Art in Conflict: Interventions in War and Crisis
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Francis Fukuyama’s eschatological idea about an “End of History” after the Cold War ended was invalidated in the 1990s faster than the author could publish his theories in a book.1 The invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi troops and the fall of Yugoslavia in particular made the world aware that military conflicts were by no means a thing of the past but rather new threats and risks had evolved for the existing world order. The Second Gulf War and the wars in Yugoslavia represent the responses of the USA and its allies – the UN, NATO, and the European Union – to the new situation that had arisen. Another crisis developed when the USA was attacked for the first time on its own territory, on September 11, 2001. Its rapid military successes subsequently in Afghanistan and Iraq proved, however, to be a Pyrrhic victory: it has long been evident that it is virtually impossible to speak of a lasting peace, and that security cannot be achieved by military means alone.

This realization has gradually focused more attention on the role culture could play in conflict prevention and management.2 However, the concept of culture remains vague. A wide gulf exists between the dangers inherent in an essentialist, homogenizing notion of culture as articulated by Samuel P. Huntington in The Clash of Civilizations3 and pinning one’s hopes on the “soft” factors of culture, which is not defined precisely. Although in individual cases the parties involved may be quick to reach agreement, it is extremely difficult to venture a global assessment of the chances and risks of cultural projects and incentive measures. “Are we working on the basis of knowledge, or hope and belief?” as Roland Grätz, general secretary of Germany’s Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa) asked recently during a debate of the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC).4

This essay is a contribution to defining a certain aspect of this problem. As Gerhart Schröder, a professor of Romance Studies once said, since the “cultural turn” the term culture in the humanities is interpreted so broadly that it can describe and explain almost anything.5 This essay, however, will focus exclusively on art – a similarly broad concept as shall be seen, but which can, without too much difficulty, be made more specific.

Conflict Scenarios: Art Initiatives in War and Crisis

On May 26, 2010, the Director of the East-West European Women’s Network OWEN,6 Joanna Barelkowska, the curator Eyal Danon, and photographer Andreas Rost discussed artistic initiatives during war and crises in the ifa gallery Berlin of the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations at a discussion event titled Konfliktszenarien [Conflict Scenarios]. The discussion was moderated by video artist Marina Gržinić, and the object of this joint initiative by the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations and the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (NGBK), Berlin, was to appraise the ongoing NGBK exhibition project Friedensschauplätze / Theater of Peace,7 and develop perspectives for dealing further with the topic.

The scenarios that Barelkowska, Danon, and Rost presented varied tremendously. As part of the program of European reconciliation with Islam, photographer, photojournalist and curator Andreas Rost has supervised photo workshops in

2 Some examples are: Kultur und Konflikt. Unser Auftrag, unsere Interessen, unsere Möglichkeiten, Goethe Institute, Munich, 2–4 February, 2011; see www.wanderlust-blog.de/?p=1548. 01/09/2014. Kunst. Kultur. Konflikt, May 17–18, 2011, Goethe Institute Bonn; Christa Meindersma, Director of the Prince Claus Fund, has also declared the relationship between culture and conflict one of the main areas of her work in the coming years, see Christa Meindersma appointed New Director of Prince Claus Fund, press release of 08.02.2010, online: www.princeclausfund.org/files/docs/Press%20Release%20Christa%20Meindersma%20New%20director%20of%20the%20Prince%20Claus%20Fund%2008022010.pdf, accessed 08/09/2013.
4 European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) / ifa, “Culture and Conflict” Roundtable: Conflict resolution through cultural and civil society initiatives? Setting the right framework, December 7, Baden-Württembergische Staatsvertretung Brüssel.
various Islamic locations including Cairo, Algiers, Ramallah, Isfahan, Aden, and Sudan. In the panel discussion in the Institute for Foreign Relations he described his experiences in Kabul. Rost instructed a group of young photojournalists there, who as multilingual locals willing to take risks were all working for international news agencies, such as dpa or Reuters, despite their inadequate knowledge of photography. He explained that his primary goal had been “to improve the position of participants in the international agency market,” but he also worked hard during his three stays in Afghanistan to persuade them at least once to develop their own projects that should have no relation to the war images sought by the agencies.

“I see the war in Afghanistan above all as a war that is conducted with images and for images,” says Rost. “The NATO armies have an interest in getting ‘good’ pictures from Afghanistan. That means they need images depicting successes. [...] The governments of the NATO countries stand under considerable pressure to justify their engagement in this war. By contrast, the Taliban try their best to produce ‘bad’ images to demonstrate that all assistance is pointless, and to oblige the foreign powers to give up.”

It is not Rost’s aim to produce “art” with his participants. That said, he does discuss with them what an image of “a different Afghanistan” might look like:

“What they showed me as this ‘other’ Afghanistan were laughing girls without headscarves on a swing. Now, I’m not going to contest that girls in Afghanistan are also capable of laughing. But is that sufficient as an alternative image? I don’t wish to argue against these images but I do believe that in order to paint an ‘alternative’ picture of Afghanistan you need a more in-depth exploration of the medium of photography and its relations to reality.”

Equally, Rost puts little faith in being able to impact the conflict using photography. Nonetheless, in 2009 he succeeded in showing a presentation by Afghan photographers for the first time, which caused quite a sensation.

