

**ART AND
POLITICS
NOW**

Anthony Downey

~~START~~ AND ~~POINTS~~ NOW



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[Cover] GEORGE OSORIE – *Ogori Boy*, 2007. From the
series *Oli Rich Niger Delta*, 2003–7 (see also pages
180–1). C-print, 80 x 120 cm (31½ x 47½ in.).

[Pages 4–5] *MOSIREEN – Tahri'n Cinema*, 2011–.
Installation (see page 223)

~~IT~~ ~~NOT~~
~~DOING~~
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Global culture and
Political Engagement

~~DOING~~ ART MEANS
~~DISPLACING~~ ART'S
BORDERS, JUST AS
~~DOING~~ ~~POLITICS~~
MEANS ~~DISPLACING~~
THE BORDERS OF WHAT
IS ACKNOWLEDGED AS
THE POLITICAL.

—
JACQUES RANCIÈRE

THE INCREASINGLY POLITICAL DIMENSION OF CONTEMPORARY ART HAS GIVEN RISE TO A NUMBER OF IMPORTANT QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ROLE IT PLAYS IN SOCIETY TODAY.

Since the turn of the new millennium, we have seen artists progressively engage with the politics of globalization, migration, labour, citizenship, activism, income inequality, injustice, conflict, terrorism, biopolitics, free trade, financial crisis, environmentalism and information technology. *Art and Politics Now* sets out to explore the implications of this development – for art and politics alike – and the ways in which artists both address specific political issues and tactically engage with, negotiate and examine the nature of politics. Contemporary art, this book will propose, imagines that which remains politically unimaginable. In this context, contemporary art practices not only offer ways of thinking about some of society's most pressing concerns, but also can rethink what we understand by the term 'politics'.

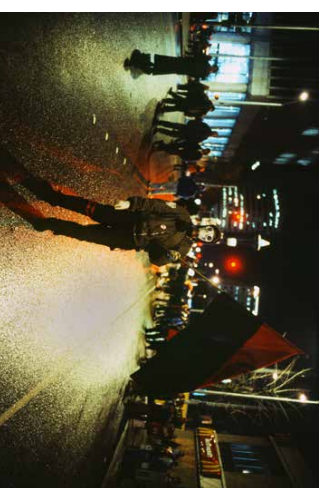
In focusing on the politics of, for example, terrorism or migration, artists have opened up new areas of consideration and reflection for audiences. Moreover, the formal methods and techniques employed by contemporary artists have become more diverse. These include lecture-performances, the use of documentary and archive material, artist-led workshops, social activism, collaborations, community-based projects, research-led seminars, artist-initiated

political movements, artist-funded organisations and, in particular, a growing tendency to co-opt individuals and communities into the processes involved in creating a work of art.

To these developments it is necessary to add the changes in the way we have come to understand the role of the artist in contemporary society. Artists are increasingly seen as occupying a number of different roles, from curators, writers and researchers to educators, documentarists and ethnographers. Most significantly, perhaps, they have also come to be regarded as social antagonists and political activists, working from within given social and political orders, rather than existing in distinction to them.

Taken as a whole, these changes to both subject matter and forms of engagement give rise to two important questions: why have contemporary artists turned towards the realm of the political in search of subject matter, and why are the formal elements of contemporary art – be they community-based practices or artist-led workshops – increasingly considered suitable platforms for discussing social and political engagement?

It is arguable, in the first instance, that the turn towards the political in contemporary art is a result of certain historical events. We could observe here a number of such events that would support this assertion, including the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the ensuing war in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its legacy of violence; the worldwide politicization of 'terror'; the opportunistic and ongoing suspension of legal rights and *habeas corpus*; the financial crash of 2007; the radicalization of civil protest and its incremental criminalization; the perceived ineffectiveness



of politics in the face of global capital; recent conflicts across North Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere; and the ubiquitous forms of interconnectivity and advanced surveillance systems that determine models of social interaction. All have proved significant in the politicization of not only artists but also, crucially, their audiences.

This is not to suggest that artistic practices in the past were somehow apolitical; on the contrary, art, being a social practice largely carried out in the public sphere, is inseparable from the broader political realm. Nevertheless, recent artistic engagements with politics need to be considered in the context of globalization and how that process is radically reconfiguring social, political, economic and cultural relationships worldwide.

