

“No One Has Yet Determined What Art Can Do”

Gaming in Waziristan

Lee Mackinnon

I leave for Beaconsfield gallery as the evening news announces the execution of Mark Stroman in the U.S., and arrive to see Clive Stafford-Smith, human rights lawyer and founder of *Reprieve*, who has just flown in from Texas where he was acting in Stroman's defence.

The black box of the world's media is beginning to reveal the knotty workings of its circuitry. My body is noticeably instrumental in this circuitry; a conduit through which the world's brutality and double standards is made manifest.

Beaconsfield is hosting a show entitled *Gaming in Waziristan*. It aims to elicit a “*call to (peaceful) arms*” to cultural practitioners, helping *Reprieve* to raise awareness of American human rights abuses in use of unmanned drones to remotely target so-called insurgents, in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

We make our way into the central gallery space, where Clive will be in conversation with Shahzad Akbar, Pakistani human rights lawyer. The room is crowded with artists, lawyers, musicians, journalists, some of whom have already begun to organise a conference in Pakistan, and a rock concert to be held in London, both during the autumn.

The two men sit at a table with a low desk lamp that lights their faces from below. Behind them, unintentionally grainy images and video depict the devastation of illegal U.S. bomb attacks on Pakistan, footage that has been taken at great personal risk by Noor Behram as *Documents from the Frontier 2007-2011*, smuggled across the border by *Reprieve*. We see a repeating reel of QuickTime excerpts- a distant white drone against a blue sky; the bodies of boys and young men laying in state; what might be part of a hand or foot; the forbidden presence of women represented by fragments of cloth held up to the camera; a red bra that I mistake as bloodied tissue; a small child whose broken skull makes me avert my eyes.

The body itself here performs a border- site of violation and terror visited by an occupying army whose distance from the ground and lack of physical presence serves to make it invisible to itself. Yet these images do not feel remote, perhaps because they are presented in the context of a call for action.

Between the clips, text announces the time and place of attack, the number of dead. But it gives no names. A member of the audience is quick to point this out. Isn't there already enough news footage that renders the other nameless? Stafford-Smith points to the complexities that underlie this lack of information. He hopes that (the collective) we can do more to remedy this situation.

Another point's to the problematic nature of such depictions and their consumption- is this art?

I think of Sontag and the well rehearsed arguments for and against representations of the others pain. For Sontag, apathy is brought about not only by the 'leaching out of content' of representations of suffering, but by an inability to translate compassion into action; it is ones passivity that dulls feeling (1). In today's 24 hour news stream, there is no guarantee of a reverent context in which to contemplate or think about the image of atrocity. Even the art gallery is a centre of social distraction, in which art itself is the question (2).

Naomi Sudderfin, who runs the space, is quick to defend the images as *documentation*; the work is not being shown as art, she explains. This defence is understandable in regard to the sensitivity of the images, but somehow unhelpful. It seems that just as things begin to get problematic, and questions of arts reflexivity compromised, nobody wants to talk about *art* anymore. Surely, art at its best is an embodiment of the very moment of this problematisation and as such, it is always a relief when it transpires that we do not really know what we mean when we talk about art.

Art is perhaps now so aligned with aesthetic consumption and commodity that we dare not imagine what is most contentious and political could ever be thought of in parallel terms or as constituent of what art might mean. I contend that what we need now is exactly to reinvest art with the kinds of debate that are deemed so serious as to not be concerned with it at all and to overthrow, once and for all, a purely self-reflexive art that claims only ever to refer to itself.

Recently, I attended a screening of Renzo Martens disturbing film *Enjoy Poverty* (2008) at Goldsmiths College. Martens' colonial provocateur sought to demonstrate the conflicted interest of the Western audience and its complicity in maintaining the poverty of the Congolese. Many objected to the showing of this documentary film in the context of a gallery- as though art must necessarily be utterly devoid of political engagement or reflection. How has the space of art become so vacuous and anodyne? Art is always political, even when- and most especially when- it claims not to be.

I am put in mind here of Ranciere's comment that: 'Artistic images do not bring weapons in the struggle, they help frame new configurations of the visible and the thinkable which also means a new landscape of the possible' (3).

If not weapons, images certainly participate in the call to arms- as we clearly see in centuries of propaganda, and recent examples of, for example, the U.S. military abusing prisoners in Guantanamo bay; the circulation of filmed beheadings by Taliban etc. Images, *artistic* or not, (and here, I assume that Ranciere refers purely to context) suggest the tools with which we should best arm ourselves in order to clear and reclaim the landscape of the possible; in order to reconsider what Sontag once referred to as an *ecology of images*.

Downstairs in the lower gallery, The Butler Brothers satire, *The Ethical Governor* (2010), plays on U.S. *ethics* of military policy regarding 'the ethical projection of unmanned autonomous force' while referencing the world of gaming. The result is a carefully executed and spare virtual environment where killing is purged of violence and couched in terms of bureaucratic formality. I was put in mind here of the seductive automaton- aesthetic of Kraftwerk. Or the soothing antiseptic tone of 2001's HAL; the man-machine whose access to remote operation eases the issue of accountability into a black box, obfuscating a human chain of command.

Nooshin Farhid has constructed a collage of moving image as *Conic Studies (2010)*. Including YouTube, original and feature film footage. Although well constructed and slick, her cinematic work seemed overly familiar and overworked in comparison with the direct rawness and latter simplicity of the other two presentations.

For me, however, the real work was in the event of the illuminated conversation upstairs; the strange juxtaposition of elements that were at once contentious and conspired toward an event that did not need to be defined as one thing or another and as such, should rather have been content to define its own terms. This was the tangible moment of recognition, in which our privilege as witness, and the others suffering as victim, were coordinates drawn upon the same map.

However, the party depart swiftly after the talk- no doubt, off to consider the logistics of making art with a capital A for the ensuing campaign. While this is all well and good, it is useful to see live debate and discussion as a platform where conceptual differences can bloom and breakdown; where real bodies and their ideas can clash or come together as a productive force for change- as art.

Spinoza once famously remarked that ‘...no one has yet determined what the body can do’ (5). Perhaps we can apply this logic to the question of art- that it is not so much a case of what art *is*-on this we will surely and rightly, never agree- but what art *can do*?

Gaming in Waziristan continues at the Beaconsfield Gallery until 5 August, Tuesday-Friday 11am-5pm.

Clive Stafford-Smith will return to Beaconsfield on 19th October 2pm as part of Beaconsfield’s *Art and Compromise* lecture series, in conversation with Julian Stallabrass.

Nooshin Farhid’s *Conic Trilogy 2010* will be on show at the gallery between 8 September - 30 October 2011

Notes:

1 Susan Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others* Penguin 2003 p 91

2 Ibid p108

3 Jacques Rancière *Lecture at Northwest College of Art in Portland Oregon* 29 February 2008 (available www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-ULbgFkNZs)

4 Spinoza *Ethics* Penguin 1996 p71

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