In stark contrast to this Eyal Danon thinks it makes little sense to add yet more images to the store of pictures already available on the Israel–Palestine conflict. For that reason, the Liminal Space project, which Danon outlined in his presentation, dispensed with a final exhibition. Instead, the focus of the 18-month project involving Israeli, Palestinian, and international artists, curators, and writers was to find new ways of communication and cooperation. While Rost claims not to represent any kind of ideological view, Danon argues the trust of participants was crucial to the project’s success, and this could only be achieved by his adopting a clear political stance. Danon comments that a lot is said about peace in the Middle East, but it is always based on two separate states, while living together is never discussed as an option. However, since the situation is only getting worse, he feels the topic of occupation is much more important than that of peace. The objective was not to present a model of cooperation, but to gather knowledge, create networks, and develop strategies in order to show alternative options to counter the prevailing debates. Unlike Rost and the representatives of the OWEN network, Danon and his associates do not try and apply external solutions to a conflict, but “seek to understand what we can do in our own society.”

Omnibus 1325, the project presented by Joana Barelkowska, refers to Resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council on the position of women in crisis regions. Supported as a project on the peace education by ifa’s civil conflict resolution body zivik, Omnibus 1325 worked from 2006 to 2009 in all countries and autonomous regions in the Caucasus, hence the inclusion of the word “omnibus” (meaning “for all” in Latin) in its title. Omnibus 1325 came about through personal contacts within the women’s network, which has been active primarily in Central and Eastern Europe for 18 years. Peace education gained even greater significance for OWEN after the September 11 attack in 2001.

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In Omnibus 1325, people of all ages and both sexes were asked to compare the ways they saw themselves and others with those of the other participants. In collaboration with the Paulo Freire Institute and peace activists invited from Latin America, approaches for Gestalt pedagogy and theater education were tried out. Photographs of national monuments were used as a basis for a discussion on issues relating to gender roles and collective memory. Role plays allowed participants to work through their experiences with topics such as the obligatory wearing of headscarves or forced marriage; participants presented short scenes and the audience then tried to show them alternatives.

Marina Gržinić, who had in her introductory remarks reminded the panel that Europe is the second largest exporter of weapons after the United States, refused to accept Rost's statement that he did not approach his workshop participants with ideological objectives, and instead urged the panel members to always consider their own involvement in a conflict. Gržinić views involvement as consisting in direct military engagement and supplying weapons, as well as domestic policy that secures, monitors and controls borders plus the interests pursued by cultural institutions when promoting projects.  

**Conflict or War? Defining a Topic**

It is not easy to find a common denominator for the conflicts in Afghanistan, the Caucasus and in Israel/Palestine unless you construct a global conflict between the “Islamic world” and “the West.” However, such a scenario in which two large blocs oppose each other as antagonists offers hardly any solutions. In reality there is also a local dimension to every conflict: in all three cases the causes go back decades and specific events can be pinpointed such as the Russian occupation in the case of Afghanistan, or variously in the case of the Israel–Palestine conflict to the creation of Israel, the Six Day War, the Oslo peace process, or the first and second Intifada. Although these specific dates and backgrounds are not comparable it is possible to derive from them several fundamental observations about the nature of the conflicts.

If we want to discuss conflicts in this context then we first need to define what “conflict” means. Conflicts are an inevitable part of human coexistence. They are necessary to address and negotiate problems and to reconcile conflicting interests. Conflicts arise in families, in marriages, and in every friendship, but they also affect the lives of entire villages, cities, and nations. Although the procedures for resolving conflicts might be identical, we do not wish to deal with conflicts in this sense but with violent conflicts between groups, regardless of whether they are defined nationally, ethnically, ideologically, or by religious affiliation. In this context it makes most sense not to define violence in terms of the measures implemented – from the use of physical violence through to the arsenals of the major powers but instead by intention: Violence means not seeking an amicable solution, but imposing one’s own will on the opponent or using physical force to destroy him.

Traditionally, we speak of violent conflicts when nations engage in war. Moreover, the armies deployed in today’s global conflicts are also members of alliances and subject to national decision-making. Thus, whenever the United States, German, Russian, or Israeli army is deployed it would be consistent to speak of war. However, it is not only the case in Afghanistan, Chechnya, or Palestine that the opponent is not an official army of a state, but rather is an enemy difficult to root out, who engages in covert operations, emerges from the local population only to disappear again, fights with inferior hand-made weapons against a vastly superior opponent, yet is evidently not to be conquered. For such constellations, which have become the rule rather than the exception since the end of the Cold War, the term conflict is commonly used. And we refer to the situations in the Middle East or Chechnya as asymmetric conflicts.
At the same time, and this is what makes it so extremely difficult to find a solution, in the majority of conflicts there is not only a local but also a global component. If it were only different ethnicities or religious groups fighting out a local conflict, it might be possible to find a solution using appropriate mediation. However, the Russian army is fighting in the Caucasus, the USA and its European allies in Afghanistan, and similarly the Middle East conflict does not seem reconcilable without the involvement of global players. That said, in none of these cases are we talking about a conflict between two superpowers hostile to each other as happened during the Cold War. Not that global spheres of interest ceased to exist following the end of the Cold War: economic and geostrategic interests continue to determine the actions of all globally operating powers. At the same time in every conflict there are also local actors, and the needs and hardships of the local population, their support or monopolization by the one or other party need to be taken into consideration. These local and global actors can enter into various connections such as supplying weapons, conducting proxy wars, supplying armies of mercenaries, but also acceding to requests for assistance and alliances.

At first sight art might appear to be a totally unsuitable instrument in this context: if neither armies nor extensive rounds of negotiations are able to achieve peace, how can it be achieved using artistic activities of all things, which only reach a small audience even in times of peace? When people's lives are at stake, is art not to be seen more as an expendable luxury? Is it possible for art to adopt a neutral position or is there always a danger of it being monopolized by the one or other side? The following section is intended to explore the changing relationship of art to war and peace within the context of a historical overview.

