



Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun

By Wafaa Bilal, Kari Lydersen

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Wafaa Bilal's childhood in Iraq was defined by the horrific rule of Saddam Hussein, two wars, a bloody uprising, and time spent interned in chaotic refugee camps in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Bilal eventually made it to the United States to become a professor and a successful artist, but when his brother was killed by an unmanned U.S. Predator drone, he decided to use his art to confront those in the comfort zone with the realities of life in a conflict zone.

His response was "Domestic Tension," an unsettling interactive performance piece: for one month, Bilal lived alone in a prison cell-sized room in the line of fire of a remote-controlled paintball gun and a camera that connected him to Internet viewers around the world. Visitors to the gallery and a virtual audience that grew by the thousands could shoot at him twenty-four hours a day. The project received overwhelming worldwide attention and spawned provocative online debates; ultimately, Bilal was named *Chicago Tribune's* Artist of the Year.

Structured in two parallel narratives, the story of Bilal's life journey and his "Domestic Tension" experience, *Shoot an Iraqi* is for anyone who seeks insight into the current conflict in Iraq and for those fascinated by interactive art technologies and the ever-expanding world of online gaming.

"Once I picked up this book, i could not put it down. There is something so urgent and compelling about Bilal's story, as though he is speaking to our time. His story is not just for those interested in the arts; it is a human story of the horror, frustration, and tragedies of war." —Mary Flanagan, artist and author of *re:skin*

"This is an unsettling and gripping book. It poignantly recounts a dark and imaginative experiment inspired by an excruciating and ghastly reality. Its unsettling effects couldn't be more welcome: we desperately need to be shocked out of our collective zombification, and this book does that by leading us through a wild labyrinth at once aesthetic, political, and existential. Potent stuff."

—Danny Postel, author of *Reading "Legitimation Crisis" in Tehran*

"Who in their right mind would allow the internet to shoot at them? Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life, and the Resistance Under the Gun tells the story of Wafaa Bilal. When his brother was killed by an unmanned Military device during the Iraq war, Bilal took it locked himself in a room, a camera showing him to the world with a remote controlled paintball gun connected to the internet, in the name of art and political statement. Bilal explains himself quite well, making Shoot an Iraqi fascinating reading." —*Midwest Book Review*

"Weaving together accounts of Iraq and America, art and violence, performance and reality, past and present, this gripping account all but shakes the reader by the lapels." —*Publishers Weekly*

Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal has exhibited his art worldwide, and traveled and lectured extensively to inform audiences of the situation of the Iraqi people, and the importance of peaceful conflict resolution. Bilal's 2007 dynamic installation "Domestic Tension" gained global recognition, being named Artist of the Year by the *Chicago Tribune*. Bilal has held exhibitions in Baghdad, the Netherlands, Thailand and Croatia; as well as at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, the Milwaukee Art Museum and various other US galleries. His residencies have included Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga, California; Catwalk in New New York; and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Weaving together accounts of Iraq and America, art and violence, performance and reality, past and present, this gripping account all but shakes the reader by the lapels. Iraqi-born artist Bilal records the month he spent confined in his 2007 interactive performance piece entitled *Domestic Tension*, living under constant fire from a chat room–controlled paintball gun 24 hours a day, his every move dogged and determined by the hostility—or benevolence—of his thousands of online viewers. The nerve-rattling conditions were intended to reflect both decades of suffering endured by millions of Iraqis and Bilal's own life and the costs of surviving Saddam's regime, Gulf War bombardment, Sunni-Shia violence, a brutal Saudi refugee camp and, finally, the difficulties and joys of the American immigrant experience. The author emerges as an Iraqi everyman, and his provocative book brilliantly juxtaposes images and time frames to convey the toll of war on Americans and Iraqis: We may think we are surviving, Bilal writes, but as I... twist and turn through sleepless nights, flailing between worlds of comfort and conflict, hope and despair, I wonder. (*Dec.*)

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Iraqi artist Bilal immigrated to the U.S. after Desert Storm, and channeled his haunting experiences into his performance pieces, culminating in *Domestic Tension*. For 31 days and nights, Bilal was the target of a paintball gun controlled by online participants who were invited to “shoot an Iraqi.” Video cameras recorded Bilal’s struggle to retain his composure if not his sanity as he interacted with shooters and viewers via a chat room and YouTube. Now he writes about his art and his life in Iraq, revealing overlooked daily struggles of existence under a dictator, in war, and during a long-term occupation. Ultimately the death of his brother back home via an unmanned American drone compelled Bilal to make his greatest artistic statement yet against all that makes the war in Iraq unreal to most outsiders. Recounting his own traumatic journey and the long-ranging effects of his bold installation makes for a powerful and demanding read that is, frankly, a literary punch to the gut. Bilal discloses all the risks he has taken with his art and asks why Americans are not willing to take their own chances and uncover the dirty truths about the Iraq War. --Colleen Mondor

Review

"Once I picked up this manuscript, I could not put it down...he [Bilal] is speaking to our time." --Mary Flanagan, artist and author of *re:skin* (MIT Press)

