

## POLITICS

### 17 works, 17 ghosts

#### Jorge Luis Marzo

War / Machines / War / Guernica / Picasso / Prison / Velázquez / Intolerance / War / Flag / Homeland / Franco / Iconocracy / Racism / Feminism / War / Memory / War / Iconoclasm / War / Immigration / War /

These are the key words. Of the 17 works in the Es Baluard Collection labelled as political, all have direct references to war and violence as a way of life. It cannot be a coincidence, but it is not easy to establish the causality, either. Perhaps it is a matter of taxonomies, of how we propose that an artwork is political; perhaps it has something to do with the fact that Mallorca has been a shore on which the waves of internal and external exiles break, the waves of so many conflicts, both distant and near: the peaceful Balearics, a geopolitical crossroads of the disturbances of a tumultuous Mediterranean whose sounds mirror those of so many other places, turning the islands into a node in which the world wants to think itself up again or simply wants to lick its wounds. The geographical origins of the artists of these 17 works speak for themselves: Afghanistan, Germany, Chile, Cuba, Spain, France, Iran, Morocco, Yugoslavia; near and distant, but all sewn together by the taxonomy of war, of physical and symbolic violence as a normalised way of social life.

The image produced by the bourgeois apparatus – and also by the state apparatus – suffers from a kind of *d\_* *effect* that occurs when everything that disappears turns into culture. On the one hand, the apparatus generates an extraordinary visual regime, a “fantasy” that conceals the dark side of modernity, full to the brim of death and injustice. On the other hand, its artistic class becomes the voice of the collective conscience, exposing the ins and outs of that which is real, that which Baudelaire called “imagination”, the search for the occult – or hidden – relationship of things. A part of the artistic avant-garde has always been champion of the terrible common causes that have been suffered over the decades, but their main merit was that of pursuing the truths and abused affections and that of exposing their absence in the bourgeois image. The world of art is the space of that enormous paradox of the machinery of capital as the representation of its effects. Political art is, above all, the ever-updated memory of that paradox.

I have arranged the images of the work according to their date of production – from 1937 to 2008 – on a home video edited as a loop. I play it to myself several times: a farmer is detained by men crowned with three-cornered hats; a military worker gives or receives

instructions inside his helmet; an abstract, truncated, torn piece of sackcloth; the Guernica painting domesticated; a group of people run behind some bars; Doña Jerónima de la Fuente, that terrible nun by Velázquez, turned into a doodle, scrawled; Cupid being conquered by a troop of little plastic soldiers; the dictator, allegorized as King Ubu, a terrible puppet and torchbearer of history; words arranged in ordered columns that say different things depending on their typography – the disincarnate regime of the new language of seduction; front cover images from *Life* magazine from which we unsuccessfully search for an image of the “others”; a woman wearing a chador passes by a man as though she were a shadow; a bodiless coat, crucified, is hanging from the wall, surrounded by white light bulbs the wires of which swirl around on the ground – there is nothing left, only the lights, which have to be kept switched on artificially; a rag-doll police officer sits on a sofa surrounded by magazines he may consider to be cultural scraps, as though he were surveilling and at the same time enjoying the entertainment due; some riders with ropes try to pull down a building devastated by artillery; on maps, some migrants narrate their – by no means classical – odyssey from different parts of Africa to Europe; the artist poses inexpressively beside a Laotian girl dressed in a military uniform and holding a shining, polished weapon.

The lights have to be kept switched on when those that were their bodies have disappeared already, as in *Le juif errant* by Boltanski. Reality simply merges into the melting pot of history, and there the art appears, to exercise its spectrological thesis, to clearly define the modern project on the memory, brutally based on the *search & destroy* typical of war, but harmonised by its amateurish, benign exhibition: *search&destroy&show*. This is where the paradoxical function of a significant part of contemporary aesthetics appears, which we pointed out a moment ago: making the ghost appear, the spectre that had no time or occasion to speak, to tell us what really happened, why it disappeared and was converted into a show, a historical narration, cleaned up and digestible. Ghosts do not emerge, and are not summoned to utter trivialities or self-evident truths: they appear because they want to tell something that was buried “too deep, too fast”, as Gilles Deleuze expressed it. Ghosts show themselves to reveal who the murderer was and who the audience was, in short, to point us towards the truth. The lights of the spectre must necessarily be kept active, in an act that restores in the present an erased day, and a past that does not only take place in a previous time.