The Role of Art in Military Conflicts: A Historical Review

Many of the most significant works in art history – the Pergamon Altar frieze, the Alexander Mosaic, the Roman triumphal arches, as well as the countless paintings portraying battles in modern times since Paolo Uccello and Piero della Francesca – deal with the subjects of war and violence, and do so without a trace of criticism. On the contrary: they glorify the belligerent acts of rulers by depicting them in all their cruelty. Or to express it in contemporary language: they served as war propaganda.

It took a relatively long time before artists began to develop a different view of the subject. And even longer before they reached a fair-sized audience. Today, people might be familiar with Goya's Desastres de la Guerra (1810–1814), but the first edition was quickly removed from circulation and it was decades before it came to be widely distributed. Goya was inspired by the Misères de la Guerre (1633) of Jacques Callot, tiny etchings produced in small numbers. It is not difficult to find the motive for depicting the misery and disaster: the mounting cruelty of modern wars, which increasingly also affected the civilian population whether it was the Thirty Years War in the case of Callot or the Napoleonic Wars in the case of Goya. However, it was not until the experience of trench warfare in World War I. that larger numbers of artworks were produced in a timely manner which were overtly critical of war. We might mention here artists such as Otto Dix or Käthe Kollwitz, but also Max Beckmann and many others who are little known today.

Dix and Beckmann had to come to terms with what they experienced as soldiers in World War I. Working as a medical orderly, Beckmann captured his own experiences of war in 1915 in drawings and etchings. He suffered a nervous breakdown, was given leave, and attempted to address the topic with Christian iconography before arriving at his own personally coded imagery in which cripples and people disabled by war repeatedly play a key role. In a series of etchings published in 1924 entitled Der Krieg [The War] and the eponymous triptych (1929–1932), Dix portrays events with a stark, apocalyptically exaggerated precision. By contrast, in her first cycle of lithographs Krieg [War]...
(1920–1922), Käthe Kollwitz depicts the perspective of women in stark black-and-white contrast and with her well-known poster *Nie wieder Krieg!* [War – Never Again!] (1924) becomes actively involved in the emerging peace movement.

**On the Topicality of Historical Positions: Wiebke Trunk’s Workshops on Otto Dix**

Since 2009 art historian and art intermediary Wiebke Trunk has been offering workshops on the traveling exhibition *Otto Dix*, which consists of the cycle *Der Krieg* [The War] and other critical graphics. 16

It all began with a lecture in July 2008 in Tbilisi, where the exhibition was presented in the Georgian National Museum. It was largely attended by university students who wanted to know how Dix had survived the National Socialist era. Outside a military parade presaged the growing tensions between Georgia and Russia, which just a few weeks later escalated into a military conflict over the republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Trunk noticed that visitors felt that addressing the works of Dix had some relevance for their own experiences.

Since then the art historian has offered workshops accompanying the Dix exhibition, which take both the local situation into account and the needs of workshop participants. In November 2008 in Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, the majority of participants were teachers, who were confronted on a daily basis with the prejudices and aggression of their pupils towards the island’s Turkish population. Given the visible differences between the southern Greek section and northern Turkish part of the city, Trunk suggested they collect media images relating to sexual violence and violence in war. The images were then assigned to pictures in the exhibition, in order to encourage the participants — and thus ultimately their pupils — to think about violence in images and how the pictures’ content might be portrayed differently.

In Brașov, where the exhibition was shown in 2009 during a tour of Romania, the 15–16-year-old participants were visibly shocked by the graphic nature of the violence depicted. Trunk got the youngsters to make collages from copies of the Dix etchings, which would give the depictions a positive character. The workshops in Romania were attended by visitors to the exhibition, museum educators, art students and professors, as well as three doctors, who were interested in the artist’s images of people injured in war. In a workshop with teachers in Timișoara Trunk worked with media images of American soldiers in Afghanistan and in Iraq, which she juxtaposed with images of soldiers in Dix’s etchings.

In 2010 the Dix exhibition was on show in the Daejeon Museum of Art and the Seoul National University Museum of Art. In Daejeon the workshop targeted museum educators, with the aim of training them to take their own feelings, impressions, and associations into account when giving guided tours of exhibitions. The workshop for art students in Seoul focused on everyday violence and sexual violence. The students knew very little about the Korean War, and most of this was based on what their grandparents had told them. However, following the sinking of a South Korean warship in March 2010, all the participants were very upset by the acute conflict between North and South Korea as evidenced by the images they produced during the workshop.

Trunk quotes the educationalist Karl-Josef Pazzini: “Art does not exist unless it is applied.” She wishes to distinguish between art education [Kunstvermittlung] and museum education: She is not concerned with conveying art historical knowledge but wants participants to reflect on aspects of image production and image policy based on their own situations. She sees the fundamental objectives of art education as being a more conscious use of language, educating people to be critical, and communicating different perspectives.

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War and Peace in Modern and Contemporary Art

The subject of war also plays a decisive role in early Modern art, although less obviously than in the work of Beckmann and Dix. Whereas in an iconoclastic announcement that is difficult to conceive of today the Futurists openly glorified war in defiance of everything history might have taught them, in 1916 in Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, artists from Germany, France, and Romania assembled to destroy the grammar of a rhetoric that had led to war and destruction. “Due to the war we had all been thrown over the borders of our home countries,” writes Richard Huelsenbeck, and he continues: “We all agreed that the war had been instigated by the individual governments using the dullest, materialistic reasons related to political maneuvering [...] None of us could appreciate the courage it takes to get yourself shot for the idea of a nation, which in the best case is a syndicate of fur traders and black marketeers, and in the worst case a cultural association of psychopaths, who set forth in the German ‘fatherland’ with a copy of Goethe in their knapsacks to run Frenchmen and Russians through with a bayonet.” In the words of Hugo Ball: “The Dadaist fights against the death throes of the age.”

