

## Scopic Regime Change: The War of Terror, Visual Culture, and Art Education

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This study examines visual dimensions and pedagogical repercussions of the war of terror. Iconographies of threat and prophylaxis are explored through a discussion of the actuarial gaze and the terr(ori)alization of the visual field. Specific visual culture fallout from the war of terror is examined, including artistic responses and educational (ir)responsibilities and possibilities. Technologies of forgetting and artistic and pedagogical strategies of remembering are also considered. The essay concludes with an examination of implications and possible future directions for contemporary art education in a post-9/11 world.

### Democratize or We'll Shoot: Framing War and Terror

May 10, 2007—Wafaa Bilal was tired, desperately so. He was shot at around the clock for 5 consecutive days. With nearly 2000 rounds fired already, he still had 25 days to endure.<sup>1</sup> Bilal, an Iraqi-born artist who immigrated to the United States in 1992, readily admitted that carrying out this 30-day interactive art installation in a backroom of Chicago's Platfile Galleries has been profoundly challenging, emotionally and physically (Arner, 2007). The defining feature of Bilal's sparsely furnished room was an ominous paint gun, which is connected to the Internet via direct feed. Anyone who visited the exhibit's website could take control of the gun and fire at will. Titled *Domestic Tension*, Bilal's installation has been described as an artistic rumination on the interconnections between technology, killing, entertainment, morality, and the global war on terror (Caro, 2007). Motivated by a television report about a soldier remotely firing missiles in Iraq while sitting comfortably in Colorado, Bilal devised this piece as a response to the abstractness of contemporary war and its consequences—consequences that are intensely personal to him, having lost both his father and brother in Iraq as a result of the ongoing U.S. military campaign.

Part of the poignancy of Bilal's installation has lain in its challenge to what Ranciere (1992) and Feldman (2004) referred to as the "police concept of history." In this scopic regime, history has been framed as a "visual dichotomy of ideal safe space and dystopic, duplicit, and risk-laden space" (p. 333). This ideological environment has been commensurate with the new globalized economy and has flourished in the aftermath of 9/11. Privacy has been handed over in return for supposed security. Fear has replaced freedom. Dissent has not coexisted with patriotism. Bilal's installation challenged these dichotomies by existing simultaneously as both a site of risk (e.g., emotionally, artistically, physically) and a place of relative safety (e.g., paintballs replace bullets while Chicago serves for Baghdad). Thus, by attempting to occupy the liminal space (Garotian, 1999) between risk and protection, terror and security, Bilal directly confronted the logic of this duality. By purposefully sacrificing his own privacy—not in exchange for increased security but for amplified physical and emotional risk—he artistically complicated the police concept of history by undermining and transgressing the terr(ori)tory between order and disorder, freedom and imprisonment, killing and technologies of killing.

Thus, Bilal's installation has been a direct affront to the ongoing "war on terror," an umbrella term used to depict the broad sweeping legal, political, and military policies promulgated by George W. Bush in response to 9/11. The war on terror, which has been described by detractors, supporters, and even the President himself<sup>2</sup> as a war that cannot be won, has been a defining element of contemporary U.S. culture. While clearly a misguided and even dangerous rejoinder to the threat of terrorism, the overarching preferences for the war on terror rarely have been challenged directly. Some astute observers, however, have pointed out the impossibilities of carrying out a war against an abstract noun, an ephemeral tactic, or a state of mind. While the term itself follows in the historical footsteps of past metaphors used to describe American domestic and foreign policies, including the "war on drugs" and the "war on poverty," this has been the first such campaign to include large-scale military action. As Lakoff (2004, 2006) identified, by framing his campaign against terrorism as a war, the President has successfully invoked Article II of the Constitution, giving him broad political, military, and legal powers as commander-in-chief. As a war president with war powers, he has had extraordinary privileges that, if certain lawmakers have their way, will only be withdrawn when the war on terror is "won." And as Lakoff (2006) explained, this can't happen because "you can't permanently capture and defeat an emotion" (p. 30).

Thus, by using conceptual frames like "the war on terror," conservative politicians and their messaging strategists have been able to manipulate public opinion and generate civic and political support for their policies.<sup>3</sup> Nearly 5 years of the war on terror has naturally led to what might be described as

<sup>2</sup>During an exclusive August 30, 2004 interview with *Today* show host Matt Lauer, President George W. Bush stated that "I don't think you can win it" in response to Lauer's question about whether the U.S. could expect victory in the war on terror.

<sup>3</sup>Lakoff (2004) explained that by purposefully using these structures to frame political issues (e.g., tax relief instead of tax cuts), prominent Conservative messaging strategists like Frank Luntz have successfully manipulated public opinion and garnered bipartisan popular support for previously unpopular policies.

