagon information apparatus that has used those analysts in a campaign to generate favourable news coverage of the administration’s wartime performance . . . The effort which began with the build-up to the Iraq war and continues to this day, has sought to exploit ideological and military allegiances, and also a powerful financial dynamic: most of the analysts have ties to military contractors vested in the very war policies they are asked to assess on air.³

In relation to the “homeless” coat and the marketing of war (via the circulation of terroristic motifs such as camouflage, masked models, and war-oriented video games), I was reminded of Slavoj Žižek’s comment:

“. . . we should be aware of the dangers of the ‘Christification of Che,’ turning him into an icon of radical-chic consumer culture, a martyr ready to die for his love of humanity.⁴

One thinks immediately of today’s resurgent fashion for Che T-shirts which sport an image of that wild haired, handsome, and defiant revolutionary whose stylized portrait used to decorate every college dorm wall in the 1960s. Žižek’s words indicate a seemingly inevitable connection between authentic revolutionary

liberation and violence: when “belief” meets the commodifying mechanisms of society’s paradigm du jour, either oppression of the “radicals” or savage resistance of these “revolutionaries” must result. Regardless of how the situation might be framed, it often seems that violence is a tacit premise in the argument for liberation. But perhaps another approach to examining Che’s transfiguration from terrorist to T-shirt icon would be to suggest that a “Chicification of Che” that has allowed designers to capitalize on a perceived element of “coolness” in defying authority figures. The ideologically vacuous popularity of Che and his representation on fashion products likewise devalues the incalculable human cost of a violent revolution, without regards to side or sensibility. Perhaps the most damaging effect of these “cultural” purchases, however, is that they appease the consumer’s (supposed) guilt about being “socially conscious” or “politically active.” Rather than heightening our vigilance, participating in the “Che aesthetic” serves to sanitize our national or personal self-perception by making tolerable, and even fashionable, narrative threads of violence we are exposed to in the media, or in our lives. It is utterly irrational (but nevertheless psychologically expedient) to venerate and glorify militant activism and principled resistance to foreign influence (as with Che), while concurrently maintaining that insurgency and ideational dissonance in the Middle East are inherently the result of a radical unreasoning evil.⁵

The iconography of what I am terming “terror” can be said to have entered world consciousness with the attack on the World Trade Center (I am aware of writing from the relative security of America—for those who have lived their whole lives with terror, imagery, or its starting point are of little concern). What emerged in terms of the visibility of the act was the power of terror as an image-making machine, an exploitation of spectacle. Thousands died in the attacks, but billions of people endlessly watched the falling towers until those images were etched into the global psyche. Many writers and artists considered 9/11 a work of art with which few could compete.⁶

Thomas Ruff also did not see the need to elaborate on this new visuality: in his Jpeg series, he simply downloaded from the Internet images of the falling towers, as well as other natural and manmade disasters, preserving intact, as Baudrillard wrote in the *Spirit of Terrorism*, “the unforgettable incandescence of the images.”⁷ Baudrillard continues:

Among the other weapons of the system which they turned round against it, the terrorists exploited the “real time” of images, their instantaneous worldwide transmission just as they exploited stock market speculation, electronic information, and air traffic . . . The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption. Admittedly, it gives it unprecedented impact, but impact as an image event.⁸

I want to make it very clear that I am not resorting here to talking about images of terror as the final stages of a society of spectacle as described by Guy De Bord: war is far from an “image event,” as Susan Sontag has eloquently pointed out in *Viewing War Photography*.⁹ To speak of spectacle or an image war in this way is to deny the horrendous reality of those who suffer in real time and space from the violence that has been released and which rages without apparent end. What I do refer to, however, is the way the paradigms have changed in the current fiascos of our War on Terror and contemporary issues of terrorism. Image making has become a significant weapon in a distinctly new kind of warfare; as much as in politics, war is fought through ideological representation in the media as well as on the bloodied streets of Iraq and Afghanistan, Mumbai and Madrid. Cyber Jihad and

Celebrity Terrorism (the latter term coined by CNN following the dissemination of images of the terrorists through the global media following the assault on Mumbai) are fought out in media images whose worldwide dissemination can influence an entire generation in the making. As the Mumbai attacks and the grisly executions from Iraq and Pakistan so clearly illustrate, hostage taking is no longer about having demands met, but rather to ensure increased international coverage. As W.J.T. Mitchell says in a powerful essay, "The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable Word and Image in a Time of Terror":