The relationship of the Dada artists to the abstraction that dominated Western art after World War II. remains ambivalent. In 1920 Huelsenbeck notes: “Rather than continuing with art Dada sought an opponent, it places itself in direct opposition to abstract art.” In response to the catchword “Abstract art (which Hans Arp supports untiringly),” Ball writes in 1927: “In principal the abstract age has been overcome.” Given the preference for abstraction after 1945 innumerable works that during and after World War II. adopted a critical stance towards the Third Reich and the war largely fell into oblivion. Typical examples we might mention in this context are the ink drawings by Max Lingen from detention in France, the cycle Vergessene Erde [Forgotten Earth] (1946) in which former concentration camp detainee Jerzy Adam Brandhuber who spent the rest of his life in Auschwitz captured the horrors of the concentration camp, or Erwin Spuler’s images of a war-ravaged Karlsruhe.

Although the informalism of artists such as Wols or Hans Hartung can be seen as a reaction to the Third Reich and war, this implicit knowledge was only present in the contemporaries’ own awareness of life, and over the course of time it was increasingly forgotten. It is almost impossible to adopt a direct stance to war and violence under the conditions of abstraction and the autonomous art of the White Cube in an art gallery.

This was a problem shared by Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, when in response to the arms race and the impending atomic overkill he inaugurated in 1985 a Biennale of Peace. “Although very many prominent artists were involved,” writes Hans-Martin Kaulbach on the exhibition in the Kunsthau and the Kunsth-verein Hamburg, “Beuys, Christo, Daniel Buren, Sol LeWitt, John Cage, to name just a few, of all important art exhibitions in past years this has remained the least known.” The tone of the Biennale was a fundamental meditative attitude; before the opening Filliou withdrew to a Zen monastery in the Dordogne, where he died two years later. “We are all against war, but what are we for?” comments curator René Block by way of a summary. The problem was just that almost every artistic work could be presented as an alternative to war and that visitors did not recognize the connection to the subject. And as Kaulbach explains “critics either largely ignored the exhibition altogether or misunderstood it as a ‘conglomeration of vague items’ (Die Zeit),”

Though the Biennale of Peace only took place once it provided an opportunity for founding the Manifesta, and eleven years later again in the Kunsthau and Kunstverein Hamburg, it inspired the major group exhibition Unfrieden. Sabotage von Wirklichkeiten, [Discord. Sabotage of Realities] curated by Ute Vorkooper and Inke Arns, which responded in its title and announcement to Filliou’s concept: “Today, the focus is no longer on making utopian or moral demands of art but...”

rather reconsidering its capacity for visualizing increasingly conflict-ridden reality/ies, intervening in existing reality structures or permitting skewed ways of dealing with private, social and political realities to be experienced either suggestively or reflectively." 25

The realities had changed. The abstract, potential threat of the East-West conflict had been replaced by a host of new conflict areas, which the exhibition concept responded to in six “zones” on topics such as control, state machinery, intelligence services, or science fiction and the economy. On the topic of border policy it states in the concept: “Border policy (balancing acts) demands new and viable strategies for solving conflicts. How did and how do conflicts play out? How might conflicts play out? Exemplary demonstrations are to provide inspiration for our culture of debate which needs to be overhauled.” 26 However, these “strategies for resolving conflicts” were geared less towards current conflicts involving weapons but looked rather like the following example: “In ‘Selbstversuch I: Tränenrückführung’ [Self-Test 1: Returning tears to their origin], using relics and statistics Birgit Brenner documents in photographs her attempt to trace the statistical average amount of tears cried within a year.” 27 Particularly the topics relating to domestic policy such as surveillance, security, control, and intelligence services have since been taken up and pursued by the participating artists and others and presented, for instance, at the Steirischer Herbst festival 2006 or in the exhibition Embedded Art 2010 at the Academy of Arts Berlin. 28

In summary we can say that it was not until the twentieth century that art adopted a largely critical position towards armed conflicts. In principle this applies to both to modernist art – with the exception of Futurism – and to the various realistic trends. This is evidenced by Picasso’s Guernica and the dove of peace that he released in 1949 for the World Peace Congress in Paris. However, on reflection a problem emerges: the dove of peace that he released in 1949 is a conventional symbol taken from the biblical story of Noah, and although it might make a suitable signet it hardly constitutes an interesting artistic motif. Without a doubt the twisted bodies of screaming, fleeing people and animals in the depiction of the German air raid on the Basque city are much more striking.

