

## Scenario House

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**Publication Date:**

2006

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/16160>

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# Scenario House

Gianni Ian Wise

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We gain security but lose our freedom. Consensual paranoia imprisons us in our own delusional fears thereby incapacitating and debilitating us.



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2004 – 2006

*Today's 'global war (on terror)' is in no way similar to an isolated conflict between two nations but rather stays suspended in a permanent possibility of becoming. The threat of 'terrorism' and the concomitant manipulation of fear have penetrated every segment of society. What is peculiar to this 'war' is the indefinability of the enemy. Despite its supposed ideological profile the enemy remains abstract, yet its threat is, we are told omnipresent. As in a Hollywood science fiction movie, the whole of humanity seems to be 'confronted by powerful destructive forces that threaten our everyday existence'.*

*Frank Furedi, Culture of Fear, 2005.*

## ***abstract***

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*Scenario House, a gallery based installation, is comprised of a room constructed as a 'family room' within a domestic space, a television with a looped video work and a sound component played through a 5.1 sound system. The paper is intended to give my work context in relation to the processes leading up to its completion.*

*This is achieved through clarification of the basis for the installation including previous socio-political discourses within my art practice. It then focuses on ways that the installation Scenario House is based on gun practice facilities such as the Valhalla Shooting Club. Further it gives an explanation of the actual production, in context with other art practices.*

*It was found that distinctions between 'war as a game' and the actual event are being lost within 'simulation revenge scenarios' where the borders distinguishing gaming violence, television violence and revenge scenarios are increasingly indefinable. War can then be viewed a spectacle where the actual event is lost in a simplified simulation.*

*Scenario House as installation allows audience immersion through sound spatialisation and physical devices. Sound is*

*achieved by design of a 5.1 system played through a domestic home theatre system. The physical design incorporates the dual aspect of a gun shooting club and a lounge room. Further a film loop is shown on the television monitor as part of the domestic space – it is non-narrative and semi-documentary in style. The film loop represents the mediation of the representation of fear where there is an exclusion of 'the other' from the social body.*

*When considering this installation it is important to note that politics and art need not be considered as representing two separate and permanent realities. Conversely there is a need to distance politicised art production from any direct political campaign work in so far as the notion of a campaign constitutes a fixed and inflexible space for intellectual and cultural production.*

*Finally this paper expresses the need to maintain a critical openness to media cultures that dominate political discourse. Art practices such as those of Martha Rosler, Haacke and Paul McCarthy are presented as effective strategies for this form of production.*

## ***acknowledgements***

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*My thanks go to my supervisor Michele Barker for her patience in reading and re-reading this paper and her total support for all the directions that Scenario House took.*

*I want to especially recognise the infinite patience and editing by my partner Melinda Austen during the writing of this paper.*

*To Robert Finder in his skills in Adobe Protools for the 5.1 sound piece for the installation that this paper is based on. To Simon Cavanagh for his totally brilliant effort in the joint building of the installation. To Alex Gawronski and Marc Chaussivert for the late night disassembly of the installation.*

*To everyone else who has helped in some way the during this process: Lynne Roberts - Goodwin in her role as my previous supervisor, Ryszard Dabek in his feedback, Alex Gawronski for his ongoing coffee conversations and Dr Karina Smith for some deft editing.*





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## *Introduction*

***We gain security but lose our freedom. Consensual paranoia imprisons us in our own delusional fears thereby incapacitating and debilitating us.***

***The threat of attack is very high today, both at home and abroad.***

*Cmdr. Matthew Bobola, U.S. Marines* <sup>1</sup>

***We live in a scary world and we want to be prepared for anything.***

*Valhalla Shooting Club website* <sup>2</sup>

In 2005 I came across a news item broadcast by ABC Radio National on a distinctly American facility, a mountain resort hotel with restaurant and five star lodge rooms. The resort was combined with a 'state-of-the-art' gun club that offered sophisticated anti-terrorist training. In its brochure, the Valhalla Shooting Club<sup>3</sup> offered gun-handling skills in an effort to prepare its members against the threat of possible homeland invasion.



*fig 1: the gun club facility at Valhalla with publicity image of the adjoining resort*

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1 viewed 12 Mar 2005, <[http://www.chips.navy.mil/archives/02\\_summer/authors/index2\\_files/simulation](http://www.chips.navy.mil/archives/02_summer/authors/index2_files/simulation)>

2 viewed 12 Mar 2005 <<http://www.valhallashootingclub.com/training>>

3 ibid

The premise for this paper is that distinctions between 'war as a game' and the actual event are being lost when 'simulation revenge scenarios' are offered by these types of shooting facilities in the wake of 9/11. The potential effect is an anaesthetisation to the human consequences of violence. (fig 1)

The title *scenario house* is directly derived from the series of live simulation rooms offered at the *Valhalla Shooting Club*. The participant enters a simulated aircraft cabin. Smoke and special effects give a sense of realism to the contest and takes out the terrorist. *Scenario* as a noun could also refer to 'a postulated sequence of events' as in a written outline of a crime or a scene or a major Hollywood studio plot. The term *scenario* in the context of my installation and this paper could be seen to have links to *scenario* as simulation or perhaps a place to act or rehearse as if it was real. Inevitably this leads to references to Baudrillard's work on simulation and synthetic in his essay "Disneyworld Company"<sup>4</sup>. Here he develops the notion of a synthetic universe as a simulated "reality show" where reality itself is transformed into a form of spectacle.

The paper begins with a discussion and investigation of violence through the manifestation of post 9/11 vengeance scenarios within such facilities as the Valhalla Shooting Club. The texture and psychology of war and violence is becoming yet another abstracted set of meta-linguistic parameters fed into the media machine of global information. The borders

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4 J. Baudrillard, 'Disneyworld Company' in *Liberation*, March 4, 1996.

distinguishing gaming violence, television violence and revenge scenarios are increasingly indefinable.

Any discussion of fear and paranoia is closely associated with the thesis of a culture of fear. This refers to the feelings of fear and anxiety that predominate in contemporary western discourse and relationships, altering how we relate to one another as individuals and as democratic agents. Most theorists agree that it is a distinctly twentieth and twenty first century phenomena with potentially harmful global implications. Some such as Noam Chomsky believe this fear has been artificially created as a means of social control with the aid of mass media. Others such as Frank Furedi feel that it emerges naturally from contemporary society,

In my past research and artist practice I began to investigate these issues; an example was the development of an installation that explored the military government's court system in Chile that watched and documented the lives of so many of its citizens. This developed into a photographic series that represented the role of the camera in surveillance of citizens (shown in Sydney, Melbourne and Berlin). My photographic practice has on occasion referenced this through the POV of the camera (from above) in series on the Department of Housing buildings in Waterloo, Sydney. One recent short film piece has extended these themes through use of investigative camera styles. (fig 2) This was used in a recent installation looking at security and the state. A more humorous project has been the recent exhibition of a 'game' that combined the innocence of

the bar game 'foosbol' with the dehumanising aspects of the US forces detention centres. My most recent installation project incorporated elements of surveillance photography within a 'photo booth' construction. Apart from these works, I have been exploring notions of socio-political paranoia and security issues in an ongoing weblog: <http://gianniwise.blogspot.com/>.

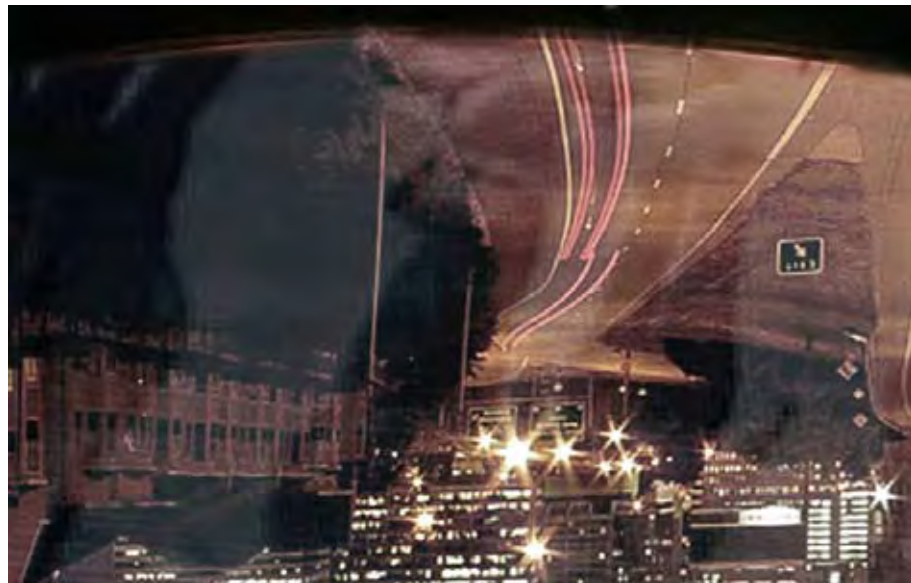


Figure 2: *Road Monitor, 2002, digitally manipulated photograph*

In essence, this paper is intended to critically investigate the relationship between the installation *Scenario House* and the theoretical underpinnings sustaining it. I intend to elucidate and extend on the body of work through a clarification of the initial basis for the installation followed by an explanation of how the installation itself was developed in terms of being an immersive medium. I then intend to frame the work in terms of an investigation into whether art can engage in the political in terms of aesthetics, representation of 'the Other'<sup>5</sup> and sustaining an effective art practice.

