

PERFORMING HISTORIES: WAFAA BILAL IN CONVERSATION WITH SARA RAZA

Sara Raza

14 August 2011

Sara Raza: *3rdi* is both a fascinating and yet controversial performance work, what's the premise behind this project?

Wafaa Bilal: *3rdi* functioned as a platform for an alternative distribution of non-narrative images. So, in effect, it is a continuation of aspects of my practice that examine the articulation and reception of public and private information. The camera implanted on the back of my head spontaneously captured one image per minute presenting my daily life, and transmitting them to a website for public consumption www.3rdi.me/. In the case of the exhibition at Mathaf images were projected within the installation space.

The concept for *3rdi* arose from a need to objectively capture my past from a non-confrontational point of view, hence the positioning of the camera at the back of my head. Whilst I was in transit and chaos at many points in my life images failed to fully register and I was unable to fully absorb them.

SR: Would you say the project is anti-photography, so to speak?

WB: That's an interesting question because generally photography, and the practice of taking images, is highly subjective. If you consider documentary photography as the most subjective form of image making, and reverse that idea in my work, you will see that I never promise the spectacular, but rather the mundane. The images that the camera captures in my work are low resolution, akin to the quality achieved on cell phones. I am really interested in the disposable and non-hierarchical notion of photography.

SR: In February of this year it was reported that you were experiencing problems with the device as your body was rejecting it and the camera was removed temporarily in order for the body to heal. How has this break affected the project that was intended to last one whole year?

WB: I had to allow the area where the pins that held the camera in my head are attached to heal properly,



Wafaa Bilal, *3rdi*, procedure detail, 2010.



SR: My reading of your performance piece *...and Counting*, (2010), in which you employed a tattoo artist to draw a borderless map of Iraq on your back and mark the death of Iraqi civilians and American army men and women, also bears an uncanny resemblance to the practice of Ta'ziyeh flagellation, wouldn't you agree?

WB: *...and Counting*, was part of a 24 hour performance piece staged at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts in New York and was a form of expressing sorrow that could draw parallels with Ta'ziyeh. The performance was a way for me to express my sympathy for both Iraqi and Americans who had lost family members in the conflict. I wanted to raise awareness of this issue so I had the American soldiers tattooed in red permanent dots, whereas the Iraqi civilian deaths were marked by blue dots of UV ink, which are more or less invisible unless seen under black light. For sure there are some connections with the mourning performed during Ta'ziyeh, but beyond that I wanted to highlight the issue of visibility and invisibility. I also asked visitors to donate a dollar from each dot towards scholarships for Iraqi and American orphaned children.

SR: Interaction with the public appears to be an important aspect of the 'spectacle' surrounding your practice.

WB: I think the public interaction with my work goes beyond simply the spectacle. The spectators as audiences are an important part of my work. For example within my earlier work *Domestic Tension*, (2007) I was confined to the gallery space for 30 days and viewers logged onto the Internet to either communicate with me or shoot the paintball gun. The point of the work was to raise a collective awareness of the war against privacy within the age of the digital. It was in fact a critique of the notion of the spectacle. The core of the project was to raise awareness of US remote wars.

SR: Did you have any control over the viewers who contacted you via the web during the project?

WB: No they were from all walks of life, consisting of hunters, hackers and general public who entered the chat room. However, I tried to not to become the focal point of the conversation and tried my best to maintain a degree of distance, unless there was of course a specific question that I felt I had to respond to. Post-project I published a book *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun*, about my life and the premise behind *Domestic Tension*.

SR: What has been the reception of your work in the US?

WB: I have received a lot of mixed responses for my work internationally, the most common response is why I am subjecting my body to these art experiments, but generally it has been very positive with a genuine



Wafaa Bilal, *Domestic Tension* (performance detail #4), 2007.



desire to learn more about my work. In the US, I teach at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, specialising in photography and imaging. The school is acclaimed for its progressive research into performance and performativity in the visual arts and this context complements my practice, which is process based.

SR: What other projects are you working on?

WB: I am working on a new photographic series *Ashes*, currently in production, that explores the possibility of archiving human DNA by creating miniatures. The series will premiere at Selma Feriani Gallery in London in the winter of 2012.

SR: Where did you obtain human ashes?

WB: At this stage, I can't reveal how I obtained the ashes, but the project is more about archiving, a long standing interest of mine.

SR: Are you interested in (re)archiving history, particularly the history of Iraq?

WB: No, not *per se*, but, for the last 15 years, I have been writing a fictional narrative novel loosely based on Gilgamesh, the central protagonist in the Mesopotamian literary masterpiece *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In my novel, I am exploring the return of this character in contemporary Iraqi society amidst its current turmoil.

SR: Are you depicting the character of Gilgamesh as a heroic figure?

WB: Perhaps on some levels yes, though on the other hand I am attempting to re-visit and pair pre-Islamic histories with modern and contemporary Iraqi Islamic history, a practice, which under the current system has been ignored and in some cases considered profane. Yet so much of modern Iraqi history and culture is rooted in the stories told in pre-Islamic literature. Not acknowledging this verges on the profane.

SR: It reminds me of the *Shahnameh* (book of kings in Farsi), the 10th century fable by Iranian poet Ferdowsi. Its central protagonist Rostam, the archetypal Persian hero, has been replaced by the image of Ali and various Shi'ite saints and Ayatollahs in an 'Islamised' version following the 1979 Iranian revolution and the Islamisation of the country.

WB: I think the image of a 'heroic' figure is completely manipulated. Ayatollahs, heroes, martyrs and kings are all selective constructs. Through my art, I hope to raise a collective social consciousness, one that transcends purely religious and nationalistic dogmas and opens up a discursive dialogue. Of course, I am not discrediting the sub-conscious baggage that we all carry with us, be it religious or patriotic. As artists, and indeed as human beings, we all carry certain weight and some of us choose to acknowledge this within our practices or enactment of daily life, whereas others purposely choose to ignore it.



[1] Ta'ziyeh is the Shi'ite Muslim ritual of mourning the death of Prophet Mohammad's grandson Hussein, who was martyred in 680AD during the battle of Karbala, Iraq.

About the author

Sara Raza is an independent curator and editor for ArtAsiaPacific for West and Central Asia. A former curator of public programmes at Tate Modern, she has written extensively for journals and institutional publications and curated, lectured and presented papers internationally. Sara holds a MA in 20th Century Art History and Theory from Goldsmiths College and a BA (Hons) in English Literature and History of Art also from Goldsmiths. She blogs regularly about her activities at www.sararaza.com.