Paradoxes of Depiction: The Exhibition Friedensschauplätze / Theater of Peace

Whether they are made by artists or others, even in calls for peace the dominating elements are images of violence, cruelty, and human suffering typically portrayed in strong contrasts between light and dark that empathize with the victims and accuse the perpetrators. However, not only is there no guarantee that such a strategy truly helps engender peace. In making accusations we also take sides, stir up emotions, and in the worst case only ratchet up the spiral of violence. This poses the question of which means would be better suited to supporting peace differently, a question explored in the exhibition Friedensschauplätze / Theater of Peace 2010 at the NGBK Berlin. 29

Such an examination also involves considering the battle for media attention. On the one hand it becomes evident that peace per se is impossible to portray: Peaceful, everyday activities such as farming, work or leisure, conversations and human interaction only make effective symbols of peace when they are explicitly contrasted with images or concepts of war, otherwise they only represent themselves. That said, today war or armed conflict is not that easy to depict as we are eerily reminded by the contrast between the painter of battle scenes portraying the Second Gulf War officially employed by the British army and the lack of images of Iraqi soldiers buried alive in unequal battles in sandstorms. 30

But what is more decisive than the fundamental question of whether war or peace can be portrayed is the fact that images of violence attract much more attention in the media than images of peace. Peace means that nothing particular

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21 Wols, or Wolfgang Schulze, was born in Berlin, grew up in Dresden, emigrated to France in 1933 and began to paint there in the internment camp, Hartung came from Leipzig, and also lived in France from 1932 onwards. He lost a leg in 1944 in the Eises due to a war injury; their Tachist or Informal painting was read as a direct record of psychomotoric processes.


24 See footnote 22.


“happens.” We find images of war and violence alarming, they “compel” us to look, trigger responses and reactions. Every news agency, television and newspaper editorial team looks for such unusual images, but they can also be manipulated. After all, the scale of violent acts that flicker across the screen bears no relation to the proportions occurring in real life. By conveying a conflict in a specific way the media channel controls the impression that observers form of this conflict. For in general the images are not made for those who operate in this conflict or are affected by it. This necessitates a certain voyeuristic component when television viewers watch the horrors to which others are subjected in the comfort of their own living rooms. It also means that arguably more than the images shown, precisely what is not seen colors the perception of a conflict, as Noam Chomsky demonstrated using the statistics relating to number of victims provided by “friendly” and “hostile” powers in American news coverage.31

In other words the asymmetry of today’s wars not only extends to weapons systems and economic inequalities, but also to how images are treated and presented. Edward Said described this linkage in 1980 in The Question of Palestine by showing that violent action can be the direct result of not receiving media coverage: bombs can be a means of securing attention.32 Conversely, Elias Sanbar sees a way out of this dilemma in the creation of cinematic art in Palestine at the time of the Oslo Accords.33 Moreover, news channels such as Al Jazeera can introduce a fresh perspective and help counter a possible one-sidedness arising from Western dominance of the media.

Thus visibility is a decisive topic. The images of war and violence that tend to dominate media coverage are taken in from a certain perspective that excludes other positions. The images omit the civilian population’s struggle to survive and their longing for a normal life in peace, but also the economic background and power politics elements of the conflicts, the traumas, the historical experience of suffering, as well as the positive efforts and initiatives to escape from the spiral of violence.

Visibility is also the terrain of art. To what extent can art initiatives either themselves reveal and set in motion options for peaceful coexistence, gain greater visibility for those areas given inadequate coverage, or torpedo the logic of violence in the media representations and introduce a different perspective?

Art in Conflict: Objectives and Prospects of Success

Just what we can hope to gain from art in conflict depends on what an artistic project seeks to achieve. Few people would expect art to be capable of ending an acute conflict. After all, art and the force of arms speak two very different languages. As such the success of a project can only be measured by its own goals, which can vary enormously as illustrated by the following short list of possible aims:

- Securing attention
- Informing
- Making visible
- Illustrating backgrounds
- Countering processes of repression
- Reappraising conflicts
- Helping people work through traumas
- Confronting/reconciling present and past
- Intervening locally
- Setting dialogs in motion
- Playing out possible solution models
- Developing utopias.

As this list demonstrates, and doubtless additional goals could be added to it, artistic projects can address very different aspects of a conflict: they can concentrate on the past, the present, or the future, increase objectivity, or appeal to the emotions – although the one need not necessarily exclude the other. Raising awareness and making problems more visible is often the first
step towards finding a solution, which cannot be provided by art but must be negotiated in social consensus. It may be necessary first to address collective trauma before perspectives can be developed for the future.

Securing attention, providing visibility, information, and background information not only relate to the local setting but also to media coverage. However, artistic works that deal with these areas cannot hope to compete with the mass media when it comes to distribution. However, they can articulate alternative perspectives, voice unspoken topics, and circulate alternative images. What is decisive in this case is not whether art only reaches a small audience or not, but rather to simply present images, background information, or possible solutions. Success then depends less on the artistic work itself and more on what the audience does with it. The comparatively marginal position of art is compensated for to some extent by the fact that it is received by an interested, usually educated audience, which is in a position to take up ideas and pass them on to others.

However, the very intention to intervene in a conflict implies that this is not art within the White Cube – in other words pieces which are collected and preserved or exhibited in galleries, museums, or art associations – but rather that a relationship is sought to the social reality outside of art. The consequence of this might be to move away from the spaces reserved for art and to intervene in spatial situations using actions or objects, and to address an audience that does not normally frequent galleries and art museums. On the other hand, the often ephemeral nature of such actions and the need to embed them in an art debate means that, generally speaking, they are not only temporary events but also provide raw material for photographs and video recordings, which are then shown in exhibitions. It follows that where the social connection is desired there is not so much a contrast between works inside and outside the exhibition space, but rather a dialectic correlation.

Consequently, over the longer term art can most certainly play a decisive role in conflicts.

Art addresses not only the intellect, but also the emotions, and above all, the imagination. As art is always on the lookout for new solutions and new means of representation, it can soften the hardened lines that are always to be found in conflicts and bring to light deeper layers of the unconscious and what is repressed, including the historical dimension, in order to encourage reflection and reappraisal. To cite Kant, only art is capable of making a synthetic judgment, in other words, to consider things in context far removed from predetermined criteria and to lend this context a form that can be perceived using the senses.

