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The Age of Ambiguity: Art and the War on Terror Twenty Years after 9/11

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ABSTRACT

9/11 and its aftermath was to have a dramatic impact on the visual arts and the artistic response to the War on Terror. This study surveys the evolution of these responses from the dramatic events of 11 September 2001 to the longer term reactions generated by the two-decade long encounter with the so-called War on Terrorism, primarily via the Imperial War Museum's *Age of Terror/Art Since 9/11* exhibition of 2017–2018. The analysis suggests that the visual artistic response moved from the initial amazement at the destruction of the Twin Towers, through satirical caricature of the terrorist persona, to a trite predictability that mirrored official equivocation about the threat posed by violent jihadist activism. Artistic endeavor on these terms became notable only for its moral ambiguity and complicity in self-censorship rather than contributing to the creation of artwork of enduring value.

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The events of 9/11 and their aftermath had a remarkable impact on both the cultural life and aesthetic perception of the West. The novel, the film, and televisual media, found in Islamist inspired violence, and the Western response to it, a rich source of material for exploring and reflecting upon the human condition. Representations of war and terror post-9/11 through the mediums of literature, film and TV drama evinced a range of reactions. Although sometimes the depictions of terror were stereotyped, clichéd and sensationalist, at their best, as in novels by John le Carré or television dramas like *Homeland*,¹ or the highly regarded French series *Bureau*,² these dramatized depictions could capture the difficult moral choices, expediency and cynical decision making sometimes necessary in situations where no self-evidently obvious *jus in bello* rule might apply. Films like *Eye in The Sky* (2015)³ intelligently captured the “trolley problem” concerning whose lives might be sacrificed to save others,⁴ and the difficulty of avoiding “dirty hands”⁵ in the context of a humanist response to apocalyptic violence perpetrated in pursuit of a non-negotiable political religious end and committed to the management of savagery.⁶ But what of the more obvious visual and aesthetic response provided through the vehicles of artistic representation?

The extraordinary impact of the fall of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, recorded on film as it occurred, and transmitted globally, had an immediate impact both on the public and the artistic imagination. Karlheinz Stockhausen, the *avant-garde* composer, assessing the event a week after the attack, considered it “the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos.”⁷ A year later, the radically chic

British artist Damien Hirst told the BBC: “the thing about 9/11 is that it’s kind of an artwork in its own right. It was wicked, but it was devised in this way for this kind of impact. It was devised visually.”⁸ From the outset, Richard Schechner has argued, the mainstream media “marketed 9/11 and the second Iraq war as a made-for-television series.” The series, “including the broadcasting and rebroadcasting of iconic images of the explosions, fires, destruction, aftermath and war, constitutes an absorption of events not only in the popular imagination, but also a presentation of events as *objets d’art*.”⁹

9/11, in this sense, underlined Edmund Burke’s insight into the character of *The Sublime and the Beautiful* that the most exquisitely executed tragedy in the imitative arts could never compete with “the delight in seeing things” that we would not wish to endorse or see done. Whatever is qualified to cause terror, Burke wrote, induces “the sublime” and was “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”¹⁰ In this context, “astonishment” [from the ancient Greek *thauma*] constituted “the office of the sublime in the highest degree.” Its “inferior degrees” involved “admiration, reverence and respect.” Thus, Burke observed: “We find something agreeable in astonishment, something satisfying about the horrible.”¹¹ More particularly, as Vernon Hyde Minor noted, we are aestheticized by horrific events of great human significance and “our inability to comprehend and... to accomplish something of this magnitude.”¹² This is particularly challenging for the artist. As Schechner contends, aestheticization is not the only response to an event like 9/11. “Making art about them – in protest, awe and sometimes support – is another response.”¹³ Given that most of what we call art today also carries an ethical or political judgment, what messages does contemporary art in the “Age of Terror” – the title of a 2017–18 exhibition at the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in London – convey?¹⁴

Painting, prints and lithographs, more perhaps than any other media, have enjoyed a long and ambiguous relationship with violence, war, propaganda and statecraft. From the sixteenth century, the nascent early modern state became increasingly interested in visual depictions of its authority and images celebrating or symbolizing its successful prosecution of war. How, we might wonder, did Western state subsidized artists depict the “age of terror” in their work?

Art, the State, and War

The modern state system emerged in the seventeenth century from the religious wars that devastated Europe and culminated in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Developments in printmaking and lithographs captured the catastrophic impact of the long wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Jacques Callot, reacting to the pitiless violence of the Thirty Years War (1618–48), produced a seminal series of eighteen etchings depicting *The Miseries and Misfortunes of War* (1633).¹⁵ Subsequently, visual artists sought to capture the human consequences of organized military violence and particularly its impact on civilian life. Francisco Goya, nearly two centuries after Callot, portrayed the sorrow and desolation that Napoleon’s peninsular warfare campaign inflicted upon his native Spain in paintings like *The Third of May 1808* (1814)¹⁶ and his series of prints of *The Disasters of War*.¹⁷

By the time of the First World War, Western governments employed war artists to capture the experience of war for posterity. In 1917, the British government founded the Imperial War Museum (IWM) to collect and commission contemporary art on war related themes and experiences. As Sarah Bevan, curator of contemporary art at the IWM writes, “the positions, ambitions and approaches of the artist and their work were... very different at that time.” Historically, “monarchs, religious leaders and governments,” Bevan continues, employed artists “to record wars.” “The resulting works were, more often than not, shaped

by the commissioner.”¹⁸ More precisely, although not self-evidently, Bevan claims that war artists like Stanley Spencer and John Nash’s images of the battlefield, which recorded their experience of the Western Front, also served the interests of the state commissioning it.¹⁹ By contrast, the artistic response to contemporary conflict, notably since 9/11, is “shaped by the media and the internet with their apparent promise of immediate access to events.”²⁰ What, then, might the visual artist contribute to our contemporary understanding of war and terror?

