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Art and the Discourse of Fear during the “War on Terror”

Imagination, of course, can open any door – turn the key and let terror walk right in.

Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

In the imaginary map of the mind that the British artist Grayson Perry drew in the form of an island (*Map of an Englishman*, 2004), fear forms a whole county. Some parts of this county are named after threats, such as the river *Invasion* and the forts *Unwanted* and *Unknown*, which provoke a sense of danger. Danger, in turn, strikes fear. Although experienced on an individual level, collective fears are perceived as threats to society as a whole: they are political fears.

The vocabulary of fear was ubiquitous in public discourse after the terrorist attacks which hit the United States on 11th September 2001, particularly with the phrase ‘War on Terror’. If the phrase denotes a fight against terrorism, especially by al-Qaeda, it is above all, if taken literally, a war against an emotion: terror, an extreme form of fear. Claims to unite a nation around an emotion are not unusual, as Barack Obama’s presidential campaign poster showed in 2008, reading only ‘Hope’. The emotional resonance of fear is manifold as it is characterised by unease, nervousness, the dread of something about to happen, and it calls for action to relieve this tension. The response given to national fear articulated by George W. Bush was military action. Following the attacks of September 2001, strikes launched by American and British troops in Afghanistan began in October.

Used as if merely in recognition of a situation, the language of fear was, in fact, instrumental in transmitting a message that was intelligible to everyone. It gave shape to a feeling that could easily resonate in all, and came to form a discourse of fear in that it framed the dominant representation, knowledge and understanding of the fight against terrorism in the aftermath of the 2001 events. As Corey Robin explained,

It is [the politicians] who identify a threat to the population's well being, who interpret the nature and origin of that threat, and who propose a method for meeting that threat. It is them who make particular fears items of civic discussion and public mobilization. That doesn't mean that each member of the public actually fears the chosen object. It merely means that the object dominates the political agenda, crowding out other possible objects of fear and concern.¹

In the context of the preparation of military campaigns, it is obvious that there were benefits to using fear as a political tool.

This article explores artistic responses to the discourse of fear which gained momentum among political leaders immediately after the 'War on Terror' broke out. Central to our argument is the idea that "a politics of fear rests on the discourse of fear. [...] The politics of fear resides not in an immediate threat from an individual leader [...] but rather in the public discourse that characterizes social life as dangerous, fearful, and filled with actual or potential victims".² The main platform for the language of fear was constituted by terminology used by members of the government, political leaders and official organisations. Richard Jackson noted in 2005 the very high frequency of the use of the words 'threat' and 'danger' in speeches by politicians.³

The first artistic actions taken in response to the discourse of fear, at the beginning of the 2000s, were less found in museums and galleries than in the public space. Mocking or subverting this discourse in the

¹ Carey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16.

² David L. Altheide, *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006), 117.

³ Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 95.

tradition of counterpropaganda, and attacking this propaganda in its own space, works bypassing institutional circuits were disseminated within the urban fabric along with newspapers headlines, TV monitors and posters. At first, it was not established figures of the art world but young, lesser-known artists who attracted the attention of the public. This was a time when the shock of the September 2001 attacks was still reverberating and political leaders were preparing public opinion for the outbreak of a new war. The invasion of Iraq started in spring 2003 and provided artists with a clear focus for the expression of political discontent. It is only against the background of the Iraq war that the discourse of fear became more specifically addressed; its mechanisms and underpinnings were exposed as it gained stronger visibility in galleries and major exhibitions.

In late 2002 a twenty-five year old art student, Clinton Boisvert, made a work which should not have gained notoriety outside of the School of Visual Arts, in New York. Working on an assignment on site-specificity, Boisvert placed more than thirty cardboard boxes spray-painted black, each bearing the word 'fear' in white lettering, in Union Square subway station in New York. The most significant aspect of this project lies in the reactions to it. Although the boxes were placed in plain view and during morning rush hour, the police were alerted and the station shut while a bomb squad examined containers, which were empty. But the boxes were big enough to accommodate an explosive device, and acted both as a materialisation of a threat and the emotional response to this threat. And "a threat [...] as such is nothing *yet* – just a looming", Brian Massumi has explained. "[...] Its future looming casts a present shadow, and this shadow is fear."⁴

By pointing explicitly to the feeling of fear while being, "very literally, empty signifiers,"⁵ the boxes made by Boisvert responded to the charged atmosphere of the time in an oblique manner. The repetition of the inscription 'fear' on a number of quasi identical boxes amplified the pervasiveness of the language used by politicians, and in turn, in

⁴ Brian Massumi, "Fear (The Spectrum said)." *Positions* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 35.