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5        see following section *The 'Other' as an excluded agent*.

## ***The ‘Other’ as an excluded agent***

This paper refers to the notion of ‘the other’ in respect to the discourse of the need to create an enemy. Slavoj Žižek <sup>6</sup> suggests there has been a direction to exclude ‘the other’ or agents from the ‘legitimate social body’ in a democracy. Thus the legitimised state needs to exclude in order to survive. This at times is referred to as the ‘real world’ where commonsense wisdoms are required, inferring that there is too much idealism and therefore a need to ‘reign-in’ more ideological positions. “What we encounter here is the age old mantra about politics as the domain of the identifications, ideals [idealists and extremism] ...towards which one should maintain a sceptical distance – political engagement ...turns us into fools”<sup>7</sup> To be included therefore is to seek within the democratic an inner security, a trust you cannot find outside in this society of fear. It is the role of ‘the Other’ in a society to maintain this balance.



‘The other’ in postcolonial studies and cultural theory is generally referred to as the processes by which societies and groups exclude ‘others’ who they want to subordinate or who are seen as not fitting into their society. For example, Edward Said wrote in *Orientalism*<sup>8</sup> of this construct by western societies

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6 S. Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, 2004, p91; pp. 90-2.

7 Ibid; pp. 103-5.

8 E. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage, 1979, p29.

to 'other' those people in the 'Orient' (meaning non-Western) who they seek to control. Of interest in relation to my installation is the clear example of the 2006 Paris riots where the Parisian suburbs had generally been excluded from the social body, which is generally defined as distinctly western. His writing in its essence investigates the misrepresentation of the non-western world. The 1995 film *Le Haine*<sup>9</sup> is a powerful commentary on the interracial and societal factors that precipitated these riots. As stated in the section discussing the film loop, a central concern is the mediation of the representation of fear via the systematic production and display of news events. The imagining of 'others', particularly of people of Muslim and Middle Eastern background is represented in the footage as an implied violence and a sense that these 'others' are being watched for our protection.

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9 M. Kassovitz (dir), *Le Haine*, duration 97 mins, France, 1995.

## Valhalla: an ultimate battle between good & evil?

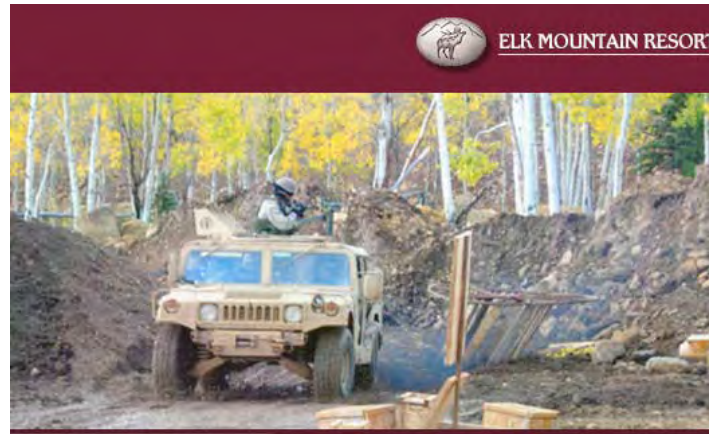


figure 3: Elk Mountain Resort & Valhalla Shooting Club publicity image

The initial conception for the installation *Scenario House* was based on gun practice facilities such as the *Valhalla Shooting Club* in the United States. Figure 4 is an image from the *Valhalla Shooting Club* brochure showing a simulated home invasion scenario. Text from the club brochure begins:

*Have you awoken to a dark world of terrorists and espionage in which nothing is as it seems? Have you wandered onto the set of the next international spy thriller? No and no. You are simply among the first to visit the home of the Valhalla Shooting Club and Training Center where recreational shooting and progressive training come together.*<sup>10</sup>

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10 Valhalla Shooting Club, opcit, training.





figure 4: rehearsal room at Valhalla Shooting Club

At the heart of the Valhalla facility is *Scenario House* where guests can engage 3-dimensional, automated targets in a variety of simulated settings including a furnished home, metro station and the cockpit and first-class section of a commercial jet (fig 5). A certain irony exists in the fact that they get to enjoy fine dining and facilities afterwards.



**The author felt he really was on a plane in the airliner scenario room**

fig 5: post 9/11 simulation of a commercial jet cabin for anti-terrorism practise

It is clear that this gun club and resort facility is a reflection of a society that continues to feel strongly about the right, and need, for gun ownership. Yet the existence of this club resort signifies something more disturbing: the inherent incongruity of a situation whereby a shooting club and anti-terrorist training facility coexist with a leisure resort. This is indicative of a society that is comfortable in bringing the gun into the domestic. To paraphrase the resort's marketing brochure: you are to prevent terrorists from hijacking an airplane. Afterward, feel free to enjoy billiards and world class dining, followed by a selection of cigars from around the world. "Make that a martini – shaken, not stirred then engage a terrorist attempting to break into the aircraft's cockpit," <sup>11</sup> Then allow the pressures of the world slip away.

Are these and other defence-of-the-homeland rehearsals simply a normal display of insecurity following 9/11? It appears certain though that public insecurity and paranoia has become more prevalent since 9/11 in the U.S. and with its allies. Yet how can we not look at this 'revenge scenario facility' as perhaps a worrying example of a culture in decay?

Jean Baudrillard in his essay *Disney World Company* <sup>12</sup> was the first to investigate not only simply social paranoia but also the notion of *spectacle* rather than merely rehearsal or simulation of the real. In framing the construction of France's Disneyworld as a spectacle he suggested that Disney as the:

*grand initiator of the imaginary as virtual reality, is now*

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11 Valhalla Shooting Club, opcit, training.

12 Baudrillard, opcit, p. 2.

*in the process of capturing all the real world to integrate it into its synthetic universe, in the form of a vast “reality show” where reality itself becomes a spectacle where the real becomes a theme park....After the prostitution of the imaginary, here is now the hallucination of the real in its ideal and simplified version.*<sup>13</sup>

Following this logic, the *Scenario House* facility at *Valhalla Shooting Club* and other organisations are part of a “reality show” where ‘the actual event’ is lost in a simplified simulation. The reality of the 9/11 hijacked planes targeting the Whitehouse and the World Trade Center is replaced by a re-enactment as willing participants in this spectacle ‘take out the terrorist’. Distinctions between ‘war as a game’ and ‘the actual event’ are being lost when ‘simulation revenge scenarios’ are offered by these types of gun facilities in the wake of 9/11. The potential effect is an anaesthetisation to the human consequences of violence:

*the most progressive reality-based training program with 360 degree dynamic simulated real world. Here guests shoot for entertainment or education under the supervision of our staff. Inside the scenario house, guests engage 3-D, automated and reactive targets... Or even Each Other.*<sup>14</sup>

This anaesthetisation to violence through these “reality-based

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13 Baudrillard, *opcit*, p 2.

14 Valhalla Shooting Club, *opcit*.

*training program(s)*<sup>15</sup> can be further witnessed in the U.S. Army online recruitment strategy of using *Playstation* like war games built to instruct and allow them to witness the spectacle of war. Even recruitment advertisements are developed from the same genres by reducing the occupation of “soldier” to a game that softens the painful truth of being part of a war. On the one hand we have this virtuality that most digitised representation is capable of reducing the more horrific truths of armed conflict and, on the other, how fear can be generated in a population using the same means...social manipulation in the guise of a game. Hence the *Valhalla Gun Club* can be seen in the same sense to be the site of the virtualisation and a spectacle in this *culture of fear*.

Consideration of these issues has informed the development of the installation *Scenario House*. The installation reflects the ongoing concerns that have shaped my research and practice culminating in my Master of Fine Arts. The resulting work reflects the complexity of the intentions for the work.