In her study of *Art from Contemporary Conflict*, Bevan argues that prior to 9/11 there had already been a shift toward “a personal or conceptual response to conflict.” This shift toward “conceptual commissioning” dated from the appointment of Angela Weight as the IWM’s Keeper of Art in 1982.²¹ This postmodern approach attracted high profile artists and the work produced became “more probing, challenging and thought provoking,” according to Bevan. From the 1980s, the Arts Commission Committee (ACC), consisting of IWM curators and external advisors, commissioned art projects.²² The ACC’s sphere of reference relates to all wars in which there was involvement by British and Commonwealth forces, including Iraq and Afghanistan, and also Northern Ireland.

In commissioning new work, moreover, artists were no longer necessarily embedded within the military. Some worked with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) whilst others acted “independently.” As warfare evolved at the millennium, so too did “the structure of the way in which the artist works.”²³ For many independent and increasingly critical and conceptual artists, the label “war artist” itself became problematic. Critical and radically pacifist artists like kennardphillipps perceived the label “as having connotations of a traditional establishment sanctioned viewpoint very different to the innovative and often challenging actuality.”²⁴ Consequently, the IWM, like similar official bodies in the United States, Australia and Europe, increasingly commissioned conceptually “challenging” works, “very different to the government-instigated projects of the First and Second World Wars,” which although “unconventional and ambitious for the period,” nevertheless served a role that “was ostensibly one of propaganda.”²⁵

By contrast, the post-9/11 approach to art and warfare, embraced by curators like Bevan herself, assumes that “we now live in a permanent state of emergency; from the Cold War to the War on Terror, the nature of warfare has changed dramatically and this has had a significant impact on the way it is visually represented. Weapons like drones can be controlled over thousands of miles and terrorism can be home grown.” Accordingly, “war is no longer confined to geographical boundaries or physical sites.” As a result, official collections and gallery spaces in Western democracies must consider “a whole host” of factors including “the moral and legal issues around conflict and security, surveillance, asymmetric warfare, cyber warfare, radicalism and sectarianism.” Art derived from contemporary conflict therefore “must probe and unpick these often abstract concepts, in the context of their all too concrete and terrible consequences.”²⁶

This view of the role of art as one that should facilitate a deconstructive gaze upon contemporary violence, in fact, reflects and reinforces developments in critical academic theorizing about terrorism and the role of Western democracies in enabling it.²⁷ Observing this evolving ideological gaze and its impact on contemporary art in the 1990s, the cultural critic, Roger Kimball, noticed how it exhibited a preoccupation with “novelty and extremity” and a tendency “to substitute a hectoring politics” for any artistic ability or insight.²⁸ As it has now become the quasi-official approach to curatorial practice, especially in the United Kingdom and Europe, it is worth examining further what precisely visual art, and especially state sponsored but critical art, add to our understanding of the age of terror and particularly of non-negotiable religious terrorism perpetrated both domestically and internationally.

The Equivocal Cultural Response to 9/11

The curiously, and increasingly, ambivalent Western aesthetic and artistic response to asymmetrical violence, which culminated in the IWM's *Age of Terror: Art Since 9/11* exhibition (2017–2018), actually predates 9/11. Its inchoate, ostensibly “reflexive” and deconstructive, stance dates from the end of the Cold War. In the British context, this movement may be traced to the then Conservative government's inept response to the Salman Rushdie affair in 1989.²⁹ The controversy began with the government's indifference to the leaders' of the Barelwi community of British Pakistani Muslims symbolic public burning of Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, some passages of which were allegedly insulting to the Prophet Mohammad.³⁰ The government's decision to ignore an intransigent minority censoring works of art – in this case books – it found offensive created a dangerous precedent. The succeeding Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair went onto codify this precedent in the *Racial and Religious Hatred Act* (2006), which gave the precedent effective legislative sanction.³¹ As the French scholar Olivier Roy discerned, the European Muslim response to Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* had, in fact, “little to do with importing Islamic radicalization to Europe.”³² On the contrary, it represented the first premonitory snuffling of the dialectical clash between a *sui generis* “EuroIslam” with the secular, progressive, liberal universalism whose tolerance of the intolerant, somewhat ironically, made possible both the publication of Rushdie's novel and the protests against it.³³

For over a decade Rushdie required police protection, and over 30 years after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* he still lives a life in hiding.³⁴ Reflecting on the Rushdie affair, Christopher Hitchens presciently detected in 2009 that the demonstrations, fatwas and death threats represented “the opening shots in a cultural war on freedom” of expression.³⁵ This cultural war reflected what the radical French feminist, Caroline Fourest, identified as a distinctive assault on blasphemy, or the secular right to speak or caricature sacrilegiously any sacred thing. In *Praise of Blasphemy* (2015), Fourest, drew attention to how, over the twenty-five years since the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, European governments and the European Union had adopted a quasi-official policy of state neutrality toward the self-development of minority communities. Endorsed after 9/11 by the progressive multicultural attempt to empathize with or cherish minority cultural understandings, it not only closed debate but also restricted the language, including the language of artistic expression, in which debate might be conducted. It is this evolution and its implications for art and the images of terror it both permitted and censored that require clarification.