⁵ David Teh, "Art and the Veil: Censorship after 9/1." *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Art* 5, no. 2 (2004): 57.

the media. Indeed, fear was an essential component of official rhetoric in the United States ever since Bush declared, in his address to the Nation on 7th October 2001: “I know many Americans feel fear today.” Signaling the beginning of the military campaign in Afghanistan, Bush explained in the same speech that the operation was meant to “defend [...] the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear.”

Very quickly the official rhetoric of fear crystallized in the term ‘War on Terror’ – as early as 20th September 2001, during a televised address Bush made to a joint session of congress. The choice of the phrase ‘War on Terror’ was highly significant, and it was not selected without disagreement among political leaders. As Adam Hodges writes, “The characterization of 9/11 as an act of war (rather than, as others have argued, a criminal act) and the response to terrorism as a “war on terror” (rather than an investigation into terrorist acts) is a discursive achievement.”⁶

It is this carefully crafted narrative that a work such as Boisvert’s disrupted. “With their enigmatic lack of content”, David Teh analysed, “the boxes threaten with collapse a whole order of banal, strategic communication which relies upon a steady turnover in the modular content of appreciable causes, effects and explanations.”⁷ The black boxes did not conform to the rhetoric of the clearly branded ‘War on Terror’: ‘fear’, however close to ‘terror’, was not the authorized word.⁸ Repeated again and again on boxes, the word ‘fear’ was prone to provoke in passers-by a reaction which was unframed, unregulated by the dominant rhetoric. ‘War on Terror’ was not only the vivid name of a policy, but also, and more insidiously, an assertive form of political and cultural narrative.

No less significant was the judicial response to the art student’s intervention. Boisvert turned himself in after the police canvassed art schools and was charged with “reckless endangerment” and “disorderly

⁶ Adam Hodges, *The “War on Terror” Narrative. Discourse and Intertextuality in the Construction and Contestation of Sociopolitical Reality* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 23.

⁷ Teh, “Art and the Veil”, 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

conduct". He was ultimately convicted of the charge of "disorderly conduct". Yet his "conduct is far afield from the kind of violent, anti-social conduct the disorderly conduct statute is trying to reach", argues Julie Hilden before she concludes that "neither of the New York criminal charges brought against Boisvert [...] was truly appropriate."⁹ But the case demonstrated that these charges could be brought against artists in the future, and its direct consequence was what is known in a legal context as a "chilling effect:" discouragement of an individual exercising a legitimate right. In this case, the right of freedom of expression.

Relaying the rhetoric employed by officials, public institutions further contributed to the creeping discourse of fear. In late 2002 the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) launched a campaign on New York public transport around the slogan "If you see something, say something." This injunction became ubiquitous in the New York subway as it appeared on numerous unmissable posters. In reaction to this, Fulana, a group of Latino artists, made a poster of their own in 2004 and subverted the original slogan by stating: "If you fear something, you'll see something." They also allowed flyers to be downloaded from their website in order to increase the visibility of their motto in the city.

Fulana is known for taunting advertisements, music videos and other mass media, and only made a mockery of the MTA slogan because of the extent to which the poster had become entrenched in the New York public landscape. With its overtly pragmatic yet deeply alarming rhetoric, the campaign was treated as a form of propaganda by Fulana, who subverted it through explicit reference. Although the campaign was meant to heighten the sense of vigilance in individuals, it can also be understood, as Fulana's parody emphasizes, as an ingredient of what Massumi calls "the organized fear trade."¹⁰ This type of "trade" was not specific to the 2000s and, as the Canadian philosopher explained in 1993, "mechanisms of fear production" invariably emerge at particularly fearful moments in history.¹¹ The

⁹ Julie Hilden, "Fear Factor: Is Art that can be Mistaken for Terrorism Protected by the First Amendment?" *Entertainment Law* 2, no. 3 (Autumn 2003), 132.

