Terror to scale

by MARTHA McWILLIAMS

Given the art world's current enthusiasm for socially conscious art, a show on terrorism was bound to happen. Its inevitability was only slightly less certain than its impossibility, for it's hard to imagine a more hydra-headed and intractable subject for art to interrogate. But the works chosen for "Beyond Glory: Re-Presenting Terrorism," recently on view at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, confounded negative expectations. On the whole, the 39 artists grounded loaded and overwhelming political issues in aesthetic specificity, thereby managing varied and dramatic commentaries on cruelty and oppression.

Conceived by Maryland Institute Exhibitions Director David Brown, who co-curated the show with independent curator Nina Felshin, "Beyond Glory" was the visual arts component of a larger series of events initiated partially in response to the deaths of two of the school's students in the crash of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, several years ago. In addition to the exhibition, the project comprised a play, *National Defense*; a series of films and videos, including Chris Bratton's and Annie Goldson's documentary, *Counterterror*, Lisa Rudman's *Geronimo Pratt*, and three videos by Shu Lea Cheang, among others; and a day-long symposium, "The Politics and Imagery of Terrorism," focusing on the academic and political discourses on terrorism. Bringing representatives of these various groups together facilitated an assessment of art's capacities for critique and commentary in contrast to the methods of other disciplines. The comparison justified the often made claims that art is a useful symbolic system for analyzing contemporary society.

Much "activist art"[1] today does not live up to those claims, but the individual pieces selected by the curators were ones in which sociopolitical ideas were, for the most part, thoroughly integrated into the art-making process and thought through in terms of materials and form, without subjugating aesthetic quality to political meaning. In fact, Brown and Felshin chose works that were not necessarily made by the artists to address terrorism, but when placed in the context of the exhibition these works explored related issues which opened up ways of thinking about the subject.

The symposium was another matter. It brought together many leading commentators and activists, including Alexander Cockburn, Randall Robinson, Margaret Randall, and John Stockwell, to analyze state terrorism. Their presentations were eloquent, convincing, and frightening, and because of the cumulative masses of data and the scope of cruelty they documented, they tended to overwhelm and numb the mind. This mental paralysis seemed a consequence of the commentators' use of the same materials and techniques—words, analysis, abstractions, and generalities—as the systems they critiqued, imprisoning them with the very mechanisms of the systems they attempted to describe.

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I was impressed as well by the disparities of scale presented in both the symposium and exhibition. The popular notion of terrorism conjures an image of the lone assassin acting over intercontinental distances, speaking for masses of the oppressed and murdered, challenging intricate bureaucracies and indifferent governments—a much less significant, although much more seemingly heroic, version than that of the state terrorism addressed in the symposium. This same vastness of contrast also characterizes the critiques of terrorism in which the single activist or tiny group confronts an enormous institutional apparatus—whether military (United States, British, Chinese, Israeli, etc.), governmental (the CIA and FBI), or cultural (the press and media establishment). The heroic aspect of these confrontations tends to deflect the mind from the enormity of abuses being described, thus terrorism becomes almost literally unthinkable.

Considered on a formal level, however, terrorism and the critique of terrorism take on a familiar shape. It is a shape, or perhaps more accurately a landscape, of incommensurate contrasts, of the very small and powerless under the control of the large and all powerful. The first and most basic experience we have of these contrasts is in the landscape of the family. It is there as children that we first experience the drama of helplessness, and, as the discourse of terrorism makes clear, human societies replicate it on a global scale. Psychologists tell us the drama is one we are condemned to repeat until we have accepted and integrated its lessons. Former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, the symposium keynote speaker, acknowledged this fact when he said an end to terrorism will come when there are "infants born healthy to people who love each other in a society of values that doesn't glorify violence."

In Baltimore, the art triumphed over powerlessness by retaining a human scale and employing a formal language of disjunctive contrast. In nearly every work the artists invoked a sense of the infinitely and/or pervasively powerful dominating the helpless, the vulnerable, the undefended. This abuse of absolute power was the moral lynchpin of the exhibition, while the identities of tormentors and victims alike were secondary, almost incidental.

