In Times of Trouble

Several recent videos and films reflect the growing cultural response, often indirect but nonetheless penetrating, to the political conditions of our day.

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

From the fifth year of the U.S. war in Iraq and the final year of the Bush presidency, the 20th century looks like a very distant place, and a cultural response has slowly built to the ravaged political landscape this administration has created. A trickle until fairly recently and now a sizable stream, the politically engaged art that has emerged is nothing like the activist work of the ‘60s that is its most significant point of comparison. The new work is oblique and fragmented, reluctant to announce fixed goals or declare unyielding positions—but no more so than the policies it opposes. Instead of ideological clarity, and in the absence of tactical success, government efforts—when not outsourced—have focused on controlling the political narrative and its visual rhetoric. Meanwhile, photographic images generated on all sides, by soldiers, terrorists, news media and the military, propagate virally in all kinds of mediums. It has begun to seem that art would be a good place to turn for relevant insights.

In the past few months, a number of recent films and videos by artists that address a variety of political conditions were on view at various venues in New York. Most are not explicitly about Iraq; instead, they examine events in present-day Syria, Algeria in the late 1950s, Hiroshima just after it was bombed and Manhattan just before it was colonized. In all, wariness about identifying finite causes and placing certain blame frames the work’s motivating anger.

Among the most acclaimed works in the Whitney Biennial is the 14-minute-long, four-channel projection The Casting (2007) by Omer Fast, winner of this year’s Bucksbaum Award. This devastating video installation is unusual in aiming squarely at the emotional consequences, for individual soldiers, of the American occupation of Iraq. It contains two narratives, related by two physically similar young men. One story concerns a soldier’s encounter with a troubled woman while on leave in Germany. He’s attracted to her—she’s a little wild and she’s pretty—but she cuts herself (she has an armful of scars to prove it), and he decides to pull back. He delivers this news while she’s driving, recklessly and then suicidally fast. The other account is of a more catastrophic moment of confusion, when the soldier, on duty in Iraq, aims a shot through the windshield of an oncoming car and unintentionally kills (or perhaps only badly injures) a passenger in the back seat. The monologue alternates seamlessly between one story and the other, the paired road motifs often serving as moments of perfect ambiguity. Violence deliberate and random, professional and amateur, officially approved and both morally and legally abhorrent, are among the seemingly fixed oppositions that The Casting causes to slip.

Moreover, as in Fast’s 2003 Spielberg’s List, which sows confusion about whether its subjects, all extras in Spielberg’s Schindler’s List, are recalling experiences of the film or the war, in The Casting it is hard to say who is making things up, and which things. The four videos are shown on two sets of roughly adjacent, back-to-back screens; a single audio track serves all four. Two side-by-side screens show staged tableaux, including, at one point (all four videos are synchronously looped), the studio where the casting call for which the work is named takes place. On this side, actors playing soldiers, Iraqi civilians, the German woman and the American soldier freeze for each scene; only windblown dust and clothing, or swaying plush dice hanging from a rearview mirror, disclose that the camera is rolling.

On the other set of screens, we see only two talking heads, an interviewer and his subject. The latter clearly appears to be telling his own story when he talks about the military incident; making us examine how we determine his credibility is one of the canniest and most provocative of The Casting’s achievements. It is not—or, perhaps it
In March 2005, filmmakers Julia Meltzer and David Thorne went to Damascus to examine the effects of the war in Iraq in a neighboring country. Within a few weeks, the prime minister of Lebanon was assassinated, and the suspicion of involvement that fell on Syria dramatically changed the political climate there. Equally consequential was the flow of Iraqi refugees into Syria, where they now number roughly 1.5 million (in a country of just under 23 million). The five-part, 47-minute portrait of the work’s German premiere reveals that this narrator is indeed a woman: “I didn’t know that that kind of thing didn’t matter.” (A catalogue essay written by Thorne, as was much of the script). The atmosphere of the Armory, where the film was written by Thorne, as was much of the script). The atmosphere of the Armory, where the film was shown—the faded opulence of its ceremonial rooms; the chill, cavernous drill room at its core; the wooded surrounds of the home of its blond, blue-eyed, middle-aged female protagonist. The other is the chaotic streets and arid surrounding landscape is potent. But formal contrats are the feat of Ahtila’s concerns. Before the tậnished European has kissed her two-tou-headed Lea Freih, an actor from Golan who delivers the mesmerizing monologues (spoken in Arabic;subtitled in English) featured in two video screens set at the work’s proper, as also part of the Armory. Not a matter of if but soldiers aim straight at the camera.

Buckingham's film emphasizes that the colonization of New York was a business undertaking rather than an assertion of national determination.

The complexities of the film, which is based in part on a true incident in the 18th century, is addressed by Göring; the speech begins, "The most vigorous forms of terror must be employed. Anyone who creates the slightest opposition must be silenced with a shot."

A simple device, it is heartbreakingly effective.

Water taxi screening of Matthew Buckingham's Muhheakantuck—Everything Has a Name, 2003, 16mm film, 40 minutes. Photo Sam Horine, courtesy Creative Time.

Matthew Buckingham’s 40-minute Moebius-stripe film, Everything Has a Name (2004) takes the issue of terror tactics a few centuries back, to a 1609 Dutch East Indies Company expedition led by Hendrick Hudson. Buckingham’s film was commissioned by Minetta Brook for its 2004/05 program of Hudson River-front projects, and first screened in a storefront in Beacon, New York. Creative Time made it possible for the film to be shown this spring in a water taxi tour, the text fragment with which it ends. The photos are from 1925; Hitler was a neophyte politician then. The photos are from an aerial view of the film and its horizontal sweep up the river were set to the music of imposing names, is a theme of the movie. Several registers of time and space were in play simultaneously: the aerial view of the film and its horizontal sweep up the river were set to the music. The vanishing point of history is always the present moment." Mournful and slow-paced, Buckingham’s project—and not the text alone—was designed to invoke a range of mostly vanished landmarks, the most obvious being the Trade Center towers. They were an absent center of the harbor tour, which passed beneath them twice, just as the attacks of 9/11 are a dropped line—a lost cause—for both present American foreign policy and the art that dared to remember it. The Trade Center towers, like the grievers that anime their attacks, are only peripheral references in Buckingham’s film. But the thousands of Native Americans who died in lower Manhattan before them, and the corporate policies responsible for those deaths, find in Muhheakantuck a powerful acknowledgment.

Works by Outer Form, Julie Heston and David Thorpe, and Leslie Thornton were presented at the 2006 Whitney Biennial (May 6-Aug. 27). Eiji Irie/Akihito Where is Where? was screened at Marfan Goodwin in New York (May 28-Aug. 30). It is included in her retrospective now at K21 Duchess (May 27-August 12). Akihito will have a solo show at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. (July 4-Oct. 26). Matthew Buckingham’s Muhheakantuck—Everything Has a Name was presented by Creative Time in New York (May 28-Aug. 14). Eiji Irie’s traveling exhibition “Play the Story” is at the Harry Ransom Center, Austin (July 7-Aug. 15).