In the context of globalization, art as a practice has developed in terms of both content and form so as to address precisely the complexity of these reconfigurations. In the works under consideration in the early chapters of this book, there is a singular question being asked: what is it to live under the conditions of globalization? Or, more specifically, what is it to experience globalization as an uneven economic, social, historical and political fact of life, rather than an abstract ideal or theoretical framework?

Globalization, as we shall see, not only has a dramatic effect on political, economic and cultural relations, but also generates worldwide conflict and upheaval. It is with this in mind that *Art and Politics Now* will consider how contemporary art both reflects on these and other such issues and – through its varied forms and processes – actively operates within them. In later chapters, we shall see how artists strategically

engage with, for example, the precarious status of the refugee, the politicization of terror and geopolitical conflict, the (mis) representation of history, the uses and abuses of information technology, the social impact of global recession, and the denigration of environments worldwide.

Also critical to any examination of the relationship between art practices in the twenty-first century and globalization is an evaluation of neo-liberalism as a dominant, global political ideology. The impact of neo-liberalism can be clearly seen if we consider, for example, the trend towards casual, migratory forms of labour and international policies on deregulating barriers to free trade, both of which are key elements of the discussion in the second chapter of the book, 'Labour'. The influence of neo-liberalism can be likewise found in the relationship between free markets and private interests, and the assumption that these factors will result in prosperity for all. For free markets to operate successfully, and for the apparent good of all, they must have minimal controls placed on them; indeed, this is the central tenet of neo-liberal, free-market capitalism. The counterargument to this position is that the deregulation of markets in favour of private initiatives results in the exploitation of the many for the benefit of the few. For some, as we shall see in the third chapter, 'Citizens', neo-liberalism is effectively a means of accumulating capital through various forms of dispossession, be it of rights, citizenship or access to the global economy.¹

In choosing to address the social and political realms, the works discussed in *Art and Politics Now* not only engage a broader audience with the politics of globalization and neo-liberalism, but also

enquire into what form social and political interaction with these issues might take. This book is therefore particularly concerned with the way in which formal experimentation, as much as the ideas behind a work, furthers our engagement with and understanding of the political.

Allan Sekula's *Waiting for Tear Gas* (1999–2000) [1] is a sequence of photographs taken during the demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle, Washington, in 1999. In his approach to these demonstrations, which saw an estimated 40,000 people protest against the economic policies of the WTO and the International Monetary Fund, both seen by many as agents of globalization and neo-liberalism, Sekula presented his work as a form of 'anti-journalism' – no auto-focus, no flash, no zoom lens – thus avoiding the spectacle and media-friendly images often associated with civil protest and activism.²

By refusing to sensationalize his subject, Sekula manages to adopt a position within the political debates surrounding globalization and yet, in his discerning use of his chosen media, maintain a critical distance from them. No longer understood as separate to or indeed antagonistic towards the political realm, such artists as Sekula offer complex responses to the geopolitics of power and social change in the early part of the twenty-first century and, crucially, provide alternative models of engagement with these and other issues.

A desire to interact and engage with politics in a manner that re-imagines possible forms of social engagement (while not necessarily expressing an overt political opinion) is common to many of the artists included in this book. This is particularly important to understanding

the main thrust of the discussion in the fourth chapter, 'Activism': that it is necessary to maintain a distinction between artist-based and political activism if the former is not to be subsumed into the latter. For art to maintain its critical powers in relation to politics, it must, somewhat paradoxically, adopt a radical position within society and yet refrain from using the often reductive terms of political rhetoric. In Jeremy Deller's *It Is What It Is* (2009) [2], the artist acquired a car that had been destroyed in a Baghdad marketplace on 5 March 2007 and exhibited it across the United States, taking in cities from New York to Los Angeles. Accompanying the car was Jonathan Harvey, a reservist in the US military who had recently served in Iraq, and Esam Pasha, an Iraqi artist who had sought asylum in the United States in 2005. As part of the tour, members of the public were encouraged to ask questions of both Harvey and Pasha and enter into a dialogue about Iraq. Although pointedly apolitical, inasmuch as no stance was being adopted in relation to the war in Iraq, Deller's work has an inevitable political undertone that implicates it in debates about the war and its legacy. It creates an event, moreover, in which the viewer becomes an active interlocutor with, rather than a mere spectator of, a work of art.

