

Art and Conflict

Seeing Conflict Differently: Art as a Tool to make Visible

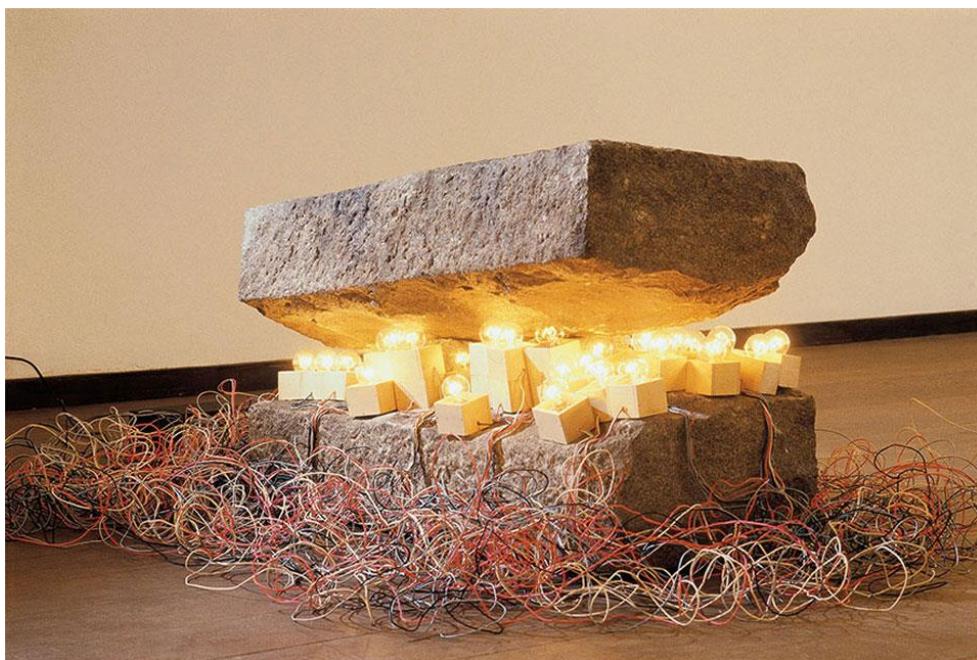
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Abstract

This short piece explores how art can be considered, beyond a representation of violence, an epistemological endeavour to comprehend conflict differently. It argues that materiality, through artistic expressions, might disrupt a conventional set of meanings, turning visible narratives, subjects and bodies. In order to pursue this argument, this work will dialogue with works from Rio de Janeiro's plastic artists that discuss contemporary violence in the city to highlight how art could function as mechanism of reflection of the very conditions of thinking and appearing.

Keywords: Art and War; Aesthetics; Epistemology; Violence; Materiality

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[image 1: "Untitled" (1985)]

The work above is by Frida Baranek, a plastic artist from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, well known for using everyday materials such as aged iron, used wood, and useless electrical wires. The phenomenological approach to the objects occurs precisely because these materials have been taken away from their ordinary use, appearing in a singular way. As if she can abolish the very function of objects, while still letting them be recognizable for those who see. In this way, and remembering Merleau-Ponty on perception,² seeing the material differently allows different ways of thinking or, even, different ways of imaging materiality around us. In this work, "Untitled", Baranek explores the distressed experience of looking at this arrangement. An experience explored in such a way we might feel the oppression of living in Rio's *favelas*. Taking the Vidigal *Favela* architecture, paradoxically situated

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty is a French philosopher who turns to Husserl phenomenology whilst highlighting the body's role at apprehending the world. Merleau-Ponty advances that "true philosophy consists of relearning to look at the world" in M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge, 2002), p.xxiii. According to this line of thought, Merleau-Ponty argues that the way we apprehend and create a meaning to the world around us is through the perception of its materiality. Thus, perception is fundamental to understand both the construction of knowledge and the production of subjectivities.

right next to one of the most expensive city's neighbourhoods, her work highlights the brutality and suffocation of living in these sites, along with the banalization of an imminent danger of shootings and military interventions.