¹⁰ Brian Massumi, "Preface." In *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), viii.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

discourse of fear that permeated society in the years following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon incited what Massumi has defined as a “*low-level fear* – naturalized fear, ambient fear, ineradicable atmospheric fright.”¹²

Although the discourse of fear was mostly delivered through phrases and slogans (one can also think of the events that occurred in October 2001 and would be known as the ‘anthrax scare’), it did not only consist of words. In fact, it was translated into an alphabet of colours when, in March 2002, the Bush administration introduced the Homeland Security Advisory System, soon referred to as the “terror alert level” in the media. Different levels of terrorist threat materialised in five colours ranging from green (low risk of terrorist attacks) to red (severe risk). What exactly led the Homeland Security to select one level or another was never made public. But the colour-coded system endowed the politics of fear with a tool all the more precious in that the level of a ‘threat’ could now easily be perceived as a scientific assessment, just like the level of air pollution. Public institutions and facilities were expected to take certain steps, such as increasing surveillance, as the risk of an attack rose. The general public was also supposed to act as a consequence, although left without any guidance on how to react to threats which always remained unspecified.

This “affective training”¹³ of the population was an essential cog in the mechanism of ambient fear, not least because it served a political agenda. Just days after he resigned as Homeland Security Secretary in 2005, Tom Ridge, who had presented the terror alert level to the press in 2002 (as Assistant to the President for Homeland Security), claimed that on the eve of the presidential election in November 2004, he was pressured by top aides to President Bush to raise the level of alert (the level was lowered from orange to yellow eight days after Bush won the election.)¹⁴

Although the effects of such “affective training” were mostly imposed on people living in the United States, Susan Silton, an artist

¹² *Ibid.*, viii.

¹³ Massumi, “Fear,” 41.

¹⁴ Tom Ridge commented on this episode in his book *The Test of Our Times: America Under Siege...and How We Can Be Safe Again* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009).

based in California, drew a parallel with other populations submitted to psychological pressure with a series entitled *By Power of Suggestion Which in Favorable Circumstances Becomes Instruction*. In 2006 she printed postcards whose backgrounds were based on the colours of the Homeland Security Advisory System [figs. 1 and 2]. These postcards featured messages culled from propaganda leaflets made as part of American Military PSYOP (Psychological Operations) activities carried out in Iraq in 2003 and 2004. Echoing the fact that the original leaflets were dropped by the American army on Iraq, Siltan's five different postcards were distributed in public spaces in Los Angeles and "in mailboxes, gallery desks and as magazine inserts. The cards bring vague yet commanding messages in bold, black, non-serif font: 'Where does this coward get his strength from?' or 'We can see everything'."¹⁵

Not only did Siltan appropriate the colours of the chart, she coupled it with a military mission. Although the abstract coloured code used in the mission performed in the United States seems more subtle than the messages thrown to the Iraqi people, their similarities are unmistakable. Widening the scope of her work to that of domestic propaganda, the artist cunningly pointed to the fact that the Homeland Security Advisory System was nothing less than a "psychological operation" aimed at the American people. Introduced at yellow (elevated risk), this Security System, in its six year existence, was never lowered to green or blue (guarded). It was yellow most of the time, went to orange five times and red once. As Massumi wrote in 2005, "Safe, it would seem, has fallen off the spectrum of perception. Insecurity, the spectrum says, is the new normal."¹⁶ The system presented as a means of assessing terrorist threats acted, ultimately, as a system that told people how scared they should feel.

By the mid-2000s the 'War on Terror' and the invasion of Iraq provided ample material for artists to take a political stance. For example, Christoph Buchel and Gianni Motti first showed *Guantanamo Initiative* at the Swiss Cultural Centre in Paris in 2004, and then the following year at the Venice Biennial; and in 2006, the *Peace Tower*, originally

¹⁵ Micol Hebron, "Incendiary Postcards." *Flash Art International*, March/April 2007, 68.