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15 Valhalla Shooting Club, opcit

## *Installation as a form of theatrical immersion*

Installation as a spatial artform is capable of immersing an audience through sound, visual and physical characteristics central to live theatre. Other forms of immersive environments of this decade have included first person shooter games and surround sound home cinema systems. Immersion has been successfully used in live theatre and later in cinema where the physical act of entry via a doorway or curtain immerses the audience within the event.<sup>16</sup>

This immersion into the installation allows relationships between sound and the space to develop. This discourse can establish intentional or random exchanges. As with film, it is the influence of acoustic and architectural space that is one of the most attractive features of installation for me. Additionally, in planning this installation I needed, to allow for the differing styles of audience interaction of a 'physical' installation compared to video installation work operating within a two-dimensional screen space. This is not to diminish in any way the importance of other media and forms of display, but rather to highlight the place of the installation in contemporary arts practice. Video artists such as the The Atlas Group (Walid Ra'ad) and Akram Zaatari have combined documentary video and personalised narratives in their work in a way that audiences are able to feel a relationship with the subject through sound, voice and

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16 M. Rosenthal. *Understanding Installation Art: From Duchamp to Holzer*. Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2003. p 17-19.

film. For example in their recent video installation at The Performance Space, the viewer becomes immersed in the work with the screened video image as the point of entry.<sup>17</sup> Increasingly digital installation work operates fully within the realm of sensory perception, in a sense “installing” the viewer in an artificial system.

I have designed this installation (*Scenario House*) as an immersive work in order to take advantage of these possibilities.

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<sup>17</sup> The Atlas Group (Walid Ra’ad), exhibited as part of *Zones of Contact*, 2006 Biennale of Sydney at The Performance Space, 8 June-27 August 2006.

## *Scenario House ...the installation*

The challenge in developing the content within any installation, particularly with one which engages with the political, is in finding an interpretation which is not overly literal. A more distanced interpretation is required in order to open up possibilities for multiple readings. Another aspect of political art is that a literal representation could lead to the danger of it being seen simply as a genre such as 'pop art'. Labels such as these can also be limiting.

Images from the Valhalla Shooting Club promotional material (e.g. fig 6) were used as a starting point for the development of the concept for *Scenario House*. In responding to these images I realised it was necessary to resist any literal representation of the facility in the construction of the installation. I wanted more open, multiple readings to develop.



*fig 6: image of an home invasion scenario for trainees at Valhalla, illustrating one of the scenario room sets as used for anti-terror gun training*

*Scenario House* is constructed as a room representing an imaginary space that is close to our “suburban heartland” – the home – the family room – alluding to the commonly used expression: ‘homeland security’. The room itself is placed within the exhibition space – a room detached in the centre of another room (the gallery space). (fig 7). The original intention to use the whole gallery space as the lounge room (domestic space) could not be achieved because Marrickville Council regulations did not allow the gluing or attaching of anything directly to the walls. This necessitated construction of false walls as a room for the ‘wallpaper’.<sup>18</sup> The room itself having been constructed with these site (gallery) specific limitations presented particular issues relating to the relationship between the gallery and the construction.

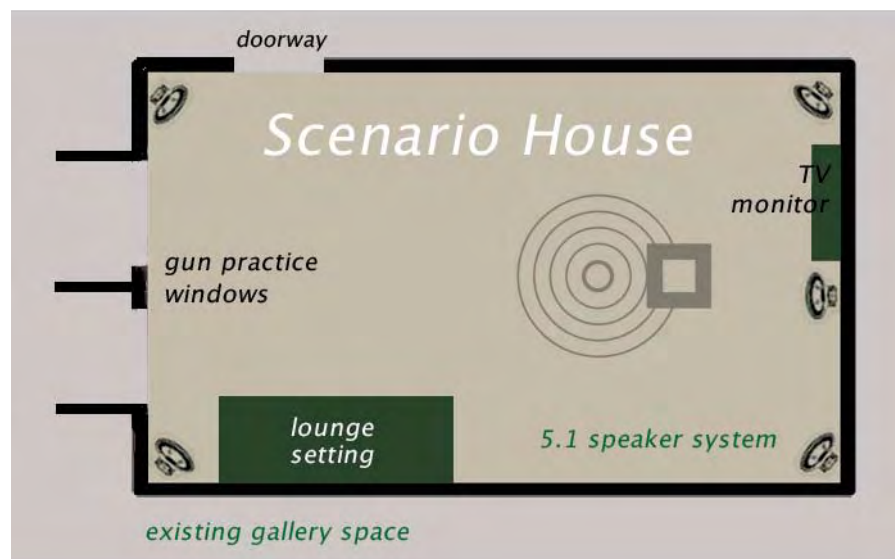


fig 7: plan of installation within gallery space

Using the device of constructing a room within gallery spaces

<sup>18</sup> The wallpaper was constructed by replicating a small target motif in Adobe Illustrator and printing long sheets in an architectural plan printer (plotter).



or in site-specific locations has been used by a range of installation artists (fig 8). A recent example of this type was the Turkish artist Mürüvvet Türkyilmaz<sup>19</sup> who reproduced a room with a low ceiling that could have been a child's world, possibly a bedroom, within a gallery space. The intimacy of the subject is suggested in the structure's apparently makeshift construction and use of wall drawings on the inside walls. The room was used as a means to explore issues of borders and social separation both in terms of the artist's personal memories as well as Turkey's peculiarly unique political relationship to that region. In contrast *Réserve du Musée des enfants* (1989), the Christian Boltanski installation (fig 8), reconfigures the existing gallery space to give meaning to the work. Yet his work also projects an intimacy through personal memory. His installations of personal objects, such as in *Réserve du Musée des enfants* are frequently project a sense of loss and fear of being hurt. His work often possesses the feeling of location (in situ) that some of the Holocaust museum displays have in Dachau and Dresden.

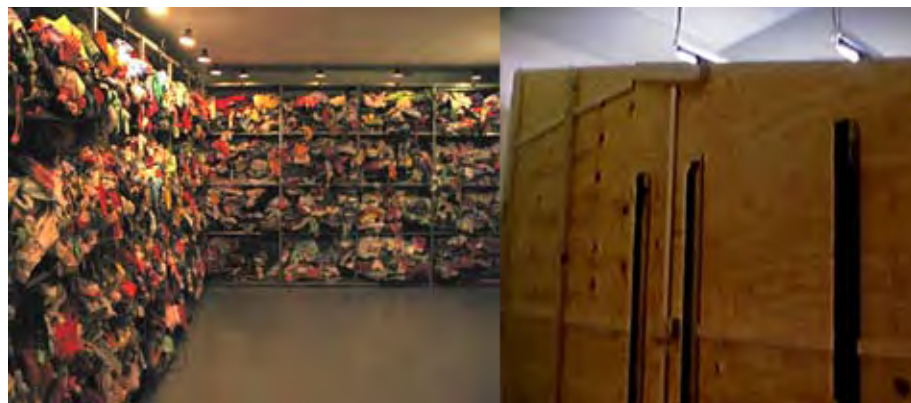


fig 8 left: Christian Boltanski; right: Mürüvvet Türkyilmaz

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<sup>19</sup> exhibited as part of *Zones of Contact*, 2006 Biennale of Sydney at the Tin Sheds Gallery, 8 July-13 August 2006.

The room *Scenario House* offers a dual viewing perspective where the participant can either enter via the doorway or choose to peer into the space through two windows at the end of the room (fig 7). These windows also double as shooter hatches in a gun shooting club facility (fig 9). A person enters the room via the door at the side, into a space that contains a gunshots audio track. They would then find themselves in a room containing a lounge setting and walls completely wallpapered in the repetitive yet discrete motif of gun targets. The person at the window is encouraged to imagine themselves as willing participants in a gunclub activity. They see through a window into a long room that resembles the domestic space of a living room whilst incorporating elements of an indoor shooting facility. Targets are visible at the end of the space and the sound of gunshots creates a more immersive effect within this simulated environment.



*fig 9 image from an indoor gun shooting facility*

At the other end of the room is a television monitor displaying footage along with a barely audible soundtrack. By mounting the television into the wall with only the front protruding, it becomes integral to the space while still acting as a device for home entertainment. The intention was not to have a flat screened monitor set back into the wall – it needed to contribute to the simulation of the domestic. Further I wanted the suggestion that it could be read as a surveillance monitor and thus have the effect of being a device to watch some external agent (the ‘Other’<sup>20</sup>).

