

Eugenie Dolberg: Open Shutters Iraq

Reviewed by Bernadette Buckley

“I think our reporting of the Middle East is lethal.” Robert Fisk

It is now almost exactly eight years since ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ began. During that time, mainstream media has made Iraq into an object of intense scrutiny. We’ve been shown documentaries justifying or condemning the rationale for invasion; high-tech simulations demonstrating the mechanics of the invasion; graphic illustrations of the economic costs of the war; images of devastation wreaked by suicide bombers and other kinds of conflict; people mourning dead friends or digging bodies out from under rubble¹; a statue falling in Baghdad; hooded men electrocuted or tied up like dogs in Abu Ghraib; photographs of American civilians hanging from a bridge in Fallujah; images of fleeing refugees; Saddam Hussein’s dental examination following his being tracked down to a hole outside ad-Dawr; his execution on the scaffold and men throwing their shoes at George W Bush. What, after all this, remains to be seen? I do not ask the question ‘rhetorically’. What remains to be seen is nothing less than the ongoing and enduring consequences of invasion for millions of unnamed, under-valued human lives— about whom we hear and see virtually nothing. Perhaps, if we more clearly saw what remains of these lives, we would ask, as millions of Iraqis do, why? Was it worth it?

Open Shutters Iraq is a project which implicitly speaks to such questions. Initially conceived by Eugenie Dolberg and managed by Irada Al Jabbouri, the project began life in 2006-7. Women from five cities in Iraq came together to plan a series of photo-stories about their lives. This publication² includes nine of the project’s photographic essays. Often classified (dismissed) as ‘non-professional’, or as ‘participatory action research’ projects run by anthropologists and ethnographers, the images produced by such projects are routinely described as ‘intimate’ or ‘touching’. But by relegating these images to the merely ‘domestic’; by consigning them to the ranks of the ‘amateur’ is to fail to observe their considerable political significance.

Everydayness isn’t newsworthy. And thus, despite all the special coverage, exclusive reports, iconic images, so very little has been seen of the daily lives of those who live in Iraq.³ In their friendship, fear, fearlessness, depression, fury, bitterness, joy, defiance—in short, in their everydayness—these images tell us what we need to know. They tell us that Iraq is gone.

Through one image, I peer out between tight, veiled windows. Behind me,

everything is dark. This is my home but it's not my sanctuary. It's my prison. I see bullet holes in kitchen walls. During the first invasion of Fallujah, "we were unable to enter the kitchen for days... snipers shot anything they could see moving." All night long, Mariam wanders "around the house shoving tables in front of all the doors...so I'll hear them when they come."

I look onto the streets beneath photographed windows—uncannily empty. I see rubbish scattered everywhere like bits of offal; scorched, decapitated palm trees; broken, half-walled-up buildings waiting for the time when they will finally keel over. These are not the open, democratic spaces of a newly 'liberated' Iraq as promised by American and British politicians. "I felt", Mariam says, "like my city had been transformed into a huge concentration camp." The women's images show us cities controlled by fear: fear of snipers, kidnappers, police, militia. So too, do their accompanying writings. Here for example, Lujane describes how she starts every day, standing on a balcony in Baghdad:

"Every morning the sound of Fairouz singing on the radio battles with the car horns, ambulances, sirens and the blasts of explosions. I'm a lecturer in a college. Normally, it would take an hour to get to work, but these days I arrive as the day is about to end."

What these images show us, at last, is the un-making of Iraq. And while, nowhere in the book or in the women's descriptions has this project been described as 'political', its inherent politicality lies in the fact that they demonstrate (the absence of) a people's right to the cities that they live in. As David Harvey shows, "the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is... one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights."⁴

In part also however, the politicality of these images lies in their relationship to 'mainstream' media. Normative discussions and images of Iraq are rooted in formations of power, the latter of which are generally invisible. This is because, the 'public sphere' operates according to what Judith Butler has called, 'rules of differentiation.'⁵ These rules operate implicitly, making certain kinds of speech possible and others, impossible. And thus, despite an enormous amount of press coverage, Iraq can, before our eyes, vanish. Or, to put it more precisely, it can be un-created:

"Shuhada'Bridge was one of my favourite places in Baghdad. We used to really enjoy watching people fishing, spreading their nets, absorbed in their work, and singing their songs...But now the bridge is closed."