¹⁶ Massumi, "Fear," 31.

conceived as a protest against the Vietnam War in 1966, was revisited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in relation to the Iraq war. In 2007 Documenta 12 in Kassel included works directly addressing the discourse of fear, as did the exhibition, curated by Robert Storr, in the central pavilion of the Venice Biennial, which included works referring to the Iraq war that were overtly political. Nevertheless, as Judith Butler claimed in 2004, the response to the Iraq war remained quite timid amongst thinkers. It was particularly notable, she argued, that in the United States a climate of suspicion prevailed towards the intellectual and within the cultural milieu: the context was that of “both a rise of anti-intellectualism and a growing acceptance of censorship within the media.”¹⁷ It is this climate that resulted in a lack of strength of opposition to the Iraq war. In 2008, the journal *October* dedicated a whole issue to “explain the seeming absence of visible opposition to the Iraq War [...] within the milieu of cultural producers working in the sphere of contemporary visual culture.”¹⁸ On this occasion Hans Haacke claimed that “Matching the abstinence of American museums, collectors are also refraining from associations with works that question the wisdom and morality of current U.S. government actions in Iraq.”¹⁹

The rise of reactions among artists about the Iraq war, however slow, provided a background against which the discourse of fear became more visible. It became increasingly obvious that the culture of fear was of prime importance in the justification of military intervention and restrictions to civil liberties that would stop the menace of further attacks. The discourse of fear may not have had the direct impact of dramatic images of the conflict in Iraq distributed by the media, but it gradually emerged as a distinctive element of the many components of the ‘War on Terror’. The language of fear in general, but also the “If you see something...” slogan and the colour chart of the Security System, caught the attention of artists again, while other artists examined the specific rhetoric developed by members of the government.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 1.

¹⁸ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and Rachel Churner, “Introduction.” *October*, no. 123 (Winter 2008), 3.

¹⁹ Hans Haacke, “Answer to a questionnaire.” *October*, no. 123 (Winter 2008), 80.

The language of fear was no less omnipresent in the second half of the 2000s than it was in the immediate aftermaths of the 2001 attacks. It was found in speeches, interviews and press conferences, and it was amplified by the mass media. During these years the Spanish artist Antoni Muntadas accumulated headlines from the press which included the word ‘fear.’ He then printed them in black, blew them up and displayed them on a wall in their original typography with the word ‘fear’ highlighted in red. Significantly, Muntadas found plentiful material to apply the same principle to the words ‘panic’ and ‘terror,’ in a work he called *The Construction of Fear* (2008).

Targeting a more specific aspect of the language of fear, Krzysztof Wodiczko used in 2005 the slogan of the MTA campaign for the title of a large installation at the Galerie Lelong in New York. The work consisted of several video screens showing silhouettes of people engaged in conversations meant to be private. These people, many of them speaking with an accent, talk of displacement, migration and harassment. As Dora Apel explained, *If You See Something...* is “a video collage of simulated surveillance fragments that confront the viewer with pressing issues in America: immigrant rights, racist reaction, and the assault on civil liberties carried out in the name of the war on terror.”²⁰ Wodiczko is known for his large video projections on facades of public buildings but significantly, this installation is meant to be shown indoors, thus giving the conversations a domestic setting, evoking “windows onto private worlds.”²¹ In *If You See Something...* the discourse of fear, referred to explicitly in the title, is addressed along with its side effects such as widespread suspicion and mutual surveillance. The work emphasises the fact that immigrants are particularly vulnerable to the politics of fear. Against the background of ambient fear, which of these silhouettes will the spectator identify as a threat, as a potential enemy? As Slavoj Žižek suggests,

²⁰ Dora Apel, *War Culture and the Contest of Images* (London and New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 21.

²¹ *Ibid*, 21.

the division friend/enemy is never just a recognition of factual difference. The enemy is by definition always (up to a point) *invisible*: it cannot be directly recognized because it looks like one of us, which is why the big problem and task of the political struggle is to provide/construct a recognisable image of the enemy.²²

In Wodiczko's work, the MTA slogan appears strikingly appropriate in terms of social dynamics developed and sustained by alarming rhetoric.