War on the Western Culture of Artistic Representation

The next shots in the evolving cultural war on sacrilege and its impact on the visual image occurred after 9/11. They were fired on 2 November 2004 when a Dutch Islamist of Moroccan descent, Mohammed Bouyeri, gunned down the filmmaker Theo van Gogh as he cycled to work in Amsterdam.³⁶ Van Gogh's supposed blasphemy consisted in making, with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a short art video film, *Submission*, that questioned the Qu'ran's treatment of women.³⁷

Whilst galleries like Exit Art, an alternative gallery space in New York City, had already mounted exhibitions reflecting the sense of amazement at the impact of 9/11, van Gogh's work was the first to respond directly to the impact of an intransigent Islamist political religion on a secular Western sensibility after 9/11. By contrast, the Exit Art exhibition, *Reactions: A Global Response to the 9/11 Attacks*, in January 2002 merely reflected the fact

“that people everywhere had an urgent need to freely communicate their feelings publicly.”³⁸ The gallery had therefore “sent out a worldwide appeal by letter and e-mail for individuals to send in creative responses.” The results “included heart-felt and highly personal creations: drawings, paintings, photographs, collages, letters, digital prints, poems, and graphic designs – with sophisticated work by internationally recognized artists hung side-by-side with drawings by children.”³⁹ As the Library of Congress notes relayed: The curated exhibition revealed “a wide variety of social, cultural, and emotional reactions to the terrorist attacks, the... works expressed strong feelings – grief, fear, anger, hope, patriotism,” and, most notably, a “strong anti-war sentiment.”⁴⁰

The aesthetic response, in other words, conveyed the sense of sublime amazement that the attack generated, rather than any hostile or negative attitudes toward its perpetrators. This was not the case, however, with van Gogh’s polemical examination of what submission might mean for Muslim women. The cultural warfare that a secular, satirical, artistic, or literary representation of Islamist, or religiously motivated, terror evoked escalated dramatically the year following van Gogh’s murder and Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s flight to America after she was somewhat questionably stripped of her Dutch nationality.⁴¹ After the home grown “7/7” attacks in London in July 2005, the Tate Gallery quickly canceled an exhibition that featured an installation by sculptor John Latham titled “God is Great,” which showed torn up copies of the Qu’ran, the Bible and the Talmud.⁴²

Meanwhile, in Denmark, a children’s writer complained that he could not find an illustrator for a book on the life of the Prophet Mohammad, while Salafist inspired Muslims assaulted a lecturer in Copenhagen for reading verses from the Qu’ran to non-Muslim students. In response to these acts of censorship, Flemming Rose, the culture editor of *Jyllands Posten*, a mass circulation Danish newspaper, commissioned twelve cartoons depicting “The Face of Mohammad,” published on 30 September 2005.⁴³ In 2006, the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Mecca condemned Denmark for using freedom of speech to defame religion.⁴⁴ Global demonstrations against the cartoons broke out. Jihadists attacked Danish, Austrian and Norwegian embassies in Syria and the Lebanon and burnt down churches in Nigeria.⁴⁵ Following these attacks, Scandinavian, Swiss, German and Dutch newspapers published the Danish cartoons in a display of solidarity.⁴⁶ The British, Australian and U.S. press failed to follow suit.⁴⁷

In France, the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* demonstrated its support not only by publishing the *Jyllands Posten* cartoons, but also by publishing a cartoon of its own. It depicted the Prophet dismissing his fanatic adherents with the comment “C’est dur d’être aimé par des cons” (It’s tough to be loved by these jerks).⁴⁸ The Paris Mosque subsequently brought a prosecution against the magazine under France’s hate speech laws.⁴⁹ The court, however, dismissed the claim against the publication, declaring its editor-in-chief, Phillipe Val, innocent of the charge of making “public insults against a group of people because they belong to a religion.”⁵⁰

In November 2011, in the wake of the Arab Spring and the election of Islamist parties to power in Tunisia and Libya, which proposed to introduce a “moderate” form of *Sharia* law, the French satirists published a *Charia Hebdo* special issue. It featured the Prophet as guest editor explaining what “sharia lite” might involve. In a press statement the magazine declared: “To celebrate the victory of the Islamist Ennahda party in Tunisia... Charlie Hebdo has asked Muhammad to be the special editor-in-chief of its next issue. The prophet of Islam didn’t have to be asked twice and we thank him for it.” The press release stated that the cover of the next issue would show Mohammad proclaiming: “100 lashes if you are not dying of laughter.” It would also feature an “editorial piece by the Prophet entitled Halal Aperitif and a women’s supplement called Madam Sharia.”⁵¹

In 2013, Al-Qaeda placed *Charlie Hebdo* on its most wanted list.⁵² On 7 January 2015, home grown jihadists, brothers Cherif and Said Kouachi, burst into its editorial offices opening fire with Kalashnikov AK-47 rifles, killing twelve people, including its editor, Stéphane Charbonnier, while shouting “We have avenged the Prophet Mohammed.”⁵³ On 11 January nearly four million people demonstrated in Paris to support freedom of speech, creating the “*Je suis Charlie*” (I am Charlie) slogan, intended to signify global solidarity in support of the principle of freedom of expression.⁵⁴

In the weeks following the attack, however, the mainstream media, academics and politicians began distancing themselves from the magazine’s satire and its evidently blasphemous cartoons. *Je suis Charlie* rapidly mutated into “*Je suis Charlie, mais...*” (I am Charlie but...). Even Pope Francis seemed to accept that the cartoonists had brought the violence upon themselves, stating that: “Its normal. You cannot provoke. You cannot insult the faith of others. You cannot make fun of the faith of others.”⁵⁵ Interviewed on Sky News about the post-massacre issue of the journal on 14 January 2015, Caroline Fourest, a former contributor to the magazine, asked, “How can I comment on the *Charlie* cover without showing it?” which, of course, she did. It showed an image of the Prophet sporting a “*Je suis Charlie*” headband.⁵⁶ The cameras panned away and the interviewer apologized “to any of our viewers who may have been offended.”⁵⁷ As Fourest commented afterwards, “we are talking here about a news channel in a democratic country... thinking that people cannot be grown up enough to decide if a drawing is offensive or not.”⁵⁸

What became clear from the temporizing of the media establishment in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks was that the official, European, progressive post-9/11 mindset had difficulty in portraying Islam as anything other than a peaceful religion. Naturally, this lack of willingness to question, interrogate, or criticize reinforced an evolving climate of media, academic and above all artistic self-censorship. Few would admit the more accurate underlying motivation for adopting this posture. Cross-dressing contemporary British artist, Grayson Perry, confessed to the *Times* in November 2007: “The reason I have not gone all out on attacking Islamism in my art is because I feel the real fear that someone will slit my throat.”⁵⁹ As journalist Nick Cohen remarked in his study of the increasingly censorious political and artistic climate in the West: “A little fear goes a long way.”⁶⁰

In effect, in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* affair, the corporate media along with European and U.S. political elites endorsed, in the name of diversity, a minority practice of religious intolerance. Tolerating intolerance on the grounds of blasphemy came to legitimate a growing and widespread condemnation of statements or artistic representations that might cause offense on British, European and North American campuses. Hate speech, trigger warnings and no-platforming campaigns were the inevitable consequence.