**Latent Conflicts**

If, as mentioned above, art can scarcely make an impact in an acute case of armed conflict, the question arises whether the definition of conflict as an armed struggle between groups cited at the beginning of this essay can be regarded as adequate. Is it not the case that the points at which art can attempt to intervene in a conflict are always before or after the events? When and where does a conflict begin and end anyhow? On the one hand, in the usual sense of the term, at the moment a conflict escalates, it is not developing but is already in existence. Similarly, a temporary suspension of armed hostilities does not by any means signify an end to the conflict. On the other hand, in case of doubt, defining something as an armed quarrel means that a conflict is first manifested as the use of arms and becomes identifiable as such. Frequently this connection is described using metaphors involving fire: people talk of smoldering conflicts, or of a spark that can trigger a conflict, or that a conflict thought to be over has flared up again, and so on.

Recent events in North Africa show how difficult it is to draw a precise border. In principle a democratic movement – in other words, a broad majority – is attempting to assert itself against autocrats using peaceful means. But if as in Libya or Syria the ruler attacks his own people using military means, and if the response to this is the
toring of government buildings and police stations and sections of the country being liberated, if there is talk of opposition between various “tribes,” the question arises at some point as to where we draw the line between a revolution and a civil war-like conflict. The problem becomes clearer when we consider international relations: doesn’t the direct intervention of European armies bring about a state of war? Certainly, conflicts are often linked with an international, indeed a global perspective, especially when the issues are not dealt with consciously. As such, in order to arrive at a peaceful agreement it may be indispensible to recognize that of the other party. When we are talking about working through traumatic events in the past using artistic means, is it legitimate to refer to this as art in conflicts?

Without attempting to provide a conclusive answer to this question I would like to recall the first two platforms of Okwui Enwezor’s Documenta 11, which focused precisely on the two topics touched upon here; namely, Democracy Unrealized and Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and The Processes of Truth and Reconciliation. The title of the second platform refers to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in South Africa after the end of apartheid: a further case of such a latent conflict, now history, in which art was used in different ways and very effectively. Perhaps this indicates that the conflict situations in which art can successfully intervene tend to be latent ones, while an overt military conflict leaves little scope for artistic activities. In some conflict areas, such as South Africa, the Balkan countries, or Israel/Palestine, which boast remarkable artistic initiatives, an everyday consumer society exists alongside military violence.

Art, Activism, Media

Be that as it may: when artistic works intervene in conflicts it is not the art of the White Cube found in galleries and museums. This kind of activity could be described as artistic activism whereas political activists working in peace initiatives, by contrast, often resort to artistic media in order to secure attention for their interests.

Trying to draw dividing lines is futile. Many artists are active citizens, just as many doctors, biologists, and jurists devote time to Médecins sans frontières, Amnesty international, and organizations to protect the environment or animals. Whether they see this as part of their artistic practice or distinguish between the two areas will differ from one individual to another, depending on their personality but also on their political and artistic orientation. It is more interesting to consider what special skills artists have that enable
them to play a useful role in violent conflicts, and what led art to respond today to social issues when this was not the case for most of the second half of the twentieth century.

Although limiting “Western” art to the White Cube in the 1950s was ultimately politically motivated, the idea being to establish art’s autonomy and prevent it from being used (or rather misused) by politics, the outcome was that it became almost totally depoliticized. Even the attempts by the Fluxus artists to impact society only led to the hermetic space of art expanding into the public realm: it did not open it to social issues. Thus any attempt to become involved in areas of political action or discussion were doomed to failure as the Peace Biennale proved.

However, there are notable exceptions to this rule. Selecting a few of them can help us understand why the relationship between politics and art has shifted considerably in recent decades. The year 1968 marked a decisive turning point, although here, too, there were exceptions as some sections of the 1968 movement were devoted to an Eastern-style agitprop, which was already anachronistic at the time, and which when viewed retrospectively certainly proved to be a dead end.

The Vietnam War was hugely instrumental in politicizing people beyond American students. Initiated by the Artists’ Protest Committee in Los Angeles, in 1966 Mark di Suvero and Mel Edwards built a 60-feet high Peace Tower, on which many artists – some of them very famous such as Ad Reinhardt, Robert Motherwell, Roy Lichtenstein, Jack Levine, Eva Hesse, and Donald Judd – hung 418 paintings. The tower stood for three months and was quite literally fought over. Frank Stella is said to have offered the sum of 1,000 U.S. dollars to anyone who defended his work. On October 15, 1969 the Art Workers coalition in New York, whose members included Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Hans Haacke, and Lucy Lippard, took part in the organization of a Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam: a major demonstration with 100,000 participants. Jasper Johns, commissioned by the Leo Castelli gallery of Los Angeles, designed a poster motif, a negative of his American flag. These activities were variously reappraised in 1989 in the exhibition curated by Lucy Lippard A Different War: Vietnam in Art, again in 2006 with the replica of the Peace Tower at the Whitney Biennial, and also in 2009 by Julia Bryan-Wilson in her book about the Art Workers Coalition and the Vietnam War, but remain little known today.36

In 1989 there was another change with serious consequences when the implosion of Communism brought about the end of the bipolar world order and ushered in a new, more open but at the same time more unstable situation, which is summarized by the term “globalization.” Let us now look at just one area in this context that, although already fully developed and therefore by no means new at the time, did receive more attention thanks to global development. In 1989 Sue Williamson published a book about Resistance Art in South Africa, which presents a compendium of artistic practices unusually broad for this period, and which does not see itself as L’art pour l’art but, on the contrary, responds to social conditions in South Africa, in other words to apartheid. 37 Moreover, it did not merely seek to express personal consternation, but was motivated by a desire to bring about change.