The Homeland Security Advisory System was also appropriated through video. *Red Alert*, made by Hito Steyerl in 2007 and shown the same year at Documenta 12 in Kassel, comprises three rectangular flat video screens, all uniformly red, a colour based on the highest level of threat on the colour chart. "It is, if you like, the colour of contemporary fear itself,"²³ the artist explained. At the opposite end of the scale to Wodiczko – who elaborated a narration from a slogan and staged the impact of the discourse of fear on individuals – Steyerl reduced this discourse to its bare essentials: what remains of a political agenda once the message consists of monochromatic screens? This is precisely the question raised by a work which also refers to Aleksandr Rodchenko's triptych of monochromatic red, yellow and blue panels made in 1921. Struck by the Russian artist's claims about the political meaning of painting, Steyerl made her own version of the triptych in order "to experiment with abstract documentarism."²⁴ As no narrative unfolds on the video screens, the intense colour, chosen by the Homeland Security office to denote a high level of danger, becomes an "abstraction of fear as such, with a minimum of concrete mediation."²⁵ The message delivered by the three screens saturated with red is rooted in emotions triggered

²² Slavoj Žižek, "Are we in a war? Do we have an enemy?" *London Review of Books* 2, no. 10 (23 May 2002), 5.

²³ Zanny Begg, "Making Films Politically: Interview with Hito Steyerl," *Zanny Begg* (website), last modified June, 2007, accessed August 2014, <http://www.zannybegg.com/hito.htm>

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

by the hue, but also it is inseparable from the visceral reaction provoked by the coded meaning of the colour red of the Security System.

At the same Documenta Steyerl's work was shown in 2007, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle presented a work which focused on another facet of the discourse of fear: the address to the United Nations in New York on 5th February 2003 by Colin Powell, then Secretary of State. This presentation was meant to make the case for the invasion of Iraq. At the heart of the meeting was the threat posed by the supposed weapons of mass destruction stockpiled in Iraq. With George Tenet, the director of the CIA, sitting directly behind him, Powell employed many charts and photographs to convince the United Nations international representatives that Iraq was producing and stockpiling biological weapons. Armed with diagrams and satellite pictures, Powell delivered a compelling speech that convinced many of the immensity of the threat. Accounts of striking moments of Powell's speech were given in the press. Particularly chilling was Powell's claim that Iraq had built mobile weapons laboratories on trucks, and that these laboratories were capable of producing enough deadly agent in a month "to kill thousands and thousands of people."

Collin's speech proved a source of a dramatic escalation of the tension that characterised the discourse of fear, not least around the idea that 'germ weapons labs' were ready to accomplish their deadly mission. At Documenta, Manglano-Ovalle built a mobile biological weapons unit exactly as described by Colin Powell in his address. The huge truck that comprises *Phantom Truck* (2007) is a life-size reproduction of the lab documented by Powell in an image he presented during his speech [fig. 3]. However the truck described by Powell turned out to be designed for launching weather balloons. Beyond seemingly objective facts, W. J. T. Mitchell explained, the Bush administration, "needed an image of clear and *present* danger, something that would be by nature designed to elude detection, at the same time that it would provide an ominous sense of concrete materiality and documented authenticity."²⁶ The invasion of Iraq started on 19th March 2003 and in the following

²⁶ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 85.

months it became apparent that none of the alleged labs could be found in Iraq. The information given by Powell in his presentation was, as he later acknowledged, wrong.

Manglano-Ovalle's artwork was made out of epoxy so it had the schematic quality that characterized the image used by Powell. In doing so, the artist accurately reproduced a deceiving 'proof'. In order to emphasize the unreal status of the truck, Manglano-Ovalle hid it in Kassel. Unlike most artists' works which were listed on maps of the city, the phantom truck was truly hidden: visitors had to find it for themselves. The huge truck had to be found in a dark room so it took a few moments before one was able to see the vehicle, thus pointing to its potential unreality. As the artist commented,

what happens there is that you become the apparatus for making this thing visible. And then if you understand what the piece refers to. Then you, in a sense, have become part of the apparatus that has, in a sense, made it appear. You've colluded in the grand lie, you are the mechanism for allowing the lie to produce itself.²⁷

In the speech he delivered to the United Nations on 5th February 2003, Powell also referred to the anthrax crisis that broke out just a few weeks after the September 2001 attacks. The anthrax episodes made the headlines in October as the government hinted that the attacks probably originated in Iraq. It is only in the following months that it appeared that the perpetrator was most certainly an American citizen. "At that point," writes Robin,

the government simply lost interest in the case – perhaps because the idea of anthrax's domestic origins did not fit with the Bush administration's foreign policy goals, or because domestic terrorism did not register as a threat to officials viewing danger solely through the lens of the Middle East.²⁸

²⁷ Alex Rauch, "Interview with Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle: Part II," *Portland Art* (website), 2010, accessed August 2014, http://www.portlandart.net/archives/2010/03/interview_with_8.html

²⁸ Robin, *Fear*, 17.