Such an illiberal outcome was quite a remarkable achievement of the post-Cold war progressive mind. After all, it had taken several centuries of confessional conflict to establish secularism and tolerance of religious difference in Europe and throughout the West after the convulsions following the beginning of the Protestant reformation in 1517. In France secularism was part of its modern republican identity. The revolution had in its 1791 *Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen* (Declaration of the Rights of the Citizen) eradicated blasphemy from French law. Thereafter, in Fourest’s words, it was not a crime to talk “sacrilegiously about God or sacred things.”⁶¹ Indeed, further political reforms of 1881 and 1905 enshrined freedom of the press, separation of Church and State, and removed the offense of “moral and religious outrage” from the French legal code, guaranteeing a right to blaspheme.

Somewhat differently, in the Anglosphere, the renunciation of religious persecution or toleration was initially articulated in John Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1686). Tolerance for Locke denoted forbearance rather than approval. It is actually with John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty* (1859) that we find "a celebration of pluralism" and philosophical arguments for moral diversity.⁶² Mill, it is worth recalling, begins his defense of the liberty of thought and discussion with the optimistic hope that the time had long past, when "the freedom of the press" and of speech would need to be defended "as one of the defenses against corrupt or tyrannical government."⁶³ He further observed that those who desire to suppress an objectionable idea or image, "of course, deny its truth; but they are not infallible." Indeed, "to refuse a hearing to an opinion because they are sure that it is false is to assume that *their* certainty is the same thing as *absolute* certainty. All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility."⁶⁴

However, the events from the Rushdie affair onwards witnessed academe, the law and the media, throughout Europe, condoning minority viewpoints that assumed such infallibility and took violent exception to a particular verbal or artistic expression deemed blasphemous or disrespectful.⁶⁵ A vocabulary of racism, Islamophobia, diversity and empathy closed debate whilst accommodating a climate conducive to violence at the expense of secular freedom and individual liberty of thought and discussion.⁶⁶ How did this curious political accommodation between what Fourest terms "fanaticism" and the multicultural, progressive, illiberally "liberal" left evolve, especially after 2003, and what were its implications for censorship in general and artistic freedom more particularly?

Closing the Western Mind

After the invasion of Iraq, the anti-capitalist wing of the trans-national progressive movement in the West experienced what Nick Cohen described as a "dark liberation."⁶⁷ Following the Europe wide demonstrations against the Iraq war in February 2003, critical progressive thought recognized that achieving global emancipatory transformation increasingly required opposing the "civilised barbarism" and hegemonic universalism of the U.S. and its allies. This "critical" theory approach regarded the recourse to jihad, not as a violent attempt to impose Islamist values, but as a form of emancipatory "resistance," perpetrated by a small, but alienated, Muslim minority.⁶⁸ It also considered home grown terrorists victims of an oppressive capitalist social order. In this understanding, in fact, there is terror as the weapon of the weak and the far worse economic and coercive terror of the liberal state.⁶⁹ Whether it was Michael Adeybolajo and Michael Adobelawaye hacking to death of British Soldier, Lee Rigby, in the London suburb of Woolwich in May 2013 or the Kouachi brothers attacking the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, or Ahmedy Coulibaly, who killed four hostages at a Kosher Supermarket in Paris in January 2015, the ideology of what has been termed "trans-national progressivism"⁷⁰ came to consider home grown jihadism as the inevitable product of a fractured society and a capitalist global order. European proponents of this Olympian tendency in progressive thought, like the academic contributors to the journal *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, or the Parisian radical feminist and filmmaker, Rokhaya Diallo, or Seamus Milne, former *Guardian* columnist turned adviser to British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, considered Western foreign policy, rather than a literalist interpretation of the Qu'ran, as the main stimulus of Islamic State style jihadism in the West.⁷¹

From this perspective, jihadists motivated by an apocalyptic political religion possessed no active agency. Advancing this critical worldview required transvaluing or radically re-describing, secular, democratic, pluralist values like freedom of speech and opinion. It

also required the active compliance of the West's corporate media and academe in the development of an attenuated political vocabulary to foreclose what might be expressed about particular cultures or identities. The evolution of this version of communicative reasoning increasingly favored speech acts that limited debate by concealing and preventing thought. It labeled pejoratively those who attempted to disclose, for example, the totalitarian purificationism explicit in Islamism's political religion. The BBC's editorial guidelines that advised journalists to describe terrorists as "militants" and qualified Islamic State with the adjective "so-called" were perhaps the most obvious examples of official complicity with this rhetorical development.⁷²

The pejorative noun "Islamophobia" proved particularly helpful in censoring any criticism not only of Muslim culture but also, by extension, of Islamism. George Orwell would have recognized that such an abstract term inscribed a worldview and "mental habits proper to the devotees," and, in the process, "makes other forms of thought impossible."⁷³ Its adventure, as a word, is worth exploring. Shi'ite propagandists first coined the neologism in the wake of Ayatollah Khomeini's 1979 Green Revolution in Iran. A decade later, in London, those campaigning against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* realized they had more to gain by transforming their status from assassins implementing the Ayatollah's *fatwa* against Rushdie to that of victims of Islamophobia.⁷⁴ In Britain the Runnymede Trust and the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), a London based and UN recognized NGO, promoted the term via its 1997 report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, the publication of which was, in fact, launched by the then Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw.⁷⁵ IHRC founder, Massoud Shadjareh, hands out annual awards for "Islamophobe of the Year." The 2015 ceremony, held less than two months after the Paris attack, awarded their international prize to *Charlie Hebdo*.⁷⁶ Islamophobia treats any criticism, and particularly any caricature of Islamic fanaticism, as a form of racism against Muslims in general. It thus functions as a semantic signifier deterring any criticism of Islam or, by implication, Islamism.