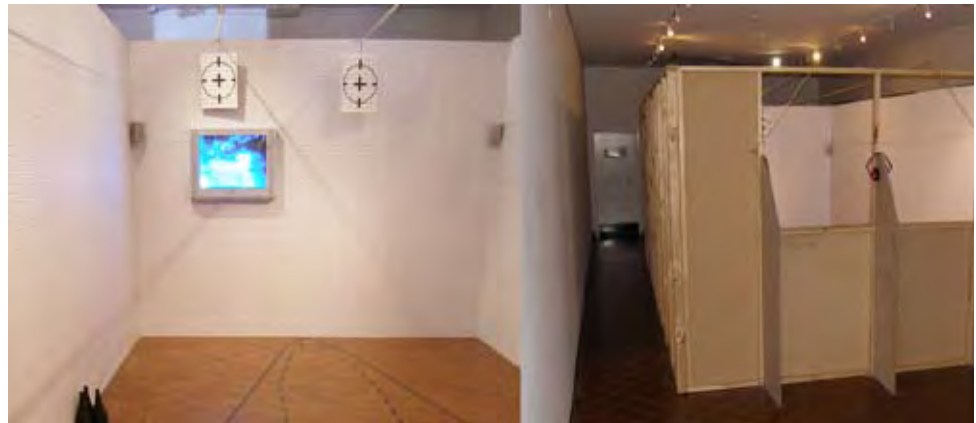


*fig 10: watching from shooter hatch*

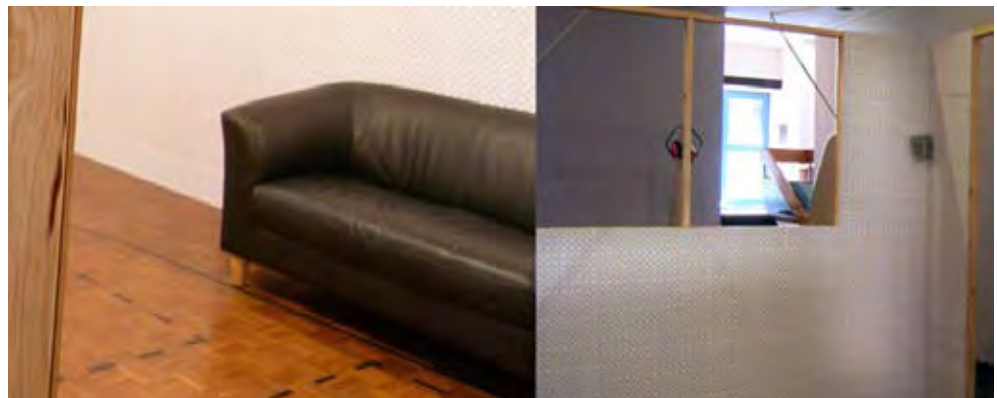
Upon entering the room the viewer's gaze may be directed towards the open windows for the gun users or towards the furnishings. (figs 9, 10 & 10a)

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20      see section *The ‘Other’ as an excluded agent*, p. 5



*fig 10a: looking inwards & out through shooter hatch*



*fig 11 left: interior view, right: exterior view of the installation*

## ***The Sound***

The sound design makes an important contribution in creating the impression of immersion. The sound design for *Scenario House* is comprised of two parts: a low level, soundtrack (as mentioned above) emanating from the television monitor and the audio component that originates from 5 speakers throughout the room. (figs 7, 10) This latter sound is that of a gun shot sound track edited as a 5.1 channel sound track. A special five-speaker matrix is installed throughout the gallery space to distribute the 5.1 channel gunshot sound. The idea (for

the gunshot soundtrack) of viewers occupying the space and then being surprised by gunshot would help create a tension between expectation and event. This would place sound at a disruptive juncture to the viewing experience (of the space and the video piece) rather than merely functioning as an illustrative soundtrack.

The gunshot soundtrack was set to play for approximately 25 seconds on a loop. (fig 8) In designing the sound in Pro Tools, I found it is nearly impossible to tell how it would manifest itself in the space without testing in situ; this was especially true in relation to the 5 channel mix.



After testing the sound in the space it became clear that the discrete gunshots needed to be opened up slightly in terms of duration. Having a barrage of gunshots coming one after the other proved to be a bit overwhelming, especially within a space that created echoes easily. Exactly how long this space would be between sounds was perhaps the key question. This was resolved only by separating and cutting then testing the sound edit within a space which simulated the proposed room sonically and spacially.

## *The Film Loop*

A film loop viewed on the television monitor is central to the installation. It is a non-narrative piece with a duration of approximately 3 mins 30 seconds. The film originated from original footage, news clips, and stills taken in the last year and short segments from an unreleased short film (fig 12). The footage was shot primarily in the outer western suburbs of Sydney. Much of the street shots were obtained by filming while being driven around in the back of a station wagon through main street shopping strips in Auburn, Belmore and Cabramatta. The close-ups were achieved with a telephoto lens. The filming took the form of a semi-documentary having a controlled observational mode<sup>21</sup>. There was no interaction between the camera operator and the 'actor'. This had a number of effects on the shots taken. There was a natural, uninterrupted raw quality in the footage. There was little opportunity for retakes. Sudden changes in existing lighting and out of focus footage was common. The intention in shooting in this way was to construct an effect reminiscent of television news reportage. It comes at a time when there is an expectation that news reportage, and its associate technologies, will satisfy the need for visual immediacy, most notably through 'breaking news' stories.

An interesting example of this style of which is frequently referred to as (art) semi-documentary is in the film *Chile on the Road to NAFTA* by Martha Rosler.<sup>22</sup> A reviewer for *Art in*

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21 B. Nichols, Introduction to Documentary, Indiana University Press, 2001, pp. 80-83.

22 G. Turner, Martha Rosler at Jay Gorney - New York, New

America states:

*The opening sequence was shot from the driver's seat of a car travelling through the Chilean countryside ...Playing in the background is martial music performed by Chile's National Police Band, including a medley of tunes from Star Wars. As the car proceeds down the road, the camera turns to capture something that at first appears to be a large fireball on the horizon. It is soon revealed to be a sight that Rosler presumably considers no less violent: a roadside advertisement for Coca-Cola reflecting the red-orange light of the setting sun. ...it offers reminders that while Rosler may sometimes be more an activist than an aesthete, her imagery can be frankly beautiful.*

Perhaps the reviewer missed the point – the work is a commentary on the conjunction in Chile of U.S. corporate presence and victims of political terror. Here the semi-documentary drive-by style suggests the thematic backdrop of car tourism in the context of the U.S. imperialism.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Semi-documentary style***

This semi-documentary style incorporates the operator/editor as voyeur who decides who is captured and how they are represented. Here the artist as camera operator has power over the subject. The camera in the hands of the operator becomes a filmic representation of paranoia. Part of the video

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York - Review of Exhibitions , Art in America, May, 1997

23 M. Rosler, Chile on the Road to NAFTA, 1997, 10 min, video, color, sound



loop involved close-up shots of street scenes in a vehicle that required me to wait and 'catch' the subject, usually a group of pedestrians. Here the artist/operator casts his/her panoptic gaze across their suburban metropolis. And in turn through the eyes of the artist the spectator acts as voyeur.



*fig 12: footage and stills combined*

A central concern within this installation is the mediation of the representation of fear that is constructed via the systematic production and display of news events. This has been particularly evident following events such as the 'Tampa Crisis' and the post 9/11 tragedy. Writers such as Lelia Green<sup>24</sup> have argued that acts of terror and issues of border security have precipitated the creation of widespread fear of the new 'others', people of Muslim and Middle Eastern background. Television media is particularly active in its reconstruction of events such as the reprisal-attacks by youths of 'middle eastern appearance' on 'our anglos' following the events such as the Cronulla Riots. Footage such as this has similarities to the style of news media

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24 The new 'others' in Media and society post-September 11, 2002.



representation of North African youths during the more recent Paris riots.<sup>25</sup> These similarities include use of a hand held, constantly 'roving' filming style, which has come to signify on-the-spot reporting, imbeddedness with the action and CCTV camera footage<sup>26</sup>. The result is, along with the incorporation of the fast jump-cut, a heightened tension and frequently a sense of unease for the viewer. Artists such as Marilyn Fairsky have made good use of this style of documentary construction using jump shots and rough edits that eschew a finished look. Her work *Connected*, 2003<sup>27</sup> is chilling in its representation of events at the American military intelligence facility at Pine Gap.

Slavoj Žižek discusses the issue of televised representation of 'the other' and terror in his commentary on media in Iraq<sup>28</sup>. He argues that increasingly the mediated representation of terror comes to occupy a central place in our everyday experience so that the witnessing of the event on television becomes our central experience even if we live there. The London bombings and the Bali bombings are witnessed as events via television networks where we have the expectation of an immediacy of feedback of the experience. This televised

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25 see section: The 'Other' as an excluded agent, p XX.