This process of inserting artistic practices into sociopolitical debates – and, by implication, the spectator/viewer – is central to the work of Spanish artist Santiago Sierra. The politics of employment, for immigrant workers in particular, provided the inspiration for Sierra's *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes* (2000) [3]. Based on earlier pieces

exhibited in Guatemala and New York, this work involved placing refugees from Chechnya inside large cardboard boxes, where they remained for four hours a day for the six-week duration of the exhibition. At the time of the show, staged at Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, German legislation was such that refugees were entitled to a small monthly allowance on the condition that they did not work; any person found to be breaking this rule would be returned to their home country. As a result, the details of this piece could not be made public until after the exhibition, and its participants were forced to collect their salaries in secret.

In common with much of the work featured in this book, Sierra's *Workers ...* does not necessarily offer a definitive comment on the issues under consideration; rather, it suggests an active engagement with and nuanced negotiation of those issues. As a form of social practice, contemporary art needs to be understood not so much in terms of 'political art' (agitprop or propaganda, for example), but in relation to how it has become part of the social and political imagination through various forms of representation and engagement. These processes, in addition, can be open-ended and defy traditional ideas of closure.

Although artists often utilize the principles of activism, a clear distinction between art and activism nevertheless remains, inasmuch as the former is not always accompanied by any clear intent or indeed ambition to bring about change.³ There is a distinction to be had between art practices that engage with politics, and the overall aims of political activism: art as a practice does not necessarily have any clear-cut goals, nor are its

end results quantifiable in terms of desirable or fixed outcomes. The focus of this book is therefore not so much on artists as outright activists, a role that can be readily co-opted into the often divisive, issue-led world of political activism, as it is on how artistic practice is able to expand the very notion of activism, protest and political participation.

Michael Rakowitz's *Enemy Kitchen* (2006–) [5] is a collaboration between Rakowitz and his Iraqi-Jewish mother, with whom he compiles recipes from traditional Baghdadi cuisine. With these recipes, Rakowitz leads a series of cooking classes with different groups of people, ranging from middle- and high-school students to the chefs in school cafeterias, some of whom have relatives in the US Army stationed in Iraq. While cooking and eating Iraqi delicacies, conversations between students about the war in Iraq arise, revealing the opinions, myths and facts that can circulate in a country, in this case the United States, during a period of conflict. As a consequence, each iteration of *Enemy Kitchen* is shaped according to the willingness of its participants to speak about the politics of war through the activity of cooking.⁴ Although this work could be seen in terms of activism, inasmuch as it opens up a space for potential discussion about a controversial subject, *Enemy*

Kitchen does not express a political standpoint or point of view; rather, it is the expression of social practices and political values, and therefore already political in its intentions.

This sense of art decoding political values and engaging communities in a common experience chimes with an individual and community-based understanding of how the political realm can



[2] JEREMY DELLER – *It Is What It Is*, 2009. Photographs taken during the *It Is What It Is*: Conversations About Iraq tour, by Jeremy Deller. Installation view, New Museum, New York

