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## A Picture of War is Not War

Wilkinson Gallery, London, UK

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Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, Kurdistan, Chechnya, Lebanon: the regions visited or invoked in the six films that comprised 'A Picture of War is Not War' were a sobering, conflict-ridden roll-call. Part exhibition and part administrative conceit, the programme was rolled out with two films installed at a time for a period of two weeks each. (One work was projected in the rear ground-floor space – Hito Steyerl's Manifesta 5 highlight November, from 2004 was first up – and the other in the first floor gallery.) Meanwhile, the entrance room to the gallery was completely empty except for a single chair and table with a monitor, headphones and DVD player, a station where all of the films could be picked out and viewed throughout the duration of the show. The inflections in the modes of display and consumption that this system triggered, with the appearance of sober authority or the illusion of choice, suggesting variously acts of scheduling or private research, adroitly echoed the character of the locations that haunted these often dense films.

Kamal Aljafari's Visit Iraq (2003) visited not Iraq but Geneva (that site of conflict management) and centred on an empty office on a street corner that until 1990 served as a branch of Iraq Airways. Aljafari's camera lingers over the faded carpet of this diplomatic blind-spot, a 'while you were out' sticker hopelessly attached to the glass door, and the recycling bins outside. These shots are intercut with vox pop-style interviews with passers-by. Stories and rumours begin to emerge: of a suspicious attaché case that has caused an evacuation, the anachronistic décor. A stuttering man chants fractured, spurious spy-story speculations involving Yasser Arafat, a conspiracy and arms dealing.

In a show that wore its 'difficult' art credentials on its sleeve, David Maljkovic's wonderful sci-fi short Scene for a New Heritage (2004) seemed like light relief. Playing time travellers arriving back from the future of 2045, three men journey in their craft (a Renault Clio covered in tin foil, to be precise) to an abandoned World War II memorial structure at Petrova Gora, Croatia – a silver hilltop folly at the heart of what was a conflict zone in the early 1990s, where they speculate in a kind of yodelling language about the building's purpose and function.

Arab Image Foundation founder Akram Zaatari contributed an awkward, intractable split-screen documentary-style work. In this House (2005) is based on the search for a letter hidden in a mortar case beneath a Beirut garden. The full story unfolds like a dissident PowerPoint presentation. The complexity of Beirut, Zaatari seems to suggest—and perhaps this counts for the other often intractable political and historical mises-en-scènes evoked in this show—is a fiction that is either delved into whole-heartedly, comprehensively and diligently, or one that is simply buried, ignored, or as is the invitation in 'A Picture of War is Not War', summarily judged and ejected from the DVD player. Newspaper clippings and diary entries, voice-overs, talking heads and a system of graphics, cues and subtitles accompany a persistent static shot of the excavation in a laboured, infuriatingly insistent analysis that seems scuppered by its own archival disphobia in the telling. Likewise, though unquestionably born of salutary ethical, political and social motives – addressing the atrocities of the Balkan civil war – Maja Bajevic's hammy Double Bubble (2001) was not wholly convincing, seeming to push already acute unintentionally material into farce.

By contrast a similar operation somehow made the 42 minutes of Renzo Martens' Episode 1 (2003) a formidable tonic. Sometimes at considerable risk to himself and his guides, the artist toured the smouldering Chechen city of Grozny, refugee camps, aid distribution points, hospitals and checkpoints posing as a Western journalist. In one scene Russian soldiers have just ransacked a market; in another a man, his face in shreds, recounts the explosion that has disfigured him. The artist speaks with United Nations officials in their base and locals in their homes, about propaganda, the politics of aid, the intrusion of the film crews. Yet throughout the film there are these moments where he poses and preens himself as he holds the camera aloft or chucks a declaration of love for a certain Marie. And he persists in asking the people he encounters, in the most desperate of circumstances, jaw-droppingly inappropriate, vain questions such as: 'Do you think I'm handsome?' or 'What do you think about me?' In one scene he questions and flirts with a sweet and obviously smitten girl about how a suitor might win her affections, before telling her she reminds him of Marie. Completely flummoxed, like all of his victim-interviewees, she crumples. Recalling Artur Zmijewski's agonizing films, Episode 1 was an intense, psychologically treacherous 'extraordinary rendition' of shame, licence and abuse.

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