

And Counting....

“Our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past.”

Elaborate flourishes mark the work of the “Harrow” in Kafka’s *The Penal Colony*, as it draws its lessons deep into the body. The pain created supposedly assures that its message will be understood, while the public witnessing of the event transforms the private act of suffering and the personal epiphany of understanding, into a performative, collective event. Wafaa Bilal intends a similar outcome. He wants to know the meaning of his work deeply in the body, and he wants us to know it as well.

“And Counting....” is the location of permanence that the performance creates. This decisive, irreversible action will establish an embodied, and, as long as Wafaa Bilal is alive, timeless memorial, to the nightmare of the Iraq war. Its most devastating consequences engraved, not only in Bilal’s consciousness but now also in the flesh.

Once the map of Iraq is drawn onto Wafaa Bilal’s back and the 5,000 red dots representing fallen U.S. Soldiers are met by the 100,000 green dots designating fallen Iraqis (only visible under UV light), there is no turning back. Tattoos are almost impossible to erase, as many soldiers have learned. And, although with good intentions, monuments are designed to help us remember, they often simply accelerate our capacity to forget. But because remembering is directly connected to the body, the act of engraving memory onto oneself is an attempt to secure recognition of the past.

This need to physically experience a simulation of the pain of mapping the war, and to take us along with him into this space, was also demonstrated in the Chicago-based performance *Domestic Tension*. There, 80 million hits were registered over the internet during the month Wafaa Bilal lived in Flatfiles Gallery. Yellow paintball bullets hurled through the space, destroying his living environment as well as his equilibrium. This new piece also will create a poignant and deeply disturbing performative event that will once again bring us recognition of a war almost forgotten

in the U.S., except by those soldiers and their families who have suffered incomparable losses.

Wafaa Bilal wants us to acquire a deep knowledge-- not an intellectual, conceptual, or archival knowledge alone, but, a physical and compassionate knowing of what this war has meant. He wants this knowledge to slow us down, so we will experience, as we can, the devastation of the victims and their families that each one of the dots represents. And he wants us to recognize that the Iraqis who have died have been invisible to most U.S. citizens as symbolically they now will be on his body.

In truth, so much of the war has been invisible in the U.S.-- those who died-- soldiers and civilians-- the damage done to all who were there, and to those who live with those who were there. The inability to register the decimation of the landscape, the loss of cultural and economic assets, all such erasures, are the result of a society driven to distraction by a glut of hyperinformation moving at a here-to-fore unknown velocity. The human organism is ill-equipped to absorb and respond to this amount of disturbing knowledge. And so it often does not. Therefore, Wafaa Bilal intends to make these unregistered abstractions real to us, as we witness the creation of a "living monument"-- Bilal's own device for establishing the "mnemonics of a moral geography."

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