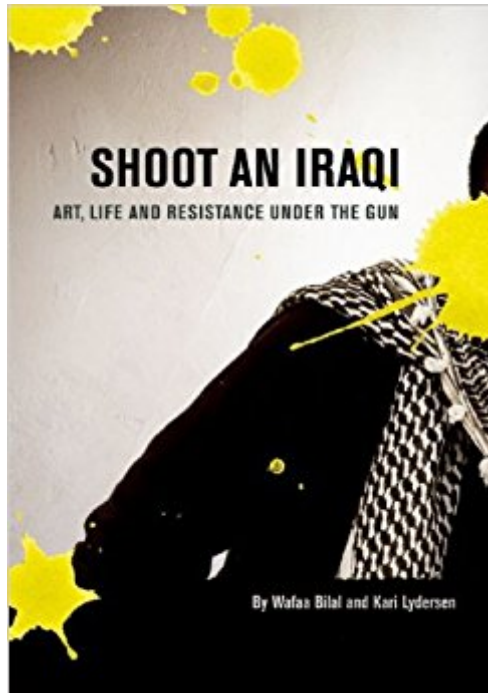




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Shoot An Iraqi: Art, Life And Resistance Under The Gun



Synopsis

Wafaa Bilal's childhood in Iraq was defined by the horrific rule of Saddam Hussein, two wars, a bloody uprising, and time spent interned in chaotic refugee camps in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Bilal eventually made it to the United States to become a professor and a successful artist, but when his brother was killed at a checkpoint in Iraq in 2005, he decided to use his art to confront those in the comfort zone with the realities of life in a conflict zone. Thus the creation and staging of 'Domestic Tension,' an unsettling interactive performance piece: for one month, Bilal lived alone in a prison cell-sized room in the line of fire of a remote-controlled paintball gun and a camera that connected him to Internet viewers around the world. Visitors to the gallery and a virtual audience that grew by the thousands could shoot at him twenty-four hours a day. The project received overwhelming worldwide attention, garnering the praise of the Chicago Tribune, which called it 'one of the sharpest works of political art to be seen in a long time,' and Newsweek's assessment 'breath taking.' It spawned provocative online debates, and ultimately, Bilal was awarded the Chicago Tribune's Artist of the Year Award. Structured in two parallel narratives, the story of Bilal's life journey and his 'Domestic Tension' experience, this first-person account is supplemented with comments on the history and current political situation in Iraq and the context of 'Domestic Tension' within the art world, including interviews with art scholars such as Dean of the School of Art at Columbia University, Carol Becker, who also contributes the introduction. Shoot an Iraqi is equally pertinent reading for those who seek insight into the current conflict in Iraq and for those fascinated by interactive art technologies and the ever-expanding world of online gaming.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In November, 2010 I read about the artistic exploits of Wafaa Bilal and was intrigued. So intrigued I blogged about his latest project and posted it in several online forums. I also ordered his book, "Shoot an Iraqi; Art, Life, and Resistance Under the Gun" co-written with Kari Lydersen. I read it in one sitting. Astonishing in content and brilliantly written, Bilal and Lydersen have taken, by my first estimate, an ill-conceived, albeit somewhat artistic, publicity stunt and turned it into a MUST READ commentary on the cost of war...now my second and more accurate estimate. In a nutshell Wafaa writes about his confinement to an exhibit room at the Flat File Gallery in Chicago. He called the exhibit "Domestic Tension" and lived within its confines for one month. That's the domestic part. The tension comes from the added twist. If you visited him, either on-line or in person, he gave you the option to fire a yellow paint ball at him at 300 feet per second, all day, every day. Approximately 65,000 balls of yellow paint were fired during his ordeal. He was forced to live under the fear of being whacked at anytime. There was a field of fire available to the paint ball gun which he could escape by remaining close to the ground...inducing the stress of literally living "Under the Gun". When online visitors stopped in they could chat with him directly, setting up a tension between those who could reach out to the humanity of the situation observing and bearing witness to the ongoing persecution, and those who wanted to have sadistic fun at the expense of another human being. (NOTE: Although sadistic fun unfortunately occurs in warfare I do not believe it is a primary driver yet it does become another ugly cost of war).

In May 2007, a man from Iraq lived continuously in a small room in Chicago. He had connected a paintball gun to the Internet so that anyone, anywhere in the world, could take potshots at him. (The gun made an ominous ratcheting sound as it swiveled to follow Wafaa Bilal's movements -- and paintballs, when fired at close range, can penetrate cardboard.) People from 136 countries fired at Bilal, that cowering fellow in the protective goggles over in the corner. In fact, in just one month, they fired at him 65,000 times (or about once every 40 seconds). Soon nearly every surface of the room was splattered with viscous, smelly, yellow paintball gunk. Geeks hacked in to turn the paintball "marker" into a rapid-fire machine gun. (They were anonymous; for them, it was like playing an online game.) Other geeks intervened, left-clicking frantically to avert the gun from Bilal. The sadists and caregivers of the virtual world were at war. But why would anyone subject himself to continual "gunfire"? You might do it if you had lived in a totalitarian state -- the spies in the universities, the

snitches in the street, paranoia like something chafing against your skin -- and if you had PTSD from living through Saddam's wars, and if you had endured the filth and famine of refugee camps just to escape your own homeland. You might do it because what remains of your family is still living in that "man-made disaster," a war zone -- and because, out of sympathy, you wanted to put yourself through the same hell that they're living in. Bilal's other performance-art pieces -- a suicide bombing scene satirically recreated, getting himself waterboarded -- suggest that he craves publicity both for himself and for the miseries of Iraq.

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