

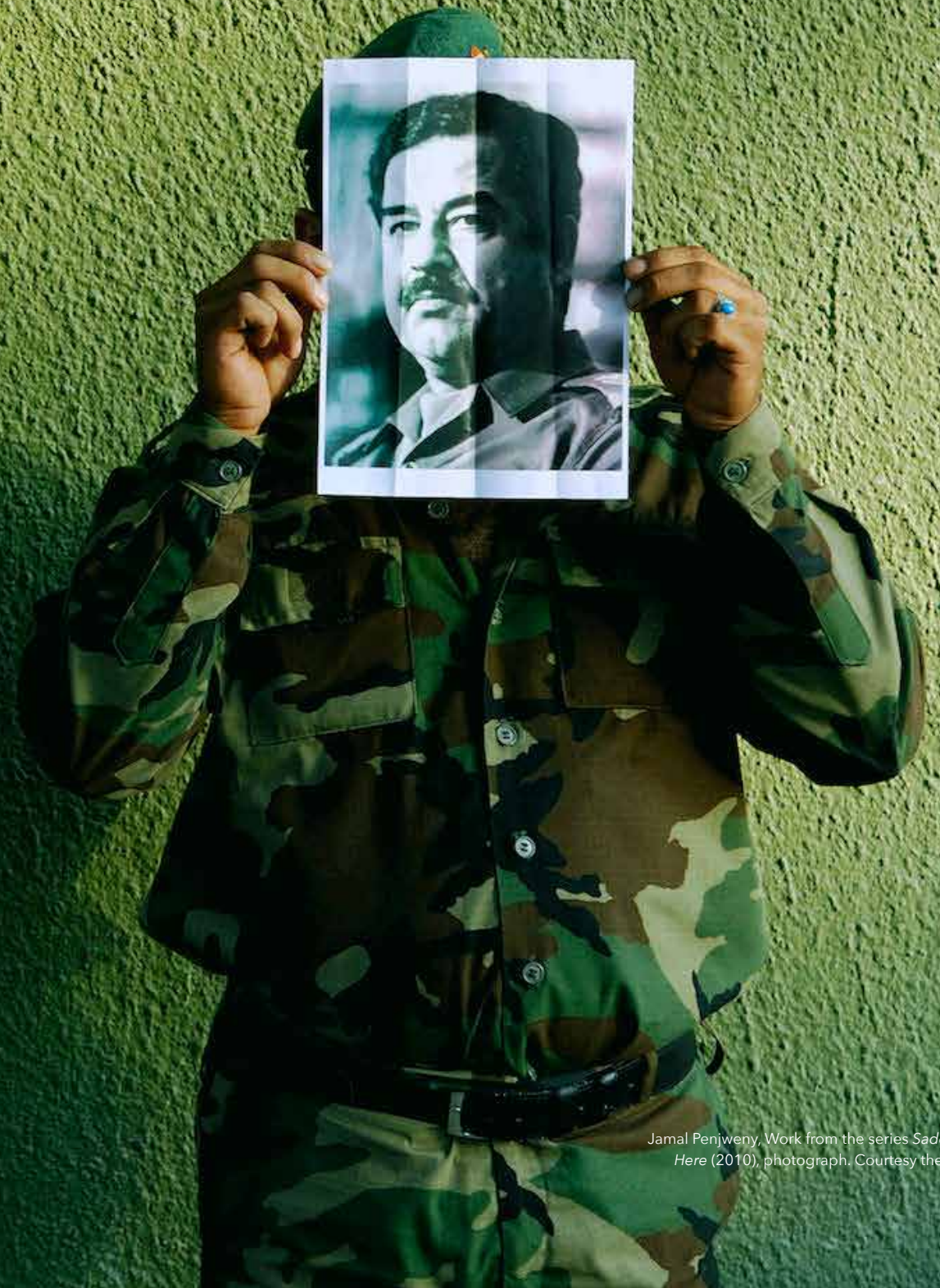
MEDIATED WAR AS CONTEMPORARY ART

Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991-2011 at MoMA PS1
November 3, 2019 - March 1, 2020