When Powell brought the threat of anthrax to the fore again in 2003, he was triggering a renewed interest in the anthrax scare. To address this issue at the United Nations, Powell was not armed, this time, with slides, but with a phial of anthrax which he brandished as he said:

Less than a teaspoon of dry anthrax, a little bit about this amount – this is just about the amount of a teaspoon – less than a teaspoon full of dry anthrax in an envelope shutdown the United States senate in the fall of 2001. [...] Iraq declared 8,500 litres of anthrax, but UNSCOM estimates that Saddam Hussein could have produced 25,000 litres. If concentrated into this dry form, this amount would be enough to fill tens upon tens upon tens of thousands of teaspoons.

The description of the situation through the idea of the enormity of the threat, through the vivid image of a phial of anthrax displayed as if it were proof, was the apogee of the reactivation of the anthrax scare. Photographs of Powell exhibiting the phial were ubiquitous in the media as the episode epitomised the impact of the Secretary of State’s performance. It is this particularly alarming moment that was immortalised by the Polish artist Goshka Macuga in the form of a bust [fig. 4]. The sculpture, made of bronze, was included in *The Nature of the Beast*, an installation Macuga made for the Whitechapel Gallery, in London, in 2009. The portrait shows Powell as he brandishes the phial of anthrax, a three-dimensional representation of an iconic image. It is this speech that convinced many that the military intervention in Iraq was justified, and Macuga’s work highlights the essential role played by fear in this process.

One of the strengths of Macuga’s work lies in the connections made between several episodes of the ‘War on Terror’, but also in the parallels drawn with historical events. The bust of Powell was only one component of *The Nature of the Beast*, an installation whose components occupied a vast room at the Whitechapel Gallery [fig. 5]. This bust was made in a Cubist style, which established a visual connection with another element of the installation, a tapestry reproducing Pablo Picasso’s painting *Guernica*. Picasso made the painting in the weeks following the bombing of the Basque town by German aircraft in 1937. There were no important military targets in *Guernica*, which was most likely

targeted because it was a strong centre of resistance against General Franco. The bombing was short but intense. It was market day and most of the victims were civilians, mostly women and children as many men were out of town fighting in opposition to Franco. Picasso's tapestry dramatically renders the terror of the population unable to escape Guernica under attack.

In the context of Macuga's installation, Picasso's depiction of the terrified people in a town in flames seems to foreshadow the war that would follow Powell's speech. The connection was made even more specific by the films screened in the same room, as part of Macuga's installation. Among these were documentaries on Fallujah. The siege of this Iraqi stronghold for rebel fighters started in April 2004 and although many were allowed to leave the city before it started, some stayed. When the residents came back in December, more than half the houses were damaged. It was an extremely heavy urban combat that resulted in a large number of civilian casualties; however no record of the Iraqi death toll was kept.

The presence of the *Guernica* tapestry in *The Nature of the Beast* also alludes to the fact that this tapestry usually hangs outside the Security Council chamber at the United Nations headquarters, where press conferences are held (it was borrowed by the Whitechapel Gallery when the United Nations building was undergoing renovations). In London, the tapestry was displayed on a blue curtain, a clear reference to the day Powell gave his presentation: although the painting representing the horrors of war had served as a background for press conferences for years, on that particular day it was covered by a blue curtain. Technical reasons relating to television broadcasts were invoked, but it was difficult not to see in this incident an example of censorship. Highlighting Butler's assertion that "censorship comes to form – to produce – the subjects"²⁹ which are censored, *The Nature of the Beast*, by having the veiling of *Guernica* at its core, gave the tapestry a new lease of life and placed it in the contemporary framework of the 'War on Terror'.