Most of the works presented the individual reality of an experienced narrative or integrated viewers so effectively into an aesthetic experience they could be propelled logically from the specific to the universal. For the most part the artists avoided predictable cliches, merely "re-presenting" a few of the many faces of terrorism, of perpetrators and victims. With the possible exception of works by TODT and Alan Belcher, violence was *not* glamorized, victims were not idealized, cruel leaders were not uniformly villified. Instead, we saw the intractable complexity of human

Installation view, TERRY BERKOWITZ, "T/ERROR," audio, video, debris, surveillance cameras, monitors, 1992; LEON GOLUB, "Mercenaries I," acrylic on linen, 116" x 186 1/2", 1976. Photo courtesy of Maryland Institute College of Art.

beings and human society, placed in a context that made cruelty and suffering intelligible, but never entirely justified in the service of an ideal.

This refusal to glamorize and eroticize violence was perhaps the most remarkable achievement of the exhibition, because it defied the paramount characteristic of over 2,000 years of European narrative art. This tradition is, almost by definition, a narrative tradition of conflict. From the time of Greek vase painting, we have idealized the struggle of man against animals, man against man, man against woman, man against God. Sometimes the conflict has been internal—emotional or intellectual—the individual against him or herself. To express this content of antagonism, artists developed formal devices that were active and dynamic, quite literally stimulating the eye and mind.

Throughout Western European history this combination of form and subject matter produced images of great psychological intensity and excitement which in turn became erotic stimulants, transforming violence into something desirable to possess. As long as narrative imagery was linked to a sacred purpose, however, those energies were at least partially directed toward a spiritual meaning with transformative possibilities. From antiquity to the seventeenth century, the dominant narratives managed to achieve some sort of balance between the potential for spiritual awakening and the glamor of erotic desire. In the context of this exhibition, it is relevant to note the centrality in art of violence and suffering and their complex emotional overtones in even iconic Christian images: the crucifixions, the pietas, the martyred saints.

The idea of terrorism fits nicely into this tradition. In a way it's the ultimate narrative of conflict. Partly *because of* the horror terrorism produces, it's exciting, fascinating, and as such establishes one end of a continuum of eroticized violence that runs throughout American society, stimulating an addicted citizenry to consume more mindless activity, more information (or, as I read recently, "infotainment"), and more images in an eternal search for intensity. This is not happening only in the world of culture, but characterizes the political process as well, as the current presidential campaign demonstrates. At the same time, all intensity grows increasingly identical, producing a curiously abstract detachment.

Since the end of the Baroque era, art has found itself either illustrating political or social, rather than sacred, ideas, or reflexively examining itself. But the structure of conflict has remained—it was simply turned in on art's materials and processes. Certain artists, however, may now be emerging from this self-referential struggle.

The art in this exhibition certainly drew on the wisdom of recent formal and conceptual experiments, but transcended detachment by an apparent allegiance to the idea that art can still express something emotionally meaningful. A distinctive blend of reticence and commitment here produced a group of works which were willing to present suffering—without a diagnosis—as significant because it's human, not because it's exciting. This work allowed specific political conclusions to grow out of the felt responses of the audience and whatever knowledge the viewer brought to the art.