European progressive thinkers and politicians embraced the term. The French government funded *Conseil Francais de Culte Musulman* (CFCM) encourages research into French Islamophobia. In 2014, the *Collectif Contra l'Islamophobia en France* (CCIF) somewhat predictably identified, "a wave of Islamophobia" sweeping the country.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, in Britain, both Islamists and critical political and international relations theorists found Islamophobia increasingly helpful for promoting their emancipatory ethics and their commitment to transforming world society. Progressive academic theorists applied it to Western foreign policy and its destructive international consequences both before and after 9/11.⁷⁸

In 2018, an All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims defined Islamophobia as "rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness."⁷⁹ The All-Party Parliamentary Group called upon the government to criminalize such expressions and impose penalties upon those who resorted to criticism that a Muslim might consider phobic. In this way, an impeccably liberal minded cross-parliamentary group appeared willing to give official credence to the concept of Islamophobia and thereby prevent any exposure of the political dissimulation the term conceals. "If words are weapons," Fourest argued, Islamophobia "is one designed to hurt secularists while feigning to target racists."⁸⁰

Those who detect Islamophobia in any secular criticism of Islamism's political religion also found the recourse to violence explicable in terms of a grievance culture and its root causes that breed alienation. Thus, for critical and progressive thought generally, home grown jihadis are the victims of a social order that already condemns them.⁸¹ Jihadists, like the Kouachi brothers and Ahmedy Coulibaly, were – according to this view – merely "the fruit" of French social and political realities, "the product of a fractured society."⁸² For the filmmaker, Rokhaya Diallo, French secular democracy, not the Qu'ran, creates

terrorists.⁸³ Even President Barak Obama, before the Bataclan massacre of November 2015, considered France, unlike the U.S. or Britain, to have a “problem” with integrating its Muslim population.⁸⁴

Given its progressive attachments, the liberal media, the art and literary world and academe proved eminently co-optable in this latest ideological endeavor, to make “lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”⁸⁵ The mainstream media, allied to a wider progressive concern after 9/11 with balance, impartiality and cultural sensitivity, proved particularly helpful in disseminating this relativist perspective on jihadist violence.

Consequently, in the wake of the massacre of *Charlie Hebdo* journalists in 2015, news networks like Sky News, the BBC, CNN, NBC and ABC (Australia) not only refused to show the magazine’s cartoons but further ensured that the opinions of those who supported the victims of the Paris attack were, in Fourest’s words, “counterbalanced by those who support the killers’ point of view.”⁸⁶ In February 2015, Channel 4 News in Britain interviewed Abdullah al Andalusi who compared the position of Muslims in contemporary Europe to that of the Jews in Nazi Germany, equating the murder of the *Charlie Hebdo* journalists with the 1936 assassination of the Nazi publisher, William Gustlaff.⁸⁷ The interviewer failed to challenge the assertion of equivalence between a drawing of the Prophet and a period of overt Nazi collective repression when Jews had their citizenship systematically revoked.⁸⁸ By endorsing al Andalusi’s moral relativism, corporate media outlets often failed to discriminate between a democratic opinion and a totalitarian practice. More worrying still, it is often only the apologists for politically motivated violence that are permitted a voice in the ethically responsible, progressive, Western media.

As it evolved after 2003, this progressive academic, media and political orthodoxy, came to absolve jihadists of responsibility for their actions, blaming it instead on contingent factors like colonialism, racism, poverty, or, after a series of lone actor attacks across Europe between 2015 and 2017, madness, generated by the anomie that the perpetrator/victim experienced in his Western isolation. In this manner, the progressive mind came rationally to explain the murderous action, whilst at the same time empathizing with it. In the process, it chose to ignore the somewhat inconvenient fact that most home grown terrorists did not turn to violence because of poverty, but out of choice, and for politically religious reasons.⁸⁹

“By naming things wrongly,” Albert Camus observed, “we add to the misfortunes of the world.”⁹⁰ The practice of state neutrality toward the self-development of minority communities, at least as articulated by its self-appointed spokespeople, means equality and social justice now, in Fourest’s view, “consists in respecting the totems and taboos of each community to ensure peaceful co-existence.”⁹¹ Such a perspective has evident authoritarian implications. If the purpose is always to avoid offense, then we end up “importing the laws of dictators and fanatics and placing their sensitivities” above the law.⁹²

Moreover, the corporate Western media’s decision to censor images that may give offense to a Muslim minority gave perverse credence to the assumption that those satirical journals like *Charlie Hebdo* must have published unacceptable or pornographic images. It implies that the offended have the right to be angry and, therefore, react violently. Self-censorship, allied to an anti-secular relativism, reinforces religious and cultural taboos, making it increasingly impossible to offer any criticism of a minority identity (except, of course, Christian, Jewish or white male) that might give offense and be considered “hate speech.”