²⁹ Judith Butler, "Ruled Out: Vocabularies of the Censor." In *Censorship and Silencing*, ed. R. Post (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1998), 247.

The different elements forming *The Nature of the Beast* were woven into a network of associations whereby fear played a prominent role. Not only was the discourse of fear staged through the bust on a plinth, but the expression of terror was depicted in all its horror in the tapestry, and told in films. In relating political to personal fear, Macuga’s installation touched upon the effects of the politics of fear on individuals. If this question of the emotions experienced by individuals at the mercy of fear and terror underlies works exploring political fear, *The Nature of the Beast* puts it at the centre of its display. Moreover, the artist handled the slippery issue of emotions, in a work dominated by political overtones, through the work of an earlier artist, Picasso. In doing so, she made visible the recurrence of the question of fear through history.

The end of the 2000s marked a new direction in the narrative developed by the government, as one of the measures taken by Barack Obama after he was elected president of the United States was to abandon the term War on Terror: in March 2009, his administration officially referred to these operations as “Overseas Contingency Operation”. The ‘If you see something, say something’ campaign of the New York public transports expanded over eight successive missions, and in 2010 the Department of Homeland Security requested permission from the MTA to use the slogan nationwide. As for the colour chart of the Homeland Security Advisory System, it was dropped in 2011.

Over the past decade, art has investigated various forms of ‘apparatus’ of the discourse of fear knowing it a burning issue that continues to have an impact on the individual’s feeling of security. As the workings and effects of the discourse of fear were investigated with increasing scrutiny and the details of the apparatus placed under greater investigation, the issue was also addressed in connection to a wider context – mostly, and understandably, that of the ‘War on Terror’ of the 2000s. However Macuga was not the only artist to expand the scope of her investigation to 20th Century history. In 2010 the British artist Roger Hiorns made *Untitled (Alliance)*, first displayed on the roof terrace of the Art Institute of Chicago that year, whose main components were two old aircraft engines and, crucially, drugs used to treat anxiety and depression. The engines, each almost five meters long, had previously

been mounted on long-range surveillance planes which were used for Operation Looking Glass. This operation was initiated in 1961 by the United States in order to ensure that at all times an aircraft was airborne and ready with bombs and missiles. This was during the Cold War and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, which generated its own fear of attacks that could destroy lives on a massive scale. The Cold War not surprisingly, had its own rhetoric of fear. The term ‘balance of terror’ was used from the late 1950s; notably by John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address in 1961, in reference to the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Were the two engines used by Hiorns in his installation a large-scale remedy for collective anxiety, or were they part of the discourse of fear of the time? Through contextual material displayed with the work, the spectator learns that these two huge machines, which were devised to protect against the enemy, contain crushed drugs used to treat anxiety and depression. In the obvious, solid, unmistakable treatment of collective fear lies a personal, volatile, much less visible, and internalised reaction to it.

Hiorns’ historical perspective on collective fear replaces the rhetoric developed under the Bush administration in the context of other episodes of politics of fear. Unexpectedly the history of collective fear became a substantial part of popular visual culture towards the end of the 2000s, after a poster, designed by the British Ministry of Information in 1939 and stating ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’, was found in Britain, then reprinted and sold with notable success. The poster was originally “held in reserve for when the necessity arose, for example, a severe air raid, although it was never actually displayed.”³⁰ Its design became ubiquitous as it was reproduced not only on posters but on a wide range of products as varied as T-shirts, water bottles, tea towels, doormats and so on, either in its original form or through countless parodies.

The simplicity of its design and its old-fashioned charm cannot completely explain the huge success of the poster. Bex Lewis indicated that the sales of the design surged after the recession hit in 2008, but the injunction to remain calm also inevitably spoke to a society which had been on constant alert for almost a decade. The motto ‘Keep Calm and

³⁰ Bex Lewis, “The Renaissance of ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’”, *The Poster* 2, no. 1, June 2011, 15.