26 see 'Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother' in *Control Space: Rhetorics of Surveillance*, viewed 3 March 2005, <<http://ctrlspace.zkm.de/e/>> for a detailed analysis of the behaviour of inmates at his model for a prison (Panopticon). He stated that: "since they [the prisoners] could thus never know for sure whether they were being watched, but had to assume that they were, the fact of actual observation was replaced by the possibility of being watched."

27 Eyeline, Vol 60, 2006 p. 58.

28 S. Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, Verso, New York, 2004, pp. 21-27.

footage is brought to us as news breaking stories that exist within the context of other news or amusement. According to Baudrillard, within this environment, news events then become part of a “Disneyfication of the known universe”<sup>29</sup> This installation investigates the relationship between the collapse of the real and simulated in situations of conflict - a conflict that is rehearsed by willing participants in a simulacrum of the real event.

*Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the “real” country, all of “real” America... Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real...It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.”*<sup>30</sup>

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29 Baudrillard, opcit, p. 10.

30 J. Baudrillard, 'Simulations' in Semiotext(e), New York, 1983, p. 25.

## *Politics and aesthetics: two separate realities?*

Anne Kirker in her review of the November 2005 exhibition *Sydney (Interesting Times: focus on Contemporary Australian Art)* at the *Museum of Contemporary Art*, stated that all art is political, even though work some may stand for more conservative values.<sup>31</sup> She suggests that the distinguishing point is that only some artwork has the intent to contribute to social awareness or possible change.

Politics and art are not separable. Much has been written on the purity of aesthetics as the prime concern of the artist (or perhaps artisan).<sup>32</sup> Plato observed that the artisan has no time for anything other than their work. Aesthetics has developed since then to the point of becoming a set of rules for identification and valuing of art since the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>33</sup>. Thus was born the narrative of the historical regime of art as a solitary, autonomous practice. This was the familiar modernist narrative, where aesthetics is seen as primary in this “autonomous world”<sup>34</sup>, isolated and seeking a ‘truth in the medium’. From this another narrative developed, one of the late twentieth century, when artistic production became increasingly inseparable from technological (digital) production and other cultural forms. Here art was seen to be increasingly linked

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31 A. Kirker, in *Eyeline*, Vol 60 pp. 58-60

32 *ibid*, p. 59

33 J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, (trans. G. Rockhill), Continuum, 2006, p. 2.

34 *ibid*, p. 3.

to popular cultural forms such as film and youth culture for example. The problem with these two narratives is that an art practice cannot separate art from politics:

*Politics and art are not two separate and permanent realities about which one should ask whether they have to be connected or not. Each of them is a conditional reality, that exists or not according to a specific partition of the sensible.*<sup>35</sup>

Art as a form of creative production is also saved from being merely a form of meta-political action (act) by being an aesthetic and thus autonomous form of production. The artist Joseph Beuys could not be seen as merely a producer of political commentary in his use of rich and evocative materials in his work such as wax and felt. These had a two-fold purpose – the social and the aesthetic – each reliant on the other for fidelity. Other artists such as The Atlas Group, founded by Walid Ra'ad in their work as part of the 2006 Sydney Biennale shared this purpose.<sup>36</sup> The group's digital video production piece uses an almost painterly aesthetic in its representation of events including bombings of a city in Lebanon. Imagery, scanned documents and footage, both real and imaginary, are overlaid in a translucent montage of events "...not attached to actual memories of events, but to cultural phantasies erected on the

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<sup>35</sup>        *ibid*, p 3.

<sup>36</sup>        The Atlas group was foundation established by Walid Raad to research and document recent history in Lebanon. The work at the shown as part of the Biennale of Sydney 2006, Zones of Contact. at The performance Space, Sydney. The work included photographic installations, single channel video productions, performance and video installations.

basis of memories".<sup>37</sup> The other video artist sharing the space was Sebastian Dias Morales, who installed a video work using existing news footage.<sup>38</sup> The footage is of a political protest in his capital city Buenos Aires, contesting a law that implemented rigorous sanctions for demonstrators and street vendors. Morales manages to evoke a dark and brooding aesthetic in his treatment of the original documented footage which maintains an authenticity to the political event which galvanised a whole sector of the population.

A further example is the *Visible Collective*, a group that has drawn attention to the detentions of Muslims since 9/11 in the U.S. It produced an installation at the Tenement Museum in New York<sup>39</sup> that used a range of aesthetically strategies, "from slick light-box installations, to comic films, to simple banners depicting the faces of the disappeared"<sup>40</sup>, as a means of engaging their audience. The intention was to make visible this issue visible and thus is identifiably political art.

*There have been various enquiries regarding what Ranci  re refers to as apolitically-political work which leads the second politics of aesthetics to another kind of [self-] suppression.*<sup>41</sup>

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37 *Zones of Contact*, 2006 *Biennale of Sydney* Free Handbook, p41.

38 Sebastian Diaz Morales, born Argentina. The work exhibited was: *Lucharemos Hasta Anular La Ley* (we will fight until the law is annulled). Installation projection on black screen and 2.1 speaker system.

39 the Tenement Museum, New York, viewed 8 February 2006, <<http://www.disappearedinamerica.org>>.

40 Artnet, viewed 21 August 2006, <<http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/books/davis/davis8-17-06.asp>>.

41 J. Ranci  re, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, (trans. Gabriel Rockhill), Continuum, 2006, p. 2.

There has been in writers such as Roland Barthes a tendency to assert the complexity of human sensory experience regarding viewing or reading art, “at the cost not only of dismissing any political promise” in the work and perhaps “transforming it into sheer ethical testimony.”<sup>42</sup> An effective counter to this would be the point made by Debord in *Society of the Spectacle* counters

*the more (the spectator) contemplates the less he lives;  
the more he accepts recognising himself in the dominant  
images of need, the less he understands his own  
existence and his own desires*<sup>43</sup>

Thus when TV re-images the CIA in a new positive light and while images of ‘precision bombings’ and ‘clean strikes’ captivate global news audiences, more than ever, Debord’s twenty year old commentary speaks:

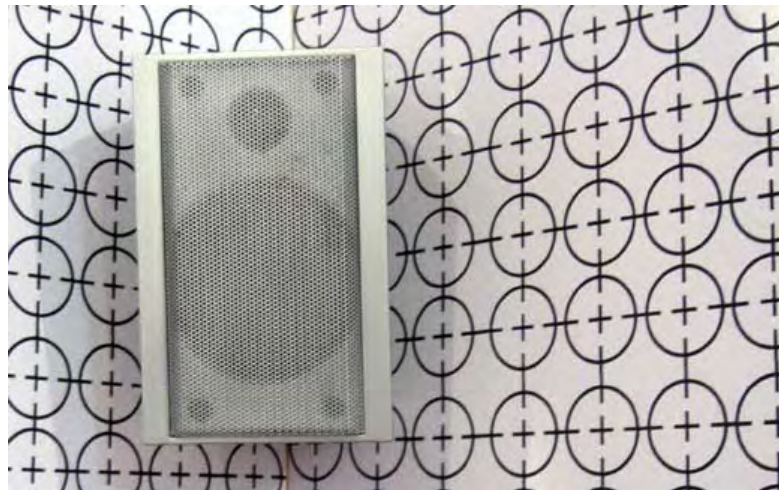
*Never before has censorship been so perfect. Never before have those who are still led to believe, in a few countries, that they remain free citizens, been less entitled to make their opinions heard. ...The spectator is simply supposed to know nothing, and deserve nothing.*<sup>44</sup>

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42      ibid, p. 2

43      G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, (trans 1995), Zone Books 1995, p 26.

44      G. Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, (trans. 1995), Verso, 1990.



*fig 13: installation detail*

In my own practice I have recognised the (complementary) role of an aesthetics that is identifiable yet not overt. It has been one of the more difficult aspects of my art production. I have found aesthetic considerations in the actual work need to have an invisibility – in a sense to be part of the work without dominating it. If, for example the viewer became concerned and focussed on the aesthetic of the wallpaper or the interior of the room within *Scenario House*, there would be a possibility that other political considerations could have been ignored.(fig 13) On the other hand without the development of the aesthetic (formal) qualities of the installation space then it may then have been read primarily as being an merely a support for political commentary. One is inevitably dependent on the other.

### ***Questions on the basic value (if any) in a political discourse***

In *The Conspiracy of Art*, Baudrillard questions the privilege attached to art as art becomes lost in “aesthetic nullity to commercial frenzy”<sup>45</sup>; art has become an aesthetic object of desire. His Freudian reference to art as the fetish object, existing in a world that now lives in simulation of the real, relates to his commentary on the impossibility for art to make any social change.