This is remarkable for a number of reasons. The declared intention to overcome apartheid inevitably meant involving non-academic artists for so-called blacks and coloreds could not enroll at academies. Williamson further expands this spectrum by also showing craftswomen like the “Women of the Valley,” children’s drawings, anonymous wall decorations by mineworkers, wall painting, graffiti, T-shirts, posters, and the so-called Peace Parks by young people who tidied up their township to create attractive meeting places that were regularly cleared and destroyed by security forces. In other words, resistance is illustrated in a variety of media, which in part had a completely different impact from paintings in galleries.
Another genre needs to be added to Williamson's spectrum. The Market Theatre in Johannesburg or the Handspring Puppet Company, for example, were cells of collaboration and resistance against apartheid, and once again not only across differences in skin color but across genre divides: William Kentridge developed his typical brand of rapidly executed charcoal drawings on backdrops used by the Handspring Puppet Company, for which composer and formerly Stockhausen's student Kevin Volans once wrote music, as did Warrick Sony, the leader of the Punk band Kalahari Surfers. Music played an important role; jazz musicians such as Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), Hugh Masekela, The Blue Notes, and Chris McGregor's Brotherhood of Breath contributed to raising international awareness about apartheid, a growing number of musicians refused to perform in South Africa, voiced their protest in songs against apartheid, or like Paul Simon made a point of collaborating with black South African musicians.

Both the activities of the Artists' Protest Committee and the Art Workers Coalition, but also those of the artists presented by Sue Williamson can most certainly be described as activist art practice. What makes them different from contemporary practices are the media. For all their broad mobilization the activism of American artists against the Vietnam War remained local and have presumably vanished into oblivion because paintings can only be viewed locally; the new media, above all video art, were still in their infancy. What is more, back then the world of art was ill-prepared for such a radically different concept of artistic activity, although this began to change around 1989. In 1984 the Havana Biennale was launched, in 1995 the first Biennale of Johannesburg took place, 1989 saw the founding of the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Technology Karlsruhe and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, which in 1996 organized a large-scale South Africa exhibition – to mention just a few reference points.

Doubtless globalization has been instrumental in renegotiating art's boundaries and mission after 1989. With the end of the old East-West conflict there was no longer any justification for the demarcation lines between West and East art. And once people in other parts of the world demanded and received access to contemporary global art its restriction to the White Cube or abstract self-referential art styles were almost impossible to communicate anyway. New styles, which had developed in these other areas under completely different circumstances, were then presented in Europe and the United States. The increasing number of biennials in every part of the world fostered a broad, global exchange that was no longer shaped solely by the old specifications of Western art.

Activism is an enigmatic term. Alongside truisms such as “active behavior,” in the Duden German dictionary there is a more specific definition relating to literature; namely, an intellectual and political movement around 1915 to 1920 that viewed literature as a means of achieving certain goals, and under Aktivist [activist] we find: (GDR) A person, who in socialist competition increasing production capacity by raising their own performance appreciably and by using new work methods. The English Wikipedia entry is more useful “Activism consists of efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental change, or stasis,” and provides a long list of methods from civil disobedience to youth-led media. The entries on conflict transformation, peace activist, and peace movement provide links to specific belligerent conflicts but also many other keywords such as boycott, lobbying, and media activism.

In actual fact we could mention all activities that would be suitable peaceful replacements for violent or repressive forms of conflict. In a sense art and culture are per se effective in this way. What Leoluca Orlando, the former mayor of Palermo, once said with regard to the Mafia, can in principle be applied to belligerent conflicts: Where
violence prevails (or war is conducted), there is no culture; where there is culture there is no war. In specific cases this is not always easy to distinguish. However, seen against this background the apolitical, abstract art of the post-war era also had a civilizing effect: as a conscious contrast to the barbaric acts that preceded it.

Evidently activism goes one step further. The term implies active intervention. If art sees itself as an activist practice and seeks to intervene in conflicts then, obviously, it cannot do so in the confines of a gallery but must move to public space instead. The tried and tested methods in this case – aside from local temporary interventions made as spectacular as possible – are above all performance and theater, in particular the forum theater technique developed by Augusto Boal, which is successfully practiced in many parts of the world, from the Everyday Gandhis in Liberia to Janakaraliya in Sri Lanka, where young people act together on a mobile stage in both languages, Tamil and Singhalese. 38 Via organizations such as the Centro de teatro de oprimido in Rio de Janeiro, Jana Sanskriti in India, Internationales Theater-Institut (ITI), Sabisa in Berlin, and the International Theatre of the Oppressed Organization, many groups are also well networked. 39

But where does public space begin and end? Does it really only consist of those places of assembly in the centers of large towns and cities, which to all appearances still continue to play a key role? Or is it that the huge crowds on such squares produce attention-grabbing media images, which lend force to a cause? Is not any type of activism dependent on media distribution, on the snowball effect? Is our supposed knowledge about the conflicts in the world not in reality conveyed by the media, in other words aren’t the images also defined by a specific policy?

It is precisely here that art begins to play a central role. Art is depiction even if it is not necessarily representation in the Baroque sense. How something is portrayed is an important issue, but most decisively as regards whether something counts as art is the self-reflective element. The positions of the opposing parties are characterized by their depicting a conflict from the one or other angle. However, questioning the means of depiction is one of the areas where art can claim to have expertise.