Thus, by a curious mutation in postmodern thought and practice, Western democracies came to tolerate the intolerant. Of this liberal paradox Karl Popper discerned that “unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance.” In fact, “if we are not prepared

to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed and tolerance with them.” Popper maintained that a liberal polity did not need to suppress intolerant philosophies, provided they are countered with rational argument in order to “keep them in check by public opinion.” Yet it may turn out, as Popper foresaw, that the fanatic might not be prepared to meet the open mind “on the level of rational argument” and teach his followers instead to answer argument or criticism with violence. In this context Popper advised that a pluralist democracy must claim “in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant.” A modern democracy characterized by conditions of deep pluralism that fails to understand the implications of Popper’s paradox cannot long survive.⁹³

The Culture of You Can’t Say That: Art in the Age of Terror

How, we might finally ask, has the growing proclivity for self-censorship and tolerating the intolerant impacted on the capacity to create meaningful works of art after 2015? Since the sixteenth century, European secularism and its preference for reasoned skepticism, from Montaigne to Voltaire, Hume and later Camus and Orwell, questioned taboos in order to promote reflection and dialogue. This distinctively European philosophical style and practice accepted disagreement as a necessary condition of individual and political freedom. By contrast, the model of official state neutrality that evolved across the West after 9/11 accepts and respects non-negotiable identities and their taboos whilst seeking to manage, rather than question, their ideological and behavioral excesses. This constitutes the new and illiberal default response to an increasingly totalitarian “other.”

The fear of being called Islamophobic, an increasingly “woke” predilection for tolerating the intolerant, combined with the dread of provoking violence, has acted to silence open debate about the rise of Islamism and its impact upon the practice of secular democratic politics in the West. Over the past decade, not only the mainstream media but also the art world in particular opted for moral equivalence, self-loathing and self-censorship.

After the *Charlie Hebdo* attack exhibitions and plays were canceled across Europe, though in fact this merely exacerbated a trend already evident before 2015.⁹⁴ One event on *Art and Violence* that went ahead in Copenhagen featuring Lars Vilks, a Swedish cartoonist who had drawn an image of the Prophet, closed on its opening night in February 2015, after a jihadist attack upon the exhibition failed.⁹⁵ The progressive arts, rather than defending or celebrating the culture, secular values, and the distinctive civilization the West has created, instead now actively participates in its censorship. The only art about terrorism that can now be publicly exhibited displays an officially approved mixture of collusion and relativism, where artists “offer a range of perspectives” questioning “the War on Terror” and its impact.⁹⁶ The Imperial War Museum’s *Age of Terror: Art Since 9/11*, which opened in October 2017, unintentionally captured how this progressive, and increasingly illiberal, ideology determines what can and cannot be said about terrorism and jihadist violence since 9/11.

Staged in IWM’s centenary year, *Age of Terror* was “the largest contemporary art exhibition ever staged by the Imperial War Museum.” It reflected “the increase in the number of artists responding to conflicts in recent years,” said Sanna Moore, the exhibition’s curator.⁹⁷ As its promotional literature explained, it was also the “first major exhibition of artists’ responses to war and conflict since the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001.”⁹⁸ It featured more than 40 British, European and international artists, including Ai Weiwei, Grayson Perry, Gerhard Richter, Jenny Holzer, Mona Hatoum, Alfredo Jaar, Fabian Knecht, Coco Fusco, Jake and Dinos Chapman and John Keane.⁹⁹ The exhibition displayed some

“50 works of art including film, sculpture, painting, installations, photography and prints” that highlighted “the crucial role of artists in representing contemporary conflict.”¹⁰⁰

The exhibition took 9/11 “as its starting point; the catalyst which altered public perception of contemporary conflict.” “The complex issues surrounding the global response to 9/11, the nature of modern warfare and the continuing state of emergency in which we find ourselves” have, the IWM contends, “become compelling subject matter for contemporary artists.”¹⁰¹ According to Rebecca Newell, IWM Head of Art, the exhibition “picks up on a widely developing canon of work by artists looking at issues relating to contemporary conflict – new types of conflict that aren’t as easy to categorize as in the past.” She continued: “September 11 was a watershed in our society, our political and cultural identity. And I think you could probably say that it’s a watershed for artists, too.” Newell proclaimed that the strength of the show was its multiplicity of voices. “It is actually quite a balanced view on lots of the issues that are raised, and if it comes down on a more negative side, it’s because that’s precisely what the artwork reflects.”¹⁰²

At the same time, and somewhat contradictorily, the exhibition was also “about drawing attention to the complexity of these situations and actually steering people away from direct causality because it’s not particularly helpful when looking at contemporary conflict,” Newell asserted.¹⁰³ Rather more accurately, the curator of the artworks, Sanna Moore told *The New York Times* that the show reflects how the West has changed, and not for the better through “mass surveillance... and detentions without trial.”¹⁰⁴

Ultimately, according to Newell, *Age of Terror* “is about the artists’ responses to the events of 9/11 and afterwards, and we interrogate broader themes about how our society has changed as a result.”¹⁰⁵ What, we might wonder, do these voices have to say about the surveillance society and “the perpetual state of emergency” in which the IWM claims we now exist?

The age defining artwork displayed explored not only personal reactions to 9/11, but also the manner in which Western civil liberties have been “compromised and security and surveillance amplified.” This was, and remains, a legitimate sphere of concern to interrogate. A visitor to the exhibition, though, would quickly have become aware that the compromised civil liberties at stake were those of Muslim minorities after 9/11, not those of cartoonists or filmmakers assassinated for having an “Islamophobic” reaction that deviated from the prevailing progressive orthodoxy. Wandering through the rooms devoted to *Art Since 9/11* the spectator would struggle to find any reference to Theo van Gogh, *Jyllands Posten* or *Charlie Hebdo*’s cartoons or “the complex issues” they might have raised.¹⁰⁶ Instead, the show addressed four themes: the artists’ responses to 9/11; the intensified levels of state control after 2001; advancements in weaponry, particularly drone warfare; and the destruction caused by conflict that has “turned homelands into wastelands.”¹⁰⁷

