

DISPLAY TACTICS

Curatorial Takes on the Invasion of Iraq

By TIRDAD ZOLGHADR



Out of the spate of recent exhibitions that have addressed the subject of war, perhaps the most aggressive in curatorial stance was Jens Hoffmann's "Apocalypse Now: The Theater of War"—curated with the artist duo Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, and shown last fall at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, in San Francisco—which claimed in its press materials that it would "attack" the audience with the "unpalatable side of humanity." The artworks, historical artifacts, and pop cultural relics that constituted the show exemplified the nimble interaction of selection and display that has been a Hoffmann trademark since his tenure at the ICA in London, which ended in 2006. And yet the exhibition betrayed an embarrassing gaucheness in its intention to critique the spectacle of conflict, a spectacle that it appeared to simultaneously employ. Not only were the curatorial statements jarring, claiming to "wage war on the visitor," but the artworks themselves also seemed deliberately chosen for their "shock and awe" effect. Rather than challenge our notion of war as theater, the heavy-handed curatorial choices enforced that very idea (soldiers and war prisoners as dolls and photo motifs; Bruce Nauman's wildly rasping voice in *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* [1968]; select spots where the visitor had to crouch and stoop). Dimming the lights and showing crass objects on labyrinthine panels can be fun, but it does not in any way help you escape curatorial domestication.

The show did engage with histories of war as spectacle, and—in a departure from recent exhibitions like "Memorial to the Iraq War," at the ICA, and "Meanwhile, in Baghdad . . ." at the University of Chicago's Renaissance

Society—it avoided addressing Iraq specifically. The curators attempted a take that was both site specific, with respect to the protest culture of the Bay Area, and universal, in that the art and artifacts examined war as an idea of "human antagonism." Nevertheless, the show's universalizing bluster completely overshadowed the local history, subsuming it into a very different local tradition, that of California culturati standing in for humanity at large. The problem with that kind of blinkered universalism was rendered obvious by the use of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* as a cornerstone of the show—because that film is also

a cornerstone of postcolonial critique, being an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The latter is invaluable not in its "universalism" but in its meticulous description of Euro-American high-cultural fantasies of the black and brown as mute, violent, mysterious, and irrational. It's striking that Hoffmann abandoned his usual light-footed, self-reflexive agility for a show that attempted to address so much but had little more cognitive value than a Metallica CD at full blast. Clearly the collaboration with Allora and Calzadilla, art-tourist mercenaries known for crisscrossing the earth's crisis zones with voracious appetites, did not do him any favors.

This poses the question of what, then, might be a better curatorial model with which to address war and its secondary effects, and I predictably fail to have clear answers. But what I do believe is that rigorously reflecting on site-specific and art-specific histories, strategies, and vocabularies of protest, rather than running head-on into atmospherics, universals, and political pornography—as