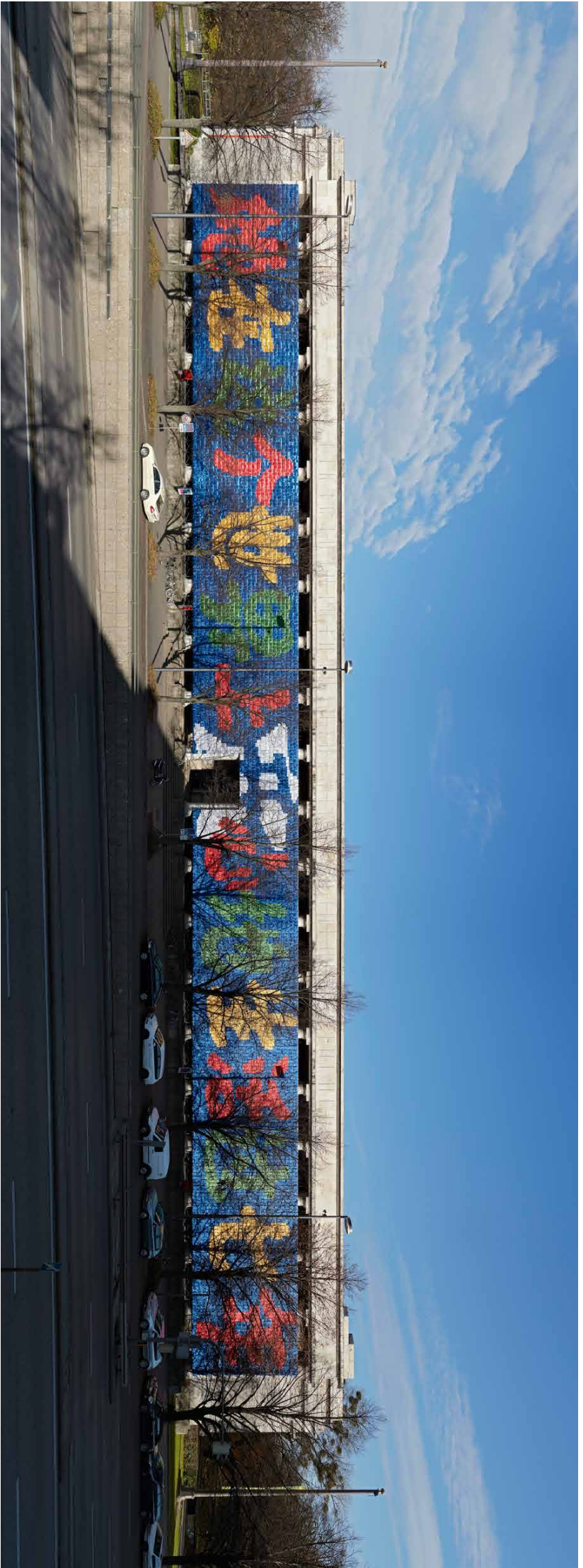
For *It Is What It Is*, the artist obtained a car that had been bombed in a Baghdad marketplace in 2007 and took it on a tour across the United States. The car was accompanied by an Iraqi artist and a US military reservist, to whom viewers were encouraged to pose questions about the Iraq war and its impact and legacy.



[3] SAMTARO SIERRA – *Workers who cannot be paid*, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes, 2000. Performance

In this performance in a Berlin gallery, the artist paid Chechen political refugees to 'live' in boxes for four hours a day for six weeks. Accused by many of being exploitative, the performance nevertheless drew attention to the fact that the participants were unable to work legally in Germany.





[4] AI WEIWEI - Remembering, 2009.
8,798 backpacks on metal structure,
9.2 x 108 m (30% x 347% ft)

Remembering pays tribute to the thousands of young students from Sichuan province in China who lost their lives when an earthquake struck in May 2008. When visiting the site of the disaster, Ai Weiwei was struck by the number of colourful rucksacks lying around, many of them representing lives lost.

be expanded and its values rethought. In the wake of the major earthquake in the province of Sichuan in China in 2008, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei decided to visit the country to see the devastation for himself. Following repeated attempts to obtain an official list of casualties, however, he was beaten with a truncheon and taken to hospital, where he received emergency surgery to relieve a cerebral haemorrhage. This did not prevent the artist from publishing on his website a year after the earthquake the names of 5,385 people who had died in the disaster. Nor did it stop him, in *Remembering* (2009) [4], from using 8,738 children's backpacks to spell out, in Chinese characters, the sentence 'She lived happily for seven years in this world', a quote from the mother of one of the earthquake's victims.⁵ Here, again, art as a practice opens up a space in which to imagine and give form to that which politics deems unimaginable or beyond the bounds of public discussion and debate.