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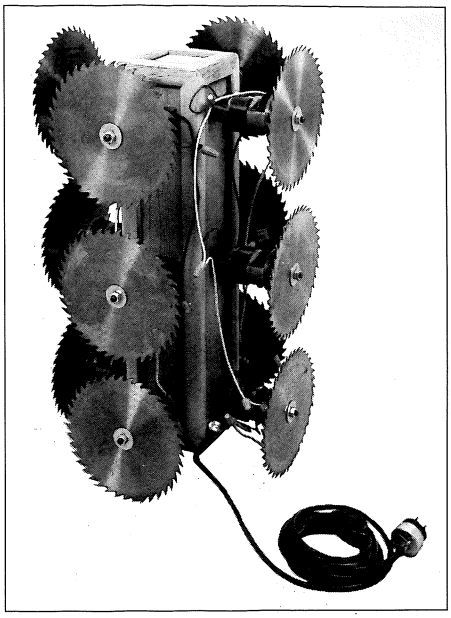
In general this effect seems to have been accomplished by presenting an aesthetic event—whether sculpture, installation, painting, or photograph—which viewers could not help but react to in a personal and immediate way. Performance and installation artists have developed this technique over the past few decades, and I was struck by how many of the sculptural and two-dimensional works in "Beyond Glory" embraced it as well. Form and material embodied rather than illustrated political events, so that the art, in this context, created a site for experience rather than an image for analysis.

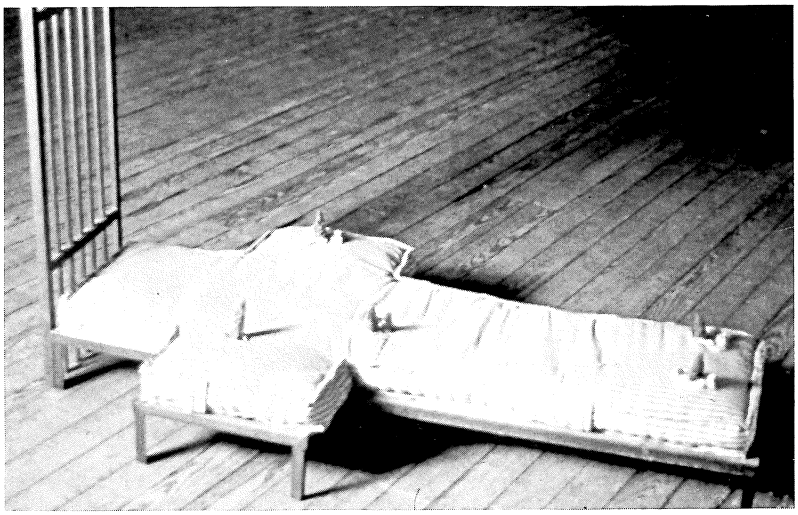


GREGORY GREEN, "Assault" (12 blade floor piece), saw blades, wood, and motors, 24" x 13 1/2" x 13 1/2", 1989. Photo courtesy of Maryland Institute College of Art.

A vivid example of this was Helen Altman's *Frost Queen*, an electric freezer with a glass window cut into its lid through which the viewer looks down into a wire basket containing ice hearts. Those frozen hearts set up inescapable reverberations between images of dismemberment, hoarding, cruel indifference, and the reticent banality of a domestic appliance.

Using very different references and techniques, Greg Barsamian produced, with his mechanized *Putti*, a flashy descendent of the European religious decorative tradition. Hung in a dark room illuminated only by a flashing strobe light, *Putti* is a whirling vision of Renaissance cherubs transforming themselves into helicopters, and from helicopters back into cherubs. It was both funny and macabre to watch as the putti arms lifted in one flash, and in the next appeared as helicopter propeller blades. In a way, the piece implied not only an end of innocence but an end of culture; the beautiful visions of art—those of Titian, Correggio and Tiepolo—replaced by images of mechanized destruction.

Even as they endorsed the reality of authentic human experience, most of the artists in "Beyond Glory" (Altman and Barsamian are good examples) also accepted the other reality of our "postnatural" world in which we are "tyrannized by human culture."[2] Life in this media-constructed and information-saturated world was labeled our "difficult religion" by Brown in his catalogue essay. He calls attention to the quantity of data and the range of images from which we construct "reality," our struggle to come to terms with the implications of that information, and the consequent awareness of how much of life is out of our control. Brown gave a more humane twist to the usual



MEL CHIN, "Jilavia Prison Bed," 1982. Photo courtesy of Maryland Institute College of Art.

Postmodern vision of a world of artifice and simulacra by suggesting, in both the text and in his exhibition choices, that art has the capacity to present a significant embodiment of human responses to that world. This humanism made the exhibition oddly optimistic (odd because of the unmitigated gruesomeness of its theme) and even restored my faith in the possibilities of contemporary art.