"This is too much!", said once Goya witnessing war atrocities in his "Disasters of War" (1863).³ Deciphering images of violence is not a recent phenomenon, especially in the field of Security Studies. However, even though conflict has been presented in paintings, photography and poetry, there is an ethical debate regarding how framing violence might lead to its aestheticization.⁴ In other words, introducing conflict beautifully in an aesthetic sense would undermine the relationship between image and viewer, in which the latter might not respond accordingly, either because the image is evaluated by its aesthetic formality⁵ or because "one cannot [stand] looking at it",⁶ to quote Goya once more.

Aware of these *problématiques*, my claim is that the relationship between art and conflict cannot be restricted to represent conflict *as it supposedly is*. Although there is an interesting literature on Art and War, I attempt to look at how art could go further than only representing *what is real*. That is, the conditions of possibility of thinking violence otherwise through art. After all, fields of knowledge work with abstractions as well: "War, the core area of IR, has been abstracted into the language of strategic weaponry and games to the detriment of scholarly inclusions of bodies, death, and killing".⁷ In this sense, it is not to say that it lacks images from conflicts (perhaps there are too many lately...), but instead another way of looking at them, identifying gaps in visual sense-making of the world.

³ F. Goya, *The Disasters of War (1863)*, (Dover Publications, 1967), p.48.

⁴ M. Reinhardt, 'Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique', in Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, and Erina Duganne (eds), *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain* (Williams College Museum of Art/The University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp.14-16.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.21.

⁶ F. Goya, *The Disasters of War (1863)*, p.48.

⁷ C. Sylvester, 'Art, Abstraction, and International Relations', in *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 30 (2001), p. 540.

My argument is that works of art inform a relevant epistemological mechanism to comprehend violence alternatively. This means to transcend art's representational language, embedded into the sublime, to a place in which art operates as a disruption of phenomena. In Jabri's words: an "art [which] comes into the realm of the political (...) when it problematises its own boundaries as well as the boundaries of the subject".⁸ Hence, instead of considering art as object of analysis, it is far more interesting to look at them when these images take a position. That is to say, when images act upon the world affecting creations of meanings. Thus, an epistemology that engages in a sort of intersubjective understanding, translating "one domain to another",⁹ specifically in the studies on conflict. To pursue this argument I will draw on works from artists of Rio de Janeiro dealing with the daily events of urban conflict.

The relationship between artistic expressions and war is not exactly recent. We could identify, overall, some patterns in which artists "have blended colours (...) to depict wartime (...) practices and symbols".¹⁰ In the history of conflict, for a moment, governments wanted to create a record of conflicts by sending artists to warzones, which naturally raised a debate on artistic freedom and censorship.¹¹ In this aspect, it is worth noting the problem of witness authenticity, which excluded gender approaches, for instance. Moreover, works such as Paul Nash's paintings, such as "The Menin Road" (1919) and "We Are Making a New World" (1918),¹² denounced war as full of horrors, inquiring against its heroic images. In addition, there is

⁸ V. Jabri, 'Shock and Awe: power and the resistance of art', in *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 34 (2006), p.820.

⁹ A. Danchev, *On Art and War and Terror* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p.4.

¹⁰ J. Bourke, 'Introduction', in J. Bourke (ed), *War and Art: a visual history of modern conflict* (Reaktion Books, 2017), pp.7-42.

¹¹ I should note that this practice is still recurrent, for instance, with "embedded reporting". The term means incorporating journalists and photographers into military units to cover onsite military operations. The condition to do so is to comply with restrictions imposed by the military unit, especially regarding the content of images and regarding which operations would be disclosed.

¹² P. Gough, 'A Concentrated Utterance of Total War: Paul Nash, C.R.W. Nevinson and The Great War', in J. Bourke (ed), *War and Art: a visual history of modern conflict* (Reaktion Books, 2017), p.270.

significant expressivity in artists against war, in which art operates as an instrument of mobilization. One of the most emblematic examples comes from artistic interventions against the Vietnam War, such as protests in front of Picasso's *Guernica* at MoMa in the 1970s,¹³ and works such as Jenny Holzer's "Lustmond" (1993)¹⁴ and Haroun Faroucki's "Eye/Machine" (2003).¹⁵

Certainly, there are plenty of examples of the "art of war". All expressions carry limits and potentialities of representing violence, especially concerning how the audience would look at it. Far from dismissing these movements, I attempt to look at violence in a way that art would *de-sublime* it. Alternatively, how art might actually function as a dispositive of enlarging comprehension on violence, propitiating a materiality of affect, in a Deleuzian sense¹⁶.