War, violence, the silence that emanates from the silence managed by victory is the main linguistic mechanism imposed on social reality. On that silence, any noise

can be superimposed to put an end to the intolerable background noise, by that excessive absence of voices which should be there. History is terribly deft at that, as can be deduced from the visions these works propose, by means of such different formats and perspectives. The 17 works we are concerned with share the unequivocal will to advise on this cacophony (*kakós*: bad, foul) designed and executed with tenacity in order to avoid the bad smell (what a good example of this are the pieces by Guinovart, Jerez, Miralda, Khalili or Meese). On the contrary, these artists have projected to us the lost language of the spectre, far from the simulacrum: that traditions are the stuff of ideological fictions (see Saura, Millares, Guinovart); that the new iconographic languages – the fertilised and paradoxical terrain of forgetfulness – are weapons of mass concealment, of falsification (Jaar, Jerez, Vostell. . .); that the forgotten, those whose voice has been spectralized, also live dislocated – *out of joint* – like the spectre of Hamlet’s father who cannot stop appearing to tell of what happened, what is really happening in that instant of ignominy rendered invisible (Abdul, Abramović, Boltanski, Genovés, Lam, Neshat).

The spectres of history know nothing of ghosts, of rhetorical scaffolding set up to withdraw from the real; rather, they emerge to speak to us of the imagination, to suggest to us ways of exploring the hidden relationship of things. We said it before. We could speak of these artists as demiurges, as mediums who summon what has been removed from life and from the life of images: “Art is a lie that makes us realize truth”, said Nietzsche, and Picasso. Art, understood in this way, is a phantasmagorical exercise that seeks to summon to the public agora what has been privatized in the regime of official caesuras and censorships inhabited by power. It is a summoning of spirits that forces the restoration of its public competence by a categoric will to question: ghosts not the dead, Alberto Ruiz de Samaniego reminded us, question us on the fact that the opposite of existence is not non-existence, but an indestructible insistence. It is what these works are warning us of. The spectres remind us that nothing wants today, and even less so now, under the regime of absolute obsolescence. Thus, art happens as an act that seeks to extract the ghost from the mere archive, from the simple collection, from the undaunted chain of historical facts out of context, which can be accumulated and chopped up. It is an act that occurs, that gains body in the insistence on singularity, in the determination to place ourselves face to face with the specific noises that emanate from the silence, translating what the spectre comes to tell us, which is not usually anything good or pleasant. The characters that inhabit these 17 works question us to our face; they do not want to be mere objects of contemplation; they want to remain as public, political subjects.

#### Lida Abdul

*War games (what I saw)*, 2006

16-mm film transferred to DVD, colour, sound

Duration: 5’

Es Baluard Museu d’Art Modern i Contemporani de Palma

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*War Games* presents concepts that are recurrent in the oeuvre of Lida Abdul, such as deterritorialization, nomadism and resilience. The video shows the action of three riders who have used white ropes to tie their beasts of burden (horses and camels) to the remains of a thick-walled construction.

Abdul urges us to view the culture and people of Afghanistan, hardly any images of which reach us. Those we are familiar with come from the media and show us a country at war, soldiers, and desolate landscapes, but we know nothing of its inhabitants and their way of life. Here, the presence of the horse is a reference to the nomadism the country has long been associated with. The white ropes and their tension are allegories of the violence of the bullets and the media which gather the testimony of the armed conflict. Both of them exert a destructive force, in a figurative but also in a literal sense, on the walls of the building, threatening a supposed interiority which has already been violated. The appearance of ruins is a constant theme in this artist’s work. They are treated as relics, as the remains of something that was once significant and has ceased to exist. They are not a mere object of contemplation, they demand an action: trying to move them, transform them, paint them.

The video deploys superimpositions and slow-motion shots, with the sounds made by the horses, which are twisted, ambiguous and terrifying. They remind one of the noises of fighter jets and heavy machinery. The final frames show only the horses, resting now and tied to the walls. The riders have dismounted, suggesting the possibility of remaking human society, even after joint acts of destruction.

Lida Abdul (Kābul, 1973) currently lives and works in Kābul (Afghanistan) and Los Angeles (USA), after having lived in Germany and India as a refugee as a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Through video art, performance, photography and installations, her work combines the aesthetic traditions that influence culture and Afghan art and addresses destruction, the loss of roots and the relationship between identity and architecture. P.R.