

Detroit museum holds meeting on US war against Iraq

Our correspondent
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The Museum of New Art (MONA) in Detroit held a public forum December 8 on “Artists and the War Against Iraq.” Artists, critics, art students and others attended the meeting held in the two-year-old art space in downtown Detroit.

The panel included painter Peter Williams, artist and assistant professor at the University of South Florida Rozalinda Borcila, documentary filmmaker Travis Wilkerson and WSWWS arts editor David Walsh. The remarks from the four panelists were followed by an hour-long discussion in which a considerable number of those present participated.

In his comments, Wilkerson, director of *An Injury to One* (screened at the recent Toronto film festival), addressed the social and political character of the war. “These days,” he commented, “we hear a great deal of discussion about the relative merits of a ‘multilateral’ versus ‘unilateral’ approach to the ‘Iraq problem.’ The only word that never enters the discussion is the only word that accurately describes American behavior: and that word is Imperialism. It’s time to call it by its name.”

He went on: “We stand at a juncture of unprecedented danger. American imperialism has finally recovered fully from its historic defeat at the hands of the Vietnamese. The Soviet Union has now been gone for more than a decade. It seems we have entered a kind of endgame in which American imperialism is now ready to turn the full force of its military, economic and political might against any and all forms of resistance—without regard to the specific ideological hue of that resistance. Our list of villains has in common but one characteristic: insufficient servility to American imperialism.”

Wilkerson told the audience that Washington’s “forward drive” can now be “halted only by the

American people themselves.”

“This reality,” he continued, “places a particular onus upon artists who live and work within the United States. This isn’t to suggest that our work must chiefly concern itself with depictions of war itself. Its horrors have been well documented. Rather, we must engage history in an active and critical way. What precisely brought us to this moment? A different kind of world is finally possible only when we are ‘at last compelled to face with sober senses, [our] real conditions of life, and [our] relations with [our] kind.’ What greater use for art could possibly be articulated?”

Walsh of the WSWWS termed the impending conflict “a war of plunder.” Characterizing the organization of the war against Iraq as “a criminal enterprise,” he said, “These are not mistaken policies. Whether it be the proposal to abduct Iraqi scientists, or the daily bombings, or the international campaign to bribe, coerce or intimidate other governments to go along with its policies, the Bush administration functions like a criminal gang.” [See “Great questions confront artists and intellectuals”]

Rozalinda Borcila criticized the upper echelons of the art world for their failure to respond to the Bush administration and the war against Iraq. She noted the eerie silence within the circles of the best-known American artists. Borcila commented that a great many artists had involved themselves in “memorializing” the victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks in a manner that fit into the agenda of the administration.

She argued that there had been, in fact, a reaction against “political art” in US artistic circles in the recent period. Critics and others have complained about the overly political content of European art. Borcila called for a serious renewal of “political” art. This would not mean didactic art, which is so often pat and formulaic,

she suggested, but art that is critical and challenging.

Peter Williams, who also teaches at Wayne State University, told the audience that he was present to learn and gather facts about the present situation. He admitted to not knowing the full story about the Bush administration and its policies. He indicated that opposition to war was widespread, indeed he suggested it was difficult to encounter anyone who supported the attack on Iraq.

Williams commented that he was not present at the discussion “as a socialist or a communist, but as a painter.” (An audience member later commented that she found it unfortunate he would consider those terms mutually exclusive.)

In the discussion that followed the opening comments, questions were asked about the lessons of the Vietnam War protests, the differences between the economic conditions in the US in the 1960s and the present day, and the role of the trade unions. Speakers were critical of the art establishment and art world, suggesting that alternative means had to be found to organize the presentation of critical art work. Travis Wilkerson noted that while making films, which he associated with the means of production, had become more and more inexpensive and manageable, the “means of distribution” remained entirely in hostile hands.

The role of the Democratic Party and the media also came under scrutiny. In response to a question as to why there had been as yet so little response from the American people to the war, Walsh first noted that there had been mass demonstrations that had gone virtually uncovered by the mass media. He commented further that the organizations to which the working population had traditionally turned had entirely abandoned them. The ideological difficulties had to be looked at historically, he argued. “There is wide opposition to the war and that will make itself felt in a powerful fashion,” Walsh said.

A number of statements were read to the meeting sent by artists unable to attend. Frank Shifreen, New York visual artist, curator and videomaker, wrote in part: “The Bush administration is pursuing a flawed policy. It is cynical, corrupt and will not help the ‘war on terrorism.’ Iraq is a country with a rich history and a wonderful people, and has already suffered greatly.... We are setting up our war machine for an Orwellian

spectacle of American Might, and Iraq is the goat. Our job today is not to create a straw dog for an oil strategy that will never work.”

In a statement, Lee Brozgold, New York ceramic artist and muralist, commented: “I think our true subject is not Iraq, but America.... The most terrible impact of 9/11 is that the Bush administration has used it to manipulate public opinion in service of repression—the Patriot Act, Homeland Security and the consent of Congress to relinquish its authority to declare war to a president who is, by the way, illegitimate. Yes, what we need to think about is not Iraq, but America. We need to think about what to do when the government takes the position that there is no poetry and steadily abrogates our freedoms.”

Eyal Weizman and Rafi Segal, Israeli architects and victims of censorship by the Sharon government, relayed the following comment: “To MONA—We are against the war in Iraq. In our work, we have studied the effects of military occupation on the urban fabric of Palestinian towns. The Israeli Defense Forces employ an architect or engineer as part of the crew of every bulldozer, along with a driver and machine-gun operator, thus transforming the science of building into the science of destruction and oppression. During these operations, the IDF has been escorting members of the American military who wore Israeli uniforms but were unarmed. In this way, the IDF has been directly involved in preparations for the assault on Baghdad and other cities. It is, therefore, our moral obligation as architects to oppose this war. We send our support to your meeting and look forward to reading about your discussion of the political basis for opposing the war against Iraq.”



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