The most effective work exhibited reflected the amazement that Burke identified as the immediate “sublime” response that a spectacular act of terror induces. Hans-Peter Feldman’s display of the front pages of the world’s newspapers on 12 September made the global impact of 9/11 disturbingly apparent. Even the *Guardian* pronounced 9/11 “A declaration of war,” over a full-page image of the burning towers.¹⁰⁸ Chilean artist, Ivan Navarro, used an arrangement of neon lighting and mirrored glass to recreate an affective imagining of an inverted Twin Towers.¹⁰⁹ Indrė Šerpytytė’s abstract painting of metallic vertical lines, *Constellations*, captured the facade of one of the towers as seen by someone who jumped and plummeted past at an estimated 150 miles per hour.¹¹⁰ More prosaically, Gerhard Richter’s painting, *September*, was intended to reflect the artist’s mood when his plane was inconveniently diverted to Nova Scotia *en route* to New York on 11 September 2001.¹¹¹

Subsequently, the works of the mainly European and North American based artists on display evinced a predictably progressive, or as Gavin O’Toole put it, “a highly self-critical

response to the aftermath.”¹¹² Jake and Dinos Chapman’s *Nein! Eleven?* piled miniature models of Nazi soldiers and corpses into grotesque apocalyptic mounds to evoke, somewhat fatuously, the World Trade Center.¹¹³ Fabian Knecht’s *Verachtung* (Contempt) offered a self-indulgent video of the artist walking around New York in a dust-covered suit acquired, allegedly, from a dead suicide bomber in Iraq.¹¹⁴ Knecht’s solipsistic exercise intended, like Islamic State, to draw the link between 9/11 and the Western way of war. In a similar vein, Kerry Tribe’s video of a casting call *Untitled (Potential Terrorist)*,¹¹⁵ posed questions about crude Western stereotypes of “terrorists,” and Grayson Perry’s burnished vase, *Dolls at Dungeness, September 11th 2001*, depicted comic-book putdowns of U.S. machismo.¹¹⁶

The second part of the exhibition, entitled “State Control,” revealed how artists have ruminated on issues surrounding the growth of the surveillance state. The response was, of course, critical of Western democratic practice since 9/11. A marble surveillance camera by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei symbolized the erosion of human rights.¹¹⁷ Indian artist Jitish Kallat’s *Circadian Rhythm 1*, used figurines of people being frisked at airports to demonstrate the nuisance of tighter security everywhere.¹¹⁸ By contrast, Shona Illingworth’s film *216 Westbound*, examined the effect of post-traumatic stress disorder on John Tulloch, a survivor of the suicide attacks that took place in London on 7 July 2005.¹¹⁹ Following the bombings, the British government proposed an extension of the “detention without charge” period from 14 to 90 days. A photograph of the deracinated Tulloch, taken shortly after the attack, was used to promote new anti-terror legislation. Using sound and images, Illingworth recreated his experience, but at the same time, Illingworth delivered her political message that Tulloch, despite his trauma, opposed the extension of detention his photograph was used to justify.¹²⁰

Nowhere, however, were the actions or the images of those who perpetrated either the 9/11 or London 7/7 attacks represented. The political messaging of the art on display became even more radically pacifist and critical of the West in the works of Cat Phillips and Peter Kennard (known by their artistic name kennardphillips).¹²¹ According to Cormac Rae, reviewing the exhibition for *Design Curial*: They began working on their “anti-war agitprop” as early as a “*Stop the War* meeting in 2003. Ever since, they have been creating art to critique government policy.”¹²² “Our approach is very much as citizens, protesting against Government foreign policy and the play out from the point of invasion,” Phillips explained, mentioning that the pair encouraged others to make their own anti-war art.¹²³ Their photomontage *Head of State*, for example, “was made very much in protest to what was happening domestically – the changes in legislation under the auspices of the war on terror.”¹²⁴ Peter Kennard added that the work was also “about surveillance, and the guy who got killed, Jean Charles Menezes [a young Brazilian wrongly suspected of being a jihadist terrorist shot dead by London police after the 7/7 attacks]. It had elements of what was happening in this country, with Blair’s image and his mad eye looking out onto the middle of it.”¹²⁵ Alongside it, the artists presented *photo op* showing another “mad” image of Tony Blair taking a selfie in front of a burning oil field. This artwork formed the front cover of Sara Bevan’s *Art from Contemporary Conflict* booklet that accompanied the IWM exhibition.¹²⁶

Following kennardphillips in the exhibition, a “Redaction” painting by Jennifer Holzer showed how the abuse of Iraqi prisoners was “redacted” in official documents she acquired under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act.¹²⁷ Opposite Holzer’s work appeared Alfredo Jaar’s two images juxtaposed showing President Obama viewing the killing of Osama bin Laden in the White House alongside a blank white screen of the assassination the world was not allowed to see. In a similar anti-war mood, Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco revealed the extreme psychological techniques the U.S. Forces used to interrogate detainees

in prison camps like Guantánamo. Her film, *Operation Atropos* (2006), simulates a prisoner of war experience with former members of the U.S. military and her female students.¹²⁸

In its “Weapons” section the exhibition devoted a number of works to American drone attacks. Here, the viewer could examine Irish-American artist Jim Ricks’s the *Predator* (*Carpet Bombing*) rug collection.¹²⁹ This featured rudimentary military sketches of U.S. military drones stitched onto traditional Afghan rugs. Ricks explained the paradox of using the sketches: “it’s taking something very new – this sort of catalogue of the drones – and then something very, very traditional that has thousands of years of history. To be able to make that in Afghanistan was the perfect way to tie it together.” The carpets conveyed a rather obvious visual pun. Asked what the locals in Kabul made of his design, Ricks laughed: “They thought it was like a really strange piece of tourist kitsch – they wouldn’t have it in their houses, I was told, because this is the opposite of what they want.”¹³⁰

Generally, then, the artwork curated by the Imperial War Museum gave visual support to a radical pacifist and critical theory informed understanding of the War on Terror, namely that Western interventions have created instability abroad and a surveillance state at home. Perhaps this has indeed been one of the consequences of the 9/11 era, and one that deserved artistic contemplation. Yet without any exploration of the broader context of the twenty-year engagement with violent, anti-modernist, jihadist activism, the exhibition as a whole was rendered both shallow and inconsequential: at worst reeking of moral ambiguity and cowardice. For example, the preoccupation with balance, empathy with the non-Western “other” and moral equivalence, extended to excluding from post-9/11 art any negative view of Islamically inspired censorship and iconoclasm, or any acknowledgement of the cartoons that Al-Qaeda and Islamic State used to justify home grown terror attacks after 2012.