PS1's recent exhibit *Theater of Operations* is about how war shapes the way we see. The exhibit tells the story of the first and second Gulf Wars through a stunning, sometimes overwhelming succession of visual transmissions. More than 250 works—in a full range of media including painting, sculpture, works on paper, and a lot of video—relay images of graphic violence, ruined landscapes, personal losses and traumas, as well as corporate visions tainted by the era's fantastic machinations (an ironic homage to George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" fiasco appears in Dia Al-Azzawi's ground floor mural). The curators have included work from numerous regional perspectives, featuring more than thirty artists of Iraqi and Kuwaiti backgrounds. The exhibit thus makes visible a comprehensive but aptly disjointed set of ideas about the Gulf Wars and their ongoing repercussions.

Such disjunctures are apparent from the start. One of the first works in the show is Monira Al Qadiri's *Behind the Sun* (2013), a video of oilfields in Kuwait set ablaze by departing Iraqi soldiers in 1991. The stream of projected imagery is nightmarish

and expansive. Black sky and towering flames fill the museum's cavernous Duplex Gallery while a sonorous voice reads short axioms from Islamic scripture: "He has created this magnificent world with His imagination / For as far as we can see its order is sound / This morning and this night are alternating forever / for one sleeps as another awakens." In a contrast, the horrors of Al Qadiri's work are quickly followed by an amusing video by Michel Auder, *Gulf War TV War* (1991/2017), which replicates channel surfing at the moment of US troop deployment. Auder's video cuts between advertisements, cartoons, and the evening news, with Ted Koppel interviewing Iraqi officials in a performance of journalistic sobriety. The work makes obvious that, for US viewers, the first Gulf War was continuous with commercial mediation and thus mass consumption. Yet there is friction here too. The video is displayed in counterpoint with a set of paintings by Iraqi artist Khalifa Qattan depicting surreal and disquieting visages: bulbous forms press into the visual field; frightened faces, including the artist's own, are distorted by streaks of color.



Jamal Penjweny, Work from the series *Saddam is Here* (2010), photograph. Courtesy the artist.



Qattan evokes such experience in his paintings via what he calls “circularism,” a fitting term given the cycles of violence which have plagued the region for forty years. The repetition of war—first the devastating Iran/Iraq war of 1980–88, which produced a great number of works by artists in the region, and later from the two US invasions—lends many of the pieces in *Theater of Operations* a serialized quality in keeping with the redundancies of mediation in today’s world. In one clever example, Tarek al-Ghoussein takes Polaroids of television broadcasts. In another case, Rachel Khedoori prints and binds thousands of digital articles (any article published between 2003 and 2009 which contains the search terms “Iraq,” “Iraqi,” and “Bagdad”). The books which result—some thirty of them lying open in the gallery, equally spaced on tables—illustrate the incommensurable scales of media and perception. Rainer Ganahl, the Austrian painter, makes blowups of *CNN*, *Fox News*, and *New York Times* websites. As the viewer moves closer, the handmade quality of the work comes into focus. Sensational phrases (“Saddam Hussein Captured: We Got Him”) are rendered slowly in fine brushwork. The ads are there too, in an uncanny presentation. The play of distortion and definition in Ganahl’s paintings seems to convey the deathlessness of the digital news interface.

Journalism has much to atone for, these works suggest. Means of capture and objectification make sovereignty over others feasible, both logistically and politically. Yet such media may also

become contested grounds. The documentary impulse can be creatively redirected. As Ariella Azoulay has recently argued, media practice is a “phenomenon of plurality, deterritorialization, and decentralization”—the basis for a politics, or what Azoulay calls a “civil imagination.” Clearly, *Theater of Operations* is indebted to these reciprocal understandings of mediated war-craft. Although Jean Baudrillard’s famous provocation “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place” is reprinted in the exhibition catalog, the show’s mix of distant views and firsthand experience evinces such glib treatments of an imaginary war to be partial, indeed chauvinistic, in their insistence on a metropolitan standpoint. What such statements really show is the static and incoherence that characterize mediated transnational relations. These conditions may be seen as failures of journalism and of critique—but they are also rich grounds for practical redress. The curators’ decision to contrast works of differing styles and origins provides a smart complement to what the work itself performs. The mix of genres, materials, and artists’ nationalities licenses comparative readings and mirrors the works’ own logics of sampling and allegory.