In the majority of the works examined in *Art and Politics Now*, the artist's chosen media and formal method of production are rarely presented as either definitive or closed to scrutiny. Instead, form and media are often positioned as propositional and contingent. For *Episode I* (2000–3) [6], Dutch artist Renzo Martens travelled to the city of Grozny to film the aftermath of the Second Chechen War (1999–2000), a bloody conflict that had left thousands dead and many more displaced and traumatized. In the film, Martens complicates any notion of objectively reporting or documenting what he sees in Grozny by placing himself at the forefront of the investigation, often drawing direct attention to the fact of his presence and pointedly asking

people what they think of him being there amid such devastation. Martens's film, in its quasi-journalistic technique and conscious foregrounding of the artist throughout, makes two important points about conflict and its representation: that there is no such thing as a decontextualized or depoliticized viewing experience, and that artists, institutions and the viewer are inevitably involved in the production of meaning, political or otherwise. It is in the moment of exposing this fact that Martens, together with other artists featured in this book, tactically engage audiences in the politics of cultural production. These issues are explored in more detail from the fifth chapter, 'Conflict', onwards.

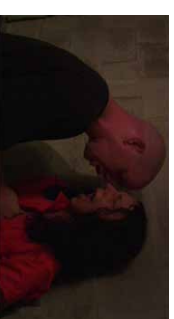
To the extent that the subject of Martens's work was a regional conflict, the Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco has chosen to confront the legislation and interrogation procedures being deployed in the worldwide 'war on terror', a subject that is addressed in the sixth chapter of the book, 'Terror'. For *Operation Atropos* (2006) [7], a 59-minute video, Fusco and six other women enrolled in an interrogation-training workshop run by Team Delta, a cohort of retired US military interrogators. We watch as Fusco and her companions are ambushed and bound, have their heads covered, and are thereafter subjected to ex-military personnel performing, with brutal verisimilitude, the role of guards and interrogators in a makeshift camp. Dressed in an orange jumpsuit, a reference to the clothing worn by inmates of Guantánamo Bay, Fusco forces the viewer to confront the hidden realities of the war on terror, and, in so doing, holds up a mirror to an era that has become largely defined by global forms

[5] MICHAEL RAKOWITZ – *Enemy Kitchen*, 2006–. Performance. Installation view at Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago

collaborating with his Iraqi–Jewish mother, and drawing on the cultural memories associated with certain foods from Iraq, Michael Rakowitz uses the act of cooking to explore the complexity of responses to the Iraq war and its legacy. The work often involves schoolchildren, who are encouraged to share their thoughts and opinions on the war.



[6] RENZO MARTENS – *Episode I*, 2000–3. Video, colour, sound, 45 min.

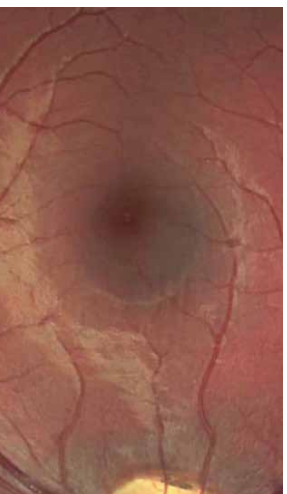


[7] COCO FUSCO – *Operation Atropos*, 2006. Video, colour, sound, 59 min.

of clandestine warfare and 'enhanced interrogation techniques' – or, to put it bluntly, torture.



[8] PRATCHAWA PHINPHONG – *Sleeping sickness*, 2012. Installation, teatse flies presented on a marble block under glass, on a plinth, 170 x 50 x 50 cm (Ø7 x 19% x 19% in.)



[9] RABIN MROUÉ – *The Fall of a Hair, Part 1: The Pixelated Revolution*, 2012. Video projection with countdown screen, colour, sound, 21 min. 08 sec.

chapter, 'History', has come to define how we understand and perceive historical events. Art has always been at the forefront of interpreting, if not defining, how history is represented, and this fact remains critical to any consideration of art's contemporary relationship to the politics of history and conflict. In

Rabin Mroué's *The Fall of a Hair, Part 1: The Pixelated Revolution* (2012) [9], the artist conducts a forensic examination of the way in which information has been presented during the ongoing civil war in Syria. For Mroué, who focuses on images that have been recorded by Syrian protesters and uploaded to the Internet, the mediation of information is of immediate interest, alongside the question of how images are produced by a global media for general consumption. Speaking about the project, Mroué has observed that *The Pixelated Revolution* is not an act of activism on his behalf; rather, it is 'about how images are being produced and used in the Syrian revolution.'⁶ Mroué's reluctance to see his work in terms of political activism mirrors the misgivings of many of the artists featured in this book, who see the label as yet another way of limiting the potential of their practice to offer different ways of engaging with and re-imagining the boundaries of the political sphere.

