A conversation with Wafaa Bilal,
author of
Shoot An Iraqi:
Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun

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Q: "Domestic Tension" was an interactive live installation, broadcast over the internet, in which you were sequestered in a gallery and could be shot at by a robotic, internet-controlled paintball gun 24 hours a day for one month. The response was overwhelming, and the project was very successful. What was your intention in creating that project initially, and what made you think of creating a book from the experience? What is it that might be different about what a book about this project can communicate, and why did you feel this was important?

A: The book is a parallel structure between my journey from Iraq to the US and what happened during the "Domestic Tension" project, aka "Shoot an Iraqi." The unfolding narrative of the project triggered buried memories from my past. At the same time events from my past subconsciously influenced the direction of the project and helped shape it to be a powerful piece.

Besides that point, I think the reader will get a first-hand experience of what influenced me as an artist to take such a risk. Furthermore, the book shows the struggles and losses for one Iraqi family under Saddam's regime during multiple wars.

Q: In *Shoot an Iraqi*, you speak about your brother's death, which ultimately inspired "Domestic Tension." For someone who has not yet read the book, can you explain what happened to him, and how you came to conceive of this project?

A: In 2004, my brother was killed by an American bomb at a checkpoint outside our hometown of Kufa. An unmanned drone had flown over just minutes before the bomb was dropped.

In early 2007, a TV news segment grabbed my attention: a soldier was sitting in Colorado dropping bombs on Iraq from behind a computer screen. She said she had no doubts about her work because she trusted the people giving her orders.

The drone that preceded the killing of my brother could have been deployed by that very woman in Colorado, or someone like her – remote from the conflict and horror they were about to help create.

So I wanted to use my art to make people aware of not only the horrors of war but also the remote and technological nature of modern warfare. With the internet, my project was able to mirror the concept of navigating a drone or dropping a bomb remotely, giving participants the power to put themselves in a role akin to that woman in Colorado. And since paintball is so

American, it was a perfect way to simulate a conflict zone with a familiar cultural experience.

Q: Having lived under Saddam's oppression, you can speak from direct experience about the realities of life in pre-invasion Iraq. Having come to the U.S. as a refugee, your position as a successful artist in the United States could be seen as a "success story," one man's journey from oppression to freedom in the U.S. The politically challenging nature of your work is therefore often criticized as "ungrateful" for the opportunities that have been made available to you as a result of living here. How do you respond to this sort of criticism?

A: I am grateful to this country. After I left Iraq, I ended up in a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia for two years. The United States rescued me and gave me a second chance in life.

The reason I am speaking out is that I believe in the greater good of this nation. I don't want our democracy to disappear. I don't want us, Americans, to become a nation of aggressors. And I don't want our collective power to vanish.

If there is one thing I have learned living in the US, it is that it is unpatriotic to stay silent in the face of injustice. As an American, I have the same rights as everyone else. And I also have the responsibilities of a citizen of this nation. Overall, my success in the United States is a testament to how great this nation is, as it rewards hard work and embraces its diversity. I don't want to see this country destroyed by injustice and aggression.

For people who criticize me, I ask them simply to step out of their comfort zone for one day to see how our moral stand in the world puts the values and freedoms we enjoy at risk. Above all it takes a lot of courage to speak out and I want to set an example for other people to speak out against injustice as well.

Q: As an Iraqi who has lived through two domestic wars, with family and friends still in Iraq, you are highly aware of the disparity between the realities of how the U.S. war is affecting lives in the conflict zone and the comfort and relative disconnect that people in the United States are living daily. In your art, you are attempting to address this specifically, and the response you receive is often highly emotional. Can you discuss what you perceive to be the role of projects like "Domestic Tension" and, more recently, "Virtual Jihadi," in raising awareness through confrontation? How difficult is it for you to maintain a sense of hope and equilibrium when you are often the target of violent reactions?

A: In "Domestic Tension" I adapted the idea of "aesthetic pleasure vs. aesthetic pain." We exist in a comfort zone unwilling to engage in a political dialogue. The idea was to create an encounter where a person finds him/herself on a platform unknowingly participating in the very thing they refused to be part of.

Since the conflict zone is very far from us here, one must filter the issue in a local language that people can understand. So, the role of the artist is to become the builder and the monitor of the platform. What comes after that is an experience, which stays with us unlike art objects of the type in galleries.