Such a deconstructive approach is a hallmark of critical documentary projects by artist/theorists such as Martha Rosler, Harun Farocki, and Allan Sekula—all of whom have works on view. Most interesting is Farocki’s two-channel installation, which shows how VR is used as a form of therapy for US Army veterans



OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE
Michel Auder, *Gulf War TV War*, (1991, edited 2017), frame enlargement. Hi8 video and mini-DV transferred to digital video. 102 min. Courtesy the artist and Martos Gallery, New York.

Monira Al Qadiri, *Behind the Sun* (2013), frame enlargement. Video (color, sound). 10 min. Courtesy the artist.

Installation view of Rachel Khedoori, *Untitled (Iraq Book Project)* (2008–2010) on view in the exhibition *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011* from November 3, 2019 to March 1, 2020 at MoMA PS1, New York. Photo by Matthew Septimus.

RIGHT Harun Farocki, *War at a Distance* (2003), frame enlargement. Video (color, sound). 58 min. The Museum of Modern Art. Committee on Film Funds. © 2019 Harun Farocki Filmproduktion.



RIGHT Martha Rosler, *Lounging Woman* from *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, New Series, (2004). Photomontage. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

OPPOSITE, TOP Installation view of Allan Sekula, *War Without Bodies* (1991/1996) on view in the exhibition *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011* from November 3, 2019 to March 1, 2020 at MoMA PS1, New York. Photo by Matthew Septimus.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM Installation view of Thomas Hirschhorn, *Hotel Democracy* (2003), on view in the exhibition *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011* from November 3, 2019 to March 1, 2020 at MoMA PS1, New York. Photo by Matthew Septimus.



with PTSD. The scenes of simulated violence are affecting and substantial engagements with remediating documentary work outside of normative institutional spaces. Another highlight in this vein is Urok Shirhan's *Remake of Paul Chan's 'Baghdad in no Particular Order'* (2012), in which Shirhan revisits many of the sites and motifs that surface in Chan's 2003 film a decade later. In other cases, it is the medial status of the document itself which is questioned. Reenactments, ruins, hand-painted notebooks (an Iraqi tradition called "dafatir"), and various kinds of testimonials swirl in the gallery space. We see the drawings of Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, the assemblages of Nuha al-Radi. There are also Ali Eyal's pillowcases, which he embroidered with the nightmares of war survivors. Although they are surrounded with high tech installations, these works question the conceptual value of digital and televisual mediation. In this way, they lend some friction to what might otherwise be an exhaustive litany of famous artists—John Kessler, Thomas Hirschhorn—thus helping us to recognize the museum's alternating roles as accomplice and antagonist to economies of violence and mediation.

The kinds of admonitions presented in these reflexive documentary projects are essential as we look to the future. The recent escalation of US troops in the Persian Gulf represents one glaring horizon. A number of other fronts call our attention as well. The buildup of the US-Mexico border and the mass deportation of immigrants living in America disclose an internal war driven by profit and the threat of new resource scarcities. The border and the migrant camp, ubiquitous visual clichés in

contemporary art and design imaginaries, are clearly among the logistical theaters of the present and future. Artist Phil Collins implied as much by withdrawing his work from *Theater of Operations* in protest of MoMA board member Larry Fink's investments in private prisons: "The times we live in are not business as usual," Collins stated. "Museums and cultural spaces, their collections, exhibitions and programs, should not be aligned with or funded by investments in mass incarceration, war profiteering, ecological catastrophe, debt ownership, devastation, oppression and the pain of others." Collins's statement is a perfect complement to a show which hopes to contain its own contradictions by understanding them—in part through dialogical engagements across media. We in the fields of filmmaking, curation, and criticism should become practiced in understanding such contradiction as well. For war is never far. And none of us are exempt.

NICHOLAS GAMSO