Cildo Meireles' works during the Brazilian Dictatorship (1964-1985) provides an accurate resemblance to what I am arguing. Meireles, at that period, aimed to develop another way of knowing the world through his "insertions into ideological circuits", in which art would be a synthesis between sensorial and mental relations. In this sense, "circuits" considered how art acts directly upon ideas' circulation in society. One of his most striking interventions was stamping messages on paper bills to disrupt official narratives from the authoritarian regime. In one of the notes in use, he stamped "who killed Herzog?" (1975), a reference to the death of journalist Vladimir Herzog after being arrested by agencies of political repression. In this

¹³ S. Malvern, 'Contemporary War; Contemporary Art', in J. Bourke (ed), *War and Art: a visual history of modern conflict* (Reaktion Books, 2017), p.183.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.183.

¹⁵ *Eye/Machine*, dir. By H. Farocki (Harun Farocki Filmproduktion, 2003), online at <https://www.harunfarocki.de/installations/2000s/2000/eye-machine.html> (Here and subsequently, all internet links were last accessed on 12 November 2019).

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze turns to Spinoza to explain *affect*, based on a philosophy contrary to rationalism. In discussing, for instance, cinema, Deleuze argues that affect is another kind of information that prompts to think or perceive differently. In this sense, something that one sees, hears or even feels, and one did not feel before. Affect, then, is not something given or thought, but it consists of events that stimulate reconsideration in how to see and feel things. G. Deleuze, *Cinéma 1. L'Image-Mouvement* (Minuit, 1998).

way, Meireles enlarges art as a *de facto* intervention in common materiality to affect truth regimes of knowledge¹⁷.

In a more recent example, artist Thainã Medeiros, in the work “News Revisited” (2019), rescues original newspaper articles from Brazil regarding a military police operation at Rocinha *Favela* “correcting” them¹⁸. In it, one sees the original article’s title and text being re-written in red according to subjects who lived through violence in another frame.



[image 2: “Correção de Matéria” (2019)]

¹⁷ *Inserções em Circuitos Ideológicos – Projeto Cédula* (1975), in Online Collection Memórias da Ditadura online at <http://memoriasdaditadura.org.br/obras/insercoes-em-circuitos-ideologicos-projeto-cedula-1975-de-cildo-meireles/>.

¹⁸ *O Globo Journal* (18 August 2017), p.1.

Another example comes from Brazilian plastic artist Igor Vidor with “Esquemas”. Between these breaches, we see bullets that distort a perfect framing. Using actual bullet cartridges from Rio de Janeiro's conflict zones, we see a fragmented narrative, but it is a story without bodies framed in a geometrical discourse, a country's abstraction. A “aseptic functionalism”, according to Vidor, which is a national project that did not foresee how certain bodies did not participate in the "social contract" while pursuing development¹⁹. The painting tells us what we have not been seeing politically in public space, from materiality that disrupts the aesthetic experience of reality: bullets that split paths and missing bodies. Even though traditional media covers shootings in favelas; these traditional frames of conflict often misread the experience of living in such devastating conditions.

¹⁹ I. Vidor, *Schemes*, in Igor Vidor's Portfolio online at <https://www.igorvidor.com/esquemas>.



[image 3: "Esquemas" (2018)]

Certainly, art helps us to comprehend violence in its unspeakable texture. Turning to oil paints, or to cameras allows that most narratives of the unimaginable become imaginable to those who

did not witness the conflict; or even to those who were present, but did not find any possible word to explain it. Nevertheless, engaging aesthetically as a disinterested attitude towards the sublime does not allow a reconciliation with the world that appears before us. As Hannah Arendt remarks, it is artists and poets who are builders of monuments without whom 'the history that mortals play and recount would not survive an instant'.²⁰ When works of art take position, they urge us to look into images to see the conditions of the possibility to know the present of time. "Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible", according to Paul Klee.²¹ It appears to me that, in the end, the creative question is how to see/know differently despite all suffering.

²⁰ H. Arendt, *Condition de l'Homme Moderne* (Calmann-Levy, 1994 ed.), p.230.

²¹ Centro Cultural do Banco do Brasil, *Paul Klee: Unstable Balance* (Ministério da Cidadania, 2019), p.17.