

# The art attacks heat up in war on propaganda

A new exhibition examines the War on Terror in ways that the mainstream media do not, says **Christopher Wood**

Two opposing opinions are sometimes voiced about the conditions necessary for art to flourish. The Truman Capote and Orson Welles versions, let's say. In 1956, Capote joined a US theatre company touring *Porgy and Bess* around the Soviet Union. He jotted down the noble sentiments expressed by the group's host at the Russian Ministry of Culture: "When the cannons fall silent... the muses are heard."

A lovely thought, but a flat

contradiction of a famous monologue delivered by Welles in the film *The Third Man*. Welles, playing Harry Lime, points out that centuries of peace and brotherly love in Switzerland had produced frighteningly little in the way of artistic glory. Unless one counted the cuckoo clock.

So which is it? Is peace or war most conducive to creativity? Is art a bloom more responsive to the milk of human kindness or to a bloodbath?

The War on Terror may shed some light. In the theatre, the re-

sponse to conflict has been lively. There have been plays based on the Hutton and Butler reports. *The Madness of George DUBYA* and its sequels, *A Weapons Inspector Calls* and *Guantanamo Baywatch*, are playing in the West End. And David Hare's *Stuff Happens*, titled after a typically unfortunate remark by Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of Defence, is packing them in at the National Theatre.

But what of the art known simply as "art"? Have artists been stimulated to express them-



**Mourning person:** Pia Lindman re-enacts images of grieving relatives culled from media

selves about that war? An answer might be found at the exhibition *Art in the Age of Terrorism*, shortly to open at the Southampton Institute.

Graham Coulter-Smith, its curator, explains what art can lend to the debate. "The fundamental problem about a discourse on terrorism," he says, "is that one is reduced to saying one side is good and the other is evil. The value of art is that it challenges the viewer to take more than one point of view."

"One of our exhibitors sent a piece that is basically al-Qaeda propaganda. It was about the 9/11 cell and was like a complete inversion of the way we see things. Our propaganda, or CNN's, for example, is the other way around. Instead of al-Qaeda being evil, you get George Bush is evil, it's the towers of terrorism that are being attacked. The people involved in the cell are heroes and martyrs. The significance of it is that it throws light on the way we think, and on the poverty of a discourse that reduces everything to good and evil."

Khaled Ramadan agrees about the goal of his work, which consists of three monitors relaying propaganda issued by al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and the Nation of Islam. "These things present the other side of the story we hear in the media," he says. "I like to see what the media of these groups publish and how they do their propaganda."

Not that Ramadan, who is Lebanese and lives and lectures on art in Copenhagen, is offering the groups free publicity with a straight rehashing of their material. "To present it in an art institution, one has to ensure it has artistic quality. You intervene and edit the material so it's not just as these groups want it to be. You pick up material that shows how they think and operate."

Coulter-Smith is also aware of the dangers inherent in presenting what is highly controversial material. "Balance is incredibly important," he insists. "The point

of showing this thing is not that we agree with what it's saying, but that it might make us think about our own propaganda."

Another artist in the show, Finnish-born Pia Lindman, who lives in New York and is professor emerita at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was also concerned with the operations of the media. Over one year, she collected from *The New York Times* about 400 images of people grieving — largely but not exclusively as a result of terrorist activity. Lindman traced these photos and ended up with out-

**'The value of art is that it challenges the viewer to take more than one point of view'**

lines of grieving gestures that she re-enacted before a video camera.

An hour-long video of 60 or so re-enactments is part one of her exhibit, which includes books of the tracings and a live performance element. The whole is to be known as *New York Times, September 2002 to September 2003*, the period from which the images were culled.

"The motivation for doing this piece was witnessing how people and their spontaneous reactions became politicised so immediately," Lindman says. "In re-enacting and repeating these gestures, I tried to equalise them. You don't know whether the gesture is performed by a Palestinian, an Israeli or whatever. The gestures are a language that appears to be universal, but what is revealed is how much it is not universal — it is politically mediated and culturally bound. *The New York Times* is a filter, and the politics are clear."

Artist Colin Darke's contribution to the show has been to print the entire text of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in Italian in three columns, representing the three sections of the poem. The spaces between the columns are intended to suggest the twin tow-

ers of the World Trade Centre. By so doing, Darke seeks to comment on the inherent racism in denunciations of Islamic fundamentalism by using a text that might be viewed as a specimen of Christian fundamentalism.

Jacqueline Salloum, another artist involved, describes her video *Planet of the Arabs* as "a short, trailer-esque montage spectacle of Hollywood's vilification and dehumanisation of Arabs and Muslims". Salloum, whose parents are a Palestinian and a Syrian, grew up in the US with Arabic as her first language.

She was so struck by the lack of positive representations of Arabs when she grew up that she once found it embarrassing to be one, which made it painful for her to survey more than 50 films over several decades of Hollywood output for her piece.

"Some of them you just have to laugh at, they're so ridiculous. The one that angered me most was *Rules of Engagement*. The Arabs were so dehumanised, they hardly spoke. And when they did, they were lying."

The show seems likely, then, to provide strong evidence that many artists are not only vocal on the subject of the war, but are providing a type of provocative discourse not always available in the media.

That's exactly as it should be, says Ramadan. "I have no doubt that art's role is essential for today's society," he insists. "In the past ten years, art has totally switched character. It's more social, based on social communication on a realistic level. Fantasy is nice, but you cannot be like the classical painters and observe from a distance. In contemporary art, you have to deal with reality on an everyday basis. It is the artist's responsibility to shed some light on the topic, to take an active part in society. This is your job."

*Art in the Age of Terrorism* will be held at the Millais Gallery, the Southampton Institute, November 11 to January 29.

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