

Censorship in Troy, New York: an interview with Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal

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An exhibition of Iraqi-born performance artist Wafaa Bilal's most recent art piece, "Virtual Jihadi," was censored last month when Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, New York, "suspended" it. The suspension came in response to protests mounted by the College Republican club and spearheaded by a local politician, Troy Public Works Commissioner Robert Mirch.

Protesters, many of whom admitted they had not actually seen "Virtual Jihadi," claimed the video piece was an incitement to terrorism. Officials at RPI, a private research institute dedicated to developing technology, made no effort to defend Bilal, an artist-in-residence at the Institute.

The Arts Department suggested that the FBI had contacted the school administration, whereas in fact the FBI said that Bilal was not a "person of interest." When the show was moved off-campus to the Sanctuary for Independent Media, Mirch had the show permanently closed based on "code violations."

The intention of the video piece is to show the effects of the US occupation on ordinary Iraqis. Hacking the code of a real video game, Bilal creates a fictional version in which he inserts himself as a suicide bomber on a quest to assassinate US president George W. Bush after his brother is killed by US occupation forces.

"This artwork is meant to bring attention to the vulnerability of Iraqi civilians, to the travesties of the current war, and to expose racist generalizations and profiling," Bilal explains on his website. "Similar games such as 'Quest for Saddam' or 'America's Army' promote stereotypical, singular perspectives. My artwork inverts these assumptions, and ultimately demonstrates the vulnerability to recruitment by violent groups like Al Qaeda because of the U.S. occupation of Iraq."

That this connection should be raised, even in an art piece, is too potentially subversive under conditions where two-thirds of the American people want a withdrawal of troops.

Born in Najaf in 1966, Bilal was arrested for creating art critical of Saddam Hussein. He refused to serve in the Iraqi Army in the invasion of Kuwait, and was held in a prison camp in Saudi Arabia for two years. He came to the United States in 1992, where he studied art at the University of New Mexico and then received an MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999.

Bilal's work is performance and video based. It seeks to create engagement and empathy for the plight of the millions of Iraqi people living under a state of siege. In his previous piece "Domestic Tension" (2007), Bilal spent a month confined in a room with a paintball gun that could be fired remotely by viewers over the Internet. In only 13 days, he was fired at 6,500 times, many of the shots aimed at his head, though he wore no protective gear.

Wafaa Bilal spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Clare Hurley: Can you say a bit more about the idea for using a video game format for "Virtual Jihadi"?

Wafaa Bilal: I had actually had the idea of using a video game for a couple of years. In 2005, CNN news had reported on a video game being

used by Al Qaeda to recruit young people to become terrorists. I decided to use a video game format to cast light on what was happening to Iraqi civilians under the US occupation. The US forces never protected Iraqi civilians. The occupation has only created more violence and hatred against the US. I wanted to show how this vulnerability and anger makes people susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups.

By inserting myself, and my own story [Bilal's 21-year-old brother was killed by American shrapnel in Najaf] into the video game, I wanted to make it tangible, so people understand what it's like to be an Iraqi civilian, to lose your loved ones and family.

I had also heard about the game "Quest for Saddam," which was a tool of the US State Department and I wanted to expose the racist generalizations and stereotypes of such games played in the US.

CH: The protestors organized by the College Republican club at RPI have called "Virtual Jihadi" an incitement to terrorism. Some have called for you to be deported, though they grudgingly admit that you are an American citizen, and that you have the right to freedom of speech. Was this response and its virulence entirely unexpected?

WB: Yes and no. I had thought that the US government might interfere, but I did not expect an educational institution like RPI to give in so easily to pressure from the Republican group on campus. Or that Bob Mirch, [the City of Troy Public Works Commissioner], because he is a nationalistic person who thinks the game is un-American, would be able to close down the show at the Sanctuary for Independent Media claiming "code violations" for his own political reasons.

CH: How many people do you think actually oppose the showing of the game, or really believe that it is meant to incite people to kill President Bush?

WB: Not that many, but the protestors want to perpetuate ignorance. The idea of a person trying to communicate what is really going on in Iraq educates people, engages people, and that is what makes some people afraid. So everything is ignored except that the game is about assassinating Bush. It obscures what the game is really trying to achieve.

Also, what attracted me to the game format was the ability to "change the skin" of the original "Quest for Saddam" game. When the purpose of the game was to assassinate Hussein, it was not considered propaganda. However, when "Virtual Jihadi" holds a mirror up to that, all of a sudden, there is all this outrage, and it is labeled propaganda.

CH: Do you think works of art have the right or even the need, to express a political viewpoint?

WB: Art is by definition political, even when an artist decides not to address political topics. I particularly agree with a comment by the photographer Sophie Ristelhueber on art and politics when she said:

"Since the end of the major artistic and political engagements of the seventies, I think that artists have cut themselves off too much from society. Many work only in reference to art history or in reference to their own medium. I often find this result is depressing and vain."