Yet this is only theory and requires specific examples. In his project The Real War Sean Snyder collected a large amount of material on media representations of war and war-like conflicts, archived and cataloged them. 40 As such, regardless of the respective conflict and the position adopted by the producer of these images, what is manifested is the mechanism of depiction. Conversely, purely documentary methods like those employed by Amar Kanwar also have their value. Kanwar began to work with the means of documentary video and photography when he realized that the poison gas catastrophe of Bhopal and the massacre of Sikhs following the assassination of Indira Gandhi – both in 1984 – received very little media coverage. It is true that videos and photographs of the kind Kanwar made on the border between India and Pakistan 41 could also be shown in other places than in art exhibitions. As such, the question of whether this is art or not is pointless: It is not a question of the material but of the audience.

However, artistic documentaries like Kanwar produces differ from documentary films on TV in two regards: first, he produces the videos for himself, and second, they typically also differ aesthetically. While on TV a pleasant-sounding and trained voice almost always explains literally everything to the clueless viewer and is accompanied by professionally composed film music, the artistic documentary deliberately leaves gaps: spaces for thinking, doubts, moments when the images speak for themselves without supplying an interpretation. It is worth observing such differences when watching artistic documentary works: for example, the sensitive video works by Sarah Vanagt about the repercussions of genocide in Ruanda and the border conflict with the Congo. 42

Especially in all-out wars where combatants attempt to force a decision within as short a time

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41 A Season Outside (1997), exhibited at Documenta 11.
as possible by using concerted military force it would be naïve to assume art can bring about any fast changes. But even here there is some scope for freedom of decision. When in 2008 Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin traveled to Afghanistan as embedded reporters with the British army, they refused the assignment to cover the events of the war. One day when no deaths occurred in their area they exposed a strip of photo paper to the direct sunlight, placed it in a carton and from then onwards only filmed the carton's journey until it arrived in England. This might be considered a radical gesture by art connoisseurs, but naturally it did nothing to alter the prevailing circumstances.

By contrast, working as an embedded reporter in Iraq Johan Spanner used a concealed camera to produce images of the humiliations Iraq's civilian population suffered at the hands of the American soldiers. In this case it cannot be argued that the depiction of violence produces counter-violence. The footage was widely published in various magazines in the United States, and opened the eyes of Americans to the behavior of their own army in a foreign country. The Danish photographer had himself been deployed as a UN and NATO soldier in Bosnia and Croatia. He was motivated by the desire to reveal the ugly face of such conflicts, which is usually hidden in the media behind a certain rhetoric and carefully selected images.

Steve Mumford entered Iraq for the first time not as a soldier and not as an embedded journalist but as a private individual, on April 9, 2003, the day the American army took Baghdad. On this and many subsequent trips he captured in innumerable drawings and water colors everyday life in the country—in all its diversity and inconsistencies, depicting army vehicles, soldiers, and attacks, but also people's everyday lives, the markets, cafés, street scenes, and portraits, and he later did the same in Afghanistan. Of these three examples Mumford's represents the most human gesture, including his decision not to leave the recording of reality to a piece of equipment, but to trust his own eyes and hands. Mumford refrains from any criticism. He presents what he sees. It is telling that typically he does not record dramatic events, but instead the illusory and at times tortuous moments when nothing much happens. This slowness also seems to be continued in the way his images are distributed: Mumford's drawings can easily be found both on the Internet and in book form, but they lack alarming or sensational, attention-grabbing effects; they only unfold their impact on closer inspection. As such they act to counter the highly exaggerated, dramatic media images to which we are accustomed.

Local intervention and performance and media transmission, image and text, documentation and reflection, Internet and paper, public space and art space are not mutually exclusive but rather complement each other. Performance in public space remains limited to the moment and location of its presentation if it is not captured on video. Even though an art exhibition can only have a limited impact on a specific audience, it can provide space for reflection and protection from outside influence: a neutral space.

There is no single strategy suitable for dealing with conflicts; rather, every attempt is first of all an attempt to embark on a new route in a deadlocked situation. This attempt must be made even if success is by no means guaranteed. Indeed, if it were everything would be very easy, and situations in which violence prevails are anything but easy. It is only natural on the part of supporting institutions that they want to foster projects using limited resources which nonetheless achieve a demonstrable success. But imagination cannot be controlled in this manner. Art depends on financial assistance, but it must remain up to the artists what they do with the funds made available to them. Art is communication, reflection, and a search for new departures—and these are the only alternatives to violence.

This text is based on Dietrich Heissenbüttel's research study commissioned by the German Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa). For further information and a great number of examples, see www_ifa.de.
Dietrich Heissenbüttel studied literature (Italian, English, French, and Francophone literature) and history of art. His PhD thesis was on medieval frescoes in southern Italy. Since 1996 he has been making radio programs on jazz and improvised music for FR3, an independent radio station in Stuttgart. He also works for various daily newspapers and specialist journals (springerin – Hefte für Gegenwartskunst, Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, KONTEXT Wochenzeitung etc.). His main subjects are globalization, contemporary art, new music, architecture, and transport policy. Dietrich Heissenbüttel was the recipient of scholarships at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome and the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart. From 2005 to 2006 he moderated an intercultural composers’ workshop, Global Interplay, at the ISCM World New Music Festival. He has taught at the University of Stuttgart’s History of Art Institute since 2008. In 2010 he was co-curator of the exhibition, Friedensschauplätze / Theater of Peace for the Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst (nGbK) in Berlin. Dietrich Heissenbüttel has written numerous articles on the subject of art and conflict for various publications. He is also active in the campaigns to preserve the University of Stuttgart’s History of Art Institute and Stuttgart’s main railway station.

Translated from the German by Jeremy Gaines.

Selected publications: