

IN THE MIME-NETWORK



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Two figures, a uniformed soldier and the artist, stalk each other, each training a video camera on the other. As they gingerly circle with intense concentration, the viewer sees in the background the harsh Afghanistan landscape interspersed with military hardware. Occasionally an army jeep drives past. This unusual art installation is the focus piece of Shaun Gladwell's exhibition Double Field: Shaun Gladwell-Afghanistan which opened at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra this week.¹

Last year the Australian War Memorial (AWM) unveiled *POV: Mirror Sequence Tarin Kowt* (2009-10), the first completed commissioned work by its new Official War Artist, Shaun Gladwell. In a press release for the exhibition, AWM Director Steve Gower notes that the choice of Gladwell, "may have caused a surprise to some given the mixed media he works with, but it was important for the Memorial to have a range of interpretations in its collection".² Gladwell works across media (video, photography, sculptural work, print, painting), but the mainstay of his practice is video installation. Yet is Gladwell really such a surprising choice? Is this work such an "unusual" art installation?

Within the particular tradition of Australia's Official War Art program, Gladwell is surely unusual. The program began long before the AWM existed, emerging out of World War I and the same history-building, nation-forming compulsion that created the Memorial. It was the historian Charles Bean's vision to include a museum as part of the Memorial.³ Bean was Australia's official correspondent and historian of that war, and the idea of having an artist counterpart extended from Bean's work. The first Official War Artist was Will Dyson in 1917. Although a cartoonist by profession at the time, the realist drawings and paintings he created were congruent with the idea of the artist as a visual historian, a factual recorder. As this tradition developed throughout the twentieth-century, the AWM enlisted a procession of naturalistic painters such as Arthur Streeton, George Lambert and Ivor Hele. Modernism was actively resisted, except for a few moderate concessions.⁴

Then during the Vietnam War, the AWM's Official War Art program was suspended. Vietnam was "the first living room war"⁵, with raw and powerful moving images broadcast into Australian homes. How were interpretive and illustrative paintings like Ken McFadyen, *Diggers sitting on an armoured personnel carrier* (1968), supposed to compete? Against a context of the emerging news media, the Official War Art tradition was losing its own battle for relevance and the program was suspended. In 1999, The Australian Defence Force's deployment in East Timor was Australia's largest overseas commitment since Vietnam. The program was revived and Rick Amor and Wendy Sharpe became the first Official

War Artists in thirty years: Amor somewhat continued the realist approach while Sharpe added a more contemporary element. This tension further played out in the subsequent AWM appointments of Peter Churcher, Lewis Miller, Jon Cattapan, Charles Green and Lyndell Brown, and eX de Medici, but a tradition of naturalistic paintings was still well entrenched.

Shaun Gladwell is indeed a curious name to add to this particular list. However, the moving image is an essential part of military conflict in 2011. According to James Gow and Milena Michalski, moving images are weapons in contemporary warfare, in no less a sense than a tank or a gun: "moving images share a particular quality with more conventional weapons—both are kinetic".⁶ In the time of a different and earlier conflict, Walter Benjamin refers to a kind of visceral "ballistic" affect evoked by images, which "hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality".⁷ Moving images impact—emotionally, psychologically, politically—and in the vast and complex cultural and social spaces of today, of the internet and the media, they are a crucial contested site. Images are where "hearts and minds" are won or lost, where military actions are legitimised or exposed as illegitimate, where insurgencies are rallied, where blows are struck, often with potent force. While the Vietnam War brought moving images of war into Western homes, and the Gulf War in 1991 brought immediacy and twenty-four hour coverage, we now live within a totalising system that James Der Derian terms the "military-industrial-media-entertainment network", or the MIME-network, which seamlessly merges "the production, representation and execution of war".⁸ Within this convergent and evolving system, moving images don't simply take their place at the periphery of the crucible of conflict, passively and coolly mediating images from heated conflict zones to domestic America, or Australia or Europe. Rather, as Gow and Michalski argue, in contemporary warfare, images are central to war, a "key weapon".⁹ The MIME-network not only includes twenty-four-hour cable news channels, but also Hollywood movies, YouTube, WikiLeaks and first-person-shooter digital games.

Digital games are an interesting example of the interchangeable functions of the MIME-network. Far from being a marginal pastime, digital gaming is mainstream culture in the USA. In 2008 the digital games industry in America grossed \$33.4 billion, similar to the revenue of the mainstream movie industry. Seventy-five percent of American households play digital games; two hundred and twenty-eight million were sold in 2005.¹⁰ One of the most popular first person shooter games is *America's Army*, released on 4 July 2002. It was developed specifically as a recruitment tool for the USA Army, with their hosting online game servers and distributing free and legal copies of the software to anyone aged thirteen years and over.¹¹ As Marcus Power notes, digital games such as *America's Army* extend the MIME-network beyond straightforward issues of visual representation: "Games are not merely watched but played and so it is no longer sufficient to talk about the visual or textual representation of meaning."¹² The MIME-network is everywhere, unavoidable and inescapable.



Rikke Shubart argues that following 11 September 2001 the MIME-network, previously monopolised by Western culture, became globalised when the ‘enemy’ used the Western media against itself with the live worldwide televising of the attacks on the World Trade Centre.¹³ During the early months of the American invasion of Iraq in 2004, we witnessed an exchange of very powerful visual weaponry with the release of digital photographic images of prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib, which were responded to directly with the video of the brutal decapitation of Nick Berg, an American contractor in Iraq. These images, explicit, affecting and deeply disturbing, were available to anyone who could type the words “Abu Ghraib” or “Iraq beheading” into Google.

In *Art Power*, Boris Groys considers the role of the contemporary artist in creating images that intervene in this current state of conflict.¹⁴ Groys argues that artists in the “classic age” once played a vital role in singing the praises of war heroes and their heroic deeds; the artist and warrior were mutually dependent. He never gives specific examples, but I imagine here Jacques Louis David, the de-facto court painter to Napoleon and works such as *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, c.1801. In our times, however, the media has taken that role. We only have to think here of CNN and Fox News journalists embedded with the USA troops as they entered Iraq. With the immediacy of these live media images of conflict, war now coincides with its representation and the role of the artist has been displaced. At the same time, terrorists also use the same moving image media as many contemporary artists.¹⁵ Groys goes as far as to say, “terrorists and warriors themselves are beginning to act as artists. Video art has especially become the medium of choice for contemporary warriors. Bin Laden is communicating with the outer world primarily by means of this medium: We all know him in the first place as a video artist.”¹⁶

However, while both the media and terrorists exchange blows, Groys argues, artists are at a critical disadvantage in addressing war through imagery, because of the iconoclastic tendencies of contemporary art and, we can add to this, of art discourse’s questioning of the authenticity of the image and of its belief in the waning of affect, as Fredric Jameson argues.¹⁷ Critiques of representation in art discourse have thoroughly dismantled blind faith in the link of images and truth, while the media and terrorists have reinforced the belief in the power of the image as a representation of the real. The media and terrorists are both fundamentally “inconophile”.¹⁸

In turn, Groys argues, this blind faith in the truth of images lends both terrorists and media the power of the “political sublime”.¹⁹ In evoking that term, Groys draws particularly on Edmund Burke’s eighteenth-century ideas of the sublime, which encompass not only the vastness of nature or the danger of wild beasts, but also the political violence and terror of torture and public beheadings. In the hands of Casper David Friedrich or JMW Turner of the early-to-mid nineteenth-century, the sublime became aestheticised and consequently depoliticised—more about misty mountain-tops and less about pain, death and human conflict. As the Abu Ghraib and decapitation videos attest, the political sublime is now the domain of the media—*not art*. Groys says “the fascination with images of the political sublime... can be interpreted as a specific case of nostalgia for the masterpiece, for a true, real image”. He continues: “The media—and not the museum, not the art system—seems now to be the place where such a longing for an overwhelming, immediately persuasive, genuinely strong image is expected to be satisfied.”²⁰ Groys argues that unless artists are willing to buy into an uncritical faith in representational truth, they’re potentially condemned to produce images of war that are, at best, harmless, and “the worst thing that can be said of an artist continues to be that his or her art is harmless”.²¹



Page 123: Shaun Gladwell, *Double Field/Viewfinder* (Tarin Kowt) (video still), 2010
Opposite page and left: Shaun Gladwell, *Double Balancing Act* (production stills), 2009-10
Photos courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery

There is, however, another alternative, which Amelia Douglas alludes to in her *Broadsheet* text on the previous Official War Artists commission of Charles Green and Lyndell Brown: “the role of the artist is not primarily to either witness or represent what has come about, but to unpick the realisation of the representation.”²² Gladwell’s *POV: Mirror Sequence Tarin Kowt* performs this kind of ‘unpicking’. This work manages to address its subject without surrendering to a faith in representational truth that would make it little more than ‘arty’ journalism. Similarly, although its subject is politically highly charged, the work is not ‘about’ the politics of war. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s interpretation of Gladwell’s work traces how, to some extent, the artist sidesteps representation and politics without becoming simply aesthetic. She says, “there are no narrative movements or structures in Gladwell’s works. Nothing ever really happens in them, even though someone is always doing something” and “instead of stories or even actions, he presents gestures and explores the meaning of gesture”.²³ Christov-Bakargiev draws on Giorgio Agamben’s short essay ‘Notes on Gesture’. Agamben argues that since early sequential photographic studies of human motion in the nineteenth-century, very few similar observations have been made throughout the twentieth-century, and that this may be because within our consumer culture our general lost control over gesture is no longer considered outside the norm. Agamben also says that the core of cinema is gesture not image, and thus the moving image belongs to the realm of politics and ethics, and not aesthetics. Agamben himself draws from Gilles Deleuze:

*Gilles Deleuze has argued that cinema erases the fallacious psychological distinction between image as psychic reality and moment as physical reality. Cinematographic images are... images themselves in movement, that Deleuze calls movement-images.*²⁴

It’s important here that I clarify the level at which Gladwell’s investigations of gesture enter the realm of ethics and politics. Gladwell’s works are not about politics and ethics; rather, they are *micropolitical* and *ethological*. At the moment of the execution of the work, and as Gladwell is slowing-down his recordings in post-production, his work doesn’t concern itself with the ethical or the political at a *macro* level, but opens up moments of gesture that examine the micropolitical—the elements that mediate the political, but are not in and of themselves political. And what about the ethological? In Deleuzian thinking, an ethological study is the study of two entities and their capacities to affect one another, before any wider consideration is given to broader contexts, such as ethics or politics. As Moira Gatens says “ethology may be understood as offering an ethics of the molecular—a micropolitics concerned with the ‘in-between’ of subjects, with that which passes between them”.²⁵ In other words, ethology is the microscopic treatment of the ‘molecular’ gestures and motions that make up ‘molar’ actions. Gladwell’s work often reveals internal logics within gesture and motion, which are always operating within larger actions, which are visible in the strictest sense but not always perceptible. Interestingly, *POV: Mirror Sequence Tarin Kowt* is one of the few video works by Gladwell that does not use slow motion; yet, it remains focused at this molecular level, on gesture and motion. In this work, the action itself is slow, as the artist and soldier stalk each other with deliberation, shuffling feet sideways, keeping each other in the centre of their camera viewfinders. The realtime movement of the vehicles in the background and the dust kicked up contrasts with their slow actions and creates a tension that would be dissolved by the slowing of motion we see in many of Gladwell’s other works. Gesture is still the focus, but it is powerfully contextualised by the serene but threatening 360-degree cyclorama of the Afghan landscape.

When Gladwell returned from Afghanistan in late 2009, his entire collection of still and moving images from the trip were vetted by the Australian Defence Force to ensure that they didn’t create a security risk, in case they included equipment, personnel and locations that might be of use to enemy combatants. And this serves as a reminder of a fundamental art historical truism popularised by Linda Nochlin, that art never stands outside of its world.²⁶ The works Gladwell produced from his trip are already, and always have been, part of the MIME-network. With works such as *POV: Mirror Sequence Tarin Kowt*, Gladwell both acknowledges and accepts this; but the work functions as neither fully complicit nor as points of resistance within the MIME-network. The value of this ethological study of action is as a reflective point of relative stillness and quiet within a network that inherently feeds on action and feeds back into it.

Notes

- ¹ Diana Streak, ‘Artists draw on scenes of conflict’, *The Canberra Times*, 10 July, 2010: 26
- ² Media Release 8 July 2010, ‘Streton, Hele, Amor and now Gladwell Double Field: Shaun Gladwell–Afghanistan’, Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 2010
- ³ Lola Wilkins, ‘Official War Art at the Australian War Memorial: How have artworks added to the texture of war history in Australia?’, *Agora* Vol 45 No 2, 2010: 19-24
- ⁴ *ibid*: 23
- ⁵ Mette Mortensen, ‘The Camera at War: When Soldiers Become War Photographers’, *War Isn’t Hell, It’s Entertainment*, ed. Rikke Shubart, Jefferson NC and London: McFarland & Co, 2009: 46
- ⁶ James Gow & Milena Michalski, *War, Image and Legitimacy*, Hoboken: Routledge, 2007: 9
- ⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn, London: Fontana, 1970: 240
- ⁸ James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*, Boulder: Westview, 2001: xx
- ⁹ Gow & Michalski, *op cit*: 9
- ¹⁰ Marcus Power, ‘Digital War Games and Post 9/11 Geographies of Militarism’, *War Isn’t Hell, It’s Entertainment*, *op cit*: 199
- ¹¹ *ibid*: 203
- ¹² *ibid*: 206
- ¹³ Rikke Shubart, ‘Digital War Games and Post 9/11 Geographies of Militarism’, *War Isn’t Hell, It’s Entertainment*, *op cit*: 2
- ¹⁴ Boris Groys, *Art Power*, London & Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2008
- ¹⁵ *ibid*: 131
- ¹⁶ *ibid*: 123
- ¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991: 11
- ¹⁸ Groys, *op cit*: 133
- ¹⁹ *ibid*: 127
- ²⁰ *ibid*: 127
- ²¹ *ibid*: 130
- ²² Amelia Douglas, ‘The Viewfinder and the View’, *Broadsheet* 38.3, 2009: 204
- ²³ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ‘Means with No End’, *MADDESTMAXIMVS*, Melbourne: Schwartz City, 2009: 110
- ²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000: 54
- ²⁵ Moira Gatens, ‘Through a Spinozist Lens: Ethology, Difference, Power’, *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, Paul Patton ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1996: 167
- ²⁶ Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, New York: Harper & Row, 1989