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"What is most remarkable about *Shoot an Iraqi* isn't, however, the chronicle of the project that brought him worldwide attention, but the back story. Weaved amid a narrative of the 31-day experiment is a memoir of

his life in Iraq and eventual flight to Kuwait and then Saudi Arabia, followed by his attempt to make a new life in the United States." --The Brooklyn Rail, November 2008

"'Shoot an Iraqi' is an invaluable work of political art and a clear-eyed view of the profoundly disturbing fate of present-day Iraq." --Shelf Awareness, December 1, 2008

"'Shoot an Iraqi' tells of Iraq's dissolution from a beacon of education in the Middle East to a locust-eaten state, mugged by a dictator and then punished from abroad for his offenses. Neither Bilal's exhibit nor this absorbing book about it can expiate Iraq's condition. Rather, they brilliantly demonstrate the lengths to which one man went to live history, and the disturbing--and occasionally hopeful--things he learned when he invited the entire world to do it with him." --John Freeman, Newark Star Ledger

"[A] highly readable, moving book." --Bea Leal, The Socialist Review

"Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal details a compelling interactive art project he undertook in 2007 . . . for 31 days in spring 2007, the artist, then a professor at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, lived in Chicago's FlatFile Galleries in front of a webcam and a remote-controlled paintball gun as part of a video game he created that allowed online players . . . to shoot paintballs at him--65,000 in total--sometimes relentlessly. . . . The self-imposed ordeal was also intended to comment on the remote-controlled warfare that allows soldiers to dehumanize their very human targets, including Bilal's brother Haji, a suspected insurgent who was killed with the support of a U.S. drone. For Bilal, who now teaches at NYU, art and life are inseparable." --Art in America, December 2008

"History simply refuses to leave some people alone. The Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal grew up under Saddam Hussein, survived two wars, was forced to live for periods at refugee camps in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and finally escaped to the U.S. in 1992 to study art. When his father and brother were killed during the latest U.S. invasion of his country, Bilal responded by creating the now infamous art piece Domestic Tension, in which the artist spent a month living in a Chicago gallery where Internet users could watch his day-to-day movements and, if they felt like it, take shots at him with a remote-controlled paint gun. By the end, more than 60,000 people had opened fire. Shoot an Iraqi--a name he initially considered for the installation--combines autobiographical narrative with a discussion of his work and its political implications." --Village Voice

Iraq artist Wafaa immigrated to the U.S. and channelled his haunting experiences into performance pieces, culminating in Domestic Tension: [sic] for an entire month Wafaa, on camera, invited online participants to 'shoot an Iraqi' with a computer-controlled paintball gun. His memoir about his life and the profound impact of his bold installation is powerful and demanding.-- Skillings Mining Review --Skillings Mining Review

"Most remarkable about this book is the thoroughly candid, unsentimental and non-martyr-making way that Bilal and Lydersen describe his life in the Middle East and the dramatic month in Chicago when he relived through art his own and his two nations' traumas. Lowering his defenses, Bilal offered himself up as the quintessential enemy, and then shared his catharsis with his friends and foes everywhere. That the art of war can cause so much suffering explains why there are so few recruits." --Art Asia Pacific

"*Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun* by Wafaa Bilal and Kari Lydersen recounts Bilal's journey, his life in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's regime, his survival of two wars, his life in refugee camps, plus 'Domestic Tension', a month-long live performance in a Chicago gallery with Internet users watching his every movement and taking shots at his with remote-controlled paint guns." --Banipal Magazine

Voted one of the Top 10 Arts Books of the Year 2009: "A staggering memoir by immigrant Iraqi artist Bilal, who staged a performance piece, during which online participants used a computer-controlled paintball gun to 'shoot an Iraqi.'" --Booklist Online

"*Shoot An Iraqi, art, life and resistance under the gun* . . . [is an account of] an interactive performance piece, illustrated, from a Iraqi brother for another brother killed by a U.S. Predator drone. `For one month Bilal lived alone in a prison cell sized room in the line of fire of a remote-controlled paintball gun and a camera that connected him to internet viewers around the world.' He was shot at 24 hours a day." -- Longhousepoetry.com --Longhousepoetry.com

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Karen Wells:

Do you have favorite book? Should you have, what is your favorite's book? Guide is very important thing for us to be aware of everything in the world. Each reserve has different aim or maybe goal; it means that publication has different type. Some people feel enjoy to spend their time to read a book. These are reading whatever they consider because their hobby is reading a book. Why not the person who don't like reading a book? Sometime, man feel need book once they found difficult problem as well as exercise. Well, probably you will require this Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun.

Patrick Pierce:

Reading a e-book tends to be new life style with this era globalization. With studying you can get a lot of information that can give you benefit in your life. Together with book everyone in this world can easily share their idea. Guides can also inspire a lot of people. Lots of author can inspire their own reader with their story or their experience. Not only the storyplot that share in the textbooks. But also they write about advantage about something that you need case in point. How to get the good score toefl, or how to teach children, there are many kinds of book that you can get now. The authors in this world always try to improve their ability in writing, they also doing some research before they write with their book. One of them is this Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun.

William Bixby:

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