Q: Your newest piece, "Virtual Jihadi," which you created in response to the U.S. Army's use of video games in soldier training, was closed on opening day, with some calling it "terrorist-inspired". Can you describe this piece for us and what your goals are/were in creating it? What response would you give to those who seek to censor it?

A: In the widely marketed video game "Quest for Saddam," by American video game developer Jesse Petrilla, players fight stereotypical Iraqi foes and try to kill Saddam. Al Qaeda did its own take, creating an online video game using the structure of "Quest for Saddam" but adding a new "skin" to turn the game into a hunt for Bush: "The Night of Bush Capturing."

I hacked the Al Qaeda version of the game to put my own spin on this epic conflict. In "The Night of Bush Capturing: A Virtual Jihadi," I cast myself as a suicide-bomber in the game. After learning of the real-life death of my brother in the war, my character in the game is recruited by Al Qaeda to join the hunt for Bush.

This artwork is meant to bring attention to the vulnerability of Iraqi Civilians to recruitment by extremist groups since the US invasion. It is also meant to shed light on the travesties of the current war, and to expose racist generalizations and profiling in similar games such as "Quest for Saddam" or "America's Army" which promote stereotypical, singular perspectives.

To the people who would censor me, I would say that it is hypocritical to claim to support democracy and freedom of speech while at the same time censoring an art show. By doing so they stifle the voice of the artist, close down potential dialogueue and destroy the very platform of conversation I am trying to build in the name of freedom of speech. Overall it is just "a video game," which is the same argument the military and Jesse Petrilla use to justify their games. It is a platform for dialogue, not a threat.

Q: What is the role of direct engagement with the community in your work, and how might *Shoot An Iraqi* be an extension of that project?

A: When I entered the gallery for "Domestic Tension," I intentionally did not bring food or drink with me. My community stepped in to sustain me.

The project had both a virtual platform and the physical one. Both of these platforms produced a personal story that is unique to each individual who participates. Some of these stories are recorded in the book. So the book becomes an extension of the project, because it allows people to experience each other's unique interactions with the project.

My goal with "Domestic Tension" is to democratize the process of making and viewing art to create dynamic encounters. The power of the project comes from creating a unique experience and not, simply, an object. It is a direct, democratic experience that invites people from all walks of life.

Q: If there were something you could explain simply to anyone who might ask about Iraq, what would it be? What message might you send to young Iraqis?

A: Iraqis are highly educated, peaceful people, who unfortunately have suffered so much war and destruction. These wars were not our choice, but imposed on us either by a dictator's regime or by an external power. What I hope for people to understand is that Iraq throughout history has influenced not only the Middle East but also the rest of the world. Let us not forget that the wheel and writing were invented in Iraq. I hope people outside Iraq do more to help, in whatever way they can, the country return to being an active member of the international community. This means everyone from politicians and diplomats on the foreign policy level, to regular people increasing their understanding, awareness and empathy for Iraqis and what they have suffered and what they have to offer. There is so much we all gain from such acts.

I would tell the young Iraqis you are the future of Iraq. Move forward and don't let what happened in the past stand in your way. Yes you have been through so much, but one must look to the future with hopeful eyes. Otherwise you will continue to exist in the persistent present while the rest of the world passes you by looking to the future. At the same time do not forget what your country has given the world. But don't rely on that alone; you must think of what you can do now for the future.

Q: Has the process of writing this book affected your own conception of your identity in any way?

A: In the chat room someone said that no matter who you are, you will be a changed person after entering this project. That was the impact it had on me. My life will never be the same. The same goes for the writing of this book. The book made realize that I don't belong to Iraq alone but I am a citizen of both nations. And it also made me realize the idea of hope alone is a naive notion, without action; and how easy it is to disengage from the rest of the world while we are safe in our comfort zones. If we truly believe in equality and social justice, our loyalty should not belong to a strip of land we call country, but it should cross all borders.

Q: You just accepted a position at New York University. What can we expect to see from you in the coming months or year?

A: Dynamic encounters will continue to take the central stage, utilizing the advantages of technology. Virtual and physical platforms, and the integration of the human-machine or "cyborg" will play major roles in my projects, with the goals of increasing public engagement and democratizing the art in the process.

That said, I am sure my new environment will affect what I will do in the future. But I am going to continue doing what I believe in. My hope is that the city of New York and New York University will give me the same support that Chicago and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago gave me. An artist is only an extension of his or her community. Without their support the artist is left voiceless, because the community is the artist's platform.