Many artists try to create a distance between what is going on in the

conflict zone [of the war] and culture, whereas they should thank those of us who do engage in political issues. We are trying to defend our freedom and even our existence. Maybe some artists can afford to be above it all, but when you are in the midst of the conflict, you can't afford disengagement. Political art allows us to mediate not on aesthetic pleasure but on aesthetic pain.

CH: What role does the technology of video and the Internet play in your work?

WB: I think they have changed the situation tremendously. They have leveled the playing field and opened up new strategies of engagement—unfortunately, a military term! Through using the platform of a video game that you can download over the Internet, you democratize the way art is made. You are breaking down the barrier between viewing art and making art. The artist may be the one who builds the platform [of the game] but the viewer is making the art by playing it. We've seen this before in a lot of performance art (in the 1990s in particular). It is not a new notion. But it goes further, especially by engaging more people more broadly through the web.

CH: Your goal is to engage people who may not be willing to engage in political dialogue through conventional means. Do you think you've succeeded with "Virtual Jihadi"?

WB: Definitely, or the censorship of the piece did! Even though not many people have seen "Virtual Jihadi," it has brought out the polarization between people. Some admire how it brings attention to the roots of terrorism and to the violence promoted in video games. Others are so opposed they don't want it to be shown. And when you have such extreme polarization, it is a sign of a culture in trouble.

CH: What are some of the reasons that political dialogue is suppressed in this country?

WB: There are many reasons, but one of them is the fear that is pushed to the point where people are not willing to entertain another point of view. I think a lot of the anger provoked by my work is displaced anger at Iraq over 9/11. So many people associate Iraq with 9/11...

CH: An association peddled by Bush administration and the media even to this day, even after all the lies that were used to start the war have been exposed.

WB: Yes, and as a result there has to be this silencing in our culture. Why is a violent video game OK, whereas a piece of art that draws attention to this violence is not OK? Art is a rendering of reality; it is not reality. But when someone from the other side, someone from Iraq presents these ideas, they become threatening. People need to see the violence that is being done to both innocent Iraqi civilians and also to the American soldiers through the occupation.

CH: Can you say more about your experience as an artist and political dissident under Saddam Hussein in the 1980s.

WB: I was making paintings and drawings that were against the regime. My shows were shut down, the art work confiscated. Shortly after the [first] Gulf War, I was inspired by [then] President G.H.W. Bush's message to the Iraqi citizens that if they attempted to overthrow Saddam, the US would stand behind them. I became involved in organizing opposition to the government and was scheduled for arrest and execution when I escaped into Kuwait. I was sent to a refugee camp on the Kuwaiti border and lived there for forty days.

Then I was transferred to another refugee camp in Saudi Arabia where I spent the next two years. In the camp, people laughed when rather than accept life in a tent I began forming adobe bricks that I dried in the sun and fashioned them into a home/studio. The adobe served a practical purpose, for it provided relative safety from abduction by Saudi soldiers who sneaked into tents in the middle of the night to kidnap young people for sale to Iraqi soldiers who tortured and executed them. Also, the studio became a center for creative minds to gather and it give us hope when we had lost all hope.

For the next two years, I lived in limbo not knowing if each day would be my last. Still I worked to improve my art, cleaning toilets, and collecting trash in the camp to earn the money for art supplies, buying supplies for children for art therapy to help them work through the horrors they witnessed. My experiences developed within me an abhorrence of violence and oppression and strengthened my inner resolve not to submit to oppression in any form, whether of art work, or any form. In 1992, I was able to leave the camp for the US.

CH: Certainly not the typical experience of many artists! What was your reaction to the US invasion? Did you think it was meant to liberate Iraq?

WB: From the start in 2003, I rejected the idea and publicly denounced the invasion. I never thought the war was directed against Saddam, but that it was to do with other reasons, the strategic importance of Iraq for the US and controlling its natural resources.

CH: Having left Iraq to escape political oppression and artistic censorship, were you surprised to encounter it in the US?

WB: Yes, I was. I never thought it would come in the form that it did, from educational institutions like RPI. But even before "Virtual Jihadi," I'd encountered censorship in a different form with my project "Iraqi House" at the Montalvo Arts Center in California last year.

The point of the project was to build a house like the typical stone houses in rural Iraq, and also like the structure I'd built in the refugee camp in Saudi Arabia. I wanted to show the situation of more than 1 million internally displaced Iraqis (according to UN estimates, there are more than 4 million Iraqis displaced by violence, the majority of whom have fled the country).

Many of them now live in mud brick homes in designated relief areas and refugee camps within Iraq. I wanted the piece to get people in the US to experience something of the devastation taking place in Iraq today, which has forced its inhabitants to return to an almost pre-modern existence of failed construction, electricity and lack of safety.

One of the ideas was to have the local community to participate in building "Iraqi House," so they felt connected to it and then to blow it up. The first part of the project happened, but when it came time to blow it up, the arts center refused to go through with it.

CH: I guess that was too much engagement.

WB: Exactly.

CH: Will you try to have "Virtual Jihadi" reopened at RPI or in Troy?

WB: No, that's pretty much finished. But it will hopefully be shown at my gallery in Chicago, Flat File. It will also be presented in Chicago at Version festival on April 19.



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