Terrorism, then, is a war of words and images carried by the mass media, a form of psychological warfare whose aim is the demoralization of the enemy and not the direct destruction of military personnel or equipment. I don't mean by this that it is not a real war, but that it is an updated version of a very old kind of war, one that is conducted mainly by symbolic gestures of violence, one that attempts to conquer the enemy through psychological intimidation rather than physical coercion. Terrorists do not occupy territory. They deterritorialize violence, making it possible for it to strike anywhere. The randomness and unpredictability of terror, coupled with its sense of over determined symbolic significance, produce a different kind of battlefield, one that has no front or back . . . The whole notion of a conventional, military "war on terror" in this light is quite incoherent, confusing one kind of war with another. It is the sort of asymmetrical warfare that is doomed, not just to failure, but to actually strengthening the enemy against which it is waged.¹⁰

What Mitchell points to (besides the fact that our current war strategy is hopelessly out of touch with the realities on the ground) is that we are beyond a "camera mediated knowledge of war" (Italics mine): the camera, and all its media extensions of film, video and Internet and cell phones have become active participants in a struggle that is as symbolic as it is brutal, as the image is elevated to "a prominent feature of social and political power."¹¹ Yet, at the same time as we are bombarded with images of the violence of terrorism, the War on Terror is rendered as invisible as possible by the government propaganda apparatus supported by the networks. As Ara Merjian wrote in an edition of *Modern Painters* devoted to the issue of art and war:

Despite the refinement of surveillance technology, we grasp far less about events in Iraq and Afghanistan—their textures, tempos, bodies, and banalities—than even citizens of the first "television war" saw of Vietnam.¹²

The lists of soldiers' deaths are tucked deep inside the newspapers while any imagery that is released by the media is censored and sanitized. What we are fed instead are carefully crafted speeches or photo-ops like "Mission Accomplished" (see *Top Gun*) or the inside of Saddam Hussein's mouth as the devil incarnate is "brought to his just deserts" and humiliated in the public media by a dental inspection. The dangers for the Administration of unregulated imagery were, of course, brought to a head with the Abu-Ghraib photographs, which showed our troops engaged in anything but the spread of democracy.

This dialectic of visibility and concealment, of disclosure and obfuscation and its echo in contemporary art is central to the investigation in *The Aesthetics of Terror*. This contrast and distinction was articulated by Israeli artist, Roe Rosen, on the principal gap between representations of underground terrorism, produced by terrorist groups, and the obfuscation of images of State Terror—banning images of returning coffins or maimed soldiers, the replacement of war coverage by blurred night vision or thermal imaging, censored documents, and the like. In terms of the

“aesthetics” of terror, this gap becomes the space between figuration and abstraction.

The representational apparatus of State Terror, says Rosen, is based on the blurring or erasure of central figures, exchanging it for abstraction: smart bombs’ aerial views of bombardments, for example, or the blocking of visibility by grids or satellite type images that obscure rather than illuminate. On the other end, representations of underground terrorism strive for a central, powerful figure or symbol—the portrait of a suicide bomber, collapsing skyscrapers, and the icon of bearded Osama bin Laden with his golden gown and triangular composition—“this is an icon in the religious sense: a human, semi-divine person whose very appearance defies the divide of life and death,” Rosen claims.¹³

What I would further suggest is the emergence of an artistic sensibility that has been informed by the imagery and politics of terrorism in the current culture as they have been formulated and conveyed through the popular media. Artworks might imitate or mirror this media rhetoric, identify its mechanisms to the viewer, critique it, push back or protest against it. For example, Coco Fusco’s examination of the apparatus of psychological torture used in interrogation is filtered through the rubric of a reality show; Harun Farocki and Johan Grimonprez dismantle news coverage of hijackings and war coverage; Jon Kessler creates war machines with imagery derived directly from magazines and action heroes, while he exploits the concept of real time action and documentation. The artists discussed in *The Aesthetics of Terror* map the relationship between abstraction and technology, color and violence, pixilated images and sovereignty, saturation and contour, authenticity and resolution.

Several interesting questions present themselves. Are these artworks concerned with the operations of terror behind and through the media representations, and not so much with any actual experience of violence? Does that gap take the viewer one further stage away from the apprehension of violence and terror, too? When an image of war or terrorism moves from the newspaper or news networks to the gallery or museum, what causes the shift from an image having “documentary” relevance to it becoming an aesthetic object circulating in the art system? As artists navigate these boundaries, either through direct translation or through appropriation, does violence retain its power to inspire fear, or does this contextual transposition fetishize violence, stripping it of meaning through aestheticization? Does this art “bight” as I referred to Leon Golub’s work in an earlier exhibition catalogue, *Anxiety* (Chelsea Art Museum, April 2003) just as America was entering the war? (Works by Leon Golub, Joshua Neustein, Mona Hatoum, Reynold Reynold, and Patrick Jolley made palpable the physical and psychic disruption of that period.¹⁴) Can the work be said to carry a sense of moral denunciation and outrage akin to say Goya, Grosz, or Dix? Or does this work itself become a self-conscious participant in the spectacle of consumerism of images, an appropriation of which “terror” becomes one more trope? It is with these questions in mind that *The Aesthetics of Terror* was born.