At the beginning of 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that the civil war in Syria had so far led to 2.4 million people seeking respite in the various refugee camps that have been set up in Turkey, Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, Lebanon and Jordan (the last of these being home to the Zaatari refugee camp, the largest in the Middle East). For some commentators, globalization, regional conflicts

and mass migration have effectively dictated the redistribution of populations on both a micro- and a macro-level. This has resulted in the camp – usually seen as a borderline, peripheral, if not historical phenomenon – being regarded as a typical space of modern geopolitics, rather than an exception.⁷ Indeed, the artist and film-maker Ursula Biemann has referred to the refugee camp as a ‘capsule’ and an embodiment of the intricate political demands of the present.⁸

The ubiquity of the camp in the context of global politics is explored in the eighth chapter of the book, ‘Camps’, together with the many different ways in which artists have chosen to examine the emergence of the camp as an unavoidable feature of globalization and modernity. Although ‘Camps’ focuses primarily on refugee camps, it is worth noting how often other types of camp emerge in the work of the artists featured in the book, including detention camps (Coco Fusco, Ashley Hunt, Christoph Büchel and Gianni Motti); concentration camps (Harun Farocki, Artur Zmijewski, Omer Fast and Santiago Sierra); internment camps (Reza Aramesh, Nada Prlja, Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabril); labour camps (Steve McQueen); protest camps (Mark Wallinger); and transit camps (Ursula Biemann and Yto Barrada). To this already extensive list we could add another form of camp, one that has appeared over the modern political horizon only recently: the climate refugee camp.

In the moment in which artists offer practical, or indeed impractical, solutions to climate change or environmental issues, we witness a deliberate blurring of any distinction between eco-activism and art practice.

Stemming from extensive research carried out in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zambia, Pratchaya Phinthong’s *Sleeping Sickness* (2012) [8], first shown as part of Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany, is deceptively slight, consisting as it does of two tsetse flies inside a large vitrine. The flies were a fertile female and a sterile male. The sterilization of male tsetse flies is a common approach to controlling the spread of ‘sleeping sickness’, a tropical disease that kills thousands of people across Africa every year. Phinthong’s research, which was conducted with the help of local communities, culminated in the promotion of an ecological flytrap. Developed by a company in Thailand, the flytrap was used by local people to combat sleeping sickness and thus pre-empt the use of harmful chemicals to sterilize male tsetse flies in the region. While Phinthong’s practice offers a practical solution to an immediate environmental issue, other artists explored in the ninth chapter of the book, ‘Environments’, provide less convincing remedies. They do, however, use their art to raise awareness of environmental issues and the politics of climate change.

As we shall see in ‘Economies’, the tenth chapter, the work of those artists who have chosen to address the current economic climate and the impact of an enduring financial crisis is often concerned with finding narratives that capture the frequently confusing realities of economic systems. Hito Steyerl’s *In Free Fall* (2010) [10] consists of three short films – *Before the Crash*, *After the Crash* and *Crash* – inspired by a photograph of an aeroplane ‘graveyard’ in the Californian desert. During periods of recession, there is an increase in the number of aeroplanes that are grounded

and subsequently fall into disrepair. Steyerl confirms this phenomenon with the owner of the graveyard in California, but also imaginatively traces the story of a Boeing 707 from commercial and military service to scrapheap, where it is finally blown up for the 1994 action movie *Speed* and thereafter recycled as a component of the pirated DVDs on to which the film is copied. One economy of value is here subverted by another: the so-called black market, a system of economic exchange that exists outside the official system, as defined by law and copyright regulations.