It's relevant that the most effective works, in general, were not two-dimensional "images" but sculptures and installations. Artists who do work two-dimensionally must, as many did in "Beyond Glory," employ recently developed devices for undermining the neutrality and/or authority of pictorial representation. This sort of critique occurs in the work of Mary Lum, who juxtaposes graphite drawings copied from newspaper photos with written accounts of violence and cruelty. Here, works from two series, "Accidents Happen" and "Historical Present," were hung in a grid so the texts were flanked by up to four images or vice versa. One piece describes the incineration of the home of a family whose children were diagnosed with AIDS, another the fatal crash of an Israeli school bus. Eventually image and narrative blur to form a neutralized panorama of violence.

A different approach was used by Paul Graham in his poetic photographs of Irish landscapes, which include IRA graffiti and political posters. These intrusions disrupt the images as violence disrupts Ireland. The strategies of Leon Golub and Nancy Spero are more familiar, both artists having pioneered Postmodern critiques of images of violence. They were represented, respectively, by *Mercenaries I* (1976) and *Search and Destroy* (1977).

Although frequently defined as the random act of a crazed individual, the first Oxford English Dictionary definition of terrorism is "government by intimidation . . ." Ramsey Clark defined it as "the use of fear to compel the conduct of other people." Annette Lemieux directly addressed this point in *Hidden Tool*. A police baton set into a cavity carved out of a volume recording the proceedings of the French Parliament of 1431 "documented" the real source of state power. This mute presentation of the "secret weapon" disrupting the linguistic record of governance reminded me of Margaret Atwood's poem which concludes, "Language, the fist proclaims by squeezing, is for the weak only."[3]

The image of the single terrorist, here identified as the leader of a terrorist state, was de- and re-constructed by Nancy Burson in a computer generated photocomposite of the faces of Hitler, Mussolini, Mao, Khomeni, and Stalin. She calls it *Big Brother*. These are of course the certified "bad boys" of modern history. It would be interesting to see if a similarly generated image of DeGaulle, Mountbatten, Johnson, Bush, and Sharon would produce a distinctively different visual character.

Exploring a range of the definitions of terrorism was one of curator Brown's purposes in organizing "Beyond Glory." Realizing that good art's examinations of these issues would be aesthetic, complex, and multivalent, he decided to organize the symposium to present the professional critique of terrorism on its own terms—in words and analysis. "I wanted each group to do what it does best," he explained. Art's expressive capacities balanced the analytical tendencies of the writers and activists, and both benefited from the combination. Art embodied the analysis in a more visceral way, while the presentations on history and politics resisted any tendency to minimize the art as "just imagination."

But, to return to Clark's definition, if fear is the main theme of terrorism, its subtext is violence, and it was to violence, the violence that Brown identified as conditioning the "difficult religion" in "postnatural" culture, that most of the artists in "Beyond Glory" turned. As the examples already given indicate, they found it ubiquitous in the modern world.

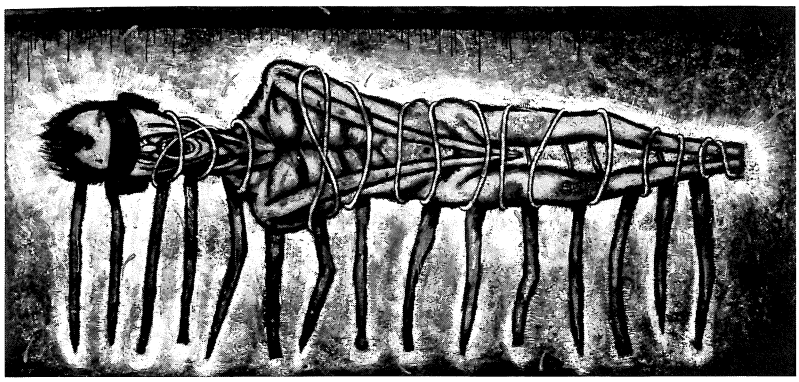
As presented by Brown and his staff, much of the exhibition, particularly the section at the Fox Building's Meyerhoff Galleries, was an installation re-creating various sites of state terrorism. Walls were covered with camouflage or constructed of chain link and corrugated metal. A wall of the video viewing room was covered with enlarged images reproduced from a 1966 U.S. Army manual for constructing booby traps. The combination of line-drawn diagrams and field manual prose made a fine Postmodern critique of "texts," merging seamlessly with context as a backdrop to other moving images of violence.