The fetish object (the art product) then is ‘representing the real’. For example a light box or large format C-type print is given more value than say a well-researched BBC documentary, despite the fact that the documentary has greater distribution. Within the artworld(s) there is a tendency to ignore that fact. As far as politically locating art in the nexus of power to ‘challenge’ government purveyors of reality there is a scepticism that art, and artists when articulated as individual practitioners, abstracted from a political, social, or cultural base, can have any actual effect.

On the other hand to merely suggest that all art lacks criticality, as I believe Baudrillard does, is possibly defeatist and does not acknowledge the possibilities that are beginning to emerge within networked and digital art practices. Art can no longer be seen to exist solely as part of a closed system.

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45 J. Baudrillard, ‘The Conspiracy of Art, Manifestos, Texts, Interviews’ Semiotext, MIT Press, 2005, pp 30-31.



## *Australian art practices as (effective) political production*

The 2005 exhibition “Interesting Times” at The Museum Of Contemporary Art chose to

*focus(es) on how artists address social and political ideas through their work. In these uncertain times, many artists are questioning their role in society and how art represents and affects people’s daily lives. Artists included in this exhibition have a sustained practice, working for at least a decade in painting, sculpture, photography, installation, video and other forms of new media.*<sup>46</sup>

The artists included John Barbour, Robert Boynes, Janet Burchill & Jennifer McCamley, Adam Cullen, Deborah Kelly, Neil Emmerson, Marilyn Fairskye, George Gittoes, Pat Hoffie, Shaun Kirby, Ruark Lewis, and Ricky Maynard. I would argue that a majority of these artists are more concerned with the broader social condition than with the political situation in this country or globally. This is not to say that the exploration of personal or broader social issues by such artists as Ruark Lewis, or John Barber is not valuable but that there appears to be a limited number of contemporary artists that have been concerned with the political. Undoubtable the work Deborah Kelly with her powerfully evocative public projection works

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<sup>46</sup> exhibition catalogue for *Interesting Times: Focus on contemporary Australian art*, curated by Russell Storer with the assistance of Keith Munro, MCA Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs, 2005.

could be seen as political in intent.<sup>47</sup>

A primary reason for this situation could lie in the geographic reality that Australia is distant from the centre of much global political and social activity. The problem with this argument is that it relies on the point that no political engagement in the arts is possible outside of the centre – implying an imagined ‘Europe’ or perhaps New York. A recent Japanese writer<sup>48</sup> for *Experimenta 2004* acknowledged that “many young Japanese media artists are entranced by the new electronic(s) ...and remain aloof from political and economic issues. ...this is not an exceptional situation in Japan.”<sup>49</sup> He further argues “the media art (and art practices) in Japan have historically a non-criticality. He suggests that in contrast ‘Europe’ the development is significantly different, characterised by groups utilising media and new art as a means of challenging the dominant culture and its media. Yet it is interesting to note that a considerable amount of contemporary art is found outside this traditional centre. An excellent example of this is the considerable number of artists represented at the recent Biennale of Sydney 2006, (*Zones of Contact*), who, in fact, are from countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, New Zealand, Russia, Palestine, Mexico and the former Yugoslavia to name a few.

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47 the group “Bewareofthegods” was part of the *Interesting Times* exhibition. 2005, viewed 11 November 2005 < <http://www.bewareofthegod.com/>>.

48 Fumihiko Sumitomo is a writer and researcher, and curator at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan.

49 *Experimenta 2004* (online catalogue essays), viewed 3 July 2006 <<http://www.experimenta.org/mesh/mesh17/fumihiko.htm>>.

Another reason given for the limited amount of political engagement by contemporary artists in Australia is that no true political engagement is possible without social unrest – militarisation, civil war and hunger to name a few. Following this logic ‘the North’<sup>50</sup> would have nothing to say. No need for a counter-voice. Yet how can we leave ourselves out of the equation?

Being geographically and politically removed as artists in Australia is only part of the problem. We are physically removed not only from the viewpoint of whether anyone is really listening but as Adam Geczy points out “Speaking as a Minority is hard enough, but when engaged in a an elite activity such as art it is harder still.”<sup>51</sup> Considering the video installation work at Performance Space for the Biennale of Sydney 2006, all of the four artists in it produced politically engaging work. All were from countries that in recent times have been caught up in political and military conflicts. These artists are from countries that are in the centre of highly charged, politico-social conditions. Possibly this is one of the main reasons that there is not a lot of Australian political art, both produced and made public. In comparison to Israel, for example, these pressing issues may not seem so visible. There is an invisibility here that is not helped by a lack of diversity in media ownership. While

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<sup>50</sup> ‘the North’ here refers to not so much a geographic position but to the North-South divide as a socio-economic and political division which exists between the wealthy developed countries known collectively as ‘The North’, and the poorer developing countries or ‘The South’.

<sup>51</sup> A. Geczy, ‘Metaresistance’ *Broadsheet*, vol 34 No 4 February 2006, pp.220-223.

I was living in Santiago, Chile media ownership was far more diverse. I found that due to the political conditions (at the end of the dictatorship) there was a generally high level personal engagement with political processes.<sup>52</sup> Under these conditions the average person is touched/effected in multiple ways by the power of this state. Similarly with Israel it's the case of proximity that politicises the average person and thus artists.

Much of our political based art production is presented through government-funded spaces such as The Experimental Art Foundation (Adelaide), Performance Space (Sydney) and Artspace (Sydney). One particular Australian artist who has had an ongoing connection with politically based production is Mike Parr. I want to explore some of his more recent work at Artspace in particular.



Mike Parr's more recent performance work at Artspace is of interest in its multi-layered response to the now infamous detention camps in this country<sup>53</sup>. It is worth quoting Artspace's press release for the event:

*At 6pm on Friday May 2, in the presence of the public, an assistant will begin sewing up my face. My face is sewn into a bind. Godot has left for Iraq and the bewildered*

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<sup>52</sup> Gianni Wise, *Chile Diaries*, 2001.

<sup>53</sup> *Aussie Aussie Aussie Oi Oi and Democratic Torture*, Artspace, May 2003 <<http://www.artspace.org.au/>>

*Australian amputee has followed him! I sit still facing the audience. A small Australian flag hangs limply from the stump of my left arm. On the wall behind me is lettered a vast field of lyrical aggression, interspersed with newspaper head-lines BLOODBATH, HUNTING PACK, FILLING HOLES IN A BULLET-RIDDLED NATION, KILLING ROOM, HUNDREDS OF VICTIMS IN COFFINS, CHILDREN WERE BURNED ALIVE, CRITICS BRANDED WITH HOT IRONS, END GAME, WE ARE CLOSER TO THE CENTRE OF THE IRAQI CAPITAL THAN MANY AMERICAN COMMUTERS ARE TO THEIR DOWNTOWN OFFICES, PLEASE DON'T HATE OUR DADS etc, etc. At 6pm on Saturday night until midnight Democratic Torture begins. By touching a hotspot on their screens the Global audience can shock my exhausted face. Go to [www.artspace.org.au](http://www.artspace.org.au) and click onto the Mike Parr link to access the performance. Anyone can contribute an electric shock direct to Mike Parr by interacting directly with the webcast. This project is real and you can attend the performance at Artspace throughout the 30 hours duration or participate directly on [www.artspace.org.au](http://www.artspace.org.au).*

Parr's performance, *Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi*, incorporates a well-known Disney tune "Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay", piles of newspapers and sown lips in response to actions by detention centre detainees. The sewing of his lips implicated his entire face, the stitches dissecting his face in a bizarre cross-stitch, dried blood tracks smeared across his cheeks and chin. The effect was distressing in the extreme.

Following this initial shock, it becomes possible to see further layers of meaning in his work. His use of media headlines looks at the media as a relentless source of sensationalism and popularist paranoia. Yet I found myself questioning whether his performative works on torture acknowledge those who are in detention? Has an artist the right to 'use' the suffering of others without their permission? If an artist uses his/her body in this way then is this perhaps simply artistic narcissism? How do we judge the genuineness of the work? Perhaps that does not matter. In the case of the Abu Graib prison torture images – do we have the right to make these public again and again? How do we weigh up the needs of the person who suffers against the need to make these narratives visible? Perhaps an answer can be found when Jill Bennett in *Empathic Vision* promotes a “critical and self-reflective *empathy* as the most appropriate form of [artistic] engagement with trauma imagery.” She refers to Dominick La Capra in his studies of Holocaust experiences – he suggests that there needs to be a distinguishing between empathy by the spectator and the “primary” victim. Yet Parr’s work has a way of confronting and effectively intervening in the abundance of mediated images through major media giants such as CNN and Reuters. Parr’s self torture tactics along with the brutal banality of newspaper headlines such ‘BLOODBATH’ and ‘HUNTING PACK’ confront the social compliance of an Australian electorate who have accepted the subjugation of asylum seekers through the rhetoric of fear of otherness. Daniel Edwards argues therefore “that in such a media-saturated environment it has never been easier for ideologically-driven politicians to dictate the words, images

and symbols through which the contemporary subject makes meaning.”<sup>54</sup> Perhaps conversely it has become increasingly difficult for artists to engage in public debate with increasing media-saturation.