Carry On' echoes the many slogans enjoining the public to be aware of potential threats such as unattended bags in public spaces. It hints at a danger which is not specified, and while this threat was obvious during the Second World War, it remained open to interpretation when it emerged as popular imagery more than half a century later. Of course the absence of a specified and obvious threat is essential to the contemporary appeal of the slogan. But also important is the suggestion that the threat is already there, and that fear (or the potential temptation to panic) is shared by all. In other words, the slogan strikes a chord through the idea that under people's composure lies, in fact, a common fear. The very act of uttering one's emotion is able to alter the sensation of this emotion, and it is highly significant that this slogan became more and more visible in the public space. The success of the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' slogan signalled appropriation on a large scale of the official rhetoric of fear.

As 'Keep Calm and Carry On' began to adorn an ever growing number of everyday objects, so too did the parodies of the slogan, more often than not lending humour to the original message. This commercial phenomenon was in stark contrast to the urban guerrilla tactics which pervaded the posters, postcards and flyers made by artists in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks. Indeed, the appropriations made by Fulana and Silton caught the attention of passers-by by surprise in the public space, and their impact lay in their striking contrast with imagery or discourse which had become familiar to all. As the parodies hinted at cunning tricks devised by higher authorities, they clearly exposed as propaganda the rhetoric set in place under the Bush administration. When the same discourse became the object of works shown in art galleries and large exhibitions, dissimulation and obstructed perception were at the core of artistic strategies. People in conversations staged by Wodiczko only appeared as silhouettes, as if seen through a veil. Steyerl's monochromatic videos appeared obstinately still, thus making invisible the movement of the images. Manglano-Ovalle's truck was hidden, and Macuga's installation summoned up the concealment of *Guernica* behind a curtain. Raising awareness of mechanisms of deception had become essential to works committed to undermining the strategy of lies deployed in the discourse of fear.

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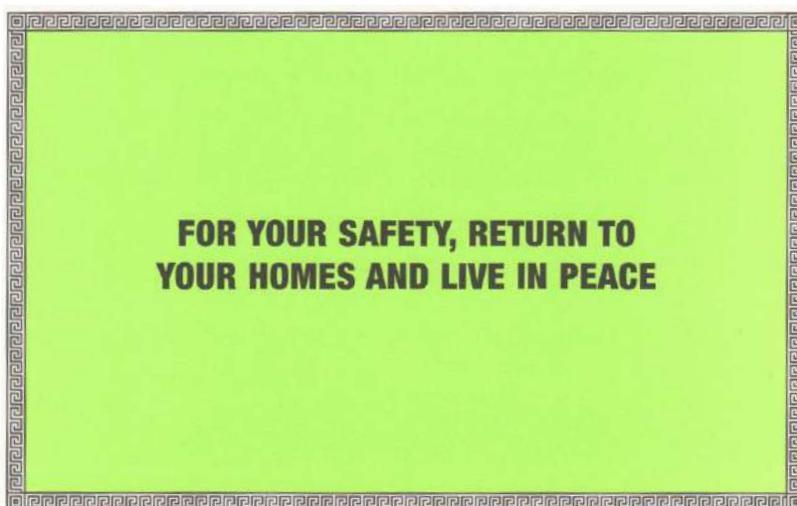


Fig. 1

Susan Silton, *By Power of Suggestion Which in Favorable Circumstances Becomes Instruction*, 2006 (front).

Courtesy of the artist.

Susan Silton

By power of suggestion, which in favorable circumstances becomes instruction, #6 2007; produced as an artist's project/insert for *X-TRA*, edition 4000.

The text printed on the front of this card—translated into English from its original Arabic—has been extracted from a leaflet, poster, or pamphlet that has been produced by United States or British military PSYOP (Psychological Operations) units, and distributed to Iraqi populations between 2003-2004. These printed materials have been commonly disseminated by air (in leaflet bombs and bundled air drops) or as handouts. Psychological operations, or psychological warfare, as it was originally called prior to the 1960s, has been utilized by Americans since WWII.

Fig. 2

Susan Silton, *By Power of Suggestion Which in Favorable Circumstances Becomes Instruction*, 2006 (back).

Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3

Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, *Phantom Truck*, 2007.

Courtesy of Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, and the artist.



Fig. 4

Goshka Macuga, *The Nature of the Beast*, 2009.

Courtesy of Kate MacGarry Gallery and the artist.



Fig. 5

Goshka Macuga, *The Nature of the Beast*, 2009.
Courtesy of Kate MacGarry Gallery and the artist.