[...]

A final group of artists under discussion look to history as a lens through which to make sense of the present. As Naeem Mohaiemen expresses it so succinctly, the accelerated speed of events can be overwhelming to a politically engaged artist: I started feeling like a hamster on a wheel. There was something soul-deadening about always responding to the news. Because so much of that

project was constantly in reactive mode and headline driven, it was not just activist art interventions, it started becoming emotionally exhausting. Every day there would be a fresh outrage in *The New York Times* (or the *Times*' under-reporting itself would be the outrage) and you would feel compelled to respond through your work. It eventually crowded out any space for contemplation. Partially as a reaction to that I started retreating further into history—to find a quiet space where I could find a vantage point to consider confrontation and the revolution impulse.³⁸ *Red Ant Motherhood, Meet Starfish Nation* (2007) is part of a series in which Mohaiemen investigates historical sites of death. In this triptych, Mohaiemen contemplates the mass graves of the twenty-two members of the Sheikh Mujib family (Mujib was the founding leader of Bangladesh) killed in the 1975 military coup that overthrew the elected quasi-socialist Mujib government. The third panel quotes text from Lawrence Lifschultz's report on alleged CIA involvement in the coup. These warm, rusty red images were captured as Mohaiemen sat all day by the graves, "through a (surprisingly) uneventful Friday. No visitors came: no mourners, no politicians. Only some insects (soldier ants) and the gardener who waters the grave sites."

Part of Mohaiemen's motivation here is to explore what he feels is the almost fetishistic interest in excavating a "foreign" connection to events, a grand theory of conspiracy that is layered onto even the most dramatic historical moments. "Everybody just 'knows' the link exists, no hard evidence needed. Smoking guns are assumed." Mohaiemen's *War of 666 Against Sixty Million* (2007) is made of degraded images from the TV broadcast of Hanns-Martin Schleyer's funeral. Schleyer was the head of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations (BDA) and the Federation of German Industries (BDI) when he was kidnapped on September 5, 1977 by the extreme left militant organization Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), known in its early activities as the Baader-Meinhof Group. Murdered in captivity one and a half months later after the German government did not give in to the RAF's demands, Schleyer, a former mid-rank SS officer, received a State funeral and a three-minute silence in the Daimler factory. While the kidnapping and assassination provided the German State with a pretext to dramatically strengthen the level of surveillance and detention, for RAF sympathizers the national hysteria surrounding Schleyer's death revealed the continuing roots of crypto-fascism within the German economic miracle. Thus both parties were locked into a black-and-white vision of conflict. The other side was always "evil," "Hitler's children," "fascists," and "satanic" (hence 6-6-6 in the title, from the horror film *The Omen*). Yet they also exaggerated their opponent's strength, leading Nobel laureate Heinrich Boll to disdainfully call it "the war of six against sixty million." (The same day Schleyer was shot to death by his captors, RAF members Andreas Baader, Jan-Carl Raspe, and Gudrun Ensslin were found dead in their cells in a Stuttgart prison. Basing his celebrated 1988 series of paintings *October 18, 1977* on newspaper and police photographs, Gerhard Richter, evoked the historical event and its politics of representation.)

Reflecting on the ambiguous images from the funeral of SS officer turned martyr and national hero, Mohaiemen asks what we can make of such a hyperventilating ceremony. His response was to contrast the sophisticated technology of both surveillance apparatus and the media coverage with a deliberately "low-tech" and tainted process. He secured a damaged VHS player to produce a blurred signal and played the funeral sequence repeatedly until the tape degraded to produce a static storm when played in slow motion. Interference, abuse, damage, chimera, and the occult, as visited on popular perceptions, reflect Mohaiemen's preoccupation with failed revolutions. What often begins as a leap into utopia too often ends debased and corrupt and the fight for freedom ends in a police state.