Gilles Deleuze in *Proust and Signs* extends on this discussion of art and political/trauma.<sup>55</sup> Deleuze argues that feeling (for the victim or issue) can be a catalyst for deep thought or critical enquiry. He warns against an art that transmits the actual trauma. This identification is problematic because empathy as a form of identification could lead to over identification and thus to a level of non-criticality by the art practitioner.

Arguably, visual art can best represent trauma or war as political rather than subjective phenomena “that is not a privileged view of an inner life”<sup>56</sup>.

A criticism that could be levelled at Parr’s work (and that of much politically responsive art production) is his choice of venues and thus audience. If he does want to use his artwork in the broader political sense (judging by the significant contemporary themes he chooses) then would it be more effective to take work out of the contemporary art venue and find his audience elsewhere? Imagine a performance such as this in a public space, perhaps within a window-fronted shop on street level. Parr partly counters this criticism though his

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54 D. Edwards, History’s great escape, *Real Time*, Vol 60, April-May 2004.

55 G. Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, (trans. R. Howard), University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp. 7-10

56 Bennett, *opcit*, p. 16.

incorporation of a live feed provided to his to performance and allowing directly interaction with the webcast.

Martha Rosler reminds us that “Artists’ groups of the 60s and ‘70s were organised mostly around public actions, adopting the protest style of the day.” And furthermore “... the total freedom of the artist in Western society also ineluctably signals total irrelevance, just as obsessive interiority speaks of social disconnection and narcissism, if not infantilism.”<sup>57</sup> She suggests that:

*In a moment of unmistakable crisis in all dimensions, cultural, political, and economic, in the US and the rest of the world, artists once again, in all self-aggrandisement, seek to reorient their audiences, forming them into public constituencies.*<sup>58</sup>

The question, then, according to Rosler, is not, “Is it art? but Whose art is it? And art for whom?”<sup>59</sup> This question is one that I have asked myself in relation to my choice of space for exhibiting my work. The audience limitations are self-evident in exhibiting in any gallery space in the case of attempting to reach an extended audience. Could I have taken my work to a public venue or perhaps created an online component showing a sound web video version of the work?

Other ways in which to locate and engage with an extended

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57 M. Rosler, Out of the Vox: Martha Rosler on art’s activist potential, Artforum, September 2004, p. 1.

58 ibid, p. 2.

59 ibid, p. 2.



audience were found within public spaces and within 'net cultures'. The Iranian-born, Paris-based artist Ghazel, as part of the 2006 Biennale Of Sydney, developed a bus shelter poster that offered herself in marriage in order to secure an entry visa. This work spoke of her own fears of repatriation from France. Web based practices such as the 'etoy corporation' adopt the online persona of corporate culture through the 'art of investment in art'. The site ironically claims "etoy. CORPORATION crosses and blurs the frontiers between art, identity, nations, fashion, politics, technology, social engineering, music, power and business to create massive impact on global markets and digital culture." Public Netbase', a web based group from Vienna is effective example of active practices which use those same materials as the media as a mode of producing real time critical affects in them.

## *Why engage in the political? What is behind the conception of Scenario House?*

Essentially the conception behind *Scenario House* is associated with the thesis of a 'culture of fear', where societal fear and anxiety predominate in contemporary public discourse and relationships. As elaborated in the section: "*The 'Other' as an excluded agent*" fear of 'the Other' is played out or 'rehearsed' in revenge scenarios such as those at Valhalla Shooting and Training Club.<sup>60</sup> These simulation defence activities are frequently represented as entertainment within online gaming networks and within the Hollywood film culture.<sup>61</sup> The danger is that there is a tendency for anaesthetisation to the real effects of violence – resulting in a society that, as Baudrillard (and Debord) argue, is now living in the simulated.

Patricia Zimmermann emphatically stated that there is a need to:

*re-embody and re-empower our politics, our analysis, our digitality, our critical art. Therefore we must resist any and all architectures of disembodiment which remove... war from geography, privacy from security... and dissent from justice*<sup>62</sup>

Zimmermann then relates how media cultures such as USA Today and CNN following 9/11 declared these tragedies as being a "blast" and a "seismic shift" where nothing is the

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60 see section: Valhalla: an ultimate battle between good & evil?

61 US Army online gaming, viewed 17 June 2006, < <http://www.americasarmy.com/>>.

62 P. Zimmermann, "Blasting War", *Afterimage*, Winter 2002, p. 2.

same after and what came before is “blasted away”<sup>63</sup>, where history is reduced to therapeutic repetitions. It was as if history begins, by this view, with the horrific attack on the U.S. Zimmermann argues that were you to ask a Palestinian about “the September massacre he will assume you are referring to the slaughter at the hands of Israel... of 1700 Palestinians in Beirut in September 1982”<sup>64</sup>. These deaths are not included in a virtualised archive of western minds/imaginings. They are replaced with a simple binary otherness – of an enemy who will always remain identifiable and whose truths will remain invisible. This is only possible for a public engaged in “an endless war” against an ill-defined “war on terror”<sup>65</sup>. She refers to a “phantom war” that is merely a cover for other means where the state is being totally restructured under the guise of “protecting our freedoms”. A phantom war (that is not really a war) is really one where imagery and news is tightly controlled – virtualised and scrutinised. War is anesthetised through digitisation. Thus we find ourselves to be an audience/public who are part of an orchestrated event in which we play a small support part.

As a public then, we are able to feel part of the solution, a solution found within a “huge reality show”<sup>66</sup>. In *Disneyworld Company* Baudrillard argues that we are no longer simply acting out or playing parts, cognicent of our roles. He theatrically refers to us as weak “lyophilised” (freeze-dried or

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63        ibid, p. 2.

64        ibid, p. 2.

65        Sontag, opcit, p. 2.

66        Baudrillard, opcit, 1991, p. 1.

preserved) members of this enormous reality game, no longer able to distinguish between truth and fantasy:

*We are no longer alienated and passive spectators but interactive extras; we are the meek lyophilised members of this huge “reality show.”*<sup>67</sup>

Notably since the Second World War, the Hollywood film industry has collaborated with the military to produce propaganda films to uplift disengaged troops and produce commercial narratives such as the 1980’s revenge action genre films such as *True Lies* for our needs at home. Zimmermann<sup>68</sup> points to another relationship between military and Hollywood in the last 5 years where the U.S. army donated US\$45 million to the University of California “to create a research centre [that] develops advanced military simulations” and attract both film studios and video game developers. Interestingly and central to the conception of *Scenario House* is the development of an online game on the US Army website used to introduce young recruits to the (endless) war on terror via a sample of an action war event couched within a simplistic gamic structure. The sides in this war are clearly defined: the US marine versus an unknown ‘Arab’ other. The references are clear and situations are inevitably resolved with a gun. We are now able to “rehearse” (or perhaps re-enact battles of the American Civil War). In 2002 various screenwriters of action films such as *Fight Club*, *Die Hard* and *Being John Malkovich* were convened by

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67 Baudrillard, opcit, 1991, p. 2.

68 P. Zimmermann, “Matrixes of War”, *Afterimage* 28, no 4, pp. 18-23.

the military to “brainstorm terrorist scenarios” to contribute to the war effort.<sup>69</sup>



fig 14: still from U.S. Army website Quicktime trailer

Deema Khatib, a producer from the Arabic News service al Jazeera, reminds us that the perspective of many Iraqis was that the Coalition of the Willings’ war in her country was one of constructed fear. In the 2003 documentary *Control Room* another producer added:

*The American media were hijacked by some people with the administration to be used as a leverage to producing some (sic) fears in the American public. Everytime (sic) danger was elevated from yellow to orange or purple then more... so to make the American people feel under siege.*<sup>70</sup>

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69      *ibid*, p. 17.

70      *Control Room*, dir. Hassan Ibrahim and Samir Khader, 2004.

Part of this threat could be perceived as being orchestrated by a government who realised following the 1991 Gulf War the absolute need to control or mediate public sympathies for its attack on a foreign state. The 1997 mainstream film *Wag the Dog* explores these themes cleverly.<sup>71</sup> A Whitehouse advisor is used to remediate “public attention away from a presidential sex scandal by hiring a Hollywood producer to simulating a fake war.” References were also made to the first Gulf War as an example of war used as to improve governmental electoral chances. The issues raised in the film are discussed by Jean Baudrillard in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*.<sup>72</sup> Undoubtably *The Truman Show*, *Ed T.V.*, *Pleasantville*, *Dark City*, and *The Matrix* would be other mainstream examples of mediation of reality or perhaps reality being a construct of the simulation.