The subject of knowledge, be it financial or otherwise, has become central to contemporary art’s interest in communications systems and the production of images and information, as we shall see in the final chapter of the book, ‘Knowledge’. As the starting point for his installation *May 1st, 2011* (2011) [11], Alfredo Jaar selected an iconic image from our recent past: an official photograph of President Barack Obama and his advisers sitting in the White House as they watch – on a screen that is out of our view – the Navy Seal attack that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden. To the left of this photograph is a blank screen, which acts as a substitute for the one being watched by the president and his advisers. The original photograph had been retouched to avoid exposing sensitive information, and images of the death of Bin Laden were not released. Thus, at the heart of one of the most significant events of recent years, there remains an informational lacuna. In Jaar’s work this gap is represented by the blank screen, a stand-in for an act of violence that we are told has happened but of which we have no proof, other than a fundamentally

politicized photograph. Knowledge, in its formal production and global dissemination, has become not only politicized but also subject to a network of political decisions that prescribe what we can and, crucially, cannot see.

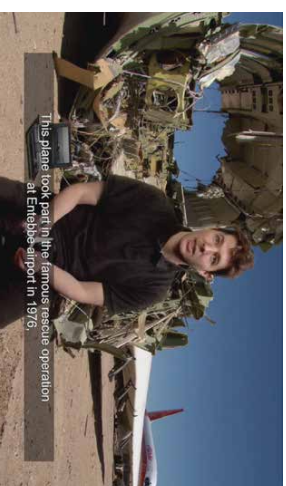
In an age of neo-liberal-inspired forms of free trade and outsourcing, the accumulation of capital within the art world itself has also come under increasing scrutiny – a point to which we shall return throughout the book. We could observe here, in passing, not only how artists represent one of the vanguards of globalization – their fluid, nomadic international travel being indicative of the apparently smooth flow of capital within the art world – but also how they embody and negotiate global working practices. In addition, it is necessary to observe that neo-liberal economies are well practised in absorbing criticism into the fabric of their operations: artworks that criticize the market, for example, are frequently co-opted by the market. However, this should not be seen as a barrier to engagement: the existence of artists within economic systems means they can often be more effective in drawing attention to the broader demands involved in producing art in a globalized cultural and economic environment.

Although this book has been organized into discrete chapters, there are inevitable crossovers between the subjects outlined above; similarly, a number of the featured artists are discussed in more than one chapter. There are also a number of key terms – ‘migration’, ‘surveillance’ and ‘biopolitics’, for example – that could have formed chapters in their own right, but which frequently recur across the entire book in different contexts. This overlap gives

role of creative practices in producing potential forms of engagement with the social and political realms. It is when these realms are challenged, when an agreed sphere of shared experience and understanding comes under scrutiny, that politics proper begins.

a further sense of the breadth and focus of contemporary art practices. Of the works examined, the majority have been produced since 2000, and represent an international take on contemporary art. The ambition here is to provide an overview of the changing relationship between art and politics, and, in so doing, clarify what is at stake in the debates discussed. It is also to provide the reader with an accessible frame of reference for both understanding and exploring these issues further.

Rather than examining politics as a government-led system of administration, or as a series of policies that advocate specific views on certain issues, this book looks towards an expanded notion of the political. Politics is understood, in this context, as the construction of a shared realm of experience and perception that includes the majority but excludes others. Furthermore, in viewing politics as a distribution of certain roles to members of a community, including the power to determine what voices can be heard within that community, we can develop an understanding of art as a social practice that challenges and negotiates the allocation and distribution of those roles, as well as the rationale behind the exclusion of individuals and communities across the globe.⁹ If politics is about determining who has the right to speak, be heard or be seen, then contemporary art of a political nature needs to be understood in the context of how, through various tactics and strategies, it disturbs, disrupts, re-imagines and expands engagement with the political.¹⁰ This book, finally, is about the critical activities of culture and its institutions in the early part of the twenty-first century, and, in particular, the ongoing



[10] MIRO STEVERL - *In Free Fall (Before the Crash, After the Crash, Crash)*, 2010. Single-screen video projection, colour, sound, 39 min., 42 sec.



[11] ALFREDO JAAR - *May 1st*, 2011. 2 LCD monitors and 2 C-prints, 74.2 x 497.8 cm (29 1/2 x 196 in.)