Zoya Cherkassky's *Jewish Terrorists* (Fanny Kaplan and Herschel Grynszpan) (2002) shows porcelain figurines of two tragic Jewish terrorists pointing. On August 30, 1918, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was speaking at a Moscow factory. As he left the building and before he entered his car, Fanny Kaplan, a Russian revolutionary and descendant of a Jewish family, called out to him. When he turned towards her, she fired three shots. When it became clear that Kaplan would not implicate other political opponents of Lenin, she was shot on September 3. On November 7, 1938 seventeen-year-old Herschel Grynszpan walked into the German Embassy in Paris and shot Third Secretary, Ernst von Rath, to avenge the brutal abduction of Jewish Poles from Germany, among them, his parents. For the Nazis the shooting supplied the pretext for massive pogroms launched against Jews in Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland—the Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass. In the subsequent twenty-four hours, Nazi storm troopers along with members of the SS and Hitler Youth beat and murdered Jews, broke into and wrecked Jewish homes, brutalized Jewish women and children, destroyed synagogues, hospitals, and schools, and looted Jewish businesses. Thirty thousand Jews were sent to concentration camps. Shown in Tel Aviv during one of the most deadly years of the Second Intifada—when Palestinian organizations were sending suicide bombers to Israeli towns, and the Israeli military re-occupied refugee camps and initiated targeted killings in Gaza and the West Bank—Cherkassky's Fanny and Herschel stood accusing. So what kind of art is this? What is the intention of these artists in bringing images of war and terror into the immediacy of the art space, and how does it influence our reception of events? Much of the work is decidedly painful, as the viewer is often placed in the central and complicit position of eye-witness. I, for one, was often unsure how to process the information or the feelings that the works aroused, but the experience of curating the original exhibition, writing this essay, and immersing myself in discussion with these artists gave me a sense of hope, even sanity, too often missing in our public life. Looking at art in the midst of war and horror may appear to be a trivialization, and an exhibition of this kind might be the artistic equivalent of the Che T-shirt referred to at the beginning of the essay—assuaging our guilt through the pretensions of artistic activity and intellectual research.

While the art is not didactic, it does, I believe, engage in us a sense of “critical citizenship” that encourages a rethinking of the crucial role of images in our media-saturated world. When simultaneity of event and image are coupled with the omnipresent fear of war and terror, the image can be used not only for entertainment and information, but also as both a weapon and a shield. It is crucial for us to learn to “see” the difference and resist the demagogic strategies to which a media driven society can be subject.

Notes

- 1 Henry Giroux, *Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism, Global Uncertainty and the Challenge of the New Media*, Paradigm Publishers, 2006, p. 42.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 3 The New York Times, April 20, 2008 p. A1.
- 4 Slavoj Zizek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, MIT, 2003.
- 5 For the thoughts expressed in this paragraph and for his meticulously careful editing, I am indebted to Joseph Saei.
- 6 www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/sep/11/arts.september11.
- 7 Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (translated by Chris Turner) Verso, 2003, p. 4.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

9 "Looking at War: Photography's View of Devastation and Death," *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2002, pp. 82–98.

10 *The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in a Time of Terror*, 298-9 W. J. Thomas Mitchell – *The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in a Time of Terror* – ELH 72:2 ELH 72.2 (2005) 291-308

11 Mitchell goes on to say: "This blocking of the scopic and vocative drives receives its most literal rendering, of course, in the now familiar scenes of decapitation that circulate on television and the Internet. These scenes are in themselves 'unspeakable' and 'unimaginable' even as they symbolize the ultimate interdiction of speech and vision, and are themselves subjected to censorship on American television, while widely circulated on the Internet."

12 *Modern Painters*, April 2008, Ara Merjian, "Diminishing Returns," p. 57.

13 "Basic Instinct Meets the War in Iraq," *Maarvon* – *New Film Magazine*, 1, 2005.

14 See exhibition catalogue, *Anxiety*, *The Chelsea Art Museum*, 2003.

[...]

38 *Ibid.*

Manon Slome is founder and chief curator of *No Longer Empty*, an organization which engages new audiences for contemporary art through site specific exhibitions in non traditional spaces. Since the organization was formed in 2009, she has curated some 14 exhibitions which have been accompanied enriching cultural and educational programming that have sought to leave a legacy for the community. She was Chief Curator of the Chelsea Art Museum from 2003 -2008 where she worked with such artists as Leon Golub, Mona Hatoum, Jose Parla, Federico Uribe, MIMO Rotella, Michael Bevilacqua, Miwa Yanagi and Shu Lee Shang. Group shows she curated include "Dangerous Beauty," "Such Stuff as Dreams are Made on" and "The Incomplete." At the Guggenheim Museum, (1995-2003), Slome organized *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, *China 5000 Years* and *the Art of the Motorcycle*.

Slome has curated exhibitions internationally and has published and lectured widely on contemporary art. She was also a curatorial consultant to the Annenberg Space for Photography for the exhibition, *Beauty Culture*. She is a recipient of the Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellowship at the Whitney Independent Study program. She earned her Doctorate at the University of Sussex, England and pursued post- doctoral studies at Columbia University, New York. She is currently working on an exhibition for the affordable housing project in Sugar Hill designed by David Adjaye under the auspices of the Broadway Housing Community and working on a book, "Running on Empty" which covers the first five years of *No Longer Empty*.

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