Or, as six year old Dima, more directly, puts it:

"I feel like Iraq is becoming empty... everyone we know and love is going away..."

Thus looking at Open Shutters, we have, as Joyce put it in *Finnegan's Wake*, "two thinks at a time". We see what we see and, through the eyes of the women, we see also that which we don't see—those same deserted streets, once beautiful, once pulsating with life. And it is this presentation of the unrepresentable which

makes these photographs essentially political.

For me, the most affective photographs and writings are those by six year old Nima. Picture after picture, Nima shows what is important to her: her friends sitting on the schoolbus (“it is called the ‘Squeeze and Crush bus’ because Abu Nizar, the driver, arranges one on top of the other to fit us all in, as if we are sardines in a tin”). She shows us her and her mum’s shadows falling on concrete barriers near her school. “It’s just next to the schoolguard’s house that was blown up”. “I love our area” Nima says, “it’s the best neighbourhood in Baghdad. Nothing bad happens here... well once a sniper shot a woman while she was walking past the generator in our street...I took a different route to school that day.” Nima shows us her friend Nour’s hands pushing through the garden gate; little Farah sitting “like an old man on his chair and praying”; Nour’s yellow skirt being “blown up like a balloon in the wind”. “I love them a lot”, she says. And this is all we need to know.

I am not proposing that these photographs are somehow more ‘authentic’ than those that populate the news and internet. As Judith Butler says, “even the most transparent of documentary images is framed and framed for a purpose” (Butler, 2009: 70). The women make no attempt to claim that these photographs represent ‘the truth’ about post-invasion Iraq. But the political significance of this work in part lies in the way that it demonstrates the limits placed on, what Butler calls “representability”, as opposed to ‘representation’. (Butler, 1998: 255) The field of vision is structured; images are mandated in order to comply with state and defence departmental requirements. And this delimiting of what we are given to see, is part of an operation of power that does not itself appear as a figure of oppression. But photographs taken by a handful of Iraqi women bring into view that very staging apparatus; that form of power which as Butler argues, is “non-figurable”. Hence, these photos show us how the norms of ‘professional’ photography can produce what Butler calls, “the nearly impossible paradox of a human who is no human”—how such news photography, rather than depicting human lives, can drain their humanity away. Open Shutters however, presents us with images which are testament to the lives of those who live with conflict not as ‘an event’, but as a persistent background to everyday life. They do not purport to speak on behalf of Iraqi women. They use photography to transform their experiences into aesthetic and political strategies of resistance. They begin, in the words of Russian poet Ossip Mandelstam, “to sow wheat in the ether”.

Notes

1 There is still no reliable mechanism by which to estimate the amount of deaths resulting from this action. Tolls are highly disputed and vary wildly from approximately 100, 000 (Associated Press ‘count’) to that of the ORB, which suggested a violent death toll in excess of 1.2 million. Polls, including those by Lancet, Iraq Body Count and the Iraqi Government Health Ministry use diverse ‘counting’ systems. To my knowledge, none of the ‘violent death’ polls conducted since occupation, have yet counted deaths related to the US use of radio-active depleted uranium.

2 The project has also been shown in exhibition form and via a film by Maysoon Pachachi,

Our Feelings Took the Pictures: Open Shutters Iraq.

3 As Georges Perec once said, "the daily newspapers include everything except the daily".
Perec (1997):205.

4 Harvey, New Left Review, 53, 2008

5 Butler, 1998: 253

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