Walter A. Davis<sup>73</sup> argues that fear has long been integral to the American psyche, as demonstrated by its attachment to a gun culture with the gun lobby. Thus the enacting or rehearsing of revenge is considered (by some) acceptable behaviour within a culture that values the gun as a just instrument of power within a fearful universe. Fears of this other, this enemy, have spawned an entertainment industry that produces films of disaster and threats on the nation that are “extremely

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71 Wag the Dog, viewed 19 July, 2006, < <http://www.wag-the-dog.com/>>.

72 J. Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, (trans. Paul Patton in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*), Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001.

73 W. Davis, *Death’s Dream Kingdom: The American Psyche Since 9/11*, 2004.

codified at the script level.<sup>74</sup> Specifically, these highly polished standardised formulaic scripts often use a characterised protagonist whose identity is defined around some central conflict which they then resolve, frequently by force. An action is launched upon something or some group which “forces a confrontation”.<sup>75</sup> The mainstream inevitability of this scenario will frequently be resolved through the successful intervention of the protagonist. In the light of this narrative framework, three major components can be identified. The first being the introduction to the characters and background; the second is the progression of that situation to a high point of conflict and great problems; and the third component being the resolution. Given the predominance of the global Hollywood system and the use of the gun on a violent level in revenge and retribution genre productions it is possible that solutions in world events may appear at times to be found through these formulae.

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74 Raul Ruiz, 2004, *Images of Passage*, pp. 15-17.

75 *ibid*, p. 15.

## *Fears of the West: representations and responses*

A fear of 'the uncivilised 'other'<sup>76</sup> has been explored extensively by the anthropologist Ana L. Valdes, in a series of projects developed with the Museum of Contemporary Art and Visual Culture, Umeå, Sweden.<sup>77</sup> One in particular involved a series of exhibitions investigating the role of the 'civilised' west in the Middle East both from historical and contemporary perspectives. It specifically considered 'the Crusades' as a series of military actions aimed at hegemony of the west over the known world. Valdes argues this pattern being now appears in contemporary Western consciousness in the 'crusade against evil' and thus in representing, how 'We' deal with these 'Others'. One major exhibition 'The Iraqi Equation' attempted to represent the real complexities of the situation in the region through the eyes of various Iraqi artists.<sup>78</sup>

Writers such as Emran Qureshi reasoned that exclusion and war were integral to a perpetual crusade. He suggests that there is no Muslim enemy. Not only that but the first crusaders of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century constructed a Muslim enemy to cover spurious conquests and mass killings. In the 21st century the new crusaders reconstruct him to cover global moral blunders.<sup>79</sup>

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76 as explained in: *The 'Other' as an excluded agent*, pp

77 Crusading, viewed 9 October 2005, <<http://www.crusading.se/about.html>>,

78 Universes in Universe, "viewed 30 January 2005, <<http://universes-in-universe.de/islam/eng/2006/003/index.html>>.

79 E. Emran Qureshi & M. Sells, *The Logic of Fear The New Crusades, Constructing the Muslim Enemy*, Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 81-6.



It could be suggested that the crusades and jihads are parallel events, both are the products of fundamentalism – Christian and Islamic. Both are framing each other as ‘the Other’.

There have been some notable responses to fear of ‘the Other’ by a range of art practitioners. Martha Rosler in her formative work “Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful” (1972-5) produced a series of images which combine Vietnam War photojournalism with cut-outs from contemporary home-design magazines. Rosler refers to these as “re-photographs” because of the way they recontextualise the original meaning in the images.<sup>80</sup> Photographs of the Vietnam War were collaged with magazine imagery of domestic suburban life and then re-photographed. The effect was that they reveal the artificiality of a severed relationship that results in our separation of us from them. Her work has proved particularly poignant in the context of the level of remediation and construction of ‘the Other’ in our now image-reliant media conglomerates. It is interesting to note that Rosler has revived this strategy in the current Iraq conflict, by incorporating women in chadors and soldiers in desert camouflage within landscapes and interiors of middle class America interior design in work titled “Wallpaper and Architectural Digest”.

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<sup>80</sup> L. Cottingham, *The War is Always Home: Martha Rosler*, New York City (catalogue essay), October 1991.



fig 15: re-photograph from *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*, Martha Rosler (1972-5)

The artist Jürgen Klauke in his work *Antlitze, (faces)* 1972/2000 looked at media representations that the catalogue essay describes as “typology of horror”. The work was an ongoing collection of newspaper clippings of photos of balaclava-faces, blown up details of the heads as a series of 96 photos in a grid-like wall installation. The earliest of the newspaper photos Klauke has used for the series relate to the tragic events surrounding the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. His work could be seen as engaging with the visual spectacle of fear as projected by European print following 1972. Klauke showed this work as part of the 2001 exhibition “Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother” initiated by the Centre for Art and Media (ZKM) (see reference to catalogue –USYD).<sup>81</sup> Klauke engages with

81 D. Zbikowski, Jürgen Klauke : »Antlitze«, 1972-2000 (catalogue essay), viewed 8 February 2006, <http://hosting.zkm.de/ctrlspace/e/works/25>.

our fears of terror through the mask. Masks of disguise not only conceal identity. For this reason, they trigger notions of illegality and thus otherness. Masks of disguise protect against identification – and against communication something that is necessary in order to maintain the other of the Middle Eastern terrorist. I found some of the formal elements of the work dominate the reading. Perhaps less adept cropping and manipulation of the news images would have given the other readings more ‘space’ to be seen.



*fig 16: Jürgen Klauke, "Antlitze", 1972/2000, Photographs on baryt paper, 96 parts each 60 x 50 cm, installation 720 x 400 cm Private Collection*

Slavoj Žižek, argues that the xenophobic policies of Le Pen, the French politician, were co-opted by "Socialist governments" by taking his "uncivilised" views and using them in a "civilised way".<sup>82</sup> The Federal (Australian) government acted in a similar way in dealing with asylum seekers arriving by boat by taking

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82 Žižek, *opcit*, p. 68.

on *de facto*, policies of groups such as One Nation. Fears that ‘these illegals’ were coming here for purely economic advantage or, at worst, to engage in acts of terror, were successfully used by the present government. Today “the alleged need to ‘regulate’ the status of immigrants and so on, is part of the mainstream consensus”<sup>83</sup> leading to rejection of extremist views and integration of the same message in a ‘civilised way’ – allowing our fears to be realised in probably anti-democratic laws such those adopted by the ironically titled “Homeland Security” department of the U.S. Fear has led to loss of freedoms through laws enacted to secure out freedoms.

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83      *ibid*, p 68.

## *a conclusion*

What emerges from *Scenario House* as a body of work is not so much that it provides definitive answers or the the last word on the subject of how art can engage with the political, or conversely the impossibility of addressing narratives relating to the political. What the work and the paper have asked is: how is it possible for an artist to address narratives, such as the use of the politics of fear and paranoia, without resorting to clichés? And further: are such strategies of an engaged political practice possible given the undoubted mass influence of media conglomerates such as CNN and Reuters?

*Scenario House* has been a work that has attempted to critically investigate the relationship between the installation and the theoretical underpinnings sustaining it within this paper. Major issues relating to art and the role of aesthetics have been considered. The role of the artist as a politically effective practitioner has been examined through a survey of contemporary artists and theoretical motives for their practice. In particular, I have discussed Mike Parr's more recent performance work at Artspace as a multi-layered response to the now infamous detention camps in this country.

The choice of venue – within a local gallery space run by an inner city council (Marrickville) – has had unexpected and results in terms of audience. The installation itself was tested within this locale in terms of the being an immersive medium. I found myself 'acting out' the role of the gallery / museum

attendant within a 'theatrical' space that interestingly produced both strong negative and positive responses. I found generally a willingness to register an impression, a reaction or an insight to the work. More than a few audience members felt comfortable enough to 'act out' in the space – in a simulation of the domestic. As Guy Debord stated in *The Society of the Spectacle*:

*the more (the spectator) contemplates the less he lives;  
the more he accepts recognising himself in the dominant  
images of need, the less he understands his own  
existence and his own desires (p30).*

Finally in terms of an art of political engagement my intent has been to seek a more effective and committed political engagement in my work. While doing this I have seen a need to distance myself from political campaign work such as direct responses to the 'Tampa Crisis' for example. This is due to the structure of "a campaign," where by its structure constitutes a fixed and inflexible space for cultural production. Art production must maintain its independence.

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