Unsurprisingly, *Al Jazeera*’s art correspondent commended the collection for exploring the “self-harm inflicted on Western society” after 9/11 “as much as the crude violence it has imposed on others ever since.”¹³¹ Additionally, Julian Stallabrass, the Courtauld Institute of Art’s expert on war photography, praised the diversity of work on display, but questioned its point of departure. One way of criticizing the show, he said: “would be that by beginning with 9/11 it makes it seem as if terror has come from nowhere and not out of a long history of oppression and colonialism.” This notwithstanding, Stallabrass thought that while “terrorism, like art itself, is notoriously difficult to define, the exhibition overall adopts a critical stance toward responses to 9/11.” Although the critical posture “wasn’t quite explicit enough” for the likes of Stallabrass at the Courtauld Institute, nevertheless, “the implication was certainly there that state terror is as much terror as that of the terrorists.”¹³²

Artists like Kennard Phillips and Jenny Holzer receive commissions and grants from multinational conglomerates as well as the IWM for their exercises in empathy and radical pacifist agitprop. Meanwhile, cartoonists like Lars Vilks, French writer Robert Redeker, who criticized the Qu’ran in a 2006 article in *Le Figaro*,¹³³ Ayaan Hirsi Ali or Mohamed Sifaoui, who exposed Al-Qaeda’s network operating from London and across Europe in 2001, eke out their lives under permanent police protection.¹³⁴

The combination of state neutrality, the omnipresent threat of violence and the fear of being branded Islamophobic, means that it is now impossible to organize a conference, let alone an art exhibition on political Islam and the silencing of freedom of expression on any British, U.S. or Australian campus. The preoccupation with “safe” spaces across Western universities, along with the fact that the Gulf States fund chairs, research projects and academic centers in Islamic Studies at places as various as Oxford, Durham and Exeter in the U.K., Harvard and Cornell in the U.S., and Griffith University in Australia further inhibits the discussion of uncomfortable secular values like the tolerance of blasphemy or

sacrilege.¹³⁵ The National Union of Students in the United Kingdom, for instance, considers any criticism of the imposition of *Sharia* law upon some British communities as Islamophobic.¹³⁶ Furthermore, 94 of the 198 member states of the United Nations Assembly currently have blasphemy laws, while the Organization of Islamic Cooperation regularly pushes for the UN Human Rights Council to recognize defamation of religion, especially in visual representations, as a crime.¹³⁷ The rising price of the freedom of expression, it seems, has become too high for many Western governments, along with their centers of higher learning and creative expression, to pay. As the IWM exhibition divulged, the long war for cultural freedom that Christopher Hitchens foresaw in 1989 has, in the visual arts, been well and truly lost.

Conclusion

It is possible, of course, to debate what constitutes art. One answer to such a question is that it can take many forms and may shift with changing fashions, moods and tastes. However, any appreciation of high art might expect it to reveal a capacity to inspire, to question, and to achieve unexpected emotional resonances. Surveying the evolution of the visual arts in the age of terror demonstrates that it moved from a sublime reaction of amazement at the collapse of the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 to a narcissistically self-regarding “critical” focus that communicated the banal and predictable message: war is terrible and it’s all our own fault.

The art world’s response to 9/11, crystalized in the IWM exhibition, but on display in curated collections across Europe and the United States, confirms and reinforces what Roger Kimball found in his survey of the art world in the 1990s where “anything counts as art.” At the millennium a post-Dadaist preoccupation with outrage resulted in artistic exercises in self-absorbed futility. To avoid the encroaching futility, “cutting edge” artists sought to marry their work with progressive politics. When the aesthetic significance of art is minimal, Kimball writes, politics “rushes in to fill the void.” The crude political allegories on offer at the IWM vividly capture the new politics of art. Another word for this activity, of course, as Kimball vouchsafes, “is propaganda.” Moreover, it goes without saying that the politics on display express the predictable pieties of the radically pacifist left. The oppressed, the misunderstood, the victimized, the third world, Islam, and the environment lines up on one side, while capitalism, the West and traditional morality line up on the other, and we all know where the artist’s sympathies lie. “It’s the political version of painting by numbers,” Kimball states.¹³⁸ In its “fevered quest for novelty at any price” contemporary art, as the Austrian art critic Hans Sedlmayr observed, we find only “insincere and superficial cynicism... we meet, in a word, the calculated exploitation of this art as a means of destroying all order.”¹³⁹

Art created on such terms, like the works on display at the IWM’s *Age of Terror* exhibition, therefore lacks any power to surprise, disclosing little of intellectual or emotional substance. Nevertheless, the didactic social messaging of much post-9/11 art does at least unconsciously reveal, in a cartoon version, the broader progressive ideological themes at work in Europe and the United States post-9/11. Western governments continue to persist in treating the development of an intolerant, non-negotiable, home grown jihadism impartially, tolerating its right to be intolerant, and addressing its excesses in the neutral vocabulary of “radicalization” and “violent extremism.” As a result, governments, the corporate media, and the artistic establishment have engaged in a practice of dissimulation, replacing more accurate descriptions that might be deemed “Islamophobic” with euphemism and equivocation. Western democracies and their security agencies have gone to great lengths

to avoid naming the political religion that undermines the practice of secular pluralism. The Western art establishment, through its own exercises in self-censorship and woke propaganda, has been a willing accomplice in this endeavor, in the process undermining the secular pluralism that, ironically, make creative expression possible in the first place.

Disclosure Statement

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Notes

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