At both the Meyerhoff and the nearby Decker galleries surveillance cameras watched gallery visitors, some playing back on monitors as part of the exhibition. The cameras were acquired by the Institute for future use in a dormitory now under construction and were borrowed by Brown for the exhibition. Institutions (including governments) have used the camera for surveillance since it was invented, so here the facts of life and history solidified in an experience of art. In a similar fashion Terry Berkowitz's elaborate video installation *T/ERROR* effectively documented the wreckage following a terrorist attack on travelers. It also called up memories of the Pan Am crash over Lockerbie, Scotland.

The fascination/repulsion of terrorism and its imagery was eloquently, even exquisitely, articulated by certain works contrasting seductive materials or components with a macabre task. The elegant plastic surface of Craig Kalpakjian's *Station (Bullet Proof Casket)*, a coffin made of bullet-proof lucite, kept confounding the grim and absurd implications of the form. Likewise, Gregory Green's *Assault*, a construction of saw blades and motors mounted on a narrow wood cabinet, inconclusively combined the fascination of the mechanized toy with the possibilities of torture. It was a frightening enough object that no one at the Institute, according to Brown, was willing to "plug it in and see what happens." The show also included two untitled works by Green, one a sheet of photographic paper with 50,000 volt electric burn marks and the other a paper with holes shot through it by a .22 caliber rifle.

Certain artworks were unambiguous. Mel Chin's *Jilavia Prison Bed*, for example, was direct and emphatic. Spikes jutting up through the mattress on a metal bed frame left no room for playful, imaginative escape. Likewise, Luis Cruz Azaceta's *Latin American Victims of Dictators* confronted viewers with a blindfolded, screaming figure lying on a row of stakes. The artist's expressionistic style perfectly documented the painting's message. Alison Saar's bound female figure stuck with nails asserted a certain vision of the female human condition.

These qualities of intensity and commitment characterized much of the work in the exhibition and the attitudes of the artists themselves, to the extent they could be discerned in the work. They actually became the subject in Fred Riskin's *The Assassin and the Holy Ghost*, which purported



LUIS CRUZ AZACETA, "Latin American Victims of Dictators, Oppression, Torture and Murder," acrylic on canvas, 76 1/2" x 168", 1987. Photo courtesy of Maryland Institute College of Art.

to analyze a professional assassin's mentality. Text alternated with a series of increasingly imprecise photographs to induce the sensations of poetic insanity.

Willie Doherty examined intensity and commitment in the context of labeling and categorizing. In *Same Difference*, a series of descriptive terms was projected onto two images of the face of Donna McQuire, a woman accused of collaborating with the IRA. Such words as "delirious," "impulsive," "savage," "grotesque" alternated with "murderer" on one image. On the other, "daring," "fearless," "intuitive," "mythical" alternated with "volunteer." The face itself seemed to change its configuration to conform with one's feeling for the meaning of the word projected across it.

One work Brown was unable to acquire for the exhibition belongs to the U.S. State Department's Art in Embassies program. It is a landscape etching whose frame was blown off while it hung in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. The Plexiglas, the image, and backing board are still in place and it contains nine bullet holes. Brown said his request for the work was denied because "they didn't want people to think that sort of thing could happen to the art." A Sophie Calle-style installation describing the work that "isn't there" would have been an effective addition to the exhibition, documenting another form of "the disappeared."

A final word about terrorism. It became clear at the introductory symposium that the discourses of political activism, economics, political science, and journalism as exemplified by these practitioners are almost entirely free of the rhetoric of deconstruction and Postmodernspeak. Participants included scholar Edward Herman, American Indian Movement official Ward Churchill, Transafrica Director Randall Robinson, former CIA agent John Stockwell, Citizens in Support of the People of El Salvador Executive Director Angela Sanbrano, and Institute for Media Analysis Director William Schaap discussing "The Politics and Imagery of Terrorism;" and author/activist Margaret Randall, writer Alexander Cockburn, media analyst Michael Parenti, and independent video producers Chris Bratton and Annie Goldson discussing "Terrorism and the Role of the Media." Only Bratton and Goldson are visual artists, and only in their presentations did deconstructive jargon occur. It is now clearly the terrorism of the Academy, replicating the unintelligible-to-children language of adults, but I began to wonder if it is mostly confined to the humanities and liberal arts.

This jargon was present with a vengeance in Maurice Berger's catalogue essay "Visual Terrorism," in which he argues in favor of the violent persuasion of radical art. Taking off from Franz Fanon's argument in *The Wretched of the Earth* endorsing "violence for the masses," Berger explored, approvingly, a number of violent strategies available, via theory, to analyze contemporary art, particularly photography. He also alluded to certain activist artists and art, praising them for the "decentering trauma" their images cause. He writes, ". . . it is nevertheless important to rethink the relationship between terrorism, representation and culture. Indeed, the kinds of images and actions championed by radical (and sometimes not so radical) oppositional culture remain deeply threatening to the status quo. While sticks and stones, bombs and bullets can kill, maim, imprison, and even liberate, so might words and images."

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It is hard to decide which is more offensive, the overall tone of condescension in the essay, which no single quote can adequately illustrate, or the abstract flirtation with a violence from which American academic intellectuals, by reasons of race and class, as they always like to point out, are almost entirely insulated. It may be true, as Stendhal observed, that "academic phrases are official, and hence produced in order to fool someone,"[4] but in the context of this exhibition, it seems profoundly irresponsible to give violence intellectual respectability.

Theory is useful, of course, as the artists in "Beyond Glory" demonstrated by internalizing its insights and employing them as components of their craft. Altman, Lemieux, Doherty, Riskin, Lum, and Kalpakjian are good examples of this integration. But images today are not, simply by existing, predisposed to "move" us, no matter how violent their "rupture" of time or space or memory, etc. Since the Renaissance devices of pictorial composition—first perspective and the grids and screens used for transferring perceptual experience to a surface, and later the camera obscura and the Claude glass, and in our time the still, film, and video camera—have worked to *distance* us from experience of the content of the depicted image, although it may produce an intense visual reaction. This has certainly contributed, on the perceptual level, to the notorious alienation of contemporary life.

Ideas and opinions have gradually substituted for the broader experiential range provided by true aesthetic experience. Add to that our general inundation by imagery and it's quite remarkable an image can provoke any authentic response at all from a contemporary viewer. It is probably for this reason that, as I noted above, many of the most effective works in this exhibition were sculptures and installations.

Many of the pieces in "Beyond Glory" *did* move us in complex ways because the artists avoided "visual terrorism." Most of them identified intuitively that universal ground where we are all both terrorists and terrorized and reported particular instances in which viewers could join. They refrained from the generalizations of theoretical posturing and judgement, allowing the works and the experience they re-present to speak, on art's terms, for themselves. ■

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NOTES

1. This term was used by Donald Kuspit in his essay "Art and the moral imperative" (*New Art Examiner*, January 1991) to describe art commenting on social issues.

2. William V. Dunning, "The Concept of Self and Postmodern Painting: Constructing a Post-Cartesian Viewer," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 49, No. 4, Fall 1991, p.333.

3. Margaret Atwood, *Power Politics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 31.

4. Stendhal, "Letter VIII" of *Racine et Shakespeare II*, quoted in Rosen and Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism* (New York: Viking, 1984), p. 11.