

Art & Technology

## Terrorist Culture

IN THE FOURTH REPORT IN THE SERIES LOOKING AT ART AND TECHNOLOGY, REGINA GLEESON DISCUSSES HOW TECHNOLOGY-BASED ART HAS RESPONDED TO TERRORISM AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE



John Gerrard *Slow Death* (detail) 2002  
Twenty-two day long screen projection of realtime 3D model. Courtesy the artist

FOR most of us, our first encounter with global terrorism is through the lens of the almighty mass media. Even though we are presented with hourly updates of mass murder and general devastation, it is at the safe distance of a newspaper, TV or computer monitor and is presented in a tidy consumerist package. In the same moment, whether on the internet, on television or in print, we are presented with images of the utter devastation of war, shoulder-to-shoulder with advertisements for holidays in the sun, breakfast cereals or matching luggage sets. Terror has become the background to our day. Devastation is the background to our lives and is mixed with the saccharine sweetness of advertising's branded lifestyle. Dressed up in a nice news slot with uplifting introductory jingles, the content of the news-bulletin can become confused with the manner of its presentation. Cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard has famously said that the Gulf war never happened and that it was played out as a virtual event unfolding according to its pre-determined script. Art that engages in this technological and virtual sphere empowers us by offering the closest thing to a genuine space for democracy and an alternative view independent of corporate sponsorship.

I have chosen a selection of four digital artworks through which to discuss the role of art in the face of global terrorism. This discussion will seek to identify how new media art has it within its scope to re-adjust the lens through which we view, encounter and understand the volatile socio-political climate of our time, along with its contemporary landscape of war, bio-terrorism, military combat and consequent death.

John Gerrard's digital work, *Slow Death*, shows a single figure falling to his death in the moment after having been shot. The figure, a soldier, moves in ultra-slow motion so that his physical demise occurs over a period of 20 days, a time that corresponds with the time of intense fighting in Iraq in August, 2003. The animated character is presented in a sterile environment and has all of the glossy stylisation of a silver-screen action hero but is denuded of the high-speed antics, the adrenalin-fueled backing track and the instant regeneration in rising to life and fighting another battle just after having been killed. It presents us with a question about the glorification of war and the war hero, the stylisation of its screen imagery, the militarisation of life and is also a reminder of death as the consequential price of war. The space and silence this work creates is much more powerful than an all-singing, all-dancing 'wounds of war tugging on the heart-strings' kind of documentary/mockumentary. Tweaking the timeline in this manner of super-exposing a minute moment of an enormous event re-presents the devastation of war through the clarity of a small moment dissected.

*The House of Osama bin Laden* by Langlands & Bell is an interactive installation in which the viewer can navigate through the desolate desert environment of Bin Laden's former stomping ground in Afghanistan. With the aid of a joystick, the viewer can navigate their way through and around these empty, crumbling dwellings. There is precious little sign of life here and these evacuated houses do not look



Blast Theory *Desert Rain* 1998  
Interactive virtual environment, video still; image courtesy the artists

### Free Range Grain Critical Art Ensemble • Beatriz da Costa • Shyh-shiue Shyu



Critical Art Ensemble *Free Range Grain* 2003 screenshot from project's website.

like they have had human inhabitants for some time. Without the Bin Laden name in the title, the actual location would be anonymous but even with this specific reference, this work still doesn't seem to engender any particular response in the viewer about the infamous owner of these dwellings. As in Gerrard's work, this piece shows us a view beyond the one most often shown in the news media. We see the barren land after the exodus and explosion of war and wander through the houses after the TV camera crews have moved onto the next 'happening' location. This work has less to do with Osama Bin Laden than with our view of war and perhaps fine tunes our awareness of the collapse of the architecture of this society beside our sharp awareness of the fall of the physical economic centre of Western society.

While the previous two works stripped away the frantic pace of the high-impact all-guns-blazing type of representation of war and terrorism, the next one forces the viewer into the eye of the storm. Blast Theory's *Desert Rain* is an immersive interactive installation in which participants assume a particular identity related to the representation of war such as a soldier, a TV presenter etc. and must fight their way through this environment of combat. This forces the viewer to re-locate their perspective by making them an active participant in the urgency of the hostile war environment. More importantly, it requests a re-evaluation of our understanding of the borders between reality and fiction. This work was made in 1998 at the time of the Gulf war when the US forces aided the Iraqis in their military assault. It is interesting to note that the definition of who is the terrorist depends on whose side you support, or more aptly, from what perspective you view the events. At that time, the developed world was stunned by the images of war which came to us, literally, straight from the heat of the battlefield. Initially there had been a general fear and shock about these images but by the time the 2003 war in Iraq happened there had been such an unfathomable profusion of silver-screen imagery of war that apathy followed. This was not necessarily towards war or terrorism but towards the news media's



Langlands & Bell, *The House of Osama bin Laden* Screen shot from interactive digital animation, April 2003. In collaboration with W/Spanco/AB. Courtesy of the artists. An Imperial War Museum commissioned exhibition. From an exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2003.

representation of it. Therefore, it is interesting to see the contrast between the full-throttle total combat experience regenerated in *Desert Rain* and the silence of the aftermath in both *Slow Death* and *The House of Osama bin Laden*.

So what does the morning bowl of cornflakes have to do with images of war and our understanding of them? In short – the collaborative activist art group, Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). CAE member, Steve Kurtz's detainment has been widely publicised in the news media after having been subpoenaed by the FBI as a suspected bio-terrorist because they found what were thought to be potential implements of bio-terror at Kurtz's house. The FBI discovered a number of laboratory devices such as mobile DNA extraction units for testing food products for possible transgenic contamination. These can also be found in college laboratories and even some US secondary school labs. CAE produces artwork to educate the public about the politics of biotechnology and its entanglements with global economy and bio-terrorism. At the time of writing this article, Kurtz is facing up to 20 years in prison for the possession of harmless technological equipment that he used to determine the integrity of commercial foodstuffs like cornflakes to see if those labelled as not being genetically modified as pure as they claim to be. Even though the personal price for Kurtz and his collaborators is monstrous, the public's awakening to the authorities inability to determine an artist from a terrorist, as well as alerting to the insidious threat of bio-engineering in the hands of terrorists has certainly meant that their efforts and painfully regrettable misidentification have not been in vain.

This small selection of art makes one wonder at the notion of reality as being a mediated game and games as being reality. It is clear that art has a role to play in re-adjusting the lens through which we see and in questioning our ability to distinguish between the drip-feed perspective of politicised news, the downgrading of war to 'terrorist culture' entertainment by the entertainment industry and the malevolent reality of global terror. Through its use of digital media, technology-based art is able to destabilise the confused mix of glossy logo-branded life with the devastation of war and terror. In doing so, it subverts the tired belief that the message contained is no more than the medium that delivers it and prevents the reality of war from being nothing more than a background to our lives. Lastly, and unfashionable as pedagogy maybe, art has the potential to teach us about the very real dangers of the world in which we live.

Regina Gleeson

*Slow Death*: <http://www.thewas.co.uk/>  
*House of Osama bin Laden*: <http://collections.bnm.org.uk/series/show/ConWeb/D0c913>  
*Desert Rain*: <http://www.d2.org.uk/projects/deserrain.htm>  
*Free Range Grain*: <http://www.